



Art history: early modern

Unravelling an icon

PENNY BOREHAM

Investigating an icon like “St George and the Boy from Mytileni” involves a rigorous quest for evidence, even when there are no documents to give any clue about who painted it and why. Professor Robin Cormack of the Courtauld Institute has studied the icon in depth.

ROBIN CORMACK

The problem in identifying this icon is that we know nothing about its whereabouts before 1978, have no history, so everything we say about it is deduced from looking at it.

ROBIN CORMACK

00:53 We tend to describe any work of art in the Orthodox Church as an icon, whether it's made in a manuscript or in metalwork, or in ivory, or as a panel painting, we call them all icons, so it's a rather cover-all term. The problem of the St George in the British Museum is what kind of an icon is it? Who is it made for? How does it function?

PENNY BOREHAM

00:33 Dr Angeliki Lymberopoulou of the Open University.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

01:20 St George through his life, his miracles, he is a military saint. He's killing the dragon to save a princess, all the legends associated with this St George have to do with his military nature, and that's why also the crusaders liked him so much obviously. And that's how actually St George came back to the rest of Europe and specifically England, to become a patron saint of England.

ROBIN CORMACK

01:47 St George is certainly known in the Eastern Church before the crusades, but from the 10th century onwards there was an enormous increase in the cult of St George. In terms of the crusades, he was seen to be fighting miraculously on the crusader side in Antioch, in the 12th and 13th centuries, and so the crusader armies identified St George as one of Eastern saints working on their side.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

02:17 In this icon we have St George on horseback, because he's a military saint and we can see his shield, and a little boy holding a glass and raising it up to St George. This is actually a miracle of St George that the saint performed after his death. Basically what happened was that a boy was abducted from the Greek Island of Mytelene, by Saracens. He was taken to Crete. On the Saint's name day his mother, the boy's mother prayed to the saint to bring her boy back, and that's what happened. The saint actually came on his horse, crossed over the sea with his horse, went to Crete, and took the boy from his captors and back to his mother.

ROBIN CORMACK

03:06 This icon comes from the 13th century and this is one of the earliest examples of this particular scene. It's catching on in the 13th century; partly perhaps because pilgrims went to Lydda and they were told by the guides at the pilgrimage site all the stories of St George. Maybe this was one of the ones they featured. In due course, what people noticed was that the good guy was St George, and the bad guys were the Saracens so it became a kind of paradigm for Christians against Islam, so I think it has a subtext of Christians versus Muslims, which is what's going on in the crusader period.

ROBIN CORMACK

00:00 The armour is puzzling and suggests that the artist wasn't quite clear how to represent the armour that would have been worn by St George because so far as we know, Byzantines at this time wore scaled like this, but they wore plate armour over the shoulders, so this is misunderstood, the rather delicate mix of plate and scale armour, and also it looks more like leather than metal.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

00:33 St George is depicted as a military saint and that's his main representation. We always see him wearing the armour, as we see here. He's holding almost invariably a shield, which can be seen here on the right. The first time I actually saw this icon I thought, "hey what's going on, St George has a wing!" But actually no, it's his curved shield, which makes it look as if he's bearing wings.

ROBIN CORMACK

00:57 He has a red mantle flying, held together by a brooch, that's quite correct for Byzantine armour, but the tunic down his legs is very odd, something quite Western, and Western knights wore these long dresses, Byzantines wore short tunics, so the more you look at it the more you see it's not quite normal for a Byzantine work. So in all, it's highly decorative with this wonderful red, flowing mantle, and the tunic below, but it's not very practical. This I don't think would have been the best sort of protection if you were a horseman at the time.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

01:38 According to the legend, St George took the boy at the moment he was about to serve wine to his captors and, as you can see in the icon, the boy is holding the raised glass with wine.

ROBIN CORMACK

01:54 The glass of wine held by the boy indicates the moment of time when he was rescued. And the point is also made that this extremely large glass fits into what we know of Islamic glass-making of this period. It looks like a glass made in the Arab world.

ROBIN CORMACK

00:00 The challenge of this painting is at first sight it looks like a Byzantine icon, but at second sight as you look at it, there's some quite odd features. The figure St George swirls round, the so-called gothic swirl that you get in the West, the horse doesn't look like a Byzantine horse, so you begin to detect that this is somebody producing what looks like a Byzantine icon, but he has all sorts of tricks in his repertoire which are Western, so it looks like a Western artist doing his best to reproduce a famous Byzantine saint.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

00:41 The artist was an above average artist, the way he has rendered every single details from the landscape with the little plants and the water, the horse is beautifully done, I would almost say a bit of cheeky horse, looks at us with these big eyes. The saint, the colours he has used, everything, every single details in this icon is very carefully chosen.

ROBIN CORMACK

01:07 The background is in gesso, this is made out of gypsum, a kind of chalk, mixed up. The artist in preparing the panel did a drawing on the flat gesso of the panel, then added this extra gypsum on top of that. It looks like a technique the artist had used before, because it is so fluent he must have worked extremely quickly in the wet gesso, and then as it dried he would then be able to fix on silver leaf on top. It gives a whole impression of richness and movement.

ROBIN CORMACK

02:19 In the 13th century when this was produced, one of the regions of the Byzantine world where St George was very popular was to the Far East, to the region now known as Georgia. Their patron saint was St George, and Georgian artists produced precious metal versions of St George in the 11th and 12th century.

ROBIN CORMACK

02:42 It seems very likely that this artist had seen one of these Georgian productions, or maybe an imitation by an artist in Palestine of these Georgian productions, so the idea of George being produced in gold or in silver for the aristocracy was a well-established tradition in the Greek East which the crusaders, when they arrived, would have confronted for the first time.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

03:11 Well, these “rolling eyes”, you can see that these eyes are very prominent. They have the white bit and then they kind of almost come out of the face. They’re looking at you intensively.

ROBIN CORMACK

03:24 These bulging eyes are only found in a very small number of works and instantly you look at them you see it, you ask why has the artist done this? He’s exaggerated the gaze in a very distinctive way. Only those paintings of around 1250 have them. It’s an extraordinary short-lived fashion, an eccentricity of a small group of artists.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

03:50 Some scholars connect this specific stylistic characteristic with French art, and it is highly likely indeed that the artist who perhaps made this icon came to the Holy land with St Louis the 9th.

ROBIN CORMACK

04:07 It’s some way a reaction to what these artists saw when they saw Byzantine churches, perhaps when they went in and saw a mosaic or a fresco, they noticed the large eyes, it struck them, they exaggerated what they saw, I think.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

04:24 These massive Byzantine eyes, basically eyes that we see in the Byzantine virgins, would have made an impression on any artist unfamiliar with that look, looking at these big eyes that dominate the saints’ faces in Byzantine icons, and basically creating their own interpretation of what they saw within their culture.

ROBIN CORMACK

04:46 The landscape elements at the bottom of the icon are extremely distinctive. You might have expected the gesso to completely cover the background, but no, at the bottom the horse gallops over a scenery with little sharp mountains, with plants growing and right at the bottom you can just detect water.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

05:08 The landscape is rendered with the minimum of detail, at the same time making clear of the precise moment of the miracle. We have mountains, which is an indication of Crete because Crete is an extremely mountainous place, and we have the water very beautifully rendered, a little stream of water to indicate the sea that the saint had to cross.

ROBIN CORMACK

05:31 This is scene-making; this shows you that the horse is travelling over the Aegean Sea from Crete back to the island of Lesbos, back to Mytilini, so it’s an essential part of the story.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

05:46 The landscape does tell us something very specific, that the painter was looking at Byzantine art. The way the mountains are rendered with this kind of very sharp edges at the top, it’s the way Byzantine art depicts mountains so we can be almost certain that the painter, the artist of this specific icon, is looking at Byzantine work.

ROBIN CORMACK

00:00 The important aspect of this icon is that because it’s in the British Museum, it’s been possible to do close technical analysis of the icon. The first thing that was found was that the pigments are mixed normally in a Byzantine icon with egg tempera, but one speck showed that oil was used as well, so there’s a mixture of oil and tempera. So far in analysis this is

only found in Western panel painting, and it's never been found in the East, so this looks to be a hint of the artist coming from the West.

ROBIN CORMACK

00:36 The other information given by the conservation was that the panel is on pine and this would suggest it's made in the Mediterranean. Northern panels are usually in heavier wood like oak, but this is a pine from the Mediterranean, and there's something extremely peculiar about this icon, which is that the normal way a Byzantine icon is made is to cut out the wood in the centre and to have a frame, and looking at this icon you can see there is a frame and the main composition is set back so the frame comes forward, and the composition on the wood, but it's not done in the normal way. It's done by fixing in linen, paper and parchment, and we found this very peculiar and odd technique in a couple of other icons now in a collection at the monastery at Mount Sinai, which I think are an indication of work by the same painter. So the technical information has allowed us to go beyond style and to look about the workshop practices of this particular painter.

ROBIN CORMACK

00:00 I happen to believe that this artist was trained in Paris and that probably meant he saw lots of miniatures and manuscripts, and was interested in what was going on in Paris, but he was confronted with a whole tradition of Byzantine art which is a very good art for communicating emotions and beliefs, so he adapted what he'd learnt in Paris to what he saw in the East, and he looked at particular features of Byzantium that he thought would work well, like the relatively two-dimensional image and the bright colours, and at the same time the way that the figure looks directly at the viewer and so makes contact with the praying viewer.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

00:50 Who would have been the recipient of this icon, or for whom this icon may have been produced, is quite a controversial issue. It could have been for a pilgrim who was travelling to the Holy Land and wanted the icon as a souvenir perhaps. Or it could have been something more personal because he would have wanted something similar, a rescue of a beloved person. Or again, could have been somebody named George, having a miracle of his name saint who would have been his protector watching over him.

ROBIN CORMACK

01:26 In this case I think that the artist travelled from Paris producing pilgrimage works on the way as he went through Cyprus, through Acca, and then over the desert to Sinai and so we have, as it were, a profile of a travelling artist, working particularly for Western pilgrims.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

01:49 You have to imagine these troops that came over the Holy Land were not purely military, they were a motley crew, they had priests, and they had obviously women following them. They had artists. They had people of who were seeking a fortune. A lot of people were following the military troops, because it was quite safe to travel with soldiers, so a lot of people, including artists, came over to the land.

ROBIN CORMACK

02:14 My suspicion is that the artist worked at the Monastery of St Catherine's on Mount Sinai, which was one of the most elite sources of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. Many people went to Jerusalem and to other sacred places in the Holy Land, but only the most exclusive, and mostly men, went to Sinai. I think that they either took icons with them to give as donations to the monastery or they purchased icons at the monastery, they were for sale and they may have brought them back.

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU

02:52 We also had the local artists, people who were already in the Holy Land working as artists and, of course, we also have the people who came from Byzantine, from Constantinople, for the same reasons, to make a fortune, and we have this basically melting pot where everything meets; different cultures, East meets West, and you have different people working on this site, and that is why it so hybrid this art.

ROBIN CORMACK

03:16 To me one of the surprising things about working at Sinai is to realise the extraordinary amount of movement of peoples in the Middle Ages – artists, traders, pilgrims. So that the impression you get from this is of immigrants to the East who are highly impressed by what they see, they don't impose their own traditions on the East, they take over, they choose parts of the traditions in the East and make a new kind of art which is just distinctive over this short time.