

# Panagia Tricherousa

## A Celtic myth among the Slavic popular beliefs?

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*A particular type of icon, known in all oriental Christendom (orthodoxe world), shows the Holy Mother having three hands. On the most ancient copies, the third hand is in silver. The legend which accompanies this icon, of Serbian origin, could well be a relic of Celtic mythology in the Balkans.*

There is throughout oriental Christendom a particularly surprising type of icon, that of Panagia Tricherousa, in other words the «Three-Handed Virgin» or «Three-Handed Mother of God». The original of this type of icon is located in one of the monasteries of mount Athos, the monastery of Chilandari, which has been for a long time run by Serbian monks. The Virgin is represented holding the Child, in a classical way, but endowed with three hands: two of them are natural, and the third is a silver one. Among the copies, it happens that this third hand is also silver or covered with silver, but most often, this one is represented in a natural way, as though the Virgin had indeed three arms, and therefore three hands. Regularly mentioned in various publications, this icon is not in general explained, except when the legend which is linked to it is told.

### Origin of the icon

The canonical legend, such as it is still officially told at mount Athos, is the following:

“The legend brings back the creation of the original of the Virgin of three hands, dating the epoch of the iconoclasm, by linking it to the personality of the great defender of the iconolatriy and creator of the byzantine theory of the picture, Saint John of Damas. Encouraged by the emperor Leo III the Isaurian, the Caliph had ordered to cut off John’s right hand and to throw it on a stall of the market. The saint asked that the cut hand should be returned him, he glued it together on the wrist and addressed a burning request to the Virgin. And by a miracle, the Virgin heard his request and healed John’s hand. As a sign of recognition, Saint John of Damas asked a goldsmith to model a silver hand. He added it then to the icon of the Virgin.”<sup>1</sup>

In the middle of the XIXth century, Mr Didron noted some variants:

<sup>1</sup> <[www.mountathos.gr](http://www.mountathos.gr)>. Abstract by Bakalova, 2001, p. 270.

“According to the legend, Saint John of Damas, the great defender of pictures, had the right hand cut off by the iconoclasts, this hand which wrote such nice apologias of painting. Holy John of Damas, full of hope in the Virgin, approached a picture, which represented Mary, the cut hand, and applied the stump against the lips of the Virgin. The hand of the saint grew back as a plant under a spring breath. Since then, pictures of the Virgin were made, in which this third miraculous hand was represented.”<sup>2</sup>

The framework is only a little more simplified in comparison with the first legend, and the hand is not glued, but has grown again as a plant.

The model of the Three-Handed Virgin entered ancient Russia only in the XVIIth century, but very quickly became popular and now many copies are found as much in Russia as in Ukraine<sup>3</sup>. And when an English traveller, passing through Moscow at the very beginning of the XIXth century, discovered one of them, he was given the following legend:

“An artist who was composing a picture of the Virgin and of her Child, found one day that to both hands which he had given to the Virgin, a third had been added during his absence. Assuming that some person had had a good time with this joke, the painter erased the third hand, and, having completed the picture, closed with care the door of his rooms. To his great surprise, he saw, next day, the third hand restored as before: then he began becoming alarmed; but still assuming that some person had been able to get into his room, the artist once again removed the superfluous hand, and not only did he close the door, but he also took care to barricade the windows. Next day, going to his workshop, he found the door and the windows closed, just as he had left them; but, in his extreme astonishment and in his confusion, as soon as he had entered, the same change came to meet the eyes: the Virgin had another three hands regularly disposed around her child. Deeply moved, he began making the sign of the cross; then, as he was about to retouch his picture, the Virgin appeared to him in person, ordered him to stop, saying to him that she so desired to be represented.”<sup>4</sup>

The legend is completely unrecognizable, re-interpreted by using a variant of the classical motif of the “recalcitrant relic”, which continuously goes back to the place where it wants to be kept. It is besides notable that the original icon had itself the behaviour of a “recalcitrant relic”:

“[In Chilandari] it was put in the close of the sanctuary, in the iconostasis, among the other pictures; but it never wanted to stay there, and came to be situated in the chorus, in the south side, on the episcopal throne. There it still is.”<sup>5</sup>

It is no longer a matter of a severed hand (and even less of John of Damas), but simply of a not explained, miraculous appearance.

<sup>2</sup> Didron, 1845, p. 461, n.4.

<sup>3</sup> See for example a beautiful icon from the Černigov country in Iuščenko's private collection: *Kol'ori i melodij...*, 2006, n°168.

<sup>4</sup> Clarke, 1813, p. 31-32.

<sup>5</sup> Didron, 1845, p. 462.

## How did the icon arrive at the monastery of Chilandari?

Traditions answering this question are relatively unanimous: it purports to be Saint Sava, the true founder of the Serbian church, who in the XIIth century would have brought it back from a trip to Palestine, and then would have entrusted it to the monastery of Chilandari, of which he had contributed to the re-foundation. It is, however, rather amazing to note that Saint Sava would therefore have gone and searched for an icon painted by a Father of the Church having lived in the monastery of Saint-Sabas.<sup>6</sup> The assonance between both names is surprising. Also, it well seems that the original icon dates from the reign of Dušan, therefore the XIVth century.<sup>7</sup> It would indeed be possible that they are facing a late and apocryphal justification of the presence of a remarkable and unexplained icon in a Serbian monastery. The icon in itself therefore comes probably from a Serbian tradition. But what tradition can it be? What is its precise origin and to when does it date back? For knowledge, it is necessary to use comparative mythology and to analyse the legend ascribed to Saint John of Damas.

### The silver hand

The most interesting motif remains that of the silver hand, substitute of a severed hand miraculously replaced. The topic of the hand in precious metal (in whatever way this hand is set up) is extremely rare in Slavic mythology and folklore. I know only a Belarussian tale in which the hero is endowed with a gold hand.<sup>8</sup> But this hand, capable of prowess, finally has got nothing to do with that of our icon: it is not a substitute for a cut hand, but simply of an attribute from birth, pledge of the quality of the hero, moreover the dragon killer.

If it is necessary to find objects of comparison for our icon, it is to the Celts' that we can go to search for them. The best known case is surely that of Nuadu Airgetlám (Nuada of the Silver Hand), the king of Tuatha of Danann, that is to say of the Gods of ancient Ireland.<sup>9</sup> Nuadu loses a hand during the first battle of Moytura, which was aimed at establishing the power of the Gods on the island. He loses the kingship, because physical integrity is an inevitable condition allowing a king to reign. But the God doctor, Dian Cécht, manages to graft onto him a silver hand, thus restoring to him a complete physical appearance, and allowing him therefore to spring back. It's interesting to know that Dian Cécht's son, Miach, was able to put back the original hand, but only out of jealousy Dian Cécht killed him.

The parallel between the Irish myth and the Slavic legend is remarkable:

Nuadu Airgetlám	John of Damas
The hand of Nuadu is cut off	The hand of John is cut off
Miach puts the hand back on the arm	The Virgin puts the hand back on the arm
Dian Cécht puts a silver hand in place of the original one	John puts a silver hand on the Virgin icon

<sup>6</sup> Studer, 1990, p. 1303.

<sup>7</sup> Bakalova, 2001, p. 271;

<sup>8</sup> Glinski, 1853, t. I, p. 43ff; french translation in Chodzko, 1864, p. 225-248.

<sup>9</sup> Krappe, 1932; Carey, 1984.

Nuadu has his strict onomastical equivalent in Wales with Nudd (or Lludd) Llaw Ereint (Nudd of the Silver Hand), but the mythology linked to this one is practically lost.

The motif is known in Brittany, in Saint Mélar life. Mélar is a prince, son of the king Meliau. But Meliau is murdered by his brother Riwod. Riwod then sends his men against Mélar, and these cut off his right hand and left foot, to prevent him from reigning, and especially from taking up weapons. But Mélar is a good Christian and in any case is intended for a monk's career. He converts many people around him. Later, they fabricated for him a foot of bronze and a silver hand which worked as well as the natural members.<sup>10</sup>

Generally, in Ireland as in Brittany, a severed hand prevents a sovereign from reigning. The Serbian legend is more pragmatic: the cut off hand of John of Damas prevents it from writing or from painting.

### The triple mother

However, John's hand is stuck together again, and not replaced with a silver hand. On the contrary, the hand which he asks to be placed upon the icon of the Virgin is of silver, in the same way as the Celtic prosthesis. But why give a third hand to the Virgin?

The late Russian comments on this subject are interesting, even if they do not have traditional value: it would be a picture of the Trinity.<sup>11</sup> However it is possible to be surprised by this triple aspect given to a "Divine Mother", because it is widely known in the Celtic domain – that is in paganism or in popular Christianity.

In Gaul, most *Matronae* (Mother Goddesses) appear by three on sculptures and reliefs. The big Irish goddess, whatever is the name that we give her (Morrigan, Bodb, Macha, Brigid, Ethne) is a triple goddess.<sup>12</sup> Brigid's name will be passed on in that of Saint Brigitte, who is also considered as triple in some Irish medieval texts, in memory of the goddess of the same name.<sup>13</sup> The Breton version of Saint Brigitte, «Sainte Brette», is sometimes known with the cut off arms.<sup>14</sup> Always in Brittany, Saint Brigitte is also Saint Budoc protector, who before dying dealt one of his arms, as a relic, in the place where his first establishment was.<sup>15</sup> And Saint Budoc's *Life*, such as it is narrated to us in relatively late texts (from the XVth century), is inserted in the folktale-type AT706, «the girl without hand», which sees its amputated heroine, before miraculously finding her hands, generally further to an intervention of the Virgin.

Let us sum up. The Serbian icon of the monastery of Chilandari is an isolated case in the Slavonic world: its legend cannot be satisfactorily explained by internal elements, while its motifs meet in abundance in Celtic mythology and folklore. But this is not a borrowing, which might otherwise be very ancient. It is good to recall that the current capital of Serbia, Beograd, was called *Singidunum* in antiquity, a very Celtic name. And the arrival of the Slavs in the region, in VI–VIIth century, was not accompanied by a disappearance of the local populations, who often stayed. It is therefore legitimate to think that some ele-

<sup>10</sup> Le Grand, 1901, p. 487–496; Bourguès, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Clarke, 1813, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> Le Roux et Guyonvarc'h, 1983.

<sup>13</sup> Sterckx, 1974.

<sup>14</sup> Suchier, 1884, p. LIX–LX, n. 1. The devil would have cut the arms of the saint.

<sup>15</sup> Lajoie, 2005, p. 82–86.

ments of their mythology and of their folklore have been passed on, in spite of language and culture changes.

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## **Панагия Троеручица, кельтский миф среди славянских народных поверий?**

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Существует особый тип иконы, на которой дева Мария представлена с тремя руками. Эту икону можно встретить у всех народов православного мира. На самых старинных ее копиях третья рука – из серебра. Легенда, сопровождающая данную икону, имеет сербские корни и возможно является остатком кельтской мифологии на Балканах.