PART ONE

6th–14th centuries

Duccio,
The Calling of
the Apostles
Peter and Andrew
(c.1308–11)

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1

VIRGIN AND CHILD

6th or 7th century

Although I would not presume to call myself an art historian, I must confess to having shared in the art historical wariness of the icon. What liberated me from my near-sighted folly was the icon I saw in the Temple Gallery in London in 2003. Up to then books on Byzantine art or on icons in general had lamented that only seven icons of the Virgin had survived the period of iconoclasm. All seven were known, though by no means well known. What happened in 2003, however, meant that the history books had to be rewritten.

Dick Temple and Laurence Morrocco discovered in a small auction house in Avignon, France, a blackened and tattered encaustic image, which, they could recognize, was a very early icon of the Mother of God. The use of wax, which is what encaustic means, is limited to the early centuries, but it was the sheer power of the image itself that convinced Temple that he had found something of extraordinary significance. It is a painting on linen, and when it was discovered it was clumsily glued on to a rectangular piece of cardboard. It took the Temple Gallery two years to clean it and to consolidate it, two years also in which they sought to find its origin. The general consensus seems to be that it hung in some church in Egypt during the sixth or seventh century and has miraculously survived to give us an unimaginably precious insight into the poetry of early Christian thinking.

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The Virgin herself, with her oval face and swanlike neck, looks away from the viewer. Apart from a gold cross over her forehead, she is simply dressed in black and shades of brown. Her gentle removal of herself from our attention has been described as aloof, but it does not seem so to me. She is well aware of our presence, and by no means indifferent to it, but all that matters to her is that we should regard the little Jesus. The passion that is absent from her face is visible in the very firm grip with which she holds the mandorla.

A mandorla is almond-shaped, rather like a shield, and we find it surrounding the infant Jesus on many early icons. It has been wondered if there is a reference here to the shield on which the Roman emperor was accustomed to display his son to the waiting army. For the Christian, the son of the Roman emperor, his heir, has given place to the child Jesus, equally emperor, but in no worldly sense.

There is a striking seventh-century Virgin at the Monastery of St Catherine at Mount Sinai, which is so destroyed that it does not count among the surviving eight. We can still make out, though, that the Virgin holds her son enclosed in an oval shield that is bright red. Here, however, the shield or mandorla is transparent. We can see Mary’s large and powerful hand grasping the rim, as she subdues herself completely to the reality of Jesus. Furthermore, as it is transparent, we can see through to the place of Mary’s womb. This is her significance: that in her, God, the Word, became flesh.

Wonderful though I find this Madonna, what seems to be truly extraordinary is the depiction of Jesus. This is a child, an anxious child. He knows that there is an answer, but yet not what it is, and his big searching eyes implore us to join with him in his quest. He is small, but not a baby. He has a rough mop of red curls, dark eyes, and a strong masculine mouth. Here we can see a likeness to his mother: whose rosy lips are womanly, but very firm. In one hand he holds what may be a scroll, but we feel that perhaps he is independent of written wisdom.

This is a child alive with a passionate desire to seek the truth and pleading with us to join with him in this all-absorbing search. His small, sandalled feet dangle in human vulnerability as he shows himself to us, held and yet not held by his mother. She holds the mandorla, not the child. He is there for our possessing, human, unprotected and haunting, an image like no other.

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2

CHRIST PANTOCRATOR

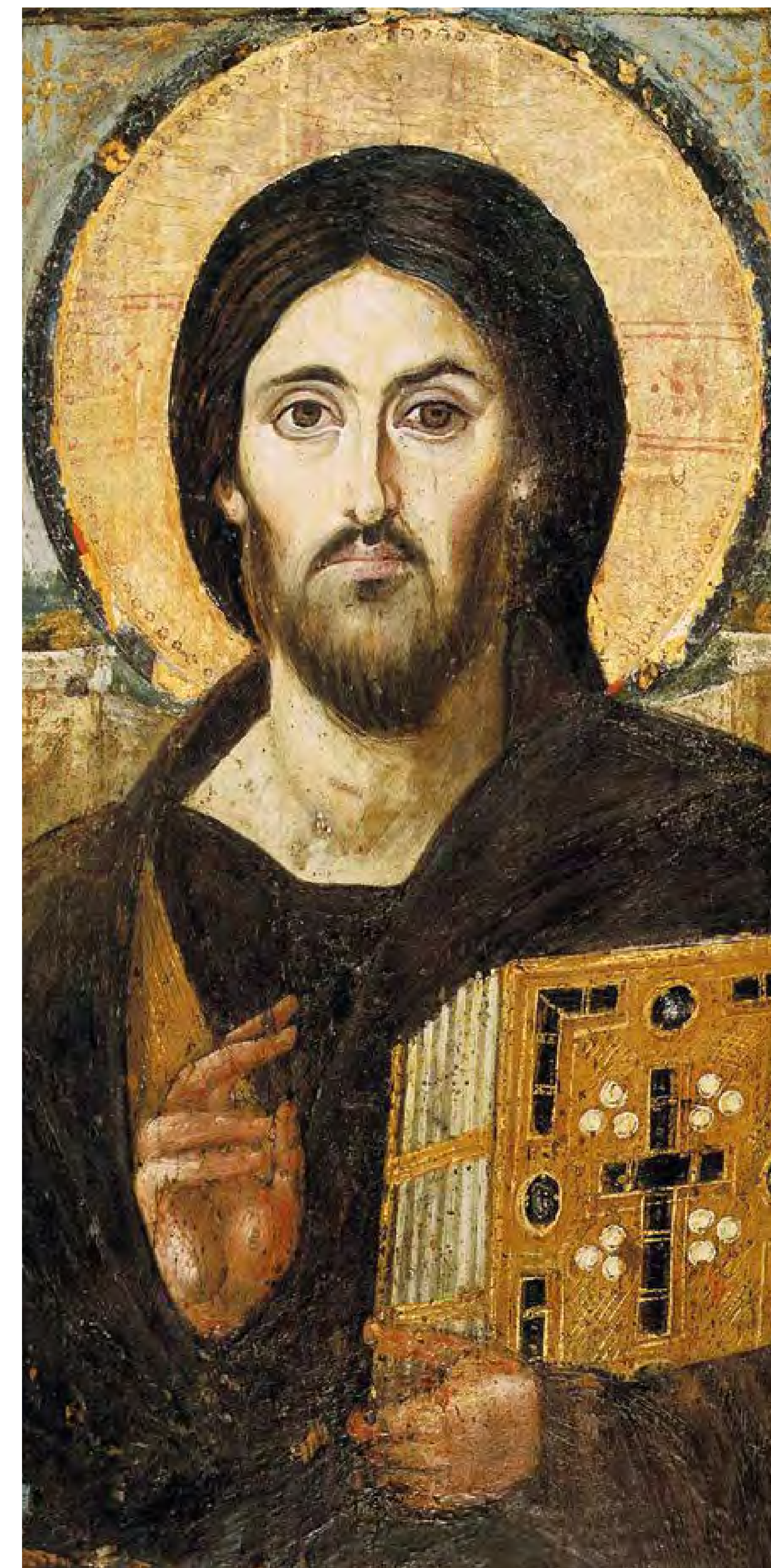
6th century

From the eighth century until halfway through the ninth century, the Byzantine Empire set about destroying all its icons. Wherever holy images existed, they were burned, thrown into rivers, hacked to pieces, whitewashed if on walls, scribbled over if in books. From this iconoclastic fury hardly anything has survived. There are eight icons of the Virgin Mary, mostly kept safe in Rome where the Byzantine Emperor had no power, and for the rest there is only a pathetic and damaged number of ancient icons in the remote desert monastery of St Catherine. Supreme among these pre-iconoclastic images is this magnificent icon of Christ the Ruler of All, the Pantocrator.

The icon painter never invented, never inaugurated. The whole point of the icon was that it was true; this was a real image. The mandylion, said to have been miraculously imprinted on a cloth, set the standard for the icon of Jesus. He is dark-haired, brown-eyed, he has a slight beard, a strong and powerful neck, and an air of majesty. This exceptionally early icon captures with grace and beauty what the early Christians saw as the essence of the Saviour.

In those far-off centuries, the truth of the faith was still imperilled. There were Christians who believed that there was only a divine Jesus, and the human Jesus was just a pretence. They could not face the reality of his physical presence. There were equally Christians who denied his full divinity and saw Jesus as the greatest of the prophets but not as the Son of God. This icon expresses that holy union of the two natures, divine and human. It was because Jesus was human that there could be icons made of him. In the sixth century there was a passionate need to establish the reality of the God-man of Christ the Pantocrator, the all-powerful.

Against a dimly glimpsed background of the real world – we can see mountains, fields, buildings, trees – Jesus stands erect. His great halo has been gilded, blotting out the sky with its brightness. In one hand he holds the book of the Gospels, glittering with gold and jewels and marked with a cross. This is the only reference in the icon to his sufferings. His other hand is raised in the traditional blessing, in which the fingers form the initials, in Greek, of his name: IC XC.



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3

MATTHEW CROSS CARPET PAGE

The Lindisfarne Gospels
7th or 8th century

The Lindisfarne Gospels are almost certainly Northumbrian. We know their approximate date – the end of the seventh century – and it is even possible that we can identify the artist who created this magnificent work as Eadfrith, the then Bishop of Lindisfarne. But even if created on British soil under the auspices of a bishop with an Anglo-Saxon name, this is still fundamentally a Celtic work.

This great book has six pages wholly devoted to a most extraordinary form of art, in which abstract patterns are traced with extreme complexity around some central and unifying theme. Incorporated within the fabric of the patternings on this page are dragons and serpents. This is called a 'carpet page', and it is obvious that the central theme is that of the cross. But this is a cross and not a crucifix – there is no Christ here, and no hint of suffering nor suggestion of bodily involvement at all. It is a magnificent abstract design, worked out with a mathematical perfection that staggers the imagination. At no moment is the work still, and yet – as pattern writhes into pattern, twisting and turning in complex gyrations – at no moment is the work out of control. Like a great symphony, every part is organized and orchestrated with incredible skill and power of invention, as this artist honours the god of complexity.

A late medieval cleric described the Book of Kells as the work 'not of men, but of angels'. He would have said the same of this Celtic masterpiece, where the precision and extraordinary formal perfection of the interlace are almost incomprehensible. These artists worked without the use of magnifying glasses, and it is no wonder that many scribes lost their sight in this glorious enterprise.

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