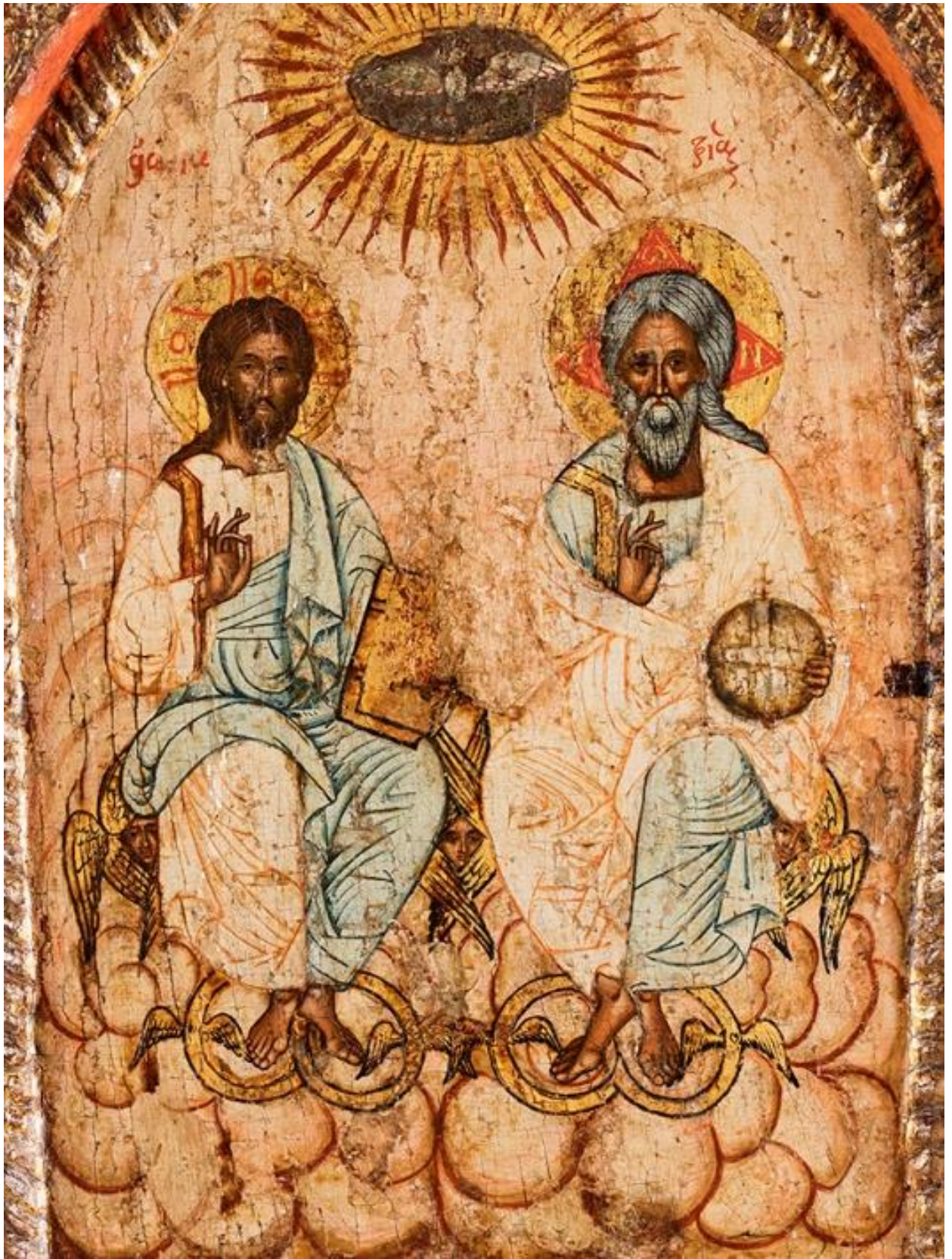




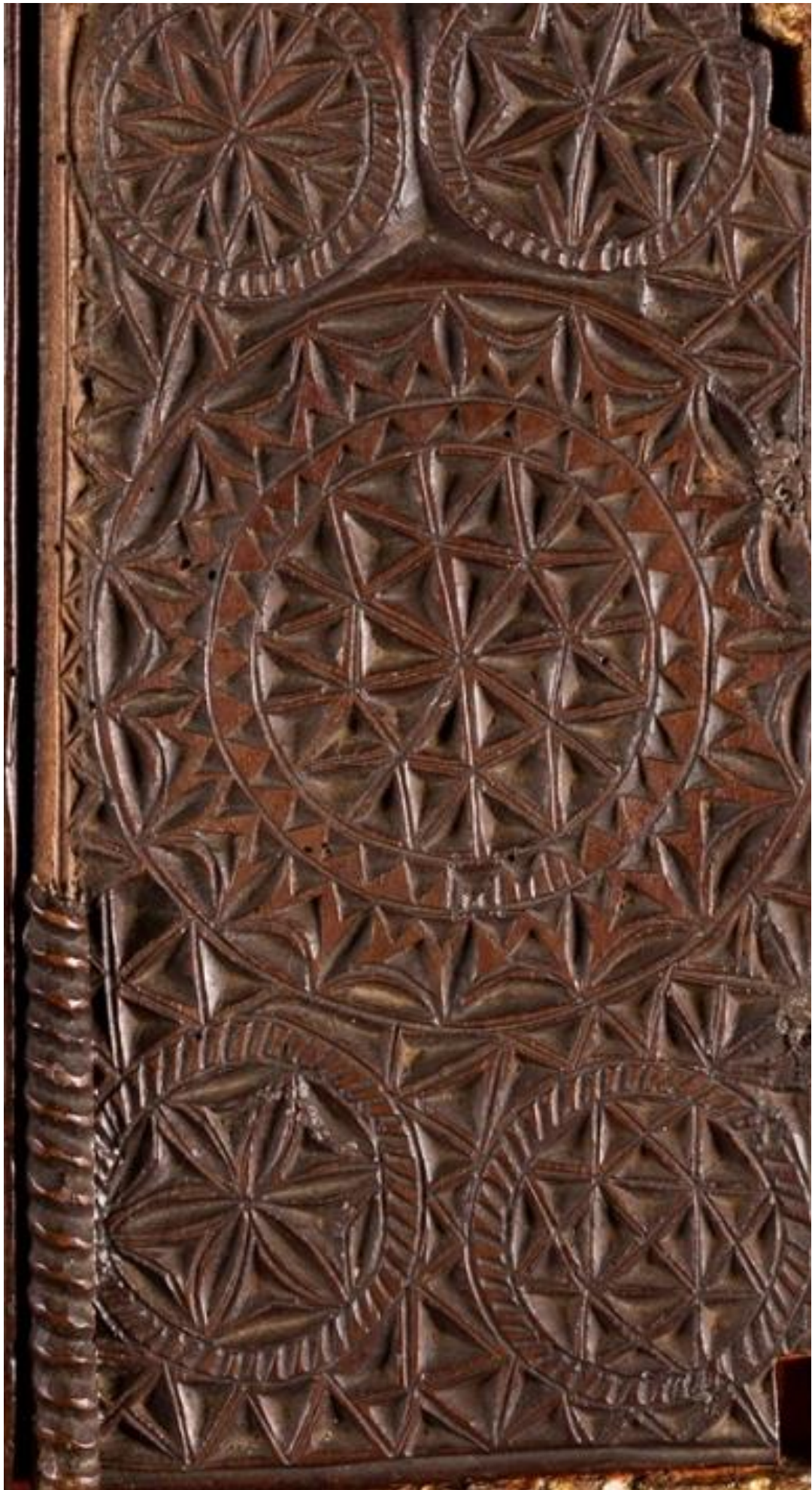
1715. Triptych depicting New Testament Trinity and Saints
Coptic, or Greek painter working in Egypt, circa 1700.
Tempera and gold on gesso and wood
Dimensions: 53 x 56.5cm (open)
Inscription in Greek: Identify figures (see table below)
Condition: Good condition with minor losses
Provenance: Private collection, London

Saint Basil (?)	The Holy Spirit	Άγιος Νικόλαος St Nicholas
Άγιος Γεώργιος St George	God the Father and Jesus Christ	Άγιος Ανδρέας Saint Andrew









The closed triptych presents us with an elongated panel surmounted by an arch opened to show the cross. Below the cross, around the arched top of the triptych wings, the surface is elaborately carved, gessoed and gilded with Islamic style geometric forms including two six pointed rosettes within circles. Attached at either side are two open-carved miniature towers surmounted by stylised domes and crosses. (The cross on the left is partly missing.)

The carving on the closed wings is not gessoed and gilded and better reveals the fine quality of the craftsman. The left wing shows nine geometricized rosettes of varying sizes and each one a different design. The right-hand wing has six. The woodcarving here has parallels with examples in the Cairo Museum.¹ (Fig. 1.)² The inner edge of the right panel has a twisted rope finish of which only the lower part survives. Attached to the lower edge are carved, gessoed and gilded tassel-like hangings.



Fig. 1. Detail from Cairo Museum

The effect of such rich and densely carved geometric work, so reminiscent of Islam, points to a Christian community in an Islamic milieu: Ottoman Turkey or, more likely, Coptic Egypt. Interesting work has been done on post-Byzantine Greek decorative wood work by Andrew Gould,³ Thanos Andronikos⁴ and others, but none of the works referred to illustrate such emphatically Islamic work as the outer part of our triptych. The millennia-old Christian community in Cairo seems a likely suggestion.

The two open-carved towers on our triptych, are reminiscent of the twin bell towers of the ‘Hanging Church’ or the Church of St Mary in Old Cairo (Fig. 2.) where, in the interior, we also see displays of geometric circles. (Fig. 3.)

The open triptych takes us into a different milieu contrasting from the severity of the closed doors. A hint of the riches within has been suggested by the gilded parts of the outside, but now we are in a world of colour, warmth and golden light. Here, the work is from the hand of an accomplished Greek or Cretan painter. There is no suggestion of orientalism.

In the centre panel within the arch is the Holy Ghost in the traditional form of a dove within a golden ellipse from which red flames shoot out, suffusing the whole area in a pink light. Below on the right is God the Father, and on the left, God the Son. Both are seated upon clouds, their feet encircled by winged wheels (a reference to the Apocalyptic vision of John Revelation 4:6–8 and Isaiah 6:2–3; Isaiah 6:6; Ezekiel 10;) Both raise their right hand in blessing while Christ holds the Book of the Gospels and God the Father holds the Orb of the World. Christ’s halo is inscribed with the Greek letters Ω ON signifying ‘I AM THAT I AM’

¹ <http://www.maverickbird.com/outside-india/the-superb-coptic-museum-in-cairo/>

² <https://starsinsymmetry.wordpress.com/2019/12/25/observations-isalmic-geometric-designs-in-coptic-churches/>

³ <https://orthodoxartsjournal.org/the-question-of-polychrome-for-liturgical-woodcarving-part-1/>

⁴ *An introduction to Greek Orthodox iconostases* <https://theframeblog.com/2014/11/12/an-introduction-to-greek-orthodox-iconostases/>

(Exodus, 3:14.) while God the Father's contains a four-pointed red star, signifying the Ancient of Days, also inscribed with Ω ON.

The right-hand panel shows, in the upper part, Saint Nicholas the Holy Bishop, and below, the Apostle Andrew. The left panel also shows a bishop, partly damaged, who may be Saint Basil, and below Saint George and the Dragon.



Fig. 2. Cairo, Egypt: Church of the Virgin Mary, Coptic Orthodox Church, aka The Hanging Church, is one of the oldest churches in Egypt, dating from the 3rd century



Fig. 3. Hanging Church interior with rosettes with crosses.