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Σχετικά με τη χρονολόγηση της Παναγίας Γοργοεπηκόου στην Αθήνα

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The church of the Panagia Gorgoepekoos in Athens is an unicum in Byzantine architecture and has been linked to a Byzantine “classicism”. Its dating has been a point of argument, as it has been dated from the ninth to the fifteenth century, but the end of the twelfth century has been proposed as the most probable period of its construction. It will be shown that there is evidence for dating the monument in the thirteenth century, during the period of Frankish rule.

Keywords
Middle Byzantine period; Late Byzantine period; Frankish rule; architecture; sculpture; spolia, Athens; the church of the Panagia Gorgoepekoos in Athens.

Regarding the Dating of the Church of the Panagia Gorgoepekoos in Athens

The small church of the Panagia Gorgoepekoos, dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, stands in central Athens, close to the city’s Greek Orthodox cathedral (metropolis). Also known as the Little Metropolis or Hagios Eleutherios, the monument has been studied or referred to by several researchers, Greek and foreign, and was included by the late Professor Charalampos Bouras in two of his seminal monographs, one of them devoted to Byzantine Athens.

There is no historical testimony relating to the erection of the church. In all probability it was the katholikon of a small monastery which existed as a dependency...
type with dome and a narthex at the west (Figs 1-4). At the east end it terminates in an apse, which is semi-hexagonal on the outside. Semi circular barrel vaults cover the arms of the cross, the corner bays and the transverse-vaulted narthex. A single semi circular barrel vault covers the west arm of the cross and the longitudinal vault of the narthex. This unified construction also known from other Middle Byzantine churches in Athens, such as Prophet Elijah at the Staropazaro (second quarter of 11th century)\(^7\), St John in Plaka (probably late 12th or 13th century, wall-paintings 13th century)\(^8\) and St Nicholas Ragavas (mid-11th century)\(^9\). The vaults of the east corner bays and those of the prothesis and the diakonikon are also unified. The result is that the parts of the church are not seen as self-contained.

The illumination of the church is rather poor. There are eight single-lobed windows in the dome and one double-lobe window in the north, the south and the west arms of the cross. The narthex is additionally lit by a single-lobed window in both the north and the south side, and the sanctuary by a double-lobed window in the central apse and a single-lobed window in the wall of both the prothesis and the diakonikon.

The dome of the church is of the so-called “Athenian type”, with marble colonettes in the corners and harmonious proportions. The church stands on a pedestal and is built with carefully-dressed stone blocks with little mortar between them, thus giving the impression of ashlar masonry. The size of the stone blocks in the east wall varies considerably and large stone blocks have been set vertically. We do not know if all these stones are spolia. The cornices are ancient spolia with mouldings or new pieces that are copies of the ancient ones\(^10\).


\(^7\) Bouras, Βυζαντινή Αθήνα, op.cit. (n. 3), 169-171.

\(^8\) Bouras, op.cit., 188.

\(^9\) Bouras, op.cit., 217.

\(^10\) Bouras – Boura, Η ελλαδική ναοδομία, op.cit. (n. 3), 48. Bouras, Βυζαντινή Αθήνα, op.cit. (n. 3), 162.
Fig. 2. Athens, The church of the Panagia Gorgoepekoos. The elevations of the church: east and west sides.

Fig. 3. Athens, The church of the Panagia Gorgoepekoos. The elevation of the church: north side.
Bricks are used only in the arches of the windows of the dome. The arches (pseudo-arches) of the rest of the windows have been carved out of solid stones or in relief.

As is usual in other Middle-Byzantine churches of Athens, harmonic divisions have been identified, as an aesthetic system organizing the façades of the church. The uniqueness of the monument lies in the extensive use and the organization of a large number of antique and Byzantine sculptures to embellish the exterior surface of the walls. These spolia are carved with figurative and decorative subjects or antique inscriptions. The sculptures originate from Classical, Roman, Early Christian and Middle-Byzantine monuments. Their positioning creates the impression of a Doric frieze with carved metopes and plain surfaces instead of tri-glyphs, which runs around all sides of the church. Special prominence has been given to the sculptures on the west and east sides of the church, and on the arms of the cross under the roof gables.

No Byzantine wall-paintings are preserved. Until 1862 Post-Byzantine wall-paintings survived in the interior of the church, which are known from Paul Durand’s drawings.

The dating of the church is difficult, due to the lack of any historical, epigraphic, or specific objective evidence, and is a much-debated issue. Dates ranging from the ninth to the fifteenth century have been proposed.

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Fig. 4. Athens, The church of the Panagia Gongoepekoos. The elevation of the church: south side.

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However, the end of the twelfth century and specifically the years between 1182 and 1204 has been considered the most likely. This last dating is based on the Byzantine “classicism” of the church, evident in its construction, morphology and decoration. It was pre-eminently M. Chatzidakis who linked the erection of the church to the ideas and activity of Michael Choniates (1182-1204), the last Orthodox Bishop of Athens and a man of letters, almost twenty years before the Franks occupied the city.

Recently, B. Kiilerich proposed a date in the second half of the fifteenth century and challenged the idea of the church’s foundation by Michael Choniates. Her proposal is based mainly on the antique inscription on a block of an epistyle in the west corner of the south wall of the church: ΗΡΑΚΛΕΩΝ ΗΡΑΚΛΕΩΝΟΣ ΚΗ ΦΕΙΣΙΕΥΣ. ΔΩΡΟΘΕΑ ΙΣΙΓΕΝΟΥΣ/ ΜΥΡΡΙ ΝΟΥ ΣΙ ΟΥ ΘΥΓΑΤΗΡ (IG II², 6419) (Fig. 5). This inscription was read by Cyriacus of Ancona, who first visited Athens in 1436. Because he made no reference to the church of the Panagia Gorgoepekoos, it has been suggested that this inscription was elsewhere when he read it and that the church was built after 1436, probably after the Ottoman occupation of Athens, in 1456.

However, it is known that Cyriacus’ information is not always reliable, as errors have been found both in the transcription of inscriptions and the location of monuments. With regard to the aforesaid Gorgoepekoos inscription, he failed to transcribe the first word. Moreover, Cyriacus does not seem to be accurate in his information about the location of the inscription that is to be found as the entrance pilaster in the church of St. Nicholas in the cemetery at Mavromation, Messene. In addition, the quality of the construction and the overall morphology of the Gorgoepekoos church rule out such a late date.

Ch. Bouras, in his last study on Byzantine Athens, repeated his previous view that the monument dates from the late twelfth century and rejected Kiilerich’s proposal, although without commenting extensively on it.
The church is obviously an example of “Athenian Byzantine classicism”.[23] It has harmonious proportions, it stands on a high pedestal and it has classicist architectural features, such as pediments and cornices with mouldings, as well as many antique sculptures incorporated into the exterior, which coexist with Christian ones. Thus, it is not the antique sculptures themselves that suggest “classicism” but the organization of all the sculptural elements, which evokes an antique Doric frieze.

Furthermore, on the exterior of the church, the walls of the arms of the cross are articulated in such a way as to evoke the form of a prostyle four-column ancient temple.[24] Last, the emphasis on the embellishment of the west and east sides of the church could refer to a similar enhancement of antique buildings with the sculptural decoration of the pediments. It appears that in the Gorgepekoos there is a particular interest in emphasizing the external decoration of the church.

With regard to typology and morphology, the monument undoubtedly represents a mature phase of Byzantine architecture of the “Greek School” and cannot be dated earlier than the late twelfth century. However, the question is: can it be dated later and, if so, how much later?

The pedestal is certainly a feature of twelfth-century church architecture.[25] However, several monuments now considered to have been built during the period of Frankish rule and particularly in the thirteenth century, have a pedestal. We mention indicatively, the church of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary at Merbaka in the

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[24] Poulimenos, Από τον χριστιανικό Παρθενώνα, op.cit. (n. 6), 99, fig. 60.

REGARDING THE DATING OF THE PANAGIA GORGŒPEKOOS

Argolida, the church of Christ the Saviour at Alepochori near Megara, and the church of the Panagia Katholiki at Castouni in the western Peloponnese.

Large, carved stone blocks klin in courses or vertically mounted in an opus pseudo-cloisonné masonry or pseudo-isodomum are known from monuments of the early thirteenth century and later in Greece, such as the churches of St Demetrius at Chania-Avlonari in Euboea, St George (Omorphi Ekklesia) at Calatsi in Athens, St Athanasios in Megara, the Omorphi

Fig. 8. Athens, The church of the Panagia Gorgœpekoos. A slab from the south façade (§ 30).

Ekklesia on Aegina, the katholikon of the Hellenika monastery at Anthia in Messenia, the exonarthex of Porta Panagia at Pyle of Trikkala in Thessaly and the Metropolis (St Demetrius) at Mistra.

It has also been observed that the use of spolia in the external walls of churches increased during the period of Latin rule. Examples include monuments of greater

χάμος των Μεγάλων, DChAE 26 (2005), 74, 76, figs 5, 6. Ead., Ἐκκλησία και Ἰστορία της Ιερᾶς Μητρόπολος Μεσσηνίας, Kalamata 2010, 218-219, 222.

According to St. Mamaloukos, the exonarthex of the Porta Panagia church probably dates to the early 13th century, Boura – Boura, Η ἑλλαδική ναοδομία, op.cit. (n. 3), 273-274 note 9, fig. 31.5.


Bouras, Ἐκκλησία και μεταβυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική, op.cit. (n. 6), 189, 196-197.


27 D. Mouriki, Οι τοιχογραφίες του Σωτήρα κοντά στην Αλεποχώρι. Αθήνα 1978, 5-10, pl. 1.


29 Bouras – Boura, Η ἑλλαδική ναοδομία, op.cit. (n. 3), 334-335, fig. 388.


or lesser importance, such as the church of the Dormition of the Virgin at Merbaka in the Argolid\textsuperscript{37}, of St John at Keria in Mani\textsuperscript{38} and of the Panagia at Vathia in Euboea\textsuperscript{39}.

A further characteristic of thirteenth-century and later church architecture in Greece is the carving of the window arches out of the same stone lintel as the masonry. We mention examples from Attica (Omorphi Ekklesia at Galatsi in Athens\textsuperscript{40}, St Athanasios, St George at Orkos and the church of Christ the Saviour in Megara\textsuperscript{41},

An important criterion for dating the Panagia Gorgoepekoos church is the sculptural decoration. However, apart from the old publication of K. Michel and A. Struck, there is no systematic study of the Christian sculptures, and the impression is that all the sculptural decoration of the church consists of spolia. It has been argued, especially by those who accept a dating of the

\textsuperscript{37} Bouras, Βυζαντινή και μεταβυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική, op.cit. (n. 6), 173, fig. 199. Sanders, «Use of Ancient Spolia», op.cit. (n. 26), 584, 598-599.

\textsuperscript{38} Bouras, op. c.ê., 189, fig. 226.

\textsuperscript{39} Bouras, op. c.ê., 198, fig. 233.

\textsuperscript{40} Vassilaki-Karakatsani, Οἱ τοιχογραφίες, op.cit. (n. 30), pl. 1.

\textsuperscript{41} Stoufi-Poulimenou, Βυζαντινές εκκλησίες, op.cit. (n. 31), figs 5, 28, 54, 55.

\textsuperscript{42} Bouras – Boura, Η Ελλαδική ναοδομία, op.cit. (n. 3), 56, fig. 35.

church to the late twelfth century that the sculptures which date back to the twelfth century were created at the same time as the church. However, careful observation reveals convincingly that most of them are too spolia.

More than twenty sculptures from K. Michel and A. Struck’s list can be dated to the twelfth century, most of them toward the end of the century. We mention indicatively: on the west side of the church (a) A slab (W 14) with two sphinxes and two lions flanking the tree of life (Fig. 6). (b) A slab (W 17) with two large sphinxes positioned symmetrically to the right and left of the tree of life, on whose branches are represented two smaller lions with human heads. These two slabs are probably products of the same workshop. (c) Two slabs (W 12, W 19) of similar subject and style, which must come from the same monument, are decorated above with heraldic griffins flanking the tree of life, which grows out of a crock, and below with two eagles mauling snakes. (d) The slab (W 6) adorned with a knitted cross.

On the east side (a) A slab (O 50) with a representation of a lion attacking an antelope (Fig. 7). (b) A slab (O 71) with a kouzena inscribed in a rectangle and enclosing beautiful palmettes and interlocking circles with rosette. (c) A slab (O 60) with a foliate cross beneath an arch.

On the south side: (a) A panel (S 44) with the familiar motif of kouzena inscribed in a rectangle and enclosing small interlocking circles. On the frame too is a customary ornament of the twelfth century. (b) A panel (S 30) with the familiar pattern of interlaced consecutive frames connected with a node (Fig. 8). The squares enclose palmettes. Both the subject and the well-drawn basket-weave ornament of the frame are attributed to the twelfth century.

Spolia used as lintel on the entrances of the narthex to the nave, as well as the north entrance of the church

been dated to the 12th century, Bouras – Boura, Η ελληνική ναοδομία, op.cit. (n. 3), 40, 42, 43, fig. 22.


51 See for example, the pseudo-sarcophagus in the church of the Holy Apostles in the Ancient Agora of Athens [Franz, The Church of the Holy Apostles, op.cit. (n. 13), 14. Grabar, Sculptures byzantines, op.cit. (n. 3), no 87, pl. LXXIXth. Th. Pazaras, Αναγλύφωμα σμαραγδών και επιτάφιες πλάκες τῆς μέσης και ύστερης βυζαντινής περιόδου στὴν Ελλάδα, Athens 1988, no 60, 46-

49 panel (S 44) with the family coat of arms of the church of the Holy Apostles in the Ancient Agora of Athens [Grabar, op.cit. (n. 13), 14. Grabar, Η ελληνική ναοδομία, op.cit. (n. 3), 40-41, figs 17, 18]. The Hosios Loukas Monastery on Kéntro [A. Orlandos, «Η μονή του Όρηστος Μελέτης και τὴν παραλαύριον αὐτῆς», AMBE 5 (1939-1940), p. 97 fig. 44, p. 101 fig. 48] and the monastery of St Nicholas Varson in Arcadia [I. Stoufi-Poulimenou, «Βυζαντινοί ἀρχαιοτεχνικοί χάλκειοι στὴν μονὴ Αγίου Νικολάου Βαρβαρίσιας», ΕΕΘΣΠΑ ΑΖ’ (2002), 712 note 21, with other examples, p. 714, 743, fig. 5, p. 744, figs 7, 8a, 8β, p. 755, figs 24a, 24β.}
can be dated to the twelfth century\(^{54}\). The frames of the lateral doors of the inner narthex and the north entrance of the church, which are decorated with the same ornament, are probably also spolia\(^{3}\) (Fig. 9).

Consequently, it is very difficult to accept that all these sculptures were carved a few years before the erection of the Panagia Gorgoepekoos, for Athenian churches that were destroyed almost immediately after they had been built. It is likewise difficult to accept that the late twelfth-century sculptures are contemporary with the building of the church, when most of them are obviously spolia. Spolia lead us probably to a period after the twelfth century.

The monument’s connection with Michael Choniates is hypothetical. In his writings, Choniates expresses his interest in the classicism of the monument that makes it unique. It is evident that the church of the Panagia Gorgoepekoos seeks to give the impression of an ancient temple or, rather, of an ancient temple that was converted into a church. The employment of ancient figural reliefs, sometimes with quite bold subjects, yet carved with the cross, such as the satyr on the north side of the church, bears witness to the familiarity of Christian Athenian society with ancient sculpture. Perhaps the most important factor was that the Parthenon, the Erechtheion and other Athenian temples were functioning as churches. Perhaps Choniates did not really understand the Athenians, as he failed to realize that the classical tradition remained alive in the city even among what he called its “unpolished” inhabitants. This was an experiential, every day relationship of the Byzantine Athenians with the monuments and tradition of antiquity, quite unlike Choniates’ relationship with antiquity, which was an academic and scholarly one.

B. Kiilerich linked the church of the Panagia Gorgoe-

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\(^{54}\) The decorative motifs can be compared with analogous 12th-century sculptures in the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens [Sklavou-Mavrouck, Πλαττά, op.cit. (n. 45), 185 no 285, with other examples from the 12th and 13th centuries], in the St Melitios monastery on Kithairon [Orlandos, «Η μνήμη τοῦ Οσίου Μελιτίου», op.cit. (n. 5), 98, fig. 43] and in the church of St Nicholas at Messara, Andros [Bouras – Boura, Η ελλαδική ναοδομία, op.cit. (n. 3), 70-71, figs 51, 52].

\(^{56}\) As B. Kiilerich, in our opinion, has rightly argued [Kiilerich, «Making Sense», op.cit. (n. 3), 98, 103-104] and in the church of St Meletios monastery on Kithairon [Orlandos, «Η μνήμη τοῦ Οσίου Μελιτίου», op.cit. (n. 3), 70-71, figs 51, 52].

pekoos with the Christian Parthenon and claimed that it was built as a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary after the conversion of the Parthenon into an Ottoman mosque (maybe in 1460 or shortly thereafter). It is possible that this highly attractive view could be argued for the case of the conversion of the Orthodox Parthenon into a Latin church, after 1204.

As we have seen, the architecture of the monument cleaves close to Middle-Byzantine church building and indeed of the twelfth century. Concurrently, the existence in the fabric of the church of spolia of the late twelfth century places its foundation probably after the twelfth century. So, although it is not always easy to distinguish churches built after 1204 from those of the late twelfth century, as previous construction methods and formats were reproduced, and some Western influences are not always visible, the erection of the church of the Panagia Gorgoepekoos during the period of Frankish rule, probably in the first half of the thirteenth century, would be probable. Thus, Alison Frantz’s view that most of the sculptures built into the walls of the church probably originated from churches destroyed by Leon Sgouros, when he invaded Athens (1204), can be vindicated.

It is true that the construction of such a notable and costly monument, under the historical circumstances of Frankish rule, is perhaps difficult for us to accept. Nonetheless, we know that in the same period, in other Frankish-held regions, high-quality monuments were built or decorated with wall-paintings (e.g. the Omorphi Ekklesia at Galatsi or the church of the Dormition of the Virgin at Merbaka in the Argolid).

All of the above, of course, presupposes that the late twelfth-century sculptures are also spolia, as are the earlier ones. However, to the extent that some of the sculptures in question may have been new, the earlier dating of the church to the late twelfth century, which was accepted by Ch. Bouras, could be accepted by us too.

1. For Sgouros, who put the lower town to the torch, see Ph. Vlachopoulou, Λέων Σγουρός: Ο βίος και η πολιτεία του βυζαντινού άρχοντα της βορειοανατολικής Πελοποννήσου στις αρχές του 13ου αιώνα, Θεσσαλονίκη 2002. Also Kaldellis, The Christian Parthenon, op.cit. (n. 9), 162-165.

Illustration credits

Iωάννα Στουφή-Πουλιμένου

ΣΧΕΤΙΚΑ ΜΕ ΤΗ ΧΡΟΝΟΛΟΓΗΣΗ ΤΗΣ ΠΑΝΑΓΙΑΣ ΓΟΡΓΟΕΠΗΚΟΟΥ ΣΤΗΝ ΑΘΗΝΑ

Ο ναός της Παναγίας της Γοργοεπηκοού στην Αθήνα, αφιερωμένος στην Κοίμηση της Θεοτόκου, βρίσκεται δίπλα στον νεότερο καθεδρικό ναό της πόλης. Δεν υπάρχει καμία ιστορική μαρτυρία σχετικά με την ανέγερσή του. Κατά πάσα πιθανότητα, στα μέσα του 17ου αιώνα ήταν καθολικό μιας μικρής μονής, που αποτελούσε μέρος της μονής Καισαριανής.

Πρόκειται για ένα εγγεγραμμένο σταυροειδές ναό με τρούλο, ημισύνθετο τετρακιόνιο, με νάρθηκα στα δυτικά (Εικ. 1-4). Διαθέτει χρηστικά και ψευδοϊσόδομη τοιχοποιία. Τα τόξα των παραθύρων, εκτός από αυτά του τρούλου, έχουν λαξευτεί σε ολόσωμους δόμους ή ανάγλυφα spolia. Το μνημείο αποτελεί unicum στην βυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική και σωστά έχει συνδεθεί με έναν βυζαντινό «κλασικισμό». Η μοναδικότητα του μνημείου έρευναται όχι κυρίως στη χρήση αλλά και στη σύνθεση της ναού με γόλιθο αρχαίο από άλλους πολιτισμούς και παλαιότερα βυζαντινά γλυπτά (spolia), με σκοπό την διαμόρφωση του παραμονής.
ανάδειξη των εξωτερικών όψεων του (Εικ. 2), όπως περίπου συμβαίνει σε έναν αρχαίο ναό ή μια εκκλησία που προήλθε από μια προηγούμενη εκκλησία.

Τα spolia περιλαμβάνουν ανάγλυφα με εικονιστικά ή διακοσμητικά θέματα και αρχαίες επιγραφές. Προέρχονται από κλασικά, ρωμαϊκά, πρωτοβυζαντινά και μεσοβυζαντινά μνημεία. Ο τρόπος που έχουν χρησιμοποιηθεί, δημιουργεί την εντύπωση μιας δωρικής ζωφόρου με ακόσμητα τρίγλυφα και ανάγλυφες μετόπες, που περιτρέχουν όλες τις όψεις της εκκλησίας. Ιδιαίτερη φροντίδα έχει δοθεί στην τοποθέτηση γλυπτού διακόσμου στη δυτική και την ανατολική όψη της εκκλησίας, και στα τύμπανα των σκελών του σταυρού, κάτω από την αετώματικη διαμόρφωση των στεγών.

Η χρονολόγηση του ναού αποτελεί σημείο διαφωνίας, καθώς έχει χρονολογηθεί από τον 9ο έως τον 15ο αιώνα. Παράλληλα, το τέλος του 12ου αιώνα προτείνει ως η επικρατέστερη χρονολόγηση του μνημείου.

Το γλυπτό διακόσμο που έχει ενσωματωθεί στην τοιχοποιία του ναού αποτελεί ένα από τα σημαντικότερα χαρακτηριστικά της εκκλησιαστικής αρχιτεκτονικής. Είναι φανερό ότι το μνημείο, όσον αφορά στη τυπολογία, την κατασκευή και την μορφολογία, αναφερόταν σε μια ισχυρή έδρα της Ελλάδος και δεν μπορεί να χρονολογηθεί πριν από τα τέλη του 12ου αιώνα. Μπορεί όμως να χρονολογηθεί μετά τον 12ο αιώνα, και πόσο μεταγενέστερα;