Authoring : *Pianalto Ana*
Translation : *Πανουργιά Κλειώ*

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Summary :

A fresco of exquisite quality, representing the archangel Michael and dating to the 6th century. It was discovered in the theatre of Aphrodisias. A rare example of early Byzantine painting, it is rather cosidered to be a votive table for personal use than part of the decoration of a church.

Date

6th century

Geographical Location

Caria

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1. Conservation

The representation of the archangel Michael formed part of a wall painting on one of the walls of the northern room of the stage of the theatre of Aphrodisias. Although it was found fragmented, thanks to the followed painstaking "collage" process, the face of a figure was revealed, which was identified, according to a written inscription, as the archangel Michael. Further restoration of the painting was impossible, although the depiction of two left feet and two spheres certifies that there existed at least a second archangel, obviously Gabriel. Fragments of a second inscription, a representation of a garden with small plants and an imitation of a marble decoration were also found. The work has been stolen and its present situation is unknown.

2. Chronology

The wall painting has been dated to the 6th century, based on the ceramics and coins found in a room in the parodos of the theatre.[1] These particular findings lead to the conclusion that the abandonment and collpase of the theatre took place in the early 7th century. This dating constitutes a terminus post quem for the wall painting of the archangel Michael.

3. Description

Archangel Michael is depicted frontally, which does not occur oftenly in Byzantine art when archangels are represented; most commonly, they turn towards a central figure, either Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ. Michael bears a halo in the colour of ochre and has brown curly hair. The face is moulded in brown and white colours and is lightened from its left side. The eyes are large and have black, expressive irises. The figure emits serenity and calmness. A small part of his yellow or light brown tunic and the purple of his wings are also preserved. The figure was accompanied by a written inscription in light grey: ΜΙΧ[Α]ΗΛ.

4. Use-evaluation

In the space where the wall painting was found there was no architectural evidence to support the fact that the room functioned as a chapel. This fact, in combination with literary sources, led to its interpretation as a votive plaque for private use.[2] It is believed that the room may have been a small oratory and that the specific wall painting testifies to the existence of private cult during the early Byzantine period. The discovery of this high quality wall painting in Aphrodisias contributes to a re-evaluation of the role of provincial towns of Asia Minor in the development of Byzantine art. Current evidence however does not allow the town's incorporation into a broader artistic and historical framework.

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1. Coins were found, dating from the reign of Justinian (527-565) to the reign of Heraclius (610-641), as well as *ostraka*, which belong to a pre-Middle-Byzantine period.

2. Cormack, R., "The wall-painting of St. Michael in the theatre", in Smith, R.R.R. – Erim, K.T. (ed.), *Aphrodisias Papers 2* (Journal of Roman

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Archaelogy, Supplement 2, 1991), pp. 109-122. Cormack, the main researcher of the fresco, bases his interpretation on an epigramma of Agathias (6th century), which, according to him, refers an image of the archangels donated for the purpose of private veneration.

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Glossary :

- parodos

It was one of two side passageways in an ancient Greek theatre, between the scene and the cavea, through which the chorus and the actors entered the orchestra.

- terminus post quem (lat.)

Technicality of historical studies for expressing the chonological line, after which an event took place.