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Alexios and Anghelos Apokafkos, Constantinopolitan Painters in Crete (1399-1421). Documents from the State Archives in Venice.

The two Constantinopolitan painters Alexios Apokafkos and Anghelos Apokafkos were active in Crete during a prosperous period of the Venetian rule of the island. Their well known Byzantine surname suggests that they belonged to the broader family of Apokafkoi (Apokaukoi), whose most illustrious members were the metropolitan of Nafpaktos Ioannis Apokafkos (ca. 1155 -1233) and the *megas doux* Alexios Apokafkos (end of 13th cent.-1345). Besides the name, we know of the Constantinopolitan origin of Alexios Apokafkos from other sources. Nevertheless, we lack specific information about the immediate lineage of the two painters or the conditions under which they left the Byzantine capital.

Crete, although under Venetian rule since the beginning of the thirteenth century, continued to cherish its Byzantine traditions in art and culture, absorbing at the same time limited Italian influences. At the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century the fertile island was a rapidly growing commercial post, at the crossroads of the mercantile routes between East and West. It was soon to become a prosperous economy, especially due to the gradual development of urban centres, and a lively place of art production with a varied art market of portable objects, and especially icons. During the last part of the fourteenth century scholars and professionals, including artists, arrived in Crete from Constantinople, leaving behind a shrunk empire, bringing their traditions with them, and probably looking for work on the island. Among these expatriated artists must have been the two painters who are the object of this study.

Alexios and Anghelos Apokafkos, probably brothers, or father and son, are therefore documented at the end of the fourteenth and the first decades of the fifteenth century, executing pictorial work in Venetian Crete or Candia, both in the capital, the city of Candia or Chandax, and the countryside. The remarkable commissions in which they were separately involved, as well as their acquaintance with prominent members of both the Venetian nobility and the Orthodox clergy, suggest that they enjoyed a considerable reputation in their time. Moreover, contacts with other professionals, as well as other activities in Candia and some business in Venice, reveal their active participation in the social and economic life of the period. It is also documented that Alexios Apokafkos was a close friend of the well known theologian and writer Joseph Vryennios, who corresponded with him and even appointed him an executor of his last will, drafted in Constantinople in July 1421.

This paper, based on both published and unpublished documents discovered in the State Archives in Venice, in the individual files of the notaries of Crete (*Notai di Candia*), aims to present a picture of the multifaceted activity of two painters, whose presence and work in Crete exemplifies significant aspects of the role of the Byzantine artist in Veneto-Cretan society in the half-century before the fall of Constantinople.

The oldest known document about Alexios Apokafkos dates from 1399 and reveals that he maintained a workshop in the city of Candia, in which he accepted pupils, in order to train them in the secrets of the craft. This suggests that the painter was already established in the capital of the *Regno di Candia* for some time by then, which would have allowed him to develop a respectable professional profile. With the relevant contract, dated 24 April 1399 (document published by M. Cattapan, in *Thesaurismata*, 9, 1972, 218-219), a lady by the name of Angelina Angeleto, apparently a widow, and an inhabitant of the *burgo* of

Candia, comes to an agreement with the painter concerning the apprenticeship of her son Georgius in the master's workshop. Specific conditions are set down in detail, as in other cases of similar documents. The apprenticeship was to last seven years that is until 1406, during which the disciple would serve his master day and night. Georgius Angeleto dutifully completed his term; he is found nine years later as an already independent painter (*pictor*), who assumes the responsibility of a guarantor in a document of January 1408 (1407 m. v.) concerning the selling of modest quantities of cloth from Florence and Pisa in Candia. It must be considered certain that in his workshop Alexios Apokafkos undertook commissions for icons, although nothing specific is discovered so far in the sources and no known icon bears the signature of Apokafkos. An idea of how these icons would have looked like can be gained by means of surviving icons, which exemplify late Paleologan trends in Constantinopolitan painting as well as their evolution in early Cretan art.

Besides working as an icon painter, Alexios was also involved in commissions for decorative work for the embellishment of aristocratic dwellings. A practice quite frequently encountered in documents of the period was for a painter to elaborate with gold and silver luxurious cloth hangings for patrician houses. Alexios did similar work before 1412, when he had decorated curtains for a member of the noble Venetian family of the Cornarii (Corner). In July of 1412 he was asked to execute similar work by a Venetian nobleman of the Contareni (Contarini) family (information mentioned by Cattapan, *op. cit.*, 232). The case concerned a pair of curtains and this time the painter was asked to make the pieces more beautiful (*tantum pulchriores*) than in the previous commission, engaging in more work according to the taste of his patron, who provided the cloth as well as gold and silver for the decoration of the luxurious hangings. The painter needed two and a half months of work to complete this commission. Upon commencement, he would receive 20 hyperpera and also three hyperpera for every single hundred of leaves, either of gold or of silver that he would use for the embellishment of these curtains.

A most interesting commission any painter of the period would hope for was one concerning fresco decoration, usually for a religious institution. And it seems that Alexios Apokafkos had secured for himself this kind of work. Archival evidence suggests that he participated, at least in the summer and early autumn of 1412, in the pictorial decoration of the monastery of Varsamonero (or Valsamonero) (information mentioned by Cattapan, *op. cit.*, 232). This monastic complex, from which only the main church or *katholikon* survives today, lies a good distance south-west of Irakleio, in the area of Kainourio. Alexios' involvement in the decoration of the monastery is not specified in detail.

However, it is known that a new, smaller nave dedicated to St. John the Forerunner was added to a preexisting chapel dedicated to the Virgin at the beginning of the fifteenth century. This, being the south nave of the complex, still survives and is covered with frescoes. A logical conclusion is that Alexios participated in that decoration, either alone or as member of a workshop, and this was probably done at the request of an enterprising abbot, Jonas Palamas. If we take this hypothesis as valid, then we have an extremely rare instance in the study of Byzantine frescoes of Crete, in which available archival evidence can be associated with a surviving ensemble of frescoes. However, any attempt to associate specific parts of this mural decoration with Alexios Apokafkos' name requires a detailed stylistic and technical analysis, combined with other factors, and is not certainly facilitated by the absence of an adequate publication of the existing frescoes either in the nave of St. John or in the whole complex, known as monastery of St. Phanourios.

Alexios was also involved in various economic affairs. An interest for commercial enterprises on his part is deduced from a number of documents. In October 1400 he received a sum of 100 hyperpera for one year from Jacobo Theotonico, a Jewish resident of Candia. In the hope of a profit, he was going to invest them through the business office of Anthonius Paradiso, a craftsman making swords (*spatharius*), in some kind of commercial activity and return them with an additional percentage of 12%. The notary Nicolaus Medrino agreed to act as his guarantor, although not without demanding security. Alexios

was able to give him as a pawn a few objects of value, that is a heavy overcoat and a dress decorated with two series of silver buttons. Despite all preparation however, the enterprise was annulled at its very beginning. Having failed with this, Alexios makes a new attempt fourteen months later. In January 1402 he borrows 44 hyperpera from Moyse Demedico, a Jew from Nigroponte and inhabitant of Candia. He was going to invest the money in business conducted again through the same intermediary. He agrees to return the sum within six months, with an interest of 12%. His guarantor this time is a goldsmith from Milan, already established in the city of Candia, Petrus de Mediolano, to whom Alexios gives a silver belt as a pawn.

Apokafkos was the owner of two ground floor houses found in the area of Candia. In October 1405 he had sold these to a lady called Anna Brocalio, wife of Johannis Ungaro. But a controversy arose between them, protracted for years, and they finally agreed in September 1411 to appoint two judges to solve the difference. Eight days later the arbitrators decided that the houses should remain in Alexios' possession, who would repay the lady only 30 hyperpera from the 40 he had initially received. Also, the loser of the case, Anna Brocalio, was exempted from a debt of another 40 hyperpera agreed in the initial contract.

A document of September 1415 reveals that the painter was involved in a rather significant case, probably a disagreement with the Venetian administration of Crete, for which it was necessary for him to appear in front of the ducal authorities of the metropolis. Members of the Acotanto and the Calergi families were directly involved in the same issue. Instead of travelling to Venice, however, they all appointed the notary Constantius Maurica as their representative in this unspecified affair in the capital of the *Serenissima*. The last document mentioning Alexios discovered during this research concerns his son Theodoros, who appears in January 1419 (1418 m. v.) as a witness in the will of a well-standing lady, Chaterucia, married into the noble Quirino family. We know from Vryennios' testament that Alexios was still alive and well in 1421.

Anghelos Apokafkos was probably a younger brother or a son of Alexios. Only a single document concerning him has been located so far in the Venetian archives, found, along with the others discussed in this paper, among the notarial cartularies of Venetian Crete. Although his activity is less documented than that of his relative, it seems to have been equally remarkable. This is suggested by the fact that he attracted the attention of Markos Pavlopoulos, a well known codicographer and clergyman, supporter of the union of the churches, destined to become the Orthodox chief-priest (*protopapàs*) of Candia in 1452.

With a contract drafted in Candia on the first day of March 1421 (document published by Cattapan, *op. cit.*, 230), the priest Markos Pavlopoulos entrusted Anghelos Apokafkos with the execution of a complex representation, a large fresco of the Last Judgment, to be painted in the church in which he was a minister, *Sancta Maria Angelorum*, situated in the *burgo* of Candia. St. Mary of the Angels was later to become the seat of the Orthodox chief-priest (*protopapàs*), probably when Pavlopoulos himself was invested with the title. Conditions for the execution of this mural decoration are set down in detail, as was the case with other similar commissions. The painter was to buy the colours needed at his own expense, while the patron would provide all preparatory material, namely scaffolding and lime necessary for the preparation of the walls which were to receive the frescoes. Anghelos' remuneration for his work and expenses is specified at 50 hyperpera. With the painter being engaged in other commissions, however, work would not start before the 15th of May and the Last Judgment would be unfolded before the faithfuls' eyes in another two and a half months, that is by the end of July 1421.

What would this Last Judgment look like? Most details in the contract concern only practical matters. Nothing is said about the different figures and the various episodes that a composition of the Last Judgment, one of the richest and more suggestive pictures in Byzantine iconography, should contain, perhaps because this was discussed orally between painter and commissioner. The church of St. Mary of the Angels having been destroyed,

and its frescoes lost, we have to turn to other pieces of evidence. A fairly good idea we can gain from frescoes of the same theme and roughly of the same period preserved in other churches of Crete. But also an interesting and picturesque contemporary description is given in texts by Joseph Vryennios, a close friend, as already said, of Alexios Apokafkos and perhaps also of Anghelos himself.

The documents briefly discussed above are a small but rather representative sample of the type of available documentation concerning painters of the late Byzantine period active in Venetian Crete. The case of these two masters with a Constantinopolitan origin, certainly belonging to the same workshop, exemplifies characteristic activities and the complex role that a Byzantine artist was asked to fulfill in the mixed and demanding society of this distant colony of the *Serenissima*. The patrons of the two painters belong both to the secular and the ecclesiastical world and were members of the Venetian nobility, abbots or priests of Orthodox monasteries and churches, scholars. Commissioners could also be of different other origins and qualities and from different social strata, reflecting the multicultural character of developing urban centres in this big island of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Alexios, a recognised master himself, was in contact with other professionals, even from different backgrounds. The document of 1402 shows his close relationship with a goldsmith from Milan, established in Candia. Contacts with the Acotanto family, to which the painters Anghelos and Ioannis belonged, are seen in documents of October 1400 and September 1415. Alexios had also a close relationship with notaries, and probably with copyists of manuscripts (or even illuminators). Furthermore, he was undoubtedly acquainted with his contemporary fellow painter Nikolaos Philanthropinos, with whom he shared a Constantinopolitan origin and close ties with the circle of Joseph Vryennios.

Alexios remained in contact with the Byzantine philosopher even after the latter's return to the capital of the Byzantine Empire. At one point Vryennios had sent him books from Constantinople and later on he also entrusted him with a chest full of manuscripts by himself, perhaps his "Forty-Nine Chapters" (N. Tomadakis, 1947) or his "Treatise Addressed to the Cretans" (H. Bazini, 2004), to be copied in Candia under Alexios' care. All this points to the education and some intellectual interests of Alexios Apokafkos, but also to his possible role as a link between Vryennios and the local Orthodox church and society. On the other hand Anghelos Apokafkos had collaborated (1421) with the above mentioned priest, codicographer and later *protopapàs* Markos Pavlopoulos. Consequently, the circle in which the two Apokafkoi painters moved included known personalities of the intellectual, theological and artistic milieu of the period. In this respect their contacts in the same period with clergymen both fervent defenders of Orthodoxy and pro-unionists were remarkable.

Even if the above evidence can be said to suggest that the two painters enjoyed the respect of the public, we cannot be sure whether this was due to their profession or rather to their Byzantine origin and social relations. In any case and although Alexios Apokafkos came to Crete as a "foreigner" according to Vryennios, he seems to have quickly been integrated in the Veneto-Cretan environment. However, the financial situation of the painter does not seem to have been flourishing. His interest in monetary investments, rather than indicating an adventurous nature, betrays economic difficulties. In these attempts Alexios resorts to the services of members of the Jewish community of Candia (1400, 1402), who exercised the profession of money-lending. The activity and quality of work of painters with a similar background did not seem to alter the medieval attitude towards painting, which is attested in Cretan documents well into the closing years of the fifteenth century. Nevertheless their presence probably helped initiate a gradual change towards a more favourable consideration of the artist in Venetian Crete, and the development of artistic personality.

In conclusion, archival evidence of the kind discussed in this paper offers a lively picture of the diversity of the work, professional activity, private matters and social

behaviour of painters, thus illustrating their role and overall presence in the society of their time. It also allows, *mutatis mutandis*, a glimpse into the works and days of late Byzantine artists in Constantinople, about which almost nothing specific survives in the sources. Furthermore, the case of these two masters, documented in the above mentioned instances to execute frescoes and decorative work, but undoubtedly capable of producing portable icons as well, and their Constantinopolitan origin, hints at the ways of diffusion of trends from the Byzantine capital to Crete. The most direct channel for this was the arrival of Constantinopolitan painters themselves in place. In an island which, despite protracted foreign political rule, had maintained vivid a Paleologan tradition, adapted to a local provincial vocabulary, new life and quality was given, whose influence can be appreciated both in existing frescoes and in surviving portable icons.

Note: A research programme under the title: “The Painters of Crete in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries. Documents from the State Archives in Venice” (responsible: M. Constantoudaki-Kitromilides) is in an advanced stage, with support from the Special Accounts for Research Grants of the University of Athens and under the auspices of the Centre for Byzantine Research of the National Research Foundation (Athens) in collaboration with the Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Studies in Venice.

