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The Eternal Nile: Aquatic Imagery in Egyptian Christian Art

Coptic art offers some particularly rich images of aquatic life in a variety of media, including pottery, textiles, and paintings. These images are not surprising given the long history of Nilotic images that were associated with Egypt, from Pharaonic times into the Christian era. Coptic art freely incorporates Nilotic motifs although many of the images associated with the Nile are not necessarily positive in a Christian context. Aquatic animals like the crocodile, fish, frog, and water birds can have a positive or negative value as symbols of the Nile itself. The Nile can serve as a symbol for fecundity and wealth even though it had a negative association with slavery in the sacred history of Israel. However, Coptic art draws on and expands its own Egyptian pre-Christian imagery and gives it a new Christian meaning. For example the frog, a uniquely Egyptian image that maintains a positive meaning in Coptic art in spite of its potentially negative Christian reading. This paper briefly surveys Nilotic imagery, both Egyptian and non-Egyptian, pre-Christian and Christian to demonstrate how Coptic art selectively incorporates various images associated by the Nile.

By surveying Nilotic imagery in Coptic art, I hope to suggest that the river scene in the twelfth-century Annunciation icon at St. Catherine's Monastery at Sinai may reflect Coptic influence. This famous icon has generally been ascribed a Constantinopolitan provenance based on its style alone. The river scene at the bottom, however, is unlike any Constantinopolitan icon of the same period and has its most likely parallels in Coptic art. The inclusion of such a scene suggests Coptic influence, and the icon's location at Sinai makes such an influence possible. In addition, the river scene offers symbolic value for the Annunciation itself, as aquatic imagery could be associated with the Virgin herself.