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## El Greco's Iraklion *Baptism of Christ*: A Question of Dating\*

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El Greco's early *Baptism of Christ* (fig. 1), discovered in 2003 and then acquired by the Municipality of Iraklion the following year, is a small but fascinating work from the painter's Italian period.<sup>1</sup> It has been plausibly surmised that the panel is in fact a fragment of a small triptych, very similar to the well-known *Modena Triptych* (Galleria Estense, Modena). Another small panel of almost identical format had been known since 1991, the *Adoration of the Shepherds* in the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Canada (fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> Since the discovery of the *Baptism* panel, most scholars have regarded these two panels as part of the same triptych.<sup>3</sup>

The Iraklion *Baptism* was extensively discussed by Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki as early as 2005.<sup>4</sup> In their articles, they clarified numerous issues related to the discovered panel, i.e., its relation to the *Modena Triptych* and to the Kingston *Adoration*, its visual sources, and a possible execution date. While their discussion is mostly persuasive, debate continues on the question of the Iraklion panel's dating. Cormack and Vassilaki dated the Iraklion panel to as early as c. 1567, that is, the year that the artist probably moved to Venice. Conversely, in his 2007 catalogue of El Greco's early works, José Álvarez Lopera proposed, apparently on a stylistic basis, the date of c. 1569 for the Iraklion panel and the Kingston panel, given that the Titian-like palette and brushwork of these panels seem to presuppose a certain period of training in Venice.<sup>5</sup>

The dating issue was further complicated when the Benaki Museum of Athens conducted a technical investigation on the Iraklion *Baptism*, and, unexpectedly, an inscribed date in neat Roman numerals was found under dark overpaint on the lower left of the panel, which reads 'MDLXVI', or perhaps 'MDLXVII'.<sup>6</sup> The results of that investigation were published in 2007, and inevitably they have affected the discussion about the panel's date. This inscribed date may confirm Cormack and Vassilaki's initial proposal of 1567, but the style of the numerals—so unusual for El Greco—has also induced no small doubt about the authenticity of the inscribed date.<sup>7</sup> In this short paper



fig. 1 El Greco, *The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1570–71, Historical Museum of Crete, Iraklion

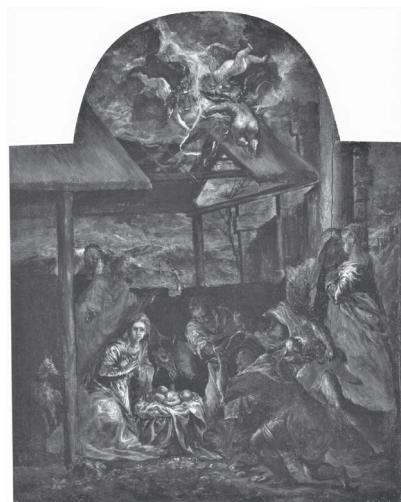


fig. 2 El Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, c. 1570–71, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario

I intend to reconsider the dating of the *Iraklion Baptism*, being fully aware of the importance of this issue within the broader question of the general chronology of El Greco's Italian period works.

Although the shapes of the *Iraklion* and *Kingston* panels strongly suggest that the original form of the triptych must have been quite similar to that of the *Modena Triptych*, their painting style is completely different from the corresponding panels in the *Modena* work.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the *Modena Triptych*, the chromatic scheme in the *Iraklion Baptism* is composed of fresh blue and deep brown, on which limited areas of brilliant red stand out. The brushstrokes are more fluent and dissolved, and the figures are better designed, their movements are more dynamic. In short, despite its small size, it is not difficult to recognize this panel as by a gifted follower of Titian. Therefore, the present author fully agrees with Álvarez Lopera's thought that there must have been a certain interval of time between the execution of the *Modena Triptych* and the *Iraklion Baptism*.

Now I would like to compare the upper body of the Baptist in the *Modena* work and that of the *Iraklion* panel (figs. 3 and 4). Obviously, the two figures are entirely different in spirit: the *Iraklion* Baptist's upper body is more anatomically accurate, his movement more natural, and his appearance more dignified. This change cannot be explained by referring to El Greco's known graphic source, Battista del Moro's engraved *Baptism of Christ* (fig. 5).<sup>9</sup> Rather, I propose the possibility that when El Greco re-worked del Moro's figure, he partially imitated, in reverse, the figure of the Baptist in Giulio Clovio's renowned manuscript illumination, the *Farnese Hours* (fig. 6).<sup>10</sup> El Greco's Baptist is much closer to Clovio's than to del Moro's in terms of facial type, the beauty of



fig. 3 El Greco, *The Modena Triptych*, panel of the *Baptism of Christ* (detail, reversed image), c. 1567–68, Galleria Estense, Modena



fig. 4 Detail of fig. 1, reversed image



fig. 5 Battista d'Angeli del Moro, *The Baptism of Christ* (detail, engraving (B. 4)



fig. 6 Giulio Clovio, *The Baptism of Christ* (detail), from *The Farnese Hours*, 1537–46, Morgan Library & Museum, New York, Ms M.69, fol. 35

the body, and the gravity of action. If the Cretan was in fact inspired by the miniaturist's masterpiece, this would lead to a dating of 1570–71 for the Iraklion *Baptism*, that is, soon after the artist's arrival in Rome and near contemporary with El Greco's well-known portrait of Clovio holding the *Farnese Hours*, a work today in Naples.<sup>11</sup> I think this late dating is easier to accept when we compare the background landscape of the Naples portrait and that of the Iraklion panel (figs. 7 and 8).<sup>12</sup>

In the upper part of the Kingston *Adoration of the Shepherds*, three little flying angels appear holding banderole and dancing vigorously in the heavenly glory (fig. 9). This group type, one that conveys an ecstatic joy in miraculous events, would become a typical motif for El Greco that he often repeated in his later works. So far as we know, the Kingston picture is the first to adopt such a motif: indeed, the infrared reflectogram of this section reveals the underdrawing that showed the artist's initial idea was a chorus of angels sitting on clouds, exactly as in the *Adoration* panel in the *Modena Triptych* (fig. 10).<sup>13</sup> He then changed the figures into flying angels,



fig. 7 El Greco, *Portrait of Giulio Clovio* (detail), c. 1571, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples



fig. 8 Detail of fig. 1

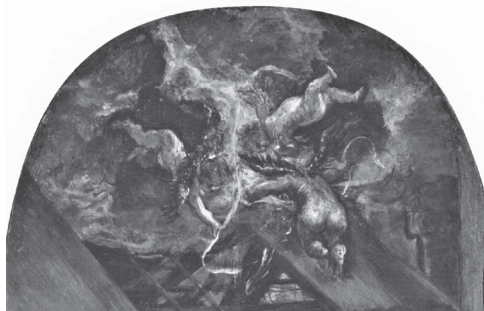


fig. 9 Detail of fig. 2



fig. 10  
El Greco, *The Modena Triptych*,  
panel of the *Adoration of the  
Shepherds* (detail), c. 1567–68,  
Galleria Estense, Modena



fig. 11  
Giulio Clovio, *The Adoration  
of the Shepherds* (detail), from  
*The Farnese Hours*, 1537–46,  
Morgan Library & Museum,  
New York, Ms M.69, fol. 24v

an idea likely based on his knowledge of Clovio's similar motif in the *Adoration of the Shepherds* in the *Farnese Hours* (fig. 11).<sup>14</sup> Further, in the *Kingston Adoration*, El Greco interpreted the scene as a genuine night piece for the first time, as in Clovio's example.<sup>15</sup>

I believe that these relationships strongly suggest that the *Iraklion Baptism* and the *Kingston Adoration of the Shepherds* were completed *after* El Greco's arrival at Rome some time before 16 November 1570 (the date of Clovio's recommendation letter to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese in favor of El Greco), although they may well have been started some time before in Venice or elsewhere. As Nicos Hadjinicolaou discussed, the pictorial style of these panels fittingly coincided with Clovio's characterization of El Greco's artistic ability as "a disciple of Titian" in the letter.<sup>16</sup> While drawing inspiration from Clovio's famous miniatures that he undoubtedly carefully studied at the Palazzo Farnese, El Greco's pictorial style was deliberately distinct from his elderly friend's style and remained faithful to the great Venetian master.

If we date the dispersed triptych, of which the two extant panels are fragments, to c. 1570–71, what does this imply about the chronology of El Greco's other known works created in Italy? Close observation of the *Kingston Adoration's* details indicates that the artist's painting techniques, especially his thin, somewhat nervous highlight strokes, unexpectedly resemble those of *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (fig. 12). Indeed, the similarity is so close as to make it reasonable to suppose that both works were produced in approximately the same period. The Washington picture is generally considered as a work of the Cretan's Venetian period and usually dated to 1567–70 or 'before 1570',<sup>17</sup> but some scholars have observed several 'Roman' elements in this work. For example, Gabriele Finaldi dated it to c. 1570–71 in the catalogue of the El Greco exhibition held in 2003–2004 in New York and London.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Guillaume Kientz seems to follow this view, giving the date of c. 1570.<sup>19</sup>

The composition of the Washington *Christ Driving the Money Changers* is usually compared with Michelangelo's composition of the same subject recorded in his own



fig. 12 El Greco, *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple*, c. 1571, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



fig. 13 Michelangelo, *The Resurrection*, c. 1532, Royal Library, Windsor, RCIN 912767

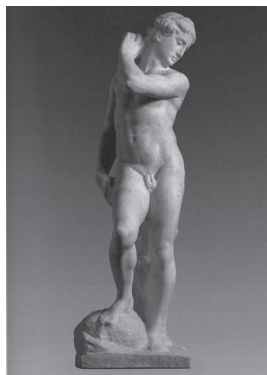


fig. 14 Michelangelo, *David-Apollo*, c. 1530, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence

drawings (British Museum, London) and in Marcello Venusti's painting version (National Gallery, London).<sup>20</sup> However, the fleeing young men to the left of the figure of Christ are obviously inspired by some figures in Michelangelo's extant drawing of the *Resurrection*, now in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle (fig. 13).<sup>21</sup> An inscription on the verso of this sheet attests that this wonderful drawing was once in the collection of Giulio Clovio (then it passed to the possession of the Farnese). The old miniaturist must have kindly shown this precious sheet to El Greco who had just arrived at Rome. Further, the central figure of Christ, with his dynamic body torsion, is in my view an unmistakable adaptation of the pose of Michelangelo's *David-Apollo* (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence / fig. 14). This famous marble statue had been in the collection of Duke Cosimo I of Florence since the late 1530s.<sup>22</sup> When Clovio spent a long time at Cosimo's court in the earlier 1550s, he must have carefully studied the statue.<sup>23</sup> So, El Greco's knowledge of *David-Apollo* would have been obtained either via Clovio in Rome, or by his own brief stay in Florence on the way to Rome in 1570.



fig. 15 El Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (X-ray), c. 1571, Collection of the Duke of Buccleugh and Queensberry, Boughton House, Kettering, Northamptonshire

All these observations seem to justify the chronological positioning of the Washington painting in the phase just after El Greco's arrival at Rome. The work's stylistic background is certainly Venetian, but it incorporates new artistic stimuli that the artist first gained by his move to Rome. The Iraklion *Baptism* and the Kingston *Adoration* would only slightly predate the ambitious Washington picture. I believe that the larger canvas version of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* in the collection of the Duke of Buccleugh in Boughton House, Kettering, followed soon after the small Kingston panel. An X-ray of the Kettering picture revealed that the flying angels motif was also originally depicted in the upper part of the canvas (fig. 15), as in the Kingston *Adoration*.<sup>24</sup>

When Cormack and Vassilaki dated the Iraklion panel to c. 1567, one of their arguments was the hypothesis that a painting by El Greco mentioned in the document of 26 December 1566 in Crete,<sup>25</sup> "a painting with a gold background depicting the Passion of Christ", is identifiable with the extant panel with a gold background, *Dead Christ Supported by Angels* in the Velmezis collection in Athens.<sup>26</sup> With this idea, they supposed that El Greco was fully versatile in Western style painting techniques even before his move to Venice in 1567 and suggested the possibility of a general shift of El Greco's early works toward still earlier dates. However, their identification regarding the Velmezis *Dead Christ* seems untenable, as the principal figures of this icon were most probably copied after an engraving by Hendrick Goltzius published in 1587.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the question of the inscribed year 'MDLXVI' or 'MDLXVII'. Andrew Casper thought that the inscription is simply a modern falsification, related to the 'early El Greco boom', as it were, in the art market.<sup>28</sup> However, Hadjinicolaou reports that the conservator in charge of

the technical investigation of the panel, Stergios Stassinopoulos, judged that the date was written by the artist himself.<sup>29</sup> As shown in the discussion above, in the present author's view, the internal, stylistic evidence of the Iraklion *Baptism of Christ* and the Kingston *Adoration of the Shepherds* is entirely incompatible with a date as early as 1566 or 1567. So, if the inscription is indeed genuine, the inevitable conclusion would be that *the date is a false one, falsified by El Greco himself*. Did he want to simulate a lengthier apprenticeship with Titian? Or rather, did the date commemorate the artist's final decision to move to Venice to launch a new artistic career? In any case, the dispersed triptych to which the two panels belonged would have demonstrated to potential patrons in Rome the artist's Cretan origin with its traditional post-Byzantine format, and at the same time, his exceptional gift as a Titian follower with its pictorial style – just as Clovio's recommendation letter states: “a young man from Candia, a disciple of Titian, who in my opinion is a rare talent in painting.”<sup>30</sup>

\* This article is based on my oral presentation at the 74th convention of Japan Art History Society organized by Kobe University in May 2021. I am grateful to Prof. Hiroshige Okada and to Prof. Kayo Hirakawa for their useful comments on my presentation which helped improve my thoughts on the present topic. Dr. Martha J. McClintock kindly edited my English text, to whom, as always, my sincere thanks go.

## Notes

- 1 *The Baptism of Christ* now in the Historical Museum of Crete in Iraklion (oil on panel, 23.5 x 18.1 cm) was first discovered in a private collection in Zaragoza in 2003, and was acquired by the Municipality of Iraklion at Christie's auction (Christie's, London, 8 December 2004, lot 91). See J. Álvarez Lopera, *El Greco. Estudio y Catálogo*, vol. II, Tom. I, *Catálogo de obras originales: Creta. Italia. Retablos y grandes encargos en España*, Madrid, 2007, pp. 54–56, no. 18.
- 2 Oil on panel, 23.8 x 19.1 cm. See Álvarez Lopera, *op. cit.*, p. 43, no. 10.
- 3 See D. McTavish, “El Greco's *Adoration of the Shepherds* in Kingston, Ontario,” in N. Hadjinicolaou (ed.), *D. Theotokopoulos between Venice and Rome* (exh. cat.), Historical Museum of Crete, Iraklion/ Benaki Museum, Athens, 2014, pp. 45–81.
- 4 See R. Cormack and M. Vassilaki, “*The Baptism of Christ*: New Light on Early El Greco,” *Apollo*, vol. CLXII, no. 522, August 2005, pp. 34–41. See also M. Vassilaki and R. Cormack, “Domenikos Theotokopoulos, *The Baptism of Christ*. A Recent Acquisition of the Municipality of Heraklion, Crete,” *Deltion tes Christianikes Archaïologikes Etaireias*, 2005, pp. 227–240.
- 5 Álvarez Lopera, *op. cit.* (note 1).
- 6 See C. Balas, “The Iraklion *Baptism of Christ*: Hyper-Spectral Analysis with MuSIS-HS Hyper-Spectral Imager,” in N. Hadjinicolaou (ed.), *El Greco's Studio. Proceedings of the International Symposium. Rethymnon, Crete, 23-25 September 2005*, Iraklion, 2007, pp. 237–242; N. Hadjinicolaou, “The Iraklion *Baptism of Christ*,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 243–270.
- 7 See A. R. Casper, “El Greco's Heraklion *Baptism of Christ*: Reconsidering Dates, Signatures, and the *Madonneri*,” *Source: Notes in the History of Art*, vol. 31, no. 2, Winter 2012, pp. 10–14.
- 8 For the *Modena Triptych*, first discovered by Rodolfo Pallucchini in the Galleria Estense, Modena in 1937, and for the extensive bibliographic information on the work, see Álvarez Lopera, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–34, no. 4.
- 9 This engraving by Battista del Moro (B. 4; *TIB*, vol. 32, p. 278) was first identified by Gianvittorio Dillon as a partial iconographic source for the *Baptism of Christ* panel of the *Modena Triptych*. See G. Dillon, “El Greco e l'incisione veneta: Precisazioni e novità,” in N. Hadjinicolaou (ed.), *El Greco of Crete: Proceedings of the International Symposium*, Iraklion, 1990, pp. 229–249. But the figure of John the Baptist in the Modena panel does not imitate the corresponding figure in this engraving. Andrew Casper is right in observing that El Greco then designed his figure of Baptist in the Iraklion panel differently, returning to the general pose of the Baptist in del Moro's engraving. See A. R. Casper, *Art and the Religious Image in El Greco's Italy*, University Park (PA), 2014, p. 47. However, the similarity is limited to the general pose, and just a quick comparison reveals that El Greco's representation of the saint is quite different from del Moro's in its solemn air and assured grasp of the human body.
- 10 For the *Farnese Hours* (Morgan Library & Museum, New York, Ms M.69), see W. M. Voelkle and I. Golub, *Farnese Book of Hours: Ms M.69 of the Pierpont Morgan Library New York. Commentary*, Graz, 2003; E. Calvillo, *Imitation and Invention in the Service of Rome: Giulio Clovio's Works for Cardinals Marino Grimani and Alessandro Farnese*, PhD.

- Diss., Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore (MD), 2003, pp. 235–356. The manuscript was completed in 1546, and Vasari admired and lengthily described this masterpiece in his 1568 edition of *Le Vite*. The miniature of the *Baptism of Christ* is on fol. 35.
- 11 Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, inv. Q 191. The portrait is usually dated to 1571–72. See G. Finaldi, in D. Davies (ed.), *El Greco* (exh. cat.), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York/ The National Gallery, London, 2003–2004, pp. 262–263, no. 70.
  - 12 José Riello aptly interpreted the background landscape of the Naples portrait as a sort of art-theoretical manifest, referring to Pliny the Elder's comment on Apelles. See J. Riello, "El Greco and Giulio Clovio: Three Gazes", in R. J. Long (ed.), *El Greco: Ambition & Defiance* (exh. cat.), The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, 2020, pp. 32–34.
  - 13 See McTavish, "El Greco's *Adoration of the Shepherds*...", cit. (note 3), pp. 63–64; Id., *The Adoration of the Shepherds by El Greco*, Kingston, 2014, pp. 23–24.
  - 14 Clovio's miniature of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* is on fol. 24v of the *Farnese Hours*.
  - 15 In Clovio's nocturnal depiction of the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, Elena Calvillo pointed out the influence from Correggio's *Adoration* now in Dresden (so-called 'La Notte'). See Calvillo, *op. cit.*, p. 305. The profound impression that Clovio's miniature must have left in El Greco's mind seems to still be felt in his large altarpiece of the same subject for the convent of Santo Domingo el Antiguo, Toledo (1577–79; now Fundación Botín, Santander; Álvarez Lopera, *op. cit.*, pp. 129–130, no. 48).
  - 16 N. Hadjinicolaou, "A Disciple of Titian in the Palazzo Farnese", in N. Hadjinicolaou (ed.), *D. Theotokopoulos between Venice and Rome*, cit. (note 3), pp. 137–194, esp. pp. 138–164.
  - 17 See J. Brown and R. Mann, *Spanish Paintings of the Fifteenth through the Nineteenth Centuries*, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 1990, pp. 67–72.
  - 18 G. Finaldi, in D. Davies (ed.), *El Greco* (exh. cat.), cit. (note 11), p. 88, no. 6. See also Álvarez Lopera, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–70, no. 23 (as 1570–71).
  - 19 G. Kientz, in G. Kientz (ed.), *Greco* (exh. cat.), Grand Palais, Paris, 2019, pp. 176–177, no. 50.
  - 20 See Finaldi, in D. Davies (ed.), *El Greco* (exh. cat.), cit. (note 11), pp. 262–263, no. 70. For the related drawings by Michelangelo, see H. Chapman, *Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master*, The British Museum, London, 2005, pp. 266–270.
  - 21 Royal Library, Windsor, inv. RCIN 912767. See F. Hartt, *Michelangelo Drawings*, New York, 1970, p. 181, no. 256; C. C. Bambach, *Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman & Designer* (exh. cat.), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2017, pp. 161–162, 304, no. 147. The remnant of El Greco's intensive study of this drawing is also evident in the *Resurrection of Christ* in the convent of Santo Domingo el Antiguo, Toledo, from 1577–79 (Álvarez Lopera, *op. cit.*, pp. 130–132, no. 49).
  - 22 See Bambach, *op. cit.*, pp. 183–186. Cosimo de' Medici obtained the statue probably in 1537, after the execution of Baccio Valori for whom the statue was originally destined.
  - 23 Clovio stayed at Duke Cosimo's court c. 1551–53/54. See I. Golub, "Nuove fonti su Giulio Clovio," *Paragone*, vol. 331, 1980, pp. 121–136.
  - 24 See D. Davies, "A Re-examination of El Greco's <Adoration of the Shepherds> in the Collection of the Duke of Buccleuch," in N. Hadjinicolaou (ed.), *El Greco in Italy and Italian Art: Proceedings of the International Symposium, Rethymno, Crete, 22-24 September 1995*, Rethymnon, 1999, pp. 149–161. Álvarez Lopera (*op. cit.*, pp. 47–48, no.14) dates the Kettering version to c. 1570–72.
  - 25 See N. M. Panagiotakes, *El Greco – The Cretan Years*, Farnham, Surrey, 2009, pp. 29–33.
  - 26 See Cormack and Vassilaki, "The Baptism of Christ: New Light on Early El Greco," cit. (note 4), pp. 39–40.
  - 27 See N. Hadjinicolaou, "Is *The Passion of Christ* in the Velimezis Collection a Work Painted by El Greco?," in N. Hadjinicolaou and P. K. Ioannou (eds.), *Perceptions of El Greco in 2014*, Benaki Museum, Athens/ Society of Cretan Historical Studies/ Institute for Mediterranean Studies, Iraklion, 2019, pp. 94–109.
  - 28 See Casper, "El Greco's Heraklion *Baptism of Christ*...", cit. (note 7).
  - 29 See Hadjinicolaou, "The Iraklion *Baptism of Christ*", cit. (note 6), p. 248.
  - 30 The original letter is in the Archivio di Stato in Parma. See Hadjinicolaou, "A Disciple of Titian in the Palazzo Farnese", cit. (note 16), pp. 166–168.

## Illustration sources

Álvarez Lopera 2007 (figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 12); *TIB*, vol. 32 (fig. 5); Voelkle and Golub 2003 (figs. 6, 11); Davies (ed.) 2003–04 (fig. 7); Bambach 2017 (figs. 13, 14); Davies 1999 (fig. 15).