The Homilies of Iakovos of the Kokkinobaphou Monastery

Kallirroe Linardou

The Kokkinobaphos manuscripts – *Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1162, hereafter referred to as V[aticanus], and *Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Par. gr. 1208, hereafter referred to as P[arisinus] – are well-known among Byzantine scholars for their text and above all for their decoration.1 In its present state of preservation, V is bound in a single volume and consists of 194 parchment folios of excellent quality. The text was written carefully in a regular, clear and large minuscule script, on ruled leaves, in one column of 23 lines, in dark brown ink by a single scribe/calligrapher.2 The illustration of the codex is preserved in an excellent condition. It consists of six full-page frontispieces, six decorated headpieces, 70 miniatures incorporating approximately 130 different illustrated episodes (all miniatures are painted on ruled leaves), and 82 decorated initials. P is bound in a single volume and consists of 261 parchment folios of high quality. The text was written carefully, in a regular, large and clear minuscule script, on ruled leaves, in a single column of 21 lines. The illustration of the codex is preserved in a very good condition except for some minor abrasions on the painted surface. It consists of a full-page introductory miniature with the portrait of Iakovos, six full-page frontispieces, six narrow decorated headpieces, 66 miniatures (all miniatures are painted on ruled leaves), and 78 decorated initials.

These two richly illuminated and almost identical Byzantine books of the 12th century were commissioned in a prominent Constantinopolitan work-

---


2 In his palaeographical analysis of the script in V.P. Canart reported a resemblance with the work of the scribe Arsenios, a monk of the monastery of Prodromou Petras in Constantinople. He also noticed that the script in V bears a resemblance with the script in P and tentatively suggested that both copies might have been written by the same scribe. See Hutter/Canart, *Marienhomiliar*, p. 88, n. 15.
They each contain six sermons of the monk Iakovos of the Kokkinobaphou monastery on the early life of the Virgin Mary, namely her Conception, Nativity and Presentation, her betrothal to Joseph, the Annunciation and finally the Visitation, Joseph's doubts and the public demonstration of her innocence.

Iakovos's six illustrated sermons on the life of Mary, a theological treatise on the Holy Spirit and a collection of 43 letters addressed to a well-known female member of the Komnenian court of the 12th century, Eirene the Sevastokratorissa (c.1110-c.1152), constitute the corpus of his works to have survived today. The secure identification of the author of the sermons was achieved after the study of his epistles, and Iakovos is believed to have lived and worked during the first half of the 12th century or shortly thereafter. The documentation and precise whereabouts of the Kokkinobaphos monastery remain inconclusive to this day, although scholars appear to favour the hypothesis that the monastery must have been located in the environs of the Byzantine capital.

Both Kokkinobaphos manuscripts are luxurious books preserved in an excellent condition. The visual effects achieved through the shining colours and gold leaf applied lavishly on frontispieces, miniatures, headpieces and decorated initials testify to the extravagant taste involved in their manufacture and the abundance of materials the commissioners had at their disposal.

The position of prominence, though, that both manuscripts have been accorded in Byzantine art lies in reasons other than the sumptuousness of their execution. The back bone of the narration, which is expounded in six sermons/chapters is the apocryphal account of the Protevangelion of James (ca. beginning of the 3rd century). They both recount vividly the early life of Mary from her conception until the public demonstration of her innocence and have been supplemented by a continuous visual narrative of miniatures, interspersed within the homiletic text, and six additional typological frontispieces (full-page miniatures) representing biblical theophanies (visions of God) and introducing each sermon. This is the most extensive Marian cycle to

---

3 Ibid., p. 17.
5 For Eirene see Varzos, *Η Γενεαλογία*, vol. 1, pp. 357-79; see also Jeffreys, “The Sebastokratorissa Eirene as patron”.
8 For the original Greek text, a scholar's translation, introduction and further bibliography see, James, *The Protoevangelion*, ed./trans. R.F. Hock, pp. 8-13, 32-77 and 78-81.