



The Depiction of “*Proskynesis*” Attitude as Intercessory Body Posture: An Application to Egyptian-Christian Art and Heritage

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ABSTRACT

Intercession can be defined as “a prayer with, for, and on behalf of another person, group, or even the world, undertaken by an individual or a group.” In Biblical accounts of prayer, various body postures are mentioned. For instance, Abraham fell upon his face before God (Genesis 17:3, 17); Moses prayed with his hands outstretched (Exodus 9:27–29); King Solomon knelt in prayer (I Kings 8:54); and Jesus prayed looking up into heaven (Mark 6:41).

Proskynesis, encompassing gestures that range from bowing down to complete prostration, has been practiced before God, rulers, or revered individuals. This gesture has been employed in Coptic art since as early as the 6th century AD. to convey the act of seeking intercession. The act of Proskynesis has been depicted in various scenes and on a wide array of materials, such as scenes of Christ’s miracles, depictions involving Coptic saints (seeking their intercession), and representations of the Holy Virgin Mary. In the context of Coptic culture, the concept of intercession was initially expressed in verbal forms before transitioning into artistic representations. This evolution is evident in some of the earliest Coptic manuscripts, such as those preserved in the Nag Hammadi library, dating back to the 4th century AD.

In Coptic heritage, there is also a significant contemporary practice known as prostration, or metanias (bowing). This physical act of reverence is deeply relevant to the concept of intercession. Through prostration, believers’ express humility and submission before God, seeking His intercession and guidance in their prayers and supplications.

INTRODUCTION

This research aims to explore the intricate concept of intercession within the context of Christian art in Egypt by examining historical, biblical, and artistic representations. This study investigates how proskynesis, as an intercessory body posture, is reflected in various physical expressions, including kneeling, bowing, laying prostrate, and raising hands. These acts symbolise humility and submission in the pursuit of divine intercession. Ultimately, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how intercessory practices have been articulated and visually represented in Christian art in Egypt.

To clarify this issue, an analytical comparative method is employed to clarify this issue, focusing on visual representations across diverse forms of Christian iconography. The study analyses the development of proskynesis from its roots in ancient Egyptian practices—as both a concept and a physical expression—to its adaptation in Greco-Roman and Christian art in Egypt. This research aims to reveal the cultural and theological implications embedded in these body postures, emphasizing how these artistic expressions communicate the faithful’s reverence and requests for intercession.

In examining the proskynesis attitude in Christian art in Egypt, this study hones in on Egypt itself. This geographical focus enables us to trace the origins of the practice to ancient Egyptian customs and investigate whether it was genuinely employed in that context. We then transition to the Greco-Roman period, where proskynesis was reinterpreted to assume new significance. It evolved to venerate prominent figures and saints, mirroring the shifts in the religious landscape and the community's yearning for intercession before God. These geographical and temporal constraints profoundly influence our understanding of proskynesis within the region's broader cultural and artistic framework.

PROSKYNESIS; ENTOMOLOGY AND MEANING

According to modern etymologists, the term Προσκυνέω is a compound verb comprising the prefix προς- and the ε-contract verb κυνέω (Bevan, 2015, p. 31). This verb was traditionally used to convey the act of worshipping deities or demonstrating obedience to rulers (Berthe, College, 1936, p. 272). In its general sense, κυνέω signifies “to kiss” or “to prostrate,” encompassing actions such as kissing the ground, honouring through prostration, or throwing kisses by hand. The compound verb carries a strong religious connotation, often associated with veneration or worship. A notable reference to the use of proskynesis can be found in the writings of Philo, who employed the term eleven times to describe acts of falling down, prostrating, and greeting (Berthe, College, 1936, p. 272; Rung, 2020, p. 40).

PROSKYNESIS IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN LITURGY, LITERATURE AND ART

Throughout ancient Egyptian history, proskynesis, both as a term and a body posture, conveyed various meanings and impressions in literature, liturgy, and iconography. Primarily, proskynesis embodied two fundamental meanings: worship and obedience. This act is evident in scenes depicting kings before gods or individuals before high-ranking officials. It also encompassed a range of body postures, varying from bowing to complete prostration (Kafafi, 2021, p. 20.)



Fig.1

Papyrus scroll, British Museum, Third Intermediate Period
 It shows a lady in a prostration gesture before the eye of Horus
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10018-1

The earliest mention of the term prostration in ancient Egyptian literature appears in spell 755b of the Pyramid Texts: “*The souls come to thee bowing; they kiss the earth at thy feet.*” This term also conveyed the notion of homage, as reflected in the king’s address to his officials: “*Don’t kiss the earth; kiss my foot*” (Hamid, 2016, p. 1). The renowned Egyptian tale, *The Shipwrecked Sailor*, which is part of Middle Kingdom literature, is considered the earliest

known text to describe the posture of lying on the ground (Eissa, 2021, p. 76) and Proskynesis as a leitmotif. Within the narrative, the sailor recounts being “on [his] belly in [the] presence” of an enormous serpent, symbolizing the immense physical presence of the serpent-deity (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, 2023).

A passage from the daily temple liturgy of Karnak demonstrates how this practice constituted a fundamental aspect of daily worship. A section of this text reads: “*The incantation for kissing the ground (sn t3) that directly precedes the incantation for seeing God (m33 ntr) instructs the prophet to say, ‘As I kiss the ground, even so do I embrace Geb.’*” This passage suggests that the act of Proskynesis, combined with the symbolic embracing of Geb (the earth), was an integral component of the temple’s rituals (Matthew, 2013, p. 66; Oppenheim, 2015, p. 279). The phrase, “*Utterance of kissing the ground placing himself upon the belly to kiss the ground,*” was one of the royal worshipping formulas associated with King Seti I (Ellen, 2006, pp. 179–196). However, the only king depicted performing this actual pose was King Akhenaten (Eissa, 2021, p. 77). Furthermore, numerous scenes from the New Kingdom’s daily life portray individuals and workers in prostration postures before high-ranking officials, symbolizing respect and obedience. In the tombs of Menkheperreseneb and Rekhmire, Aegean figures are depicted in a prostration gesture, presenting Aegean objects to the tomb owners (Uroš, 2023, p. 653).

The ritual act of prostration endured into the later centuries of ancient Egyptian religious practices. The temple of the goddess Isis on Philae Island (Aswan, Egypt) contains a collection of graffiti texts inscribed by pilgrims who visited the site. These inscriptions record their personal prayers and, on many occasions, include references to the act of ‘prostration’.¹

PROSKYNESIS IN GRECO-ROMAN CIVILIZATION

Various scholarly resources provide detailed insights into the concept of *proskynesis* and its perception by different authors and their contemporaries. Herodotus, for instance, describes *proskynesis* as an act of respect shown to individuals of higher rank. He explains, “If the difference in rank be but little, it is the cheek that is kissed; if it be great, the humbler bows down and does obeisance to the other.” In another account, Herodotus recounts the story of Spartan soldiers who refused to perform *proskynesis* before a Persian king, emphasizing their cultural resistance to such a gesture. This refusal illustrates how the Greeks associated this posture with divine reverence rather than human hierarchy (Bevan, 2015, p. 32).

During Diocletian’s reign, *proskynesis* was established as a formal ritual involving the act of kissing the imperial purple. (Corcoran, 2008, p. 235). Beginning with his rule, Roman emperors increasingly adopted various Persian customs, including elaborate court ceremonies and gestures that emphasized the divine authority of the ruler. (‘Azmah,2017, p.93), (Vučković,2023, P.45), (Blachford,2024, P.86). Another notable example is Emperor Caligula, who mandated *proskynesis* to himself, portraying the act as one of worship toward his deified persona (Bevan, 2015, p. 34).

Coptic art utilized a variety of body postures to convey a wide range of meanings. Body language plays a significant role in communicating messages, both explicitly and implicitly. Coptic artists employed different degrees of *proskynesis*—from bowing to complete prostration—to symbolize intercession, veneration, and worship. Prayer is broadly defined as the act of seeking communication with God for various purposes, such as worship, seeking guidance, confessing sins, or expressing personal thoughts and emotions. Intercession, as a specific form of prayer, involves urgently appealing to God on behalf of another person (Bustrum & Lampport, 2011).

According to the Holy Bible, intercession is defined as “*a prayer with, for, and on behalf of another person, group, or people, or even the world, undertaken by an individual or group.*” Another interpretation describes intercession as “*a petitionary prayer on behalf of others*”, which may include sinners, the sick, or those in distress (Wakefield, 1983, p. 309). The Old Testament contains numerous examples of intercessory prayers offered on behalf of entire communities, such as those by Moses and the patriarchs (Gen. 18:22-32; Exod. 5:22-32; 32:11-13) and by David (2 Sam. 12:16-17). Additionally, intercessory prayers by prophets can be found in passages like (Amos 7:1-6) and (Ezekiel 9:8; 11:13). There are also instances of intercessory prayers made for individuals, as seen in (1 Kings 17:20-21) and (2 Kings 4:32-33). In the New Testament, Jesus Christ serves as the ultimate guide and sole instructor of prayer. The Gospel of Luke highlights various occasions where Christ himself prayed, including during his baptism, the calling of his disciples, his crucifixion, and his transfiguration.

During the early days of the Church, prayers were primarily directed either to God (1 Cor. 1:4; 1:3) or through Christ, based on the understanding that God’s grace was obtained through Him, positioning Christ as a mediator (Rom. 10:9-13; 1 Cor. 1:9). Furthermore, Christ himself is portrayed as an intercessor, praying on behalf of the saints (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). In Coptic culture, the concept of intercession was initially expressed through words before being reflected in art. Early Coptic manuscripts from Nag Hammadi, dating to the 4th Century A.D., and Greek fragments from Oxyrhynchus, dating to the 3rd Century A.D., reveal a profound interest among Coptic Christians in the name of God. This emphasis is regarded as the fine line connecting Coptic healing practices with popular Coptic magic (Lasser, 2011, p. 153).

The belief in the healing powers of divine titles is a longstanding tradition among Egyptian Christians. These enigmatic divine names are still preserved in numerous prayer scrolls, which also feature prominent intercessors revered by the Copts, such as Archangel Gabriel and the Evangelists. These scrolls often depict women praying for healing and children praying for their dying mothers. Such materials are invaluable, as they provide significant insights into the lives and spiritual practices of early ordinary Coptic people (Lasser, 2011, p. 153). Early Coptic art offers some of the earliest depictions of proskynesis. A notable example comes from a scene found in the Monastery of St. Jeremiah at the Saqqara necropolis. This scene portrays a row of four haloed male saints in a frontal position.

On the far left, a saint is depicted standing in the prayer pose known as “*orante*,” with his left hand touching the nimbus of the saint beside him. He is shown with long flowing hair that leaves his ears visible, large eyes, and a long white beard. The inclusion of a palm tree and the saint’s nudity suggest that he might be Saint Onophrios. The second saint, identified by inscriptions as Apa Makarios, also called “*the Pneumatophoros*” (meaning “*the bearer of the spirit*”), is depicted holding a red codex in his left hand, with his right hand resting on it—symbolizing the Holy Bible. He is portrayed with a nimbus around his head, short white hair that leaves his ears visible, large staring eyes, and thick eyebrows. The third saint in this scene is the most prominent figure. According to the inscriptions, he is identified as Saint Apollo (The Great). He is depicted in a prayer posture, haloed, with a relatively short, curly white beard. At his feet, a male figure is shown in a proskynesis posture. The identity of this figure remains unknown, and he is not considered a saint for several reasons. First, he is depicted without a halo, a direct symbol of sanctity. Second, the figure is rendered on a much smaller scale compared to the four saints, indicating a position of inferiority. Third—and perhaps the most challenging aspect of interpreting this scene—is how to justify this specific body posture of proskynesis.

To accurately interpret this posture, we must ask why a person would perform proskynesis before a saint. The most direct answer is veneration. Saints are regarded as being in a higher spiritual position than ordinary people—closer to God, more pious, and capable of interceding and praying on behalf of others. This elevated status is precisely why saints are venerated. The figure is shown in a position that suggests he is about to kiss the feet of Saint Apollo, symbolizing a request for blessings and intercession. (Fig.1).



Fig. 2

Wall painting, Coptic Museum, Cairo, Egypt, 6th century AD.

Gabra, G. (2007). *Treasures of Coptic Art: in the Coptic Museum and Churches of Old Cairo*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Intercession was sought from both male and female saints in Coptic tradition. One icon features Saint Irene, depicted in a frontal posture, wearing a blue chiton, a cherry-red omophorion, and red shoes. She holds a cross in her left hand, symbolizing her martyrdom, and a handkerchief in her right. Her face bears traditional Coptic features, characterized by large eyes, an elongated nose, and a small, delicate face. At the bottom of the icon, the donor is represented wearing a light brown robe, a light beard and moustache, and a black mantle. He is shown in a Proskynesis position, bowing deeply with his head turned toward the ground in a gesture of veneration. Inscriptions on the icon identify him as Nikolas Sab Atianos.

Saint John of Damascus eloquently describes the veneration of saints, emphasizing their spiritual significance and the reverence they inspire among the faithful:

“The saints are the sons of God, sons of the kingdom, the co-heirs of God. And of the Christ. Therefore, I venerate the saints and glorify them: slaves and friends, and the co-heirs of Christ, slaves by nature, friends by choice, Sons and heirs by Divine grace” (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015, p. 90)



Fig. 3

Icon of Saints George Diasorities with the donor George Parisis

The Holy Monastery of Saint Catharine, Sinai, Egypt. 8/9th Century, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.). (2015). *Age of Transition: Byzantine Culture in the Islamic World*. New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

According to the Vita Macarii, during Saint Macarius the Great's celebration of the liturgy, a cherub appeared to him and guided him to a place in the desert where he could reside. This cherub is depicted in a wall painting, holding the saint's hand and leading him to his seat, symbolizing the recounted story. The angel is portrayed as almost the same size as the saint, with attentive eyes, thick eyebrows, a long, straight nose, and a small mouth. Its right hand is open, while his left hand holds St. Macarius's wrist.

Saint Macarius the Great is depicted standing, facing the viewer, with a pointed, medium-length white beard, a halo above his head, and his left hand raised prayerfully. The surrounding architecture suggests he is standing under an arch. To the right of his head is a Syriac inscription reading “[AB] ba Maqari the Great.” Below him is a smaller figure whose identification remains unclear due to the lack of inscriptions. However, based on the halo surrounding his head, we can infer that he is a monk.

The monk is shown with a white beard and hair, and his clothing is nearly identical to that of St. Macarius. He is depicted in a proskynesis-like position, with both hands pointing to the ground and two-thirds of his torso turned toward his patron saint. This representation is distinctive because it depicts a monk bending to another monk rather than the typical depiction of a supplicant or intercession seeker (Inneme, Ochała & Ochała, 2016, p.150).



Fig.4

Wall painting, Deir Al-Surian, Wadi El Natrun, Egypt, 889 AD. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Karel C. Innemée for generously providing these images of two newly discovered wall paintings from Deir Al-Surian.

Another example, echoing earlier depictions, portrays Christ enthroned, holding a book in his left hand while raising his right in a gesture of blessing. However, the composition of the surrounding figures deviates from the traditional Deësis. In this version, the Holy Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist are absent, replaced by bowing angels and supplicant saints.

A haloed figure, possibly a monk, is depicted in the lower left of the scene. While his exact identity remains uncertain due to the lack of accompanying inscriptions, he is speculated to be St. Maqari or his son, Youhanna. This figure is dressed in a manner similar to the saint seated to his right. Uniquely, this seated saint, unlike other saints typically depicted in Deësis compositions, mirrors the posture of a supplicant, making the same gesture of prayer and intercession for others before Christ (Innemée, 2023, p. 27).

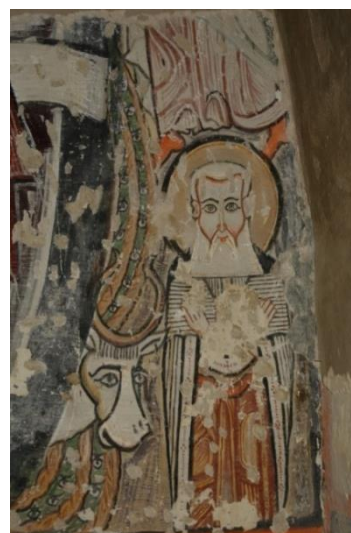


Fig.5

Wall painting, Deir Al-Surian, Wadi El Natrun, Egypt. 12th century

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Karel C. Innemée for generously providing these images of two newly discovered wall paintings from Deir Al-Surian

Proskynesis was a frequent act performed before Christ in the Holy Bible, symbolizing reverence and recognition of His divinity as both God and the Davidic King. This act was also how His supplicants, both Jews and Gentiles, sought His intercession.

One specific scene depicts Christ standing, adorned with a cruciform halo, holding a book most likely the Bible with his left hand and blessing the woman before Him with His right hand. Christ is portrayed with a black beard, a moustache, and relatively long hair. In the background, a representation of a town symbolizes the location where Christ encountered the Canaanite woman, near Tyre and Sidon. The depiction includes domes, representing the buildings of the two towns, and a date palm tree, referencing the regions' association with dates.

The woman is shown in a proskynesis posture at Christ's feet, with her head and palms touching

the ground and her face slightly turned toward the viewer. She approached Christ to plead for the healing of her daughter, who was afflicted by demonic possession. Behind her, three men are depicted standing and conversing with Christ. These figures are unlikely to be disciples, as they are portrayed without halos, distinguishing them from the sanctified.²

The Arabic writings say:
 “المرأة الكنعانية وهي ساجده للمسيح”
 “The Canaanite woman prostrate before Christ.”



Fig.6

Manuscript of the Canaanite woman and Christ, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 12th Century AD.
<ark:/12148/btv1b52508833q>. Retrieved from <ark:/12148/btv1b52508833q>

Intercession has been a prominent theme in Christian art since its earliest expressions. Various scenes, featuring a range of body postures can be traced back to Byzantine art beginning in the eighth century (Cormack, 2018). The concept of intercession is visually represented by figures such as Christ, the Holy Virgin Mary, the angels, and the saints, depicted as intercessors alongside those seeking their intercession. These representations appear across various materials (Beckwith, 1986).

One of the most notable manifestations of this idea in art is Deësis. This composition typically portrays Christ standing or enthroned, flanked by the Holy Virgin Mary on his right and St. John the Baptist on his left (Van Loon, 1999, p. 313). Angels, while not depicted in the same postures, are often shown with bent backs, signifying reverence, either in the presence of Christ himself (Bolman, 2002, p. 65) or the cross, symbolizing Christ (Bolman, 2002, p. 77).

In the iconic Deësis composition, Christ is seated on a throne, holding a Gospel in his left hand and making a blessing sign with his right. Surrounding him are saints, angels, and the two primary intercessors, the Holy Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist. Mary and John are typically shown standing, with their hands raised toward Christ, interceding for humanity.

In variations of this composition that include saints and angels, these figures often adopt similar postures, reinforcing the theme of prayer and intercession.

A striking example of this concept is found in a scene from St. Anthony's Monastery, located in the apse of the Church of the Four Incorporeal Creatures. Here, Christ is depicted as the Pantocrator, seated on a throne, holding the Bible in his left hand and raising his right hand in

a gesture of blessing. To Christ's right, the Holy Virgin Mary, and to his left, St. John the Baptist, are shown in intercessory postures, gazing toward Christ. The four incorporeal creatures also adopt similar body postures, emphasizing their roles in intercession.

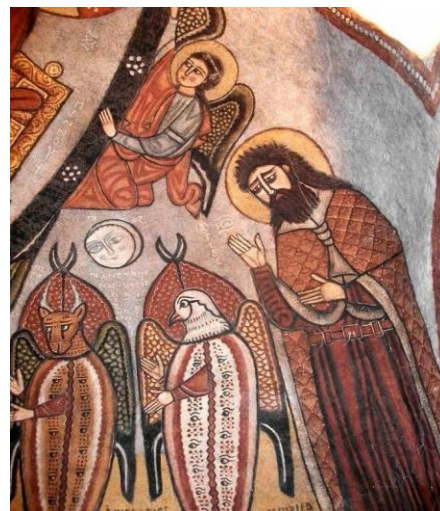


Fig. 7

Wall painting, 1232/33 AD. St. Anthony Monastery, Church of the Four Incorporeal Creatures, Red Sea, Egypt

Bolman, Elizabeth S., Godeau, Patrick, *Monastic Visions: Wall paintings in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea*. American Research Center in Egypt/Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2002, p.31,72

At Saint Catherine's Monastery, notable examples of Coptic iconography depict both the intercessor and those seeking intercession. One such example features Saint Sergius, shown seated on his Western saddle, holding a Crusader flag and the reins of his horse. The icon incorporates several characteristic elements of Crusader art, including a diadem within his halo, chainmail armour over a blue tunic, and red leggings paired with matching shoes. The horse is depicted in a dynamic stance while a female figure kneels, holding the saint's foot.

The similarities between Saint Sergius carrying a red-crossed flag and the paintings of Qara are significant. Lucy-Anne Hunt explored this connection in her study on Crusader art and native artists, noting parallels with wall paintings in Lebanon, such as those in the Church of Mar Tadros in Bahdeidat. She concluded that these icons likely originated from Syrian Orthodox circles in the County of Tripoli (Immerzeel, 2024, p. 29).

A kneeling woman is depicted at the saint's feet, in a proskynesis posture. She holds his right shoe and places her cheek upon it, seemingly seeking his blessing. This gesture could be interpreted as a reflection of the donor's plea for intercession. The woman, possibly a widow or a mother, is dressed in a long, wide blue dress with long sleeves and a black veil draped over her back. The icon may have been a gift from a pilgrim (Evans, 2004, p. 374).



Fig.8

Icon of Saint Sergios, The Holy Monastery of Saint Catharine, Sinai, Egypt, 1250-1275 AD
 Evans, H. C. (2004). *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*. New York, NY; New Haven, CT: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, P.374

Another icon from St. Catherine's Monastery portrays two saints against a golden background: Saint George and Saint Theodore Stratelates. Saint George is depicted as a young, beardless soldier, while Saint Theodore is portrayed with a distinctive two-pointed beard. Both are shown riding their horses above a smaller male pilgrim, identified in inscriptions as George Parisis. The pilgrim, depicted with a beard, thick hair, and a brown robe, gazes upward at his patron saint while raising his hands in a proskynesis-like gesture, symbolizing his plea for intercession. The accompanying inscriptions, attributed to the donor, read "pray for me,"

confirming that the pilgrim is seeking Saint George's intercession. This representation of interceding figures on a much smaller scale, with raised hands and either kneeling or standing, is a common motif found in multiple examples of knight saints depicted in wall paintings and icons.

Saint George is shown seated on an elegant Western saddle, gazing directly at the viewer. He holds a long black staff with a flag bearing a red cross and wears a diadem within his halo that frames his thick, curly hair. His attire includes a long dark blue tunic, dark red leggings, and black boots. A red chlamys drapes over the left side of his body and flows in a flame-like shape behind him.

Saint Theodore is similarly dressed, wearing a red chlamys that takes on the same flame-like appearance, flying behind him. However, his head is turned toward Saint George. The two saints are depicted without weapons, emphasizing that they are part of a ceremonial parade rather than engaged in battle with an evil creature. This icon is believed to have been executed either at Sinai or in Acre (Evans, 2011, pp. 316–317).



Fig.9

Icon of Saints George Diasorities with the donor George Parisi, The Holy Monastery of Saint Catharine, Sinai, Egypt, 13th century, Evans, H. C. (2004). *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*. New York, NY; New Haven, CT: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press, P.376

The concept of intercession continued to be prominently featured in Coptic icons. This is evident not only in the iconography but also in the accompanying inscriptions from the icon's owner or executor, who would often request the saint's intercession and mercy. For instance, the phrase, "*Lord recompense in Your Kingdom of Heaven him who toiled,*" is a recurring theme in such inscriptions (Langen, 1991, pp. 2081–2087).

Coptic and Islamic dates began appearing on icons from the second half of the Eighteenth Century. During this period, prayers with Arabic inscriptions also became prevalent. One

frequently repeated phrase was “أذكر يارب تعب عبدك” (Remember, O Lord, the labor of Your servant). The practice of seeking intercession from saints continued to influence contemporary Coptic tradition, highlighting the enduring connection between faith, art, and devotional practices. An icon of the Archangel Gabriel, dating to 1493 AM/1777 AD and created by Ibrahim al-Nasikh, is preserved in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. This icon features an intercessory prayer text that the donor may have requested. The prayer reads:

اشفع فينا يا ريس الملائكة الجليل ميخائيل

عوض يارب من له تعب في ملكوت السموات

“Intercede for us, Archangel Michael

Lord, recompense in Your Kingdom of Heaven him who toiled”

(Gabra, Eaton-Krauss 2007, 211), (van Moorsel. P. et al. 1991, 24-25 nr 17, Pl. 4b.)



Fig.10

Icon of archangel Michael, Coptic Museum, Cairo, Egypt, 18th Century

(Gabra, Eaton-Krauss 2007, 211)

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina preserves an early 7th-Century letter written by a widow to a bishop, pleading for his intervention against the Persian authorities who were threatening to deprive her of her house and cattle. This letter, inscribed on a large limestone ostrakon, vividly reflects the widow’s desperate appeal. She writes:

Ϡ̅ ⲛⲱⲣⲛ ⲙⲉⲛ Ϡ̅ⲁⲥⲣⲁⲗⲉ ⲛⲡⲉ-
 ϗⲓⲟⲥ ⲛⲟϥⲣⲏⲧⲉ ⲉⲧⲟϥⲁⲁⲃ ⲛ̅ⲧⲉⲕ-
 ⲙ̅ⲏⲧⲉⲓⲱⲧ ⲛ̅ⲙⲁⲓⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ ϗ̅ⲛ ⲟϥⲙⲉ
 ⲁϥⲱ ⲉⲧⲡⲣⲉⲥⲃⲉϥⲉ ϗ̅ⲁⲣⲟⲛ ⲛ̅ⲏⲁⲗⲣ̅ⲙ̅ ⲡⲏⲟϥⲧⲉ

“First, I embrace the sweetness of the holy feet of our truly God-Loving fatherliness, who intercedes for us before God” (Bagnall, 2006, 242, 243).

The aforementioned introductory greeting of the letter provides two significant insights. Firstly, when the body posture accompanying these words is envisioned, it can only be imagined as proskynesis. Secondly, the widow explicitly acknowledges that the bishop “prays before God for them,” which, in essence, confirms his role as an intercessor.

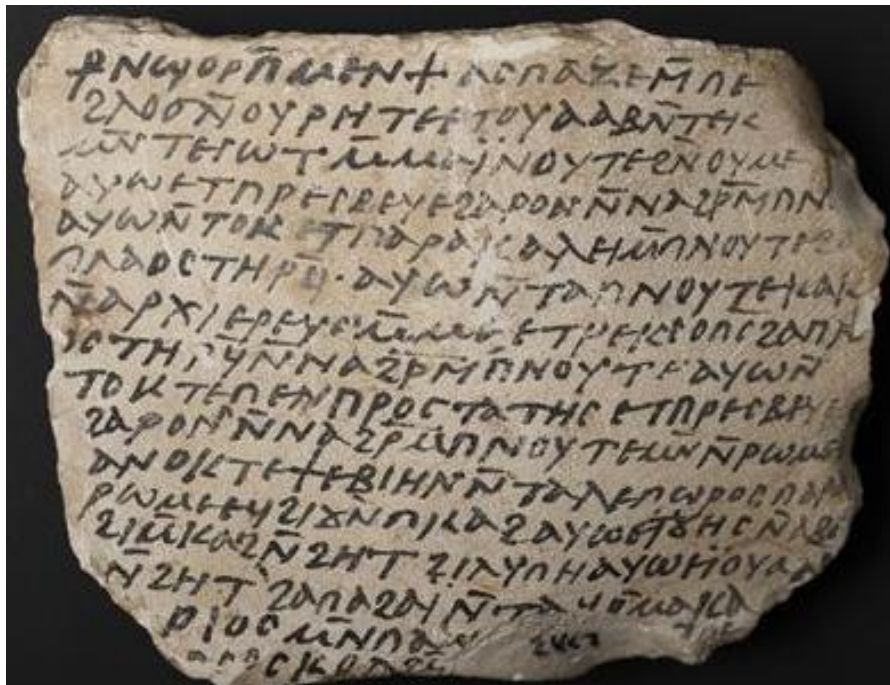


Fig. 11

Limestone Ostrakon, Antiquities Museum, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt, 7th Century

<https://antiquities.bibalex.org/Collection/Detail.aspx?lang=en&a=923>

This letter is not an isolated case. The Louvre Museum preserves two additional letters that include descriptions of proskynesis in their introductory sections. The first letter is from Hello (referred to as “the most humble one”) to the most holy God-bearer, Apa Pesynthius, the bishop. In the introduction, Hello states: “Before everything, I embrace the feet of your fatherly saintliness.” Fig.12

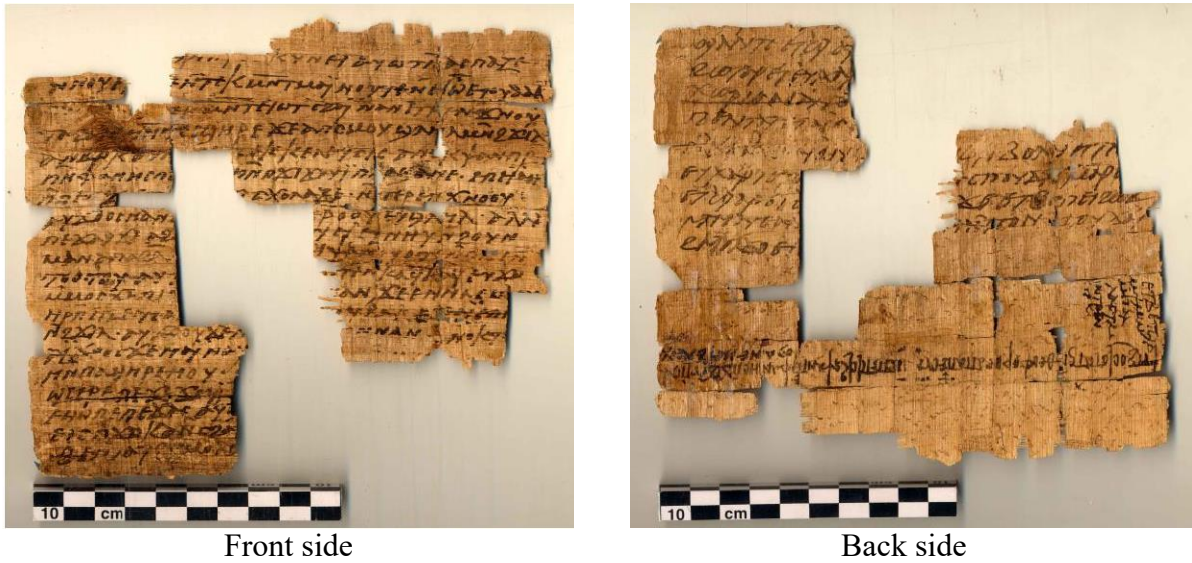


Fig. 12

Coptic letter from Apa Pesynthius’s collections, Louvre Museum.

The second letter is from “Psan the priest, Phanes, and Pdjidjoui the headman, these most humble ones,” addressed to the most holy God-bearer, Apa Pesynthius, the bishop. Psan begins the letter with the words: “*Before everything, we prostrate ourselves and embrace the feet of your holy, fatherly piety*” (Revillout, 1900, p. 150).³ Fig.13.



Fig. 13

Coptic letter from Apa Pesynthius’s collections, Louvre Museum.

INTERCESSION IN COPTIC TRADITION

In contemporary Coptic tradition, the act of *proskynesis*, or reverential bowing, continues to find expression through the practice of seeking the intercession of saints. While the gesture originated in ancient traditions as an act of respect or worship, its essence endures in the veneration of saints. Through intercessory practices, Copts maintain a tangible connection to their faith, invoking saints as intermediaries between themselves and the divine. The practice of intercession plays a significant role in daily devotions. The miracles attributed to saints are considered evidence of their intercessory power, which Copts believe they can invoke on their behalf. Every Copt is thought to have a personal intercessor whom they turn to for help during times of hardship, catastrophe, or oppression. Notably, some saints are venerated not only by Copts but also by Muslims, who make vows in their names and seek their intercession. This practice remains widespread in several regions. This practice is prevalent in the following areas:

Saints' Relics

The belief in the miraculous power of relics, particularly those of saints, was widespread in both the East and the West. By the 5th Century, the veneration of relics had become a common practice. St. Shenoute, however, wrote an entire treatise criticizing those who “honor the bones of skeletons.” Nevertheless, places, where relics were kept were regarded as sacred, and amulets containing small fragments of bone or dust from a saint’s remains were believed to bring blessings, even benefiting deceased Copts. This belief persisted into Medieval Egypt. For instance, Ibn Rusta (d. 913) mentions a village called Badrsanah Al-Ara (modern-day Badrashein, located east of Memphis on the west bank of the Nile Valley). He describes a room beneath the church containing a dead body lying on a bed, said to produce an endless flow of oil. According to local tradition, if a woman wanted to determine if she was pregnant, she would place the dead body on her lap. If she were pregnant, she would feel the baby's movement.



Fig. 14

St. Mark Cathedral, Alexandria, Egypt, Photographed by the Author

Al-Maqrizi (d. 1142), in his account *Khitat* (1:183–85), documents a Coptic festival known as “the Festival of the Martyr.” During this celebration, a saint’s finger was placed in a sarcophagus and cast into the Nile to ensure a good annual flood (El Daly, 2009, p. 104). According to Heo, saintly intercession is defined as “*the advocacy of one saint for another,*” which relies on the presence of their relics and belongings, believed to make the divine tangible. Saints, such as the Holy Virgin Mary, act as mediators (*wasta*), delivering requests, thanksgiving, sorrow, wishes, praise, wants, and prayers (Heo, 2012, p. 376).

Coptic Christians have long venerated the bodily remains of their saints and martyrs, attributing miraculous fertility and healing powers to these relics. The annals of the Coptic Church are replete with stories of blessings received through these holy remains. According to the biography of Cyril II, the 67th Patriarch of Alexandria, during the 9th Century, the Coptic Church possessed an extensive collection of holy relics. Many of these relics have survived and are now distributed among Coptic churches in Cairo and the monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun. These relics are typically preserved in long cylindrical boxes wrapped in cloth, silk, or other materials. The final form resembles a bolster, often accompanied by a small icon representing the saint (Meinardus, 2015, p. 104).

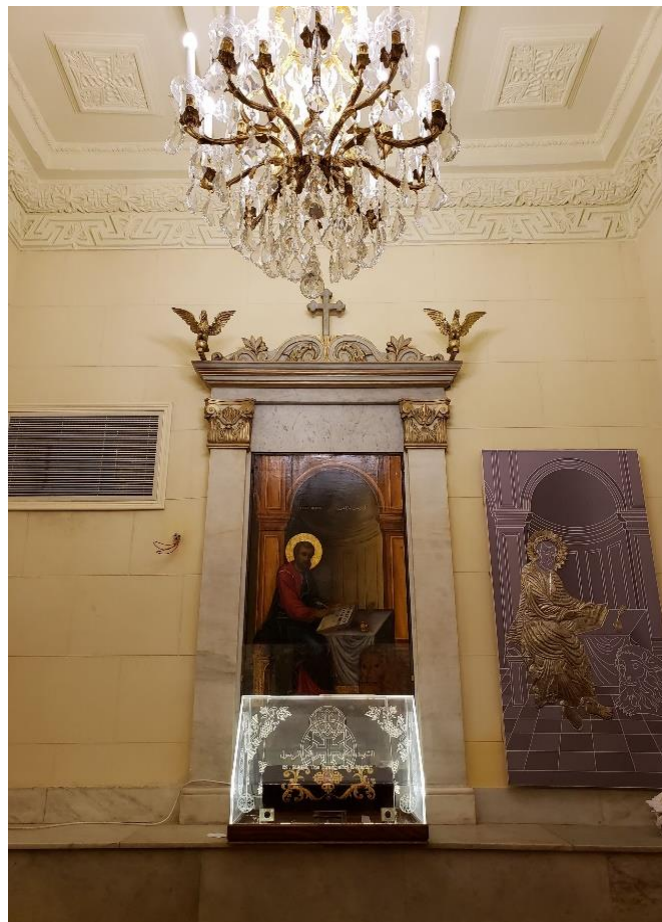


Fig. 15

Part of Saint Mark Relics, St. Mark Cathedral, Alexandria, Egypt.

Photographed by the Author

Churches and monasteries throughout Egypt preserve relics of saints, allowing believers to pray before them, kiss them, and seek the intercession of the saints to whom the relics belong. It is a common practice for the sick to hold a picture of a saint and place it on the afflicted area of their body as a means of seeking healing (Kruk, 2007, p. 520). A personal observation at the Deir Al-Azab Monastery in Fayyoun, Egypt, reveals that some Copts continue this tradition by placing relics of saints on injured parts of their bodies, hoping for recovery. The first extensive list of relics preserved in Coptic churches was compiled in the late 11th Century by Mawhub ibn al-Mufarrig al-Iskandarani, a deacon in Alexandria. He travelled to numerous churches across Egypt and documented his findings in the biography of Cyril II (1078–1092), the 67th Patriarch of Alexandria (Meinardus, 2015, p. 311).

One hundred twenty years later, during the patriarchate of John VI, Abu al-Makarim wrote his renowned account, *Churches and Monasteries of Egypt*, in which he provides detailed descriptions of the venerated relics preserved in the churches and monasteries he studied. Another valuable medieval source is the Coptic Church's Arabic *Synaxaria*. Two prominent versions exist: the first is attributed to Peter Severus al-Gamail, the Bishop of Malig, dating to the 12th–13th centuries, and the second to Michael, Bishop of Atrib and Malig, during the mid-13th century. In his book *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity*, Otto Meinardus compiles a list of Coptic churches and monasteries that house saints' relics. Among these examples are:

Abd Al-Masih Al-Makari Al-Manahri (Baramuda 6/April 14)

Father Abd al-Masih (1892–1963) is revered as a wonder-maker and is venerated by both Copts and Muslims in the regions of Minya and Maghaga. His monastic clothes, regarded as relics, are preserved in the Church of the Holy Virgin Mary in Manahra.

Abra'am of The Fayyum (Ba'una 3/ June 10)

Deir al-Azab in Fayyum preserves the relics of Anba Abra'am, who served as the Bishop of Fayyum from 1829 to 1914. Initially, his relics were placed beneath the southern altar in the Church of Saint Mercurius. In 1987, they were transferred to a specially constructed mausoleum located to the east of the church in Deir al-Azab (Meinardus, 2015, p. 311).

This practice is not limited to the Coptic Orthodox tradition but extends to other Christian denominations. In the main shrine of the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George in Old Cairo, intercessors fulfil their vows to the saint by offering his icon various items, such as golden chains, rings, and metal pieces shaped to represent a newborn or healed body parts. These offerings symbolize gratitude for blessings or healing attributed to the saint's intercession. The shrine's main icon depicts St. George riding his horse, adorned with a large golden chain offered as a vow and placed upon the icon.



Fig.16

Icon of St. George, Church of St. George's church in Old Cairo, Unknown date.

Photographed by the Author

KISSING AND TOUCHING ICONS

Icons hold an elevated and sacred position in the life of every Copt, serving as windows through which blessings and intercessions are believed to flow. During the 5th Century, in a homily about St. Mary, Theophilus, the Archbishop of Alexandria (385–412), recounts an incident where an icon of the Virgin Mary oozed blood. He further explains that intercessory prayers offered before a saint's icon could heal diseases and cast out evil spirits.

According to Father Maximous El-Anthony, icons also play a significant role in the lives of monks and nuns. Within their cells, various icons are preserved to aid in isolating them from the earthly world and helping them “see the heavenly world through the windows of the icons” while seeking intercession. Like all Copts, monks practice the veneration of icons by kissing, touching, and holding them. In addition to their traditional use, images of saints are widely reproduced in contemporary Coptic life, appearing on mugs, labels, bottles, jars, and even T-shirts (Vrolijk & Hogendijk, 2007, p. 520).

Father Maximous further elaborates on how icons are integral to his liturgical day. After performing his entry prayers, he greets the icons by either kissing or touching them. In front of the icon of the saint whose intercession he seeks, he lights a candle as an act of veneration (Vrolijk & Hogendijk, 2007, p. 90).

The Coptic veneration of icons is rooted in two key traditions. The first is the tradition of Abgar, the renowned prince of Osrhoene, who is believed to have received a miraculous image of Christ. The second is the tradition of Luke, regarded as the first iconographer, who is believed to have painted the first icon of the Holy Virgin Mary (Meinardus, 2015, pp. 118–119). The pious Copt does not directly kiss the icon; instead, they prefer to touch the lower part of the icon and then kiss the tips of their fingers as an act of reverence (Kamil, 2013, p. 218;

Meinardus, 2015, p. 120). Others express their devotion by touching the sanctuary curtains and prostrating themselves in prayer (Gabra, 2007, p. 188).

In ancient Egyptian temples, healing was a central function, a tradition that continues in Coptic churches. Worshippers often write their names using the wax of candles or leave small pieces of paper carrying their names and appeals, placing them on the edges of saints' icon frames as a plea for intercession. At the shrine of Saint Benjamin in the Church of Saint Macarius at Wadi Natrun, countless pieces of paper left by pilgrims can be found. Similarly, in the Church of the Holy Virgin Mary in Sakha, a similar practice is observed in the cabinet housing the sacred relic known as the "Foot of Jesus" (Kamil, 2013, p. 218; Meinardus, 2015, p. 120).

In general, Copts do not differentiate between the distinctive characteristics of an icon and the saint it portrays. Whatever the saint could do during their lifetime—or even after their death—is believed to be equally possible through the icon. Essentially, the icon serves as the "personification" of the saint, which is why it becomes a subject of intercession and profound veneration among believers. It is no surprise that Copts, like Greeks and Russians, attribute human qualities to their icons, such as weeping, sweating, and bleeding. Interestingly, miraculous occurrences involving flowing substances—particularly tears, sweat, and blood—are reported more often than other signs of divine intervention (Heo, 2018, p. 183).

In parallel with weeping icons, there were also bleeding icons, often associated with times of oppression and injustice. Stories surrounding these incidents suggest that the bleeding of an icon symbolizes the saint's spiritual solidarity with the suffering and pain of believers. One such account comes from the Monastery of Saint Macarius, where monks witnessed the image of Christ, the Merciful One, located in the Church of Saint Severus on the rock. They observed how its side was opened, and blood flowed from it—a profound sign of Christ's compassion and shared suffering. When afflicted by illness, Copts seek remedial assistance from certain icons including those of the Holy Virgin, Saint George, Saint Damiana and her forty virgins, Saint Theodore, and Saint Menas. Through the intercessory prayers of these saints, they hope to receive healing and recovery.

Historically, during periods of oppression and mistreatment by certain Muslim rulers, Copts often entrusted their sorrow and emotional burdens to the saints depicted in their icons. It is said that during the time of Cosmos II (815–858), the fifty-fourth Patriarch of Alexandria, the eyes of icons in Wadi Habib at the Monastery of Saint Macarius and other locations wept in response to the injustices perpetrated by the *walis* (provincial governors).

A similar incident occurred during the days of Patriarch Christodoulos (1047–1077), though it was interpreted as a sign of grief over the sins of the Christians themselves (Meinardus, 2014, p. 55).

The miraculous gift of conception is also attributed to icons through intercession. According to legend, the barren mother of Peter I (d. 310) experienced such a miracle. During the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, she observed believers anointing their children with oil from the lamp burning before the two saints' icons. Following this act of faith, she conceived and later gave birth to a son, who was named Theonas.

SAINTS' MAWALID

The term *mouled* (derived from the Arabic *mawlid* and pronounced 'muled' in the Egyptian dialect) literally means "anniversary." It refers to the Egyptian tradition of pilgrimage to the tombs of saints, a custom shared by both Muslims and Christians. A *mouled* is typically held once a year to commemorate the death or martyrdom of a saint. Festivals are organized for two weeks, sometimes even an entire month leading up to the anniversary. These celebrations gradually intensify, culminating in the "Great Night" (*al-layla al-kabira*), the peak of the

festivities.

Mouleds are not simply visits or pilgrimages; they are distinguished by their specific timing and location. However, exceptions exist for prominent figures such as the Virgin Mary and St. George, whose *mouleds* are celebrated multiple times in various locations due to their elevated status in public devotion. For instance, during the celebration of the Virgin Mary (August 7–22), pilgrims may visit several sites associated with her, including Zeitun, Mostarod, Dronka, Bayad al-Nasara, and other similar locations (Van Doorn-Harder, 2012, p. 212).

One of the most prominent Coptic *mouleds* is that of St. George at Riziqat near Luxor, which takes place from November 10 to 16. This celebration attracts millions of pilgrims who come to seek the blessings and intercession of the saint. In contrast, other *mouleds* enjoy more regional recognition rather than nationwide popularity. Examples include the *mouleds* of Anba Shenouda and Anba Bishoy near Sohag, as well as Anba Nub in Sammanud (Van Doorn-Harder, 2012, p. 113).

It is essential in this regard to shed light on the “vows” as they are considered a distinguished and distinctive component of the *mouled*. For the visitors and pilgrims, it is the most valuable chance to request the saint and ask for his/her intercession. Most of the appeals are related to fertility and recovery from diseases. Everyone stands before the saint icon with a different request: women asking for children, sick people asking for healing, students who want to pass their tests, and single people who want to get married.

If a vow is made to a saint during the year and the prayers are answered, the individual is obligated to fulfill their promise as repayment of their “debt” to the saint. This is often expressed as “I owe a vow to the saint” (*lu nadrah’ aleyya*). The nature of the vow varies according to the person’s social and economic status. For the poorest, it may involve placing a small amount, such as 12 piasters or a pound, into the specially designated coffer (*sandug*). Others may offer candles, while wealthier individuals might fulfill their vow by slaughtering a goat, sheep, or buffalo (Van Doorn-Harder, 2012, p. 117).

A notable contemporary practice closely related to intercession is the act of prostration, or *metanias* (bowing), known in Arabic as “المطانية.” This practice is observed among Copts who perform prostrations before bishops or, in some cases, in front of a saint’s relics. The origins of this practice are monastic. During the midnight prayer, monks are required to perform private prayers in their cells, which include 150 or more prostrations. These bows, called *metanoia*, involve the monk lowering his body entirely to the floor in a gesture of humility and submission. Over time, this practice evolved into a customary act within the Coptic Church, often used as a form of greeting among monks (Zacharias, 2010, p. 291).

CONCLUSION

- In Ancient Egyptian civilization, the term ‘*proskynesis*’ was unknown, but the body posture was practiced, carrying meanings of respect, worship, and obedience.
- Both kings and individuals were depicted performing *proskynesis*, with its meaning varying according to the context in which the posture was used.
- Kings were depicted performing *proskynesis* before gods as an act of worship and obedience. At the same time, individuals and workers were often shown in daily life scenes prostrating before high officials, “smelling the earth” (a form of prostration), and presenting various offerings.
- The act and term *proskynesis* continued to hold significant liturgical value in daily life throughout ancient Egypt, even into its later periods. Newly discovered graffiti on

Philae Island includes the word “prostrate,” left by pilgrims who performed acts of prostration to gods as a gesture of submission and worship.

- Other civilizations contemporary with ancient Egypt also practiced similar acts. Persians performed *proskynesis* in royal courts to show worship, while Greeks and Romans used it to express respect toward higher ranks.
- When Coptic art began using prostration postures, this practice was not a newly introduced or imported concept; instead, it was a continuation of a longstanding Egyptian tradition that had never disappeared.
- The meaning of prostration evolved to include new interpretations while retaining its original significance, adapting to the context in which it was depicted.
- Beyond the body posture, the concept of intercession also had a strong presence in ancient Egypt. This is evidenced by “intercessory statues,” which were used by Egyptians to seek divine intercession.
- The earliest evidence of proskynesis in Coptic art dates to the 6th century A.D., showing an individual kneeling and kissing the foot of St. Apollo. From this point onward, the context of the scene and the depicted body posture became key to interpreting its meaning.
- Daily life in Coptic literature confirms the use of both the term and the act of proskynesis. For instance, a letter from a widow to a bishop vividly describes the practice.
- Early Coptic art provides numerous examples of proskynesis, depicted with varying body positions, consistently conveying messages of intercession with saints and Christ himself.
- Generally speaking, the patron saint is portrayed on a much larger scale than the intercession seekers.
- An example of intercession seekers is seen when they are depicted kissing the foot of their patron saint while the saint is portrayed among other haloed saints.
- Other examples highlight the body postures and expressions of figures surrounding knight saints, gazing at them, pointing with their fingers, and witnessing the saint’s miracles of victory over evil creatures or acts of rescue from impending danger.
- Knight saints are frequently represented alongside intercession seekers in wall paintings and icons. The saint may be depicted alone, riding a heavily armed horse, sometimes striking down an evil creature.
- In other compositions, the saint is shown riding a horse while the intercession seeker kisses his feet. Alternatively, the saint may appear standing with the intercession seeker prostrating on the ground before him.
- Both male and female saints are represented as intercessors and intercession seekers, often with similar body postures. The intercession seekers are typically shown in a uniform manner, kissing or holding the foot of the saint. Saints themselves are sometimes depicted seeking intercession from other saints.
- The *Deësis* composition is a recurring theme in Coptic art, portraying the two principal intercessors, the Holy Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist, flanking Christ and interceding for humanity. Other saints are often included in the composition, contributing to the intercession with similar postures.
- Scenes depicting Christ’s miracles frequently illustrate both the event and the intercession seekers’ acts of prostration before Him. For instance, the Canaanite woman is portrayed prostrating before Christ as she pleads for the healing of her possessed daughter.

- It is noteworthy that modern Egyptians continue to use similar body postures of prostration before icons and relics of saints. In some cases, this gesture of respect is also observed when encountering a bishop or a monk.
- Although all saints are venerated equally, each Copt has a particular intercessor to whom they turn during times of sickness, distress, or oppression.

NOTES

¹According to Indiana University Bloomington website, the first major work on the graffiti was done by F. Ll. Griffith, who published 450 of the graffiti in his volume *Catalogue of the Demotic Graffiti from the Dodecaschoenus* (Oxford, 1937). Indiana University project recorded an additional 534 graffiti. The new graffiti was published by Eugene Cruz-Urbe, *The Demotic graffiti from the Temple of Isis on Philae Island*, (Lockwood Press, Atlanta, Georgia), 2016. For more information about prostration texts see: <https://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/images/splash.htm?scope=egypt/VAD4445> accessed 18 May, 2023.

²For further readings about the proskynesis in the Holy Bible, see: Matthew, “They Came and Held Him by the Feet and Worshipped Him”: Proskynesis before Jesus in Its Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Context”, 63, 73.

³I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Renare Dekker for kindly providing me with her personal translation of the two letters.É. Revillout, “Textes Coptes Extraits de la Correspondance de St. Pésunthius, Evêque de Coptos, et de Plusieurs Documents Analogues (juridiques ou économiques)”, *Revue égyptologique* 9 (1900): 150-51.

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تصوير وضعية "السجود" كإماعة جسدية معبرة عن الشفاعة تطبيقاً على الفن والتراث المصري المسيحي

المخلص

يمكن تعريف الشفاعة على أنها "صلاة مع شخص أو مجموعة من الأشخاص أو نيابة عنهم يقوم بها فرد أو جماعة". يصف لنا الكتاب المقدس العديد من الأوضاع الجسدية التي عبرت عن مختلف المواقف، فعلى سبيل المثال، حين سقط (أبرام) إبراهيم علي وجهه أمام الله: «أَنَا هُوَ اللهُ الْقَدِيرُ. سِرُّ أَمَامِي وَكُنْ كَامِلاً، فَأَجْعَلَ عَهْدِي بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكَ وَأَكْثَرَ نَسْلَكَ جِداً. ٣ فَسَقَطَ أَبْرَامُ عَلَى وَجْهِهِ» (خروج، ١٧: ٣)، كما يصف لنا أن النبي موسى كان يصلي بينما كانت يده مرفوعتين للسماء، «عِنْدَ خُرُوجِي مِنَ الْمَدِينَةِ أَبْسِطْ يَدَيَّ إِلَى الرَّبِّ، فَتَنْقَطِعَ الرَّعُودُ وَلَا يَكُونُ الْبَرْدُ أَيْضًا، لَكِنِّي تَعْرِفُ أَنَّ لِلرَّبِّ الْأَرْضَ. خروج (٩: ٢٩)، كما ركع الملك سليمان أثناء صلواته: «عِنْدَمَا انْتَهَى سَلِيمَانُ مِنَ الصَّلَاةِ إِلَى الرَّبِّ وَالتَّضَرُّعِ إِلَيْهِ، نَهَضَ مِنْ أَمَامِ الْمَذْبَحِ حَيْثُ كَانَ جَائِعًا عَلَى رُكْبَتَيْهِ وَبَاسِطًا يَدَيْهِ نَحْوَ السَّمَاءِ» (١ ملوك ٨: ٥٤)، وصلي المسيح ناظرًا إلى السماء: «ثُمَّ أَخَذَ يَسُوعُ الْأَرْغِفَةَ الْخَمْسَةَ وَالسَّمَكَيْنِ، وَرَفَعَ نَظْرَهُ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ وَبَارَكَ، وَكَسَّرَ الْأَرْغِفَةَ، وَأَعْطَى تَلَامِيذَهُ لِيُقَدِّمُوا لِلْجَمْعِ وَالسَّمَكَاتِ فَسَمَّهْمَا لِلْجَمْعِ» (مرقس، ٦: ٤١).

بما أن السجود هو إماعة جسدية، فقد يتنوع التعبير عنه بين الانحناء والركوع برأس منخفض إلى الأرض، أو السجود التام أمام الإله أو الحاكم أو القديسين، وعليها فقد استخدمت الفنون القبطية هذه الإيماءة للتعبير عن طلب الشفاعة منذ بداية القرن السادس الميلادي. تم تصوير هذه الإيماءة الجسدية في مشاهد مختلفة وعلى مجموعة واسعة من المواد، مثل مشاهد تصوير معجزات السيد المسيح، مع القديسين ومع السيدة مريم العذراء. في البداية ظهر التعبير عن مفهوم الشفاعة باستخدام الألفاظ قبل أن يعبر عنه في الفنون. هناك بعض الأمثلة المعبرة عن هذه المرحلة اللفظية للشفاعة يمكن أن نجدها في مخطوطات نجع حمادي التي تعود للقرن الرابع الميلادي.

كما توجد ممارسة مسيحية معاصرة تسمى "مطانية" والتي يعبر من خلالها المؤمنون عن التواضع والخضوع أمام الله أو أمام رفات القديسين طلباً للبركة والشفاعة.

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