

Virtues' Iconography in the Wall Paintings of Bawit and Saqqara

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Abstract

Coptic artists relied on monastic literature and religious sources, which described popular religious figures. Such sources represented virtues, as well as symbolic representations in the mural paintings of Bawit and Saqqara. It is noteworthy to find that the illustrations of virtues in Coptic art went through some developments. They may not have been remarkable, but the scarcity of their portrayal, in comparison to the stereotypical themes, such as the depictions of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, is interesting.

Keywords: Virtues, Paintings, Bawit, Saqqara, Symbol, Coptic.

Introduction

The monasteries of Saqqara and Bawit are rich in numerous murals of religious themes, which reveal the fruitfulness and richness of monastic literature during the early periods of Eastern Christian art in Egypt. Furthermore, the representations of virtues on their walls are considered a unique subject in these two archaeological sites.

I pursue to make documentation, analysis and tracking the development of the representations of virtues in Coptic Art.

In this context, the paper will deal with many questions. One question is investigating whether there was a relationship or mutual influence between the representations of virtues in Coptic art and the literary sources or not.

This research will produce an accurate documentation and analysis of the representations of virtues in Coptic art, specifically wall paintings.

The research will document the scenes, which portray virtues in Coptic Egypt as depicted on the walls of the two monasteries of Bawit and Saqqara (7th -8th Century AD). The study will also collect, photograph, translate and analyze the Coptic documents which were preserved in the international museums. In addition, it will classify those items chronologically to analyze their characteristic features.

The sources that I will use will include art works (wall paintings), Coptic collections in international museums, biblical texts, illustrations of the early church fathers and The church was accepted the virtues among other angelic orders (Schaff, Wace (eds.), 1953.), therefore Christianity developed a hierarchy of angels based on the Judaic tradition. In addition to angels, archangels (Marriot, 1979), seraphim, and cherubim, there are five other spiritual angelic groups: named by St. Paul. In Ephesians 1: 21, who refers to Christ sitting at God's right hand "far above all principality and power and virtue and dominion..." –

Guilly gave explanation that virtues are angels who carry out the instructions of *dominions*, besides they are in charge of miracles and provide courage, grace..."(Guilly, 1996)

Whereas the monastic meaning of virtues, According to John Cassian (Schaff, Wace (eds.), 1953.), who advised the monks to face the principal faults by contemplation of the different virtues.

The virtue is mentioned in Coptic inscription as "arety" which is derived from Greek word "ἀρετή" (Strong, 1978), moreover the term virtue is followed the names of Virgin Mary and the archangels, such the eastern wall in the chapel XLII in Bawit monastery (Clédat, 1999).

At first glance, the scenes of virtues resemble those of angels because of their wings or their position as archangel holding globs (Madsen, 1975)¹ in their left hands, as seen in the wall paintings of archangels in the different monasteries, like St. Antony's monastery at Red sea (Bolman, 2002), monastery of St. Jeremiah at Saqqara, monastery of St. Shenouda at Sohage, the Monastery of the Archangel Gabriel at Naqlun near al-Fayoum (Gabra, 2005), and the monastery of St. Simeon at Aswan (Villard, 1927) etc...

The research aims to explore the portrayal of the personification of virtues in Coptic iconography. Consequently, it poses various questions such as: Why did angelic virtues appear exclusively in the two sites Bawit and Saqqara 6th – 7th Century A.D.? Why did they appear with earrings, as women (feminine facial features)?

They are represented with curly hair, diadem, and earrings, to give the impression of gentleness. They appear in the form of busts provided with wings, wearing tunics with rich decorated borders. They wear blindfold around the waves of their curly hair. Their ears have only jewels. Each figure carries a round object (globe), the faces reflect personalities rather than individualities (Rassart-Debergh, 1989).

While Mahmoud Zibawy related the feminine features to angles according to the synaxarium "*d'êtres sacrés tout à la fois anges et femmes*" (Zibawy, 2003), he supposed that it is probably an allegoric symbol between the feminine features and the virtues' iconography.

The heads of female figures in the wall paintings at the monastery of St. Jeremiah were covered with a piece of cloth which is so called *maphorium*. (Rassart-Debergh, 1989), while the angelic virtues had their heads represented without headdress like other scenes of women in the mural painting of the same site.

May be, the painter wanted to show them as female personifications to confirm that they are not angels, but they are symbolic figures of virtues.

Graffiti is inscribed beside the heads of virtue's personifications, who are represented as slightly less life-sized human figures. The common features between these figures and those seen in other depictions of virtues are wings and halos. These features assimilate them with angels. All are represented with the same design of costume with slight variations in the decorative bands on the tunics, coiffures, and plumage in adjacent figures.

However, the earrings, which appear in the representations of the angelic personifications of virtues, were exclusive and unique case in two regions at Bawit and Saqqara.

The scenes of virtues were discovered in two sites; Chapel XVIII, and XII at Bawit (Clédat, 1904) and cell 607, and 7989 at Saqqara. Both groups of representations date back to, 6th – 7th Century A.D. Since this style of representations was not common in Coptic art after the 7th century, it could be assumed that there was an artistic connection between the artists or Coptic monks who painted these murals in the two sites.

There is a frieze of winged haloed busts of virtues wearing long hair and earrings, shaped as the ankh cross, and holding in both hands a globe (pl. 12). The inscription beside each figure indicates that they are personifications of virtues, as mentioned mention in the Pauline epistle (St. Paul the apostle), such as Faith, Hope, Charity (on the south wall) – patience, prudence, fortitude and other labels are illegible, beneath there are an interlace band of floral motifs

¹ The archangels represented holding in their left hand a circle disc, and there are some hypothetical opinions which mention in the article by OLE SKJERBÆK MADSEN, which is probably represented the oblation (offering loaf), is derived from Italian word 'oblazion' which mean liturgical offering which used in the Coptic Church, (MADSEN, 1975).

The citation of the Holy Spirit fruits Galatians 5: 22 -23 the Coptic text:

“22 poutah de nte pipna vai pe ouagapy ourasi ouhiryny oumetrefwounhyt oumet,rc oumetaga;oc ounah 23 oumetremraus ouegkratia nai mpaury] mmon nomoc]oubyou” (باسليوس، 1988)

“*22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience (long-suffering), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and temperance. Against such things there is no law²”.*

Angels, according to Christian dogma, are neither male nor female, because they are made up of energy, love and light. But Angels will project themselves to us in a manner we are most comfortable with which means we often see them as human figures³.

The Phenomenon of expression concerning virtues appeared also in Asia Minor from Alikarnassos (Halicarnassus) on Stone mosaic (pl. 1). It is dated to the 4th century AD. It almost certainly served secular, religious or funeral context. It was made of square black border containing a laurel wreath. In the center, there is a Greek inscription in black letters, the mosaic’s floor with wishes (health, longevity, joy, peace, cheer, hope) there is a black branch and an ochre ivy leaf outlined in black.⁴

The Coptic painter represented human figures as symbols of the virtues for the first time at al-Salam tomb in al-Bagawat cemetery (pl. 2, 3; fig. 1). It dates back to the fourth - fifth cent.AD. The representations are not winged. They depict representations of virtues such as peace, love and justice. The Coptic inscriptions on top of these figures identify these meanings (Fakhry, 1951); (Zibawy, 2005).

In the following scenes, the Virtues are represented behind the figures of saints and martyrs. They are represented on the outer frame of apses in the monastic cells that are painted with the figures of Jesus Christ the pantocrator and Virgin Mary.

Plates no.	Pl. 4-12
Dating	6 th – 7 th Century
Provenance	Western wall of chapel XVIII, The monastery of St. Apollo At Bawit (Clédat, 1904)
Description	The figures are depicted within circular medallions. Their faces are surrounded with a halo. Their heads are adorned with crowns. Their wings arch is elegantly above their shoulders and sweep down. Facial features are painted in broad lines through the eyes and forehead, tapering gracefully to the chin, making the face clearly elongated. Their eyebrows are emphasized with dark paint, slightly furrowed. They are painted with large and dark pupils. The hair of virtue is coiffed with two tufts of hair, and tied swathe around the hair with central button? Immitating a precious stone.
Inscription	With the pl. LXXIII (--) tenkrati (?) ouegkratia (self-control) (Schroeder, 2004)
Plates no.	Pl. 13- 15
Dating	6 th – 7 th Century
Present place	The East apse of hall VI, the monastery of St. Apollo At Bawit (Clédat, 1904); (Capuani, 2002); (Zibawy, 2003), preserved in Coptic Museum No. 7118.

² Quotations from the Authorized king James; virsion, (New Testament, press London, 1943).

³ Gensis 19: 10-12, Vision 7:2, 8:3, 10:7, Matthew 22:3, Pslmes 104: 4.

⁴ <http://www.lifo.gr/team/evrymata/45067>(last accessed 11/10/2018)

Description	<p>The upper register represents Jesus Christ enthroned in a <i>mandorla</i> carried on wheels with flames licking at its base. Wearing yellow tunic under crimson cloak, he gestures the grace sign with his right hand, whereas his left hand holds the bible. A halo with a cross is surrounding his head. Jesus is surrounded by the figures of the four living creatures flying on six wings strewn with eyes.</p> <p>The four living creatures protrude from the lower left as ox-headed, the lion-headed, human head mounted by a simple crown which is a fine bandage around the head which surrounded with halo, and the eagle-headed.</p> <p>While two angels bow as a sign of veneration, they wear blue tunic and yellow cloak with red lines, their heads have fine bandages around hair, and halo around the head, the sun and moon, personified by human faces, symbolized the eternity</p> <p>The lower register represents St. Mary seated on a throne in the middle of The twelve apostles and two Egyptian saints, who are holding the codex near their chests.</p>
Inscription	<p>On the opening page of the bible three times: AGIOC AGIOC AGIOC Holy Holy Holy</p> <p>The coptic inscription around outer farm of the nich: Tpictric the faith, ;elpic the hope, Pe;bio Humility, ptbbo Purity, tmntmpas Patience, tegratia Grace, kindness, mercy Tagpe love.</p>
Plates no.	Pl. 16- 18; fig. 2
Dating	7 th Century
Provenance	Cell 607, The Monastery of Saint Jeremiah, Saqqara (Quibell, 1909); (Rassart-Debergh, 1981);(Zibawy, 2003) (GABRA, 2007).
Description	<p>They are represented in a static and frontal position, with their wings spread out. Their faces are haloed. With both hands, they are holding a round disk with a dark purple edge on their chests' left. Their hairs are curly, and wear rings on their ears, taking the form of the Ankh sign.</p> <p>They wear sticharion with long sleeves. The folds are painted in pinkish-violet and colored with a black line, a white cloak fastened on the two shoulders.</p>
Inscription	<p>Pictic Faith ;elpic Hope tagape Charity Hareshyt the Patience Oumetrefwounhyt Perseverance</p>
Notes	It is unique case to angels to appear with rings
Plates no.	Pl. 19- 20; fig. 2
Dating	7 th Century
Provenance	Cell 1725 - Monastery of Saint Jeremiah, Saqqara(Quibell, 1909); (Rassart-Debergh, 1981);(Zibawy, 2003) (Gabra, 2002), preserved in the Coptic Museum No. 7987.
Description	<p>They are represented with their frontal faces and halos around faces. They are depicted with curly hair and earrings shaped as the ankh cross. The inscription beside each figure identifies their identities as personifications which are illegible. Beneath this scene, there is an interlace band of floral</p>

	motifs. Their eyes having different looks, from the right one look at the right side, behind him two looking forward, and the last two looking each other. The painter probably wanted to show dynamic status through moving of their eyes.
Inscription	There are some Coptic letters around their faces inside the halos, but they are illegible

Discussion

The research is concerned with the relationship between the representations of virtues in monastic art and the religious sources of the Coptic Church.

The hierarchy of angelic orders, which includes the virtue acts as a ranking for them. Subsequently, the painter might desire to show them as angels. It is probable that he differentiated between the female depictions and the angelic virtues, to create a special character as symbolic figures of the biblical virtues.

The representations of the virtues combine characteristic of angels and women.

Results

The prototype scenes of angels show them as human figures surrounding Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary. They are usually portrayed in poses that denote their roles in the Christian conception

<p>Angels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are represented in winged human form. • Their faces are haloed • Male feature. • They are accompanied by the name of angels or archangels (angel of God, angel of Lord, Michael, Gabriel, etc...) • Angels are representing in certain attitudes denoting their roles, such as: Divine Guardians, Messengers, and Servants. 	<p>Virtues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are represented in winged human form. • Their faces are haloed, because they are described in Coptic inscriptions as holy virtues⁵ • Female feature by wearing earrings • They are accompanied by the name of virtues (Love, Faith, peace, long-suffering, etc...) • They are painted in two ways: as bust figures or haloed faces
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Conclusion

The depiction of virtues reflects the depth and richness of Coptic literature, which expresses meditative thoughts of Coptic monks.

Most probably this kind of scenes used to help monks in their cells, during spiritual meditation, to visualize different virtues that must be adhered in his monastic life.

Lastly, the virtues disappeared during the later period in Coptic arts; almost certainly they were replaced by the events and details of the biblical texts.

⁵ Actually, in eastern wall in chapel XLII at Bawit monastery, (Clédât, 1999).

Plates



Fig. 1-The female figure of The Justice, after (Fakhry, 1951, p. 77, fig. 70, pl. XXIV).



Fig. 2-The busts of virtues with globs in their hands, The Monastery of Saint Jeremiah, Saqqara (Rassart-Debergh, 1981, fig. 21).



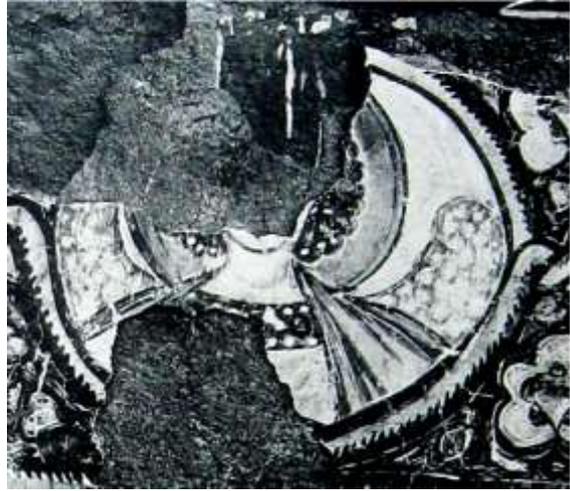
Pl. 1- Mosaic floor with wishes, Alikarnassos (Halicarnassus), Asia Minor, no. 1857, 1220.434, British Museum, London, after [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collecti on_online/collection_object_details/collection_i mage_gallery.aspx?assetId=1124028001&object Id=1417973&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collecti_on_online/collection_object_details/collection_i mage_gallery.aspx?assetId=1124028001&object Id=1417973&partId=1) (last accessed 9/10/2018)



Pl. 2- Human figure symbolizes the virtue of peace, the tomb of al-Salaam, al-Bagawat, 4th cent. A.D.



Pl. 3- The female figures symbolize the virtue of prayer and Justice, the tomb of al-Salaam, al-Bagawat, 4th cent. A.D.



Pl. 4- Virtue in roundel, Bawit, Chapelle XVIII (Clédat 1904, pl LXVI).



PL. 7- Virtue in roundel, Bawit, Chapelle XVIII (Clédat 1904, pl. LXVIII).



PL. 8- Virtue in roundel, Bawit, Chapelle XVIII (Clédat 1904, pl. LXX).



PL. 9- Virtue in roundel, Bawit, Chapelle XVIII (Clédat 1904, pl. LXX)



PL. 10- Virtue in roundel aquarelle copy (Clédat 1904, pl. LXXIII).



PL. 11- Virtue in roundel aquarelle copy (Clédat 1904, pl. LXXIV).



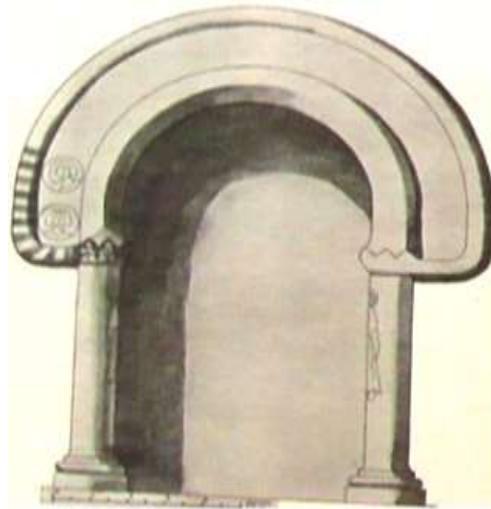
PL. 12- A frieze of roundels in the lower part, including the virtues, Bawit, Chapelle XII, (Clédat, 1904, p. 63, pl. XXXI).



PL. 13- Christ in majesty (*Pantocrator*), The East apse of hall VI, the monastery of St. Apollo at Bawit preserved in Coptic Museum No. 7118, (Gabra 2002 pl. 85).



PL. 14- Virtue in roundel (Clédat, 1904, p. 23, fig.18).



PL. 15- Re-establish of the outer frame of the niche that shows virtues in roundels after (Clédat, 1904, fig.18).



PL. 16- The busts of virtues with globs in their hands, The Monastery of Saint Jeremiah, Saqqara Cell 607 (Quibell, 1909, pl. IX).



PL. 17- The bust of virtue with glob in his hands, The Monastery of Saint Jeremiah, Saqqara Cell 607 (Quibell, 1909, pl. X).



PL. 18- The busts of Virtues, The Monastery of Saint Jeremiah, Saqqara Cell 607 (Gabra 2007, pl. 41).



PL. 19- St. Mary *Theotokos* (the Mother of God) between two angels, Monastery of Saint Jeremiah, Saqqara (Zibawy, 2003, pl. 100).



PL. 20- The details of outer arch frame, aquarelle copy, Monastery of Saint Jeremiah, Saqqara (Quibell, 1912, pl. XXII).

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