

The Orthodox Origins of the Christmas Tree

By His Eminence Metropolitan Anthimos of Alexandroupolis

It is usually said that the custom of the Christmas tree is foreign and western. But a manuscript of the British Museum (Add. 17265 of the 13th cent.) informs us that in 512 the Emperor Anastasios I built a church in the Monastery of Saint Gabriel in Tur Abdin in northern Syria, and among other dedications he offered

“...two large brass trees which stood on both sides of the Beautiful Gate of the sanctuary. On the leaves of the trees there was a place for lights to flicker. Each tree had one hundred and eighty lamps and fifty silver chains from top to bottom. On these hung small objects of gold, silver or copper, as well as red eggs, kraters, animals, birds, crosses, wreaths, bells, carved grape bunches, discs...”

Paul, the Silentiary (c. 563) in his *Ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople* and *Ekphrasis from the Ambon of Hagia Sophia*, describes in detail the lights of the icon screen and the pulpit of the Great Church (Hagia Sophia was first dedicated on Christmas Day of 537). On the architrave of the icon screen there were metal cone shaped trees, like a pine tree or a cypress of tender foliage, where instead of fruits they had conical shaped lights, and it even records that illuminated crafted trees (tree-like chandeliers) were throughout the church.

“There is also on the silver columns above their capitals, a narrow path of access for the lamplighters, a path full of light, glittering with bright clusters; these one might compare to the mountain-reared pine tree or to the cypress of tender foliage. Pointed at the summit, they are ringed by circles that gradually widen down to the lowest curve that surrounds the base of the trunk; and upon them have grown fiery flowers. Instead of a root, bows of silver have been affixed beneath these trees of flaming vegetation. And in the center of this beautiful grove, the form of the divine cross, studded with bright nails, blazes with light for mortal eyes...”



Countless other lights, hanging on twisted chains, does the church of ever-changing aspect contain within itself; some illumine the aisles, others the center or the east and west, others shed their bright flame at the summit. Thus, the bright night smiles like the day and appears herself to be rosy-ankled."

The tree in Christian theology and worship refers to the tree of Paradise (Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil) and mosaic trees are in the early Christian basilica of Saint Demetrios in Nicopolis in Epirus and elsewhere. Even in the catacombs Christ is symbolized as the "Tree of Life", the phoenix is a symbol of immortality, the olive tree is a symbol of the Old and New Testaments, etc.



In the first four centuries of Christianity, Christmas was celebrated on January 6th together with the feast of Theophany, and in many parts of mainland Greece they set two trees in the middle of churches decorated with oranges (Ionian Islands, Litochoro, etc.)

The two bronze candelabra are still placed in our churches on both sides of the Beautiful Gate and often they resemble trees (such as the Metropolitan Cathedral and the Church of Saint Eleutherios in our city), and they refer to those festive trees.

The above mentioned is documented in the study of the late professor of Byzantine Archaeology at Aristotle University of

Thessaloniki, Constantine Kalokyris, titled *Sacred Trees and the Eastern Origin of the Christmas Tree*. Here he reveals that the custom of the Christmas Tree is not foreign or western European, but Byzantine and Orthodox!

We must certainly consider the decorated boats as only traditionally Greek, because on the Greek islands, before they were liberated in 1821, there were no trees they were able to cut and decorate in their churches or homes, while the copy of a ship or a caique was a common object.

As your bishop, I advise you, however, to not overdo the decorations in our province and not to exceed the boundaries of exaggeration and provocation. When Justinian was building Hagia Sophia, he intended to invest the sanctuary of the Temple with golden plates. But the Patriarch prevented him saying, "Emperor, if even one man is wandering in Constantinople without clothes, God will not rest in a gold sanctuary." And Justinian obeyed and invested the sanctuary of the Temple with silver plates.

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