

# The Panagia of Orchomenos : a Votive Icon of the Second World War

by

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## *Introduction*

The belief that in national crisis situations supernatural powers intervene on behalf of the faithful is almost as old as mankind. War deities, deified heroes, angels and saints were and still are believed to have assisted the divinely chosen whoever they happen to be in their military endeavours. With the Christianization of the Roman Empire, supernatural forces were soon called upon to further the advance of the Christian Cause, and celestial apparitions were interpreted as divine proof for the righteousness of the contender. As early as 312 A.D., St. Constantine's victory over the forces of Maxentius as well as his conversion were attributed to his vision of the Flaming Cross which appeared in the sky at noonday with the legend 'Εν τούτῳ νίκα. It is only understandable that this heavenly vision by the first Christian Roman Emperor became a model for subsequent generations.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that even in early days popular religious art, which was not necessarily bound to any particular iconographical canons, represented apparitions of Christ, the Holy Virgin and the Saints. Since these productions, however, were expressions of the folk-art rather than the imperial or the monastic art of the age, many of these early portrayals have perished.

Iconographical representations of supernatural interventions in military encounters can be traced at least to the latter part of the XVth century. One of the earliest icons depicting the assistance of the miraculous icon of the Snamenje is the famous Novgorodian icon showing in three sections the battle of the Novgorodians against the Suzdalians in 1169. The subject became especially popular in the period of the political struggle between the two cities of Novgorod and Moscow. The Suzdalians mean the Muscovites and it was against them that the Holy Virgin had come to aid Novgorod. In this particular case, it is the palladium of the Novgorodians, the icon of the Snamenje that came to the assistance of her peoples. Thus, in the upper section of the icon we see the miraculous icon of the Holy Virgin of the Sign being car-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "The Apparition of the Cross" in the Sala di Constantino, Vatican, by pupils of Raphael.



ried from the Church of the Saviour to the Novgorod Kremlin. In the central section, the Novgorodians are seen taking cover behind the fortress walls and the Suzdalian army shooting arrows towards the miraculous icon. The lower section shows the Novgorodian army emerging from the fortress led by SS. Boris, Gleb, George and Demetrius, who were commissioned by the Holy Virgin to help the Novgorodians.<sup>2</sup> In a XVIIth century icon of the Jaroslavl School we see the miraculous icon of the Feodorovskaja being carried in front of the troops to safeguard the city of Kostroma from the assaults of the Tartars<sup>3</sup>.

The famous battle of Navpaktos (Lepanto) on October 7, 1571, when the fleets of the Holy League, *i.e.* the Papacy, Venice, Spain, Genoa, Savoy and the Knights of Malta under the command of Don John of Austria, destroyed a Turkish fleet of two hundred galleys, became the theme of numerous religious paintings<sup>4</sup>. In a votive icon depicting this battle, there are portrayed the Holy Virgin and Child flanked by two Saints on either side supported by clouds. Because of the divine assistance of the Holy Virgin in this decisive victory over the Turks, the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary was instituted for the Latin Church for October 7.

Every year on the Saturday of Lazarus and on Palm Sunday the citizens of Missolonghi (Arcanania-Aetolia) commemorate the heroic resistance and the battle of Missolonghi against the Turks in 1826 by carrying in procession the famous painting "The Exodus from Missolonghi" by Theodore Vryzakis to the Heroes' Tomb of the town. Although this painting is not an icon in the strict sense of the word, it, nevertheless, fulfils the functions of a sacred picture. The painting portrays the Greek insurgents who force their way out the besieged castle. In the upper part of the painting there is portrayed the enthroned Pantocrator attended by angels holding candles and olive-crowns, the symbol of martyrdom<sup>5</sup>.

In the famous battle of Adowa of March 1, 1896, the first major victory of an African over an European army since the victories of Hannibal, St. George on his white horse is said to have fought on the side of the Ethiopians against

<sup>2</sup> This icon is in the Museum of History and Architecture, Novgorod, *cf.* Lazarev, V.N., *Novgorodian Icon Painting*. Moscow, 1969, pp. 35-36, pl. 51. A late XVth century icon of the same theme is in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

<sup>3</sup> Skrobucha, H., *Maria. Russische Gnadenbilder*. Recklinghausen, 1967, pp. 48, 53.

<sup>4</sup> Meletopoulos, J.A., 'Η Ναυμαχία τῆς Ναυπάκτου. *ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ*, December 1970, pp. 22-34. The votive-icon of the Battle of Navpaktos is published by Kriss, Rudolf and Kriss-Heinrich Hubert, *Peregrinatio Neohellenika*. Wien, 1955, p. 26. Also in the *Handbuch der Ikonenkunst*. München, Slavisches Institut, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Troulios, G. (ed.), *ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΟΝ ΑΕΥΚΩΜΑ*. Athens, Melissa, 1970, vol. II, p. 441.



the Italians. Ethiopian miniatures<sup>6</sup> and mural-paintings<sup>7</sup> depicting this battle always include St. George above the battle field<sup>8</sup>.

The confidence in the divine protection and assistance in military operations was just as firmly held by many soldiers and officers in the battles of the Second World War (1939-1945) as in previous centuries. Dr. T. D. Mosconas, librarian of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Alexandria, refers to a story of a horseman who appeared in Marcotis a few days before the great battle of al-Alamain in October 1942, urging the allied soldiers in Egypt to fight shoulder to shoulder, alleged to be St. Menas<sup>9</sup>. In the *Egyptian Gazette* of November 10, 1942, we read, that "St. Menas is now hailed by the Greeks in Egypt as the Saviour of Alexandria from the onslaught of the Axis troops... It was a case of St. Menas versus Rommel, with the first round won by the Egyptian Saint"<sup>10</sup>.

One of the more recent votive-pictures is an oil-painting on canvass of 1945, which shows an attack of enemy planes on the city of Corfu. Thanks to the protective intervention of St. Spyridon, the patron of the city and the island, all the bombs are said to have fallen into the sea. This painting, which is in the Church of St. Spyridon in Corfu, depicts three planes and two bombs falling into the sea as well as St. Spyridon supported by a cloud above the castle of Corfu<sup>11</sup>.

### *The Panagia of Orchomenos*

#### *The Event*

In July 1943, the Allies disembarked successfully in Sicily and South Italy. A new Italian Government under Marshal Pietro Badoglio was formed that surrendered to the Allied Forces. As a result, the Italian occupation garrisons that were stationed in Greece, including that in Livadia<sup>12</sup>, were subjected to attacks by the German forces in their drive to collect the armaments of their former allies. Exploiting this confused situation, the Greek National Liberation Front (E.A.M.)<sup>13</sup> appeared in Livadia in September 1943

<sup>6</sup> I.e. the 1965, 80 cents Ethiopian postage stamp which portrays the battle of Adowa with St. George.

<sup>7</sup> This theme was already depicted on the walls of the destroyed Church of St. Mary of Lekemte in or around 1899.

<sup>8</sup> Neubacher, Hermann, *Die Festung des Löwen*. Olten, 1959, pp. 96 and 164.

<sup>9</sup> Mosconas, D. T., personal correspondence of December 28, 1959.

<sup>10</sup> Meinardus, O., *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts*. Cairo, 1961, p. 354.

<sup>11</sup> Kriss, R. and Kriss-Heinrich H., *op. cit.*, p. 84, pl. 70.

<sup>12</sup> The capital of Viotia county, situated at the foot of two hills, the Lafistion and the Thourion, has a population of about 14,000.

<sup>13</sup> The irregular military organization of the Communist Party in Greece.



to capture the weapons from the departing Italian troops. First, however, these irregular Greek units occupied the village of Orchomenos, about ten km. from Livadia, where they gathered by force the non-combatant population of the village and then headed towards the Italian H.Q. in Livadia. On their way, they stopped at the Shrine of St. Andrew where they prepared the destruction of the bridge across the Kifissios River to forestall the advance of the German forces. In the agony and impatience that seized everybody they saw the German troops advancing and fled to the village of Tsamani<sup>14</sup>. On September 9, 1943, the German troops entered Livadia and disarmed the Italian garrison. In the meantime, however, the citizens of Orchomenos had returned to their village. On the following day, the German commander sent four tanks against Psamani. As these tanks passed Orchomenos near the IXth century Byzantine Church of the Koimesis of the Holy Virgin<sup>15</sup>, they stopped.

According to the testimony of the villagers of Orchomenos, the drivers of the four tanks maintained that after passing the ancient church, they saw a two metre high apparition of the Holy Virgin, who ordered them to stop their vehicles. Immediately the tanks stopped, moreover, the drivers were unable to move them either forwards or backwards. The first tank had already crossed the village-brook, the second stopped while crossing the brook. Then the officer went to the church where he is said to have kissed the icon of the Panagia. Later in the day he was invited by the mayor. The tanks were left in this position until the following day, when the German officer in charge ordered the mayor to pull the second tank out of the brook by means of a tractor. On September 11, the commanding officer from Livadia arrived in Orchomenos and announced that because of the miracle the German troops were to be withdrawn from Orchomenos<sup>16</sup>.

It is not within the scope of this study to question either the veracity or the accuracy of this account as it was given twenty-five years after the occurrence of the event. It must be borne in mind that stories and also printed pictures portraying the blessings or the intervention of the Panagia or the Saints in the battles of the Second World War involving the Greek Army were very popular. As Betty Wason so pointedly stated : "The avenging Virgin was continuously reported to have appeared to soldiers asleep at isolated posts

<sup>14</sup> A small village in northern Niotia, north-west of Orchomenos.

<sup>15</sup> The text of the painting above the entrance of this church reads as follows: "This Church of the Koimesis of the Mother of God was constructed in the time of Leo Protospatharios in the year 6382 of the Byzantine Era, i.e. 874 A.D. in the reign of the Roman Emperor Byzantius Basilios of the Macedonians and of the Patriarch of Constantinople Ignatios, about the time of the schism of the two churches : Orthodox and Western".

<sup>16</sup> None of the citizens of Orchomenos witnessed the apparition, and this story is based entirely upon the testimony of the German officer and soldiers !



or riding on the wings of a Greek pilot's plane or whispering to men in battle to rush forward and strike at the enemy. At times I had the feeling that their Virgin had many of the characteristics of Pallas Athena, the avenging goddess of ancient times".<sup>17</sup>

### *The Description of the Icon*

The votive icon of the Panagia of Orchomenos adorns the north-wall of the nave of the Church of the Koimesis of the Holy Virgin in Orchomenos. The icon is normally veiled with a silk curtain. Many of the citizens of Orchomenos attribute to the icon miraculous powers as is evident from the *tammata* which are offered to the icon.

In the upper part of the icon there is the following inscription : "The Godmother Mary, the unconquerable defender of the citizens of Orchomenos". In the lower right hand corner there are depicted three German tanks with German soldiers advancing towards Orchomenos. In the centre of the picture, there is a column of three German armoured cars proceeding in the bed of the village-brook. Except for one soldier, who fires a rifle and ten other soldiers preparing for the crossing of the brook, all the other fifteen soldiers face the apparition of the Holy Virgin resting on a cloud. Two soldiers have their arms raised, an officer holds his left arm in front of his breast. All soldiers, except for two officers, wear helmets and on their right arms arm-bands with the swastika (sic).

Below the cloud, there is an elderly bearded Orthodox priest wearing the stole and holding in his right hand a pectoral cross. A large number of male and female citizens of Orchomenos are gathered behind the priest. In the background there is the IXth century cruciform Church of the Koimesis of the Holy Virgin of Orchomenos and several houses.

The Holy Virgin, with her eyes cast down and slightly turned to the left, has her hands raised in prayer and benediction. This type of the Holy Virgin is a variant of the Haghiossoritissa.

In commemoration of the deliverance of Orchomenos on September 10, 1943, the following hymn was composed (echos A).

### *HXOΣ A'*

Λαός Ὁρχομενίων ἐν Ὠδαῖς εὐφημήσωμεν  
 Ἡμῶν τήν Πολυούχον καί τοῦ κόσμου προστάτιδα  
 Πηγὴ γάρ τῶν θαυμάτων νῦν ἡμῖν  
 Ἡ Πάνσεπτος ἀναδέδεικται εἰκῶν

<sup>17</sup> Wason, Betty, *Miracle in Hellas. The Greeks Fight On*. New York, 1943, p. 172.



Icon of the  
Panagia of  
Orchomenos



The Church of the  
Koimesis of the  
Holy Virgin at  
Orchomenos









*Τῆς ἀχράντου Θεοτόκου  
 Διόπερ ἅπαντες ταύτην ἀναβοήσωμεν  
 Χαῖρε τῶν Σέ τιμώντων ἡ ἐλπίς  
 Χαῖρε ἡμῶν τό κραταίωμα  
 Χαῖρε ἡ τοῦ πυρός τόν Ὁρχομένον ἀπαλλάξασα*

*KONTAKION THS ΠΑΝΑΓΙΑΣ ΔΙΑ ΤΗΝ 10<sup>HN</sup> ΣΕΠΤΕΜΒΡΙΟΥ  
 ΗΧΟΣ Α'*

*Προθέσεις βαρβάρων δεσμεύουσαν  
 Καί λύτρωσιν λαοῦ σου παρέχουσαν  
 Θεοτόκε Μαρία  
 Ὑμνοῦσε Σε Ὁρχομένιοι  
 Ὅτι πόλιν αὐτῶν ἐφύλαξας  
 Ἐξ ὀλέθρου πολεμίων  
 Δι' ὃ σέ ἀννυμνοῦμεν  
 Χαῖρε ἡ ἀκοίμητος φρουρός τοῦ Ὁρχομενοῦ  
 Καί προστάτρια.*

We Orchomenians in odes let us praise  
 Our town's defender and the protectress of the World.  
 The reverent icon  
 Of the immaculate Mother of God  
 Has demonstrated itself a source of miracles for us.  
 Let us all, therefore, acclaim her:  
 Hail, the hope of those who honor Thee,  
 Hail, our source of power,  
 Hail, Thou who hast saved Orchomenos from conflagration.

The Orchomenians adore Thee,  
 Mary, Mother of God,  
 Who frustratest devices of barbarians  
 And profferest salvation to Thy people.  
 For Thou hast preserved our city  
 From devastation by the foe.  
 We, therefore, extol Thee :  
 Hail, Thou, vigilant guardian of Orchomenos  
 And protectress<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> In duty bound I want to express my gratitude to Mr. G. Phylactopoulos for the beautiful translation of this hymn into the English Language.