COPTIC WORKS OF ART BEARING DEPICTIONS OF THE RAPE OF EUROPA

A.Y. KAKOVKIN

One of the elements in the art of the Egyptian Christians (Copts) was the Graeco-Roman artistic tradition, which quickly took root and became firmly established in the valley of the Nile. This is clearly borne out by the popularity of Classical motifs, heroes and subjects in Coptic art up until the beginning of the II millennium AD.1

This article will focus attention on just one group of Coptic works of art — those on which the Rape of Europa is depicted — one specific subject from the unusually rich repertoire of Graeco-Roman mythology and literature. This myth was very popular and it was recounted by Moschus of Syracuse (Moschus, I. Idyl.), Apollodorus (Biblioth. III. 1.1-2; 3.2; 4.2) and Ovid (Metamorph. II. 24-48)2. The literary basis for artists was provided by a Greek myth, according to which Zeus — the father of the Gods and men — fell in love with the “Phoenician princess” Europa. Bewitched by her beauty and eager to captivate the maiden, Zeus turned himself into a bull and carried Europa on his back to the island of Crete, where they celebrated their marriage. This is how Lucian tells the story: “Europa was walking along the sea-shore playing with female companions of her own age: Zeus, after assuming the appearance of a bull came up to them, as if

1 The literature devoted to the assimilation of the Classical heritage by Christians in Egypt is extensive. The main works on this subjected are listed in my article “The classical heritage in the art of Coptic Egypt”, VDI, 1996, No. 1.

2 For translations of classical texts telling of the Rape of Europe see: A.F. Losev, Antichnaya mifologiya v istoricheskom razvitii (Classical Mythology in its Historical Development), Moscow 1957; P. Ovidii Nazon, Metamorphoses (Book II, Moscow-Leningrad, 1937, pp. 335-338; Moschus of Syracuse, “Europa” in Feokrit, Moskh, Bion — Idilli i epigrammy (Theocritus, Moschus and Bion — Idylls and Epigrams), Moscow, 1958, pp. 151-156; Apollodorus, Mifologicheskaya biblioteka (Library of Myths), Leningrad, 1972, pp. 48, 50f. 162f; For a paraphrase of the myth according to Moschus see: I. Trencheni-Valdapfrel, Mifologiya (Mythology), Moscow, 1959, pp. 144-146. The fragment of a tragedy by Aeschylus has survived entitled: “The Carians or Europa” (see: Aeschylus Tragedii [Tragedies], Moscow, 1989, pp. 293f). See also: O. Jahn, “Entführung der Europa”, Dankschrift: Bildwerke in Rom, 1881, II, pp. 379f; J. Vürteim, Europa, Amsterdam, 1924.

3 According to the Ovid version Europa was the daughter of the Phoenician king, Agenor and, according to Homer, the daughter of Phoenix.

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to join in their game. The bull was magnificent and of an unblemished white, with gracefully curved horns and his gaze was so gentle! He gambolled along the shore and lowed so sweetly that Europa decided to sit on his back. As soon as she had done that, Zeus ran towards the sea with her, rushed into the water and began to swim. Europa, frightened by this turn of events, clasped one of the bull's horns with her left hand and with the other held down her garment blown about by the wind. . . Yet, what followed was more pleasant many times over . . . Suddenly, the waves died down and a gentle calm settled over the sea. . . Cupids, whose feet hardly touched the water, began to fly just above the waves, holding burning torches and singing marriage hymns. Nereids, dived forth from out of the water, all naked to the waist and sitting on dolphins as they applauded the procession. The Tritons and all other creatures of the sea, who are a delight to the eyes, formed a circle round the maiden. In front of them all sped Poseidon with Amphitrite on his chariot, making a path for his brother swimming behind him. Last of all and borne by two Tritons harnessed to a shell rode Aphrodite, showering the bride with all manner of blossoms. This was how the procession made its way from Phoenicia as far as Crete. When they had reached the island, the bull suddenly disappeared and Zeus, taking Europa by the hand, led the blushing maiden with lowered gaze into the Dictaean cave: she already knew what lay in store for her . . ."

The subject of the rape of Europa gave artists great scope for many different compositional variations. The detailed entry by Martin Robertson devoted to Europa in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* and the accompanying illustrations (numbering over 200) of works of art ranging from the Archaic period to the middle of the first millennium AD (most of which illustrate the actual rape of Europe) make it unnecessary for me to examine the Classical works of art or outline the emergence and typology of this subject. Attention can therefore be focused from the outset on works by Coptic craftsmen, which were not included in Robertson's entry or in works by other authors devoted to the same subject.

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4 This passage has been taken from Lucian's "Dialogues of Marine Deities" (translated by S.S. Lukyanov) and it reproduces the dialogue between Zephyrus and Notus (Lukian, *Izbrannye ateisticheskie proizvedeniya* [Selected Atheistic Works], Moscow, 1995, pp. 96f)).


6 Coptic articles were not represented either at the large exhibition held in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1988 devoted to the Rape of Europa (*Die Verführung der Europa*, Frankfurt a.M., 1988). There is not