The painting technique of the proskynetarion by Isaak Demetrakes, 1818, Palestine

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The proskynetarion by Isaak Demetrakes (Fig. 1) is one of the largest known pilgrim icons with an extraordinary dense iconographic program. As permanent loan provided by a private collection, it is presently exhibited at the Icon Museum in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. The icon was examined and treated by the author at the University of Fine Arts Dresden (HBK), Faculty of Technology and Conservation of Art and Artefacts as part of a Diploma thesis under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Ursula Haller in 2008 - 2009.

SUPPORT AND ITS IMPREGNATION, BACKSIDE COATING AND PREPARATION
The plain-weave cotton fabric counted circa 25 threads.cm-1 in warp and weft and was of fine and dense quality. During the painting process the cloth has been stretched onto a stretcher with diagonal battens in all four corners using a cord every 7 - 9 cm (Fig. 2). To reinforce the support for painting and later transportation the textile was impregnated with drying oil and received a thin coating on the verso (Fig. 3, 4). On the front a thin white ground was applied.

UNDER-DRAWING
Two phases of under-drawing could be distinguished. In a first step the composition was laid out with some further motives sketched in (Fig. 5, 6). The painter used a ruler and a compass and worked with a dry, sharp drawing tool. Hereafter he concentrated on refining the figures as well as reinforcing all contours and lines of subdivisions using blue paint with a thin brush (Fig. 7).

PAINT LAYER, GILDINGS, VARNISH AND INSCRIPTIONS
The application of paint in multiple layers as well as the modeling of details corresponded to the traditional techniques in icon painting. Analysis confirmed egg yolk tempera as binder. In preparation for the oil gilding with powdered gold, defined areas like orbs or the background were isolated with a glue solution and covered with an opaque white layer to improve the reflection of the ground (Fig. 8). The mordant was lightly pigmented with orpiment. The painter handled the gildings exuberantly and used them to embellish certain garments, small details in interiors and architecture as well as simple bushes. Analytically, there were no differences traced between the mordant and the varnish suggesting the same mixture was used. Furthermore its coloring proved that the varnish was applied consciously to harmonize the appearance of the icon. With some exceptions most of the inscriptions were executed with an oil-rich yellow paint which displayed a wide ratio in pigment-volume-concentration. (Fig. 9). The paint must have been of high viscosity as the inscriptions maintained body; light refraction distinguishes the letters from the surrounding paint layers. In a final step some areas in the background were further differentiated with more or less transparent glazes (Fig. 10).

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REFERENCES

FIGURES
1. proskynetarion after treatment; measurements: 145 x 240 cm
2. schematical drawing of stretching during painting process
3. cross section (P6)
4. schematic view of cross section
5. detail, 1st phase of under-drawing (IR reflectography)
6. the same detail as in Fig. 5 (VIS)
7. detail, 2nd phase of underdrawing
8. detail, white ground below oil gilding
9. detail, inscriptions with yellow paint
10. detail, blue glaze over inscription