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## NEW LIGHT ON THE SOURCES OF THE ILLUMINATIONS OF THE *CHRISTIAN TOPOGRAPHY* OF KOSMAS INDIKOPLEUSTES

The illuminations of the *Christian Topography* were depicted in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by the author of this cosmological treatise, known under the pseudonym Kosmas Indikopleustes. If his identity still remains uncertain along with other facts of his life, we know from his own words that his doctrine derives from the commentary on the *Exodus* by the bishop of Persia Mar Aba I (540–552). He used this knowledge of a large repertory of cosmological and biblical illuminations actually conserved only in the three extant manuscripts of the *Christian Topography*: the more ancient one in the Vatican Library, others in the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai and in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence.

Though the presence of the twelve springs of Moses in these illuminations, conserved in the latter two manuscripts, has already been interpreted as a consequence of Jewish tradition, this contribution, written in collaboration between an art historian and an expert in Syriac sources, offers a new interpretation of the illumination of the third stage of the Israelites' journey in the desert. It is based on a fragment of the teaching of Mar Aba, conserved in the *Commentary of the Exodus* of Ishōdad of Merv, a Christian bishop lived in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, never compared before with the illuminations of the *Christian Topography*. This source clarifies the genesis of the iconography, shading new light on these illuminations, which represent the witnesses of an oral source involving many exegetical traditions. Refs 46.

*Keywords:* *Christian Topography* by Kosmas Indikopleustes, Byzantine studies, Syriac studies, Jewish studies, Byzantine art, Byzantine illumination.

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## НОВОЕ ОБ ИСТОЧНИКАХ МИНИАТЮР ХРИСТИАНСКОЙ ТОПОГРАФИИ КОЗЬМЫ ИНДИКОПЛОВА

Миниатюры к тексту *Христианской топографии* (VI в.) были созданы Козьмой Индикопловом — автором этого космологического трактата. Если вопросы о личности Индикоплова и многих фактах его биографии до сих пор остаются до конца не проясненными, то происхождение его космологической концепции не оставляет сомнений. По его собственному утверждению, она восходит к толкованиям на книгу *Исход* патриарха (мара) Абы I (540–552). На основе его экзегетики Козьмой Индикопловым был создан целый ряд миниатюр на космологические и библейские темы, сохранившийся в трех греческих списках *Христианской топографии*. Старейший из них находится в настоящее время в Библиотеке Ватикана, два других — во флорентийской Лауренциане и библиотеке монастыря Св. Екатерины на Синае.

В исследовательской литературе ранее высказывалась мысль о том, что присутствие в двух более поздних рукописях *Христианской топографии* миниатюр с изображением двенадцати источников Моисея объясняется влиянием древнееврейской традиции. Авторы данной статьи — историк искусства и источниковед-сиролог — предлагают новую интерпрета-

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цию этих иллюстраций к третьему периоду странствий евреев по пустыне. Она основывается на экзегетическом тексте мара Абы, принадлежащем одновременно к нескольким традициям в библейской экзегетике и сохранившемся в составе «Толкований на книгу Исход» епископа Хадитты Ишоада Мервского (IX в.). Этот фрагмент, фактически представляющий собой фиксацию устной речи, до сих пор не привлекался для изучения названных миниатюр *Христианской топографии*, но именно он, как полагают авторы статьи, позволяет пролить свет на истоки их иконографии. В целом, по их мнению, более широкое обращение к восточносирийской патристике при исследовании миниатюр *Христианской топографии*, может привести к значимым результатам в изучении сложных и отчасти таинственных взаимоотношений слова и образа. Библиогр. 46 назв.

*Ключевые слова:* Христианская топография Козьмы Индикоплова, византиноведение, сирология, иудаика, византийское искусство, миниатюры византийских рукописей.

## Depicting the wandering in the desert

The illuminations of the *Christian Topography* were painted in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by the author of this cosmological treatise, known with the pseudonym Kosmas Indikopleustes [Kominko 2013, pp. 10–12]<sup>1</sup>. If his identity still remains uncertain along with other facts about his life [Hewsen 1971, p. 187; Wolska Conus 1989, pp. 28–31; Odorico 1995, pp. 305–315], we know from his own words that his doctrine derives from the commentary about the *Exodus* by the bishop of Persia Mar Aba I (540–552) [Wolska Conus 1968, pp. 306–309; Wolska Conus 1970, pp. 12–13; Wolska Conus 1973, pp. 194–195]. He used this knowledge depicting a large repertory of cosmological and biblical illuminations actually conserved only in the three extant manuscripts of the *Christian Topography*: the more ancient one in the Vatican Library, the others in the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai and in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence.

This contribution, written in collaboration between an art historian and an expert in Syriac sources, offers a new interpretation of the illumination of the third stage of the Israelites' journey in the desert, based on a fragment of the teaching of Mar Aba, conserved in the *Commentary of the Exodus* of Isho'dad of Merv, a Christian bishop lived in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, never compared before with the illuminations of the *Christian Topography*.

This fragment can clarify the genesis of the iconography, throwing new light on this illumination, which represents the precious witness of an oral source.

The illumination of the third stage of the Israelites' march through the desert is conserved only in two manuscripts of the *Christian Topography*, depicted in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, or at the very beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century: in the codex *Plut.* IX. 28 of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence and in the codex *Sinait. gr.* 1186 in the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai [Kondakov 1886–1891, II, p. 53; Weitzmann 1935, pp. 36–38; Wolska Conus 1968, p. 48; Morandini 1986, p. 90; Schneider 2010, pp. 11–12; Losacco 2013, pp. 1–17, 30–31; Garrucci 1876, p. 73; McCrindle 1897, p. 13; Salmi 1949, p. 17; Gardthausen 1886, p. 241; Benešević, 1911, pp. 432–439; Kāmil 1979, p. 125; Clark 1953, pp. 21–43, 11].

The manuscripts show three illuminations on the topic of Israelites' wandering in the desert, corresponding to the three camps at Merra, Elim and Rephidim. In both the manuscripts these images are painted inside thin frames in the lower part of the parchments 103r, 103v, 104r in the codex of Florence (fig. 1, 2, 3), and 73r, 73v, 74r in the codex of Sinai.

<sup>1</sup> Valentina Cantone has written the paragraph *Depicting the wandering in the desert*; Vittorio Berti has signed the second paragraph, on the source of the Kosmas.



Fig. 1. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. IX.28, Kosmas Indikopleustes, *Christian Topography*, f. 103r, *Israelites at Merra*

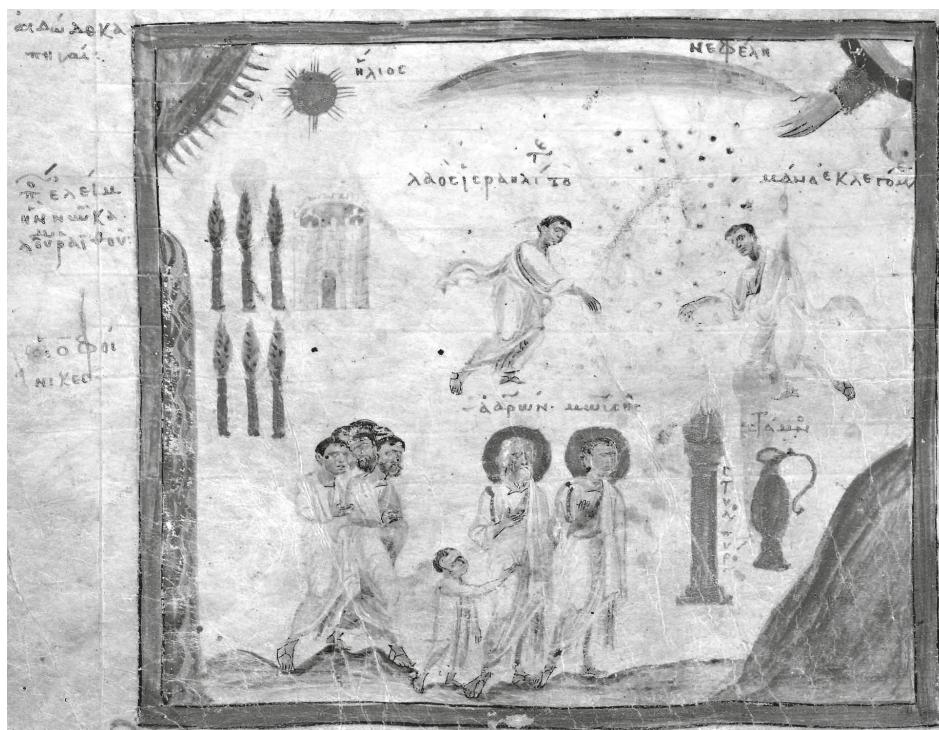


Fig. 2. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. IX.28, Kosmas Indikopleustes, *Christian Topography*, f. 103v, *The miracle of the manna*





Fig. 3. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. IX.28, Kosmas Indikopleustes, Christian Topography, f. 104r, *The miracle of the quails and smiting of the rock*

The last illumination represents the third stage of the Israelites' march. There are some stylistic differences between the two manuscript decoration, but I intend to focus on the iconography, analyzing the Florentine codex, which, by this point of view, corresponds to the manuscript at Sinai [Wolska Conus 1968, pp. 51–58].

The illumination in the folio 104r of the manuscript Plut. IX. 28 is depicted on the lower margin of the parchment (fig. 3), under the words referred to the origin of the celebration of the Sabbath, after the raining down of bread from heaven [Wolska Conus 1970, p.31]<sup>2</sup>. The text after the illumination reports the miracle near Rephidim, when Moses beat with his wooden staff a rock on Mount Horeb, from which flowed a spring to quench the Israelites' thirst.

The illumination contains two supernatural scenes in one single frame: the *Miracle of the quails* and the *Smiting of the rock*.

Inside the frame there is a depiction of two cities between which the miracles happened. The one on the left side shows the city walls of πόλις Ἐλείμ written near the upper border of the arrangement. The second city is depicted on the opposite part of the frame, near the right corner. The monumental gate of the city, πόλις Ῥαΐθου, has two columns which hold up a tympanum. Between the two cities there is a large cloud, νεφέλη, a sort

<sup>2</sup> Explicit: ἠθέλησαν γάρ τινες καὶ τῷ σαββάτῳ συλλέξαι καὶ οὐχ εὖρον, καθὰ γέγραπται.

of supernatural umbrella protecting the march of the Israelites from the sun. Below the arch formed by the cloud there are some birds flying down toward the lower part of the illumination. The *titulus* written on the parchment, ὀρνυγομήτρα, states that they are quails. A young boy dressed with a long tunic and a pallium is catching a bird and his dynamic movement contrasts with the static positions of the figures in the lower part of the arrangement. These figures are standing above the irregular gray footpath laid on the lower line of the rectangular frame. Another young boy, dressed with a short red tunic is following the column of fire which guided the Israelites journey in the desert, the στύλος πυρός, depicted in the middle of the scene, shifted to the right margin. Between the young boy with the red tunic and the red column there are some figures dressed with a light blue tunic and a pink or yellow pallium. They represent the little group of witnesses of the miracle of *The smiting of the rock* [Exodus 17: 5]. They are watching two figures depicted on the right, isolated on the neutral ground of the parchment, identified by the names written above the nimbus: Aaron and Moses (Ἀαρών and Μωϋσῆς). Moses is touching with its wooden staff a curious element in blue color with twelve dark blue superimposed flaps alongside the right margin of the arrangement. Outside the frame there is a *titulus* which clarifies that this curious band represents the twelve springs that flowed after the beating of the rock: the δώδεκα πηγαί [Weitzmann, Galavaris 1990].

The complex articulation of these sources is in contrast with the text of the *Christian Topography*. There is a lack of textual evidence about the springs in Rephidim. Moreover, twelve springs have been already depicted in the page before (fig. 2), where Kosmas mentions the miracle of the smiting of the rock near the city of Elim, famous for its twelve springs and the palm grove [Exodus 15; Wolska Conus 1970, pp. 26–29]. In this illumination, which shows the image of the second stage in the desert, the springs are depicted in the left corner, above the blue band which represents the seaside. In addition the shape of these springs is very peculiar, because they are depicted as twelve light blue lines in a radial arrangement flowing out of a green lunette. At the same time, in the previous illumination, which represents the camp at Merra (fig. 1), where the Bible describes the miracle of the bitter waters, the source is depicted in the same geometrical way. But Kosmas does not quote this miracle in the text written above this illumination, corresponding to *Christian Topography* 13, where he describes the origin of the supernatural cloud and the column of fire.

The twelve springs depicted in these illuminations represent a very critical part of the pictorial repertory of the *Christian Topography* for more than one reason. First of all, from the point of view of the iconographic analysis, they do not correspond to Early Christian and Byzantine tradition [Morey, Ferrari 1959; Van Moorsel 1964, pp. 221–225; Bisconti 2000, pp. 43–53; Nieddu 2000, pp. 216–219; Weitzmann and Bernabò 1999, pp. 720–724; Hann 1978, pp. 73–92; Brubaker 1981, pp. 73–92]. The curious solutions adopted in the *Christian Topography*, seem to be an original variation of the iconography.

Moreover, we should consider why the illumination which represents the camp of Merra shows also the episode of the bitter waters, even if Kosmas does not quote this miracle in his text. There is also another important lack of textual evidence about the twelve springs at Rephidim. The Bible [Exodus 17] and the chapters 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of the 5<sup>th</sup> book of the *Christian Topography* [Wolska Conus 1970, pp. 30–33] do not describe any kind of spring during the third stage in the desert at Rephidim. For this reason the third illumination of the journey in the desert has been considered a nonsense in the decorative repertory [Wolska Conus 1968, p. 35], an error in the transmission of the manuscripts



Fig. 4. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. IX.28,  
Kosmas Indikopleustes, *Christian Topography*, f. 104r,  
*The miracle of the quails and smiting of the rock*, by Wolska Conus W

[Wolska Conus 1990, p.177], or an incongruity in Kosmas's illustrations [Anderson 2013, p. 48].

In order to solve the problem, Wanda Wolska Conus has corrected the *titula* in the illumination (fig. 4). First, she replaced the name Raithou, written above the city depicted on the right side of the illumination, with the word Rephidim, thinking that an error in the transmission of the manuscripts occurred, because Raithou is the “actual name of Elim”, as confirmed by Kosmas himself [Wolska Conus 1970, pp. 26–27]. Moreover, she has deleted the words δώδεκα πηγαι, considering them another mistake, because they were already depicted in the illumination of Elim [Wolska Conus 1990, p. 177, image].

A very different solution, based on Jewish tradition, has been already proposed by [Kominko 2013, p. 88].

### Jewish and Syriac exegetical tradition in the teaching of Mar Aba

It has been proposed that among his pictorial sources, Kosmas used an illuminated Jewish Torah manuscript of some sort; this may explain the apparent similarity of the *Christian Topography's* illuminations and the iconography of the Dura Europos synagogue [Revel-Neher 1990–1991, p. 95]. But it is also possible that Jewish exegetical motifs reached Kosmas through his East Syrian teachers and their books, especially their Bibles.

Since their origins, Christian schools of Syria and Persia, indeed, developed an exegetical tradition influenced also by Jewish readings [Brock 1979]. With this in mind, we may imagine that Kosmas' source was a set of *hypomnemata*, notes taken during the lessons, which he wrote while listening to Mar Aba's lectures [Cribiore 1996, p. 100]. This hypothesis is supported by a comparison of Kosmas' sentences with fragments from Mar Aba as quoted in Isho'dad's *Commentary on Exodus*.

The first parallel concerns the encampment at Rephidim (Exodus 17):

Cosmas, <i>Chr. Top.</i> 5.16–18	Isho'dad, <i>Commentary on Exod.</i> 17.1
<p>Next, they camped at Rephidim, at the place now called Pharan. Since they were thirsty, Moses, by God's command, went with the elders, staff in his hand, to Horeb, the mountain, that is, on the Sinai that is near Pharan, about six miles away*. There, Moses struck the rock and much water gushed out, and the people drank, as David exclaims in the Psalms: "He split open a rock in the desert and gave them drink as from a great deep" (Ps 77.15) and again: "And he split open a rock, and the water gushed out, it flowed through the desert like a river" (Ps 104.41) and "He brought water out of a rock and caused it to flow down like rivers" (Ps 77.16).</p>	<p>Moses brought water out of the rock at Rephidim, the seventh resting place, where he fought with Amalek. God commanded him to bring the water out from a rock because this is dryer and harder than any other stone, and it cannot be pierced by iron. A strong heat of fire was accumulated there, so that the miracle was much greater. Someone says: water flowed out from that rock through twelve slits, as the number of the tribes [of Israel]. [According to] others, [water flowed] from a single spring, as well as today, they say, the water gush out from this place. Aba the Catholicos, it is said, went there and saw the water.</p>
<p>But the Apostle Paul says: "For they drank of that spiritual rock which followed them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10.4); by which he meant that, just as the water that flowed out from the rock which followed them gave them copious water to drink, so Christ, of whom the rock was a type, supplies to us life-giving waters, through the mysteries. Again, it was here (Rephidim) that they fought against and vanquished Amalek [Wolska Conus 1970, pp. 30–33].</p>	<p>Paul also clearly says: "They drank of that spiritual rock which followed them" (1 Cor 10.4). He called it "spiritual" not according to its nature, but meaning that what this rock was for them, Christ is now for the Church [<i>Commentaire d'Išo'dad</i> 1981, vol. II (edition — p. 34, translation — p. 45)].</p>

\* For this passage and the correct interpretation of its geographical statements, I follow the translation and explanation of Caneer, which is more consistent with Greek grammar than previous secondary literature [Caneer 2010, p. 249].

These texts evidently share a common exegetical background. My first point concerns the reference to Mar Aba linked by Isho'dad to the episode of the source of Rephidim. The Catholicos is quoted as an exegetical authority who had personally visited the place where Moses struck the rock and made the water gush forth. Mar Aba ostensibly found the spring still extant.

The second point concerns the quotation of 1 Cor 10.4 as a Christological prism through which the Exodus narrative is interpreted typologically. We should note that Theodoret of Cyrrihus employs the same quotation in a similar interpretation in his Question 27 on Exodus [Theodoret, p. 273]. Thus it appears to be a common reference in the Antiochene tradition, which Kosmas may have received via Mar Aba's lectures.

The third point, more complex and intriguing, deals with the scholastic debate on the twelve springs from which the water gushed forth and the possible correlation to the



number of Israel's tribes. This was a very frequent *topos* in late antique biblical imaginary, quoted also in the Quran [Quran, 2, 60].

In the Christian churches, the most widespread interpretation of Exod. 15.27 connects the number twelve to the apostles [Origenes, VII, 3]. Limiting our sight to the Syriac milieu, we can refer to Jacob of Serugh, *On the veil of Moses* [Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis, p.295]<sup>3</sup>.

The connection between the twelve tribes and the twelve springs was common in the Jewish exegetical tradition, relating to Exod. 15.27 and the stopover at Elim. I will limit myself to give reference to a few examples of such tradition that bind the number of springs and the number of Israel's tribes<sup>4</sup>. In this perspective, see also Kominko [Kominko 2013, pp. 87–100].

An excerpt of the *Exagoge* written by Ezekiel the Tragician (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE), quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, IX, 29, blends together the two scenes of Elim and Rephidim. It shows us for the first time a reference to the stopover at Elim that brings forward the image of the smashed rock mentioned in relation to the stopover at Rephidim (Exod. 17).<sup>5</sup> We can find a trace of the Syriac reception of this mixture in Jacob of Serugh's *Homilies against the Jews* [Jacques de Saroug 1976, p.94, l. 126]. In the case of Isho 'dad's commentary, we are faced with a further step: the employment of such a mixed image *explicitly* and *directly* to clarify Exod. 17, where we should recall that the reference to the twelve springs is not present at all. Isho 'dad's east-Syrian scholastic sources seem to have assumed the blending of Exod. 15.27 and Exod. 17 expressed by Ezekiel the Tragician or by some similar Midrashic tradition and to have expanded it to the remaining stopovers of the wandering in the desert, together with the connection between the twelve springs at Elim and the twelve Israel's tribes. As far as I know, this further exegetical shifting to explain punctually the stopover at Rephidim is a peculiar issue of the scholastic background of Isho 'dad. I wish to underline the connection of this explanation with the reference to Mar Aba.

In order to do this we need to take a step back and consider what Kosmas reports just previously about the Israelites' earlier stopover at Elim, which he identifies with the toponym of Raithou:

“Next, departing from Merra, they arrived at Elim, which we now call Raithou, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees; the springs are still preserved, and the palms have become much more numerous” [Wolska Conus 1970, pp. 26–27].

Kosmas do not quote the interpretation relating to the twelve springs as a reference to Israel's tribes. Instead, Kosmas' allusion to up-to-date information about the conservation of the springs of Elim until his time could be linked to Isho 'dad's statement concerning Mar Aba's personal survey at Rephidim. We may be dealing with a recollection of Mar Aba's journey following the path of Moses. The illustration attached in the manuscripts of *Christian Topography* to the stopover at Elim generally fits with the text (fig. 2).

<sup>3</sup> English translation: [Brock 1981, p.78].

<sup>4</sup> 1) A passage of Philo, *Life of Moses*, 1, 189 [Philonis Alexandrini Opera quae supersunt 1898, p. 165].  
2) A teaching attributed to Rabbi Eleazar of Modi'im (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) transmitted in the *Vayassa* I.8–12 of the first book of the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael* (see [Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael 2004, p. 231]).  
3) The Targum Neofiti and the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Ex. 15, 27 [Targum Neofiti 1 1994, pp. 69, 206].  
4) The Synagogue of Dura-Europos, where a fresco on the west wall represents Moses giving water through twelve springs to the twelve tribes (see: [Goodenough 1964, p. XII]).

<sup>5</sup> Edition: [Eusebius 1954, p.537, l. 8; Eusebius 1903, p.446]. On this topic see: [Bienaimé 1984, pp. 56–57]. For a different interpretation see: [Lanfranchi 2006, pp. 280–281].



Likewise, Kosmas' comment concerning the following stopover at Rephidim, to which Isho'dad refers in his exegesis, omits any details on the spring. What is striking is that, on the contrary, the illustration provided to comment on this passage gives an iconographic evidence coherent with the above said exegetical extension collected by Isho'dad (fig. 3). Indeed, in upper left side, as afore said, we can read αἱ δώδεκα πηγαί ('the twelve springs') in relation to twelve, ascending, blue flaps.

Trying to explain this coincidence, I would primarily suggest that the influence over Kosmas exercised by Mar Aba's lectures could have been spread also by some iconographic guideline derived from Mar Aba's exegetical background and used by Kosmas as a source for the illustrations of his book. We cannot be precise about the medium by which such an iconographic program reached Kosmas. However, this connection could clarify the general extension of the reference to the number twelve related to Exod. 15.27. Indeed, we find the δώδεκα πηγαί not only in the illustration of the encampment at Rephidim (Exod. 17.1) as above said, but also in the representation of the bitter water at Merra (Exod. 15.25) (fig. 1).

We need to remember that Mar Aba shared the same scholastic background as Isho'dad. It is possible to suggest that the sources preserved by Isho'dad derived from some exegetical compilation collecting, among others, old traditions known also by Mar Aba, binding them together with some genuine information about Sinai from Mar Aba: an exegetical repertoire very similar to what probably reached Kosmas during the western travel of "Patrikios". According to my suggestion, this East-Syrian polyphonic teaching transmitted at least these elements to Kosmas: a) the extension of the motif of 'the twelve springs' from Elim to Rephidim, b) information about Mar Aba's reconnaissance of these places, and c) the Christological use of 1 Cor. 10.4 to interpret Exod. 17.

Almost surely, the insertion of the δώδεκα πηγαί depicted in fig. 3 dates back to Kosmas's iconographical apparatus. Some later copyist modified the inscription on it probably in order to avoid the apparent discrepancy with the biblical text: so he doubled Elim/Raithou in two distinct toponyms to make Raithou the name of the town painted on the upper right side, correcting by this way an undoubtedly former reference to Rephidim.

The faraway reference to an East-Syrian teaching on this topic may have become incomprehensible or arcane for the 11<sup>th</sup> century copyists of these manuscripts.

Wanda Wolska-Conus has made a compelling case for emending this version of the illustration, which she attributed to a corruption of the manuscript tradition [Wolska Conus 1970, p. 34, no. 18]. Nevertheless, she was not able to explain the iconographic recurrence of the number twelve connected to the springs of water in this illumination; she thought that the addition of αἱ δώδεκα πηγαί was another mistake of some copyist [Wolska-Conus 1990, p. 177]. Maja Kominko has recently confirmed the influence of Jewish exegesis on the image of the twelve springs at Rephidim. Now, through Isho'dad, it is possible to clarify the mediation of Mar Aba and his oral teaching omitted (or deleted) in the text, but preserved on the iconography. This clue suggests that a broader investigation of the East Syrian origins of the iconography of the *Christian Topography* might produce valuable results shedding new light on its complex and in part mysterious relations between word and image.

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