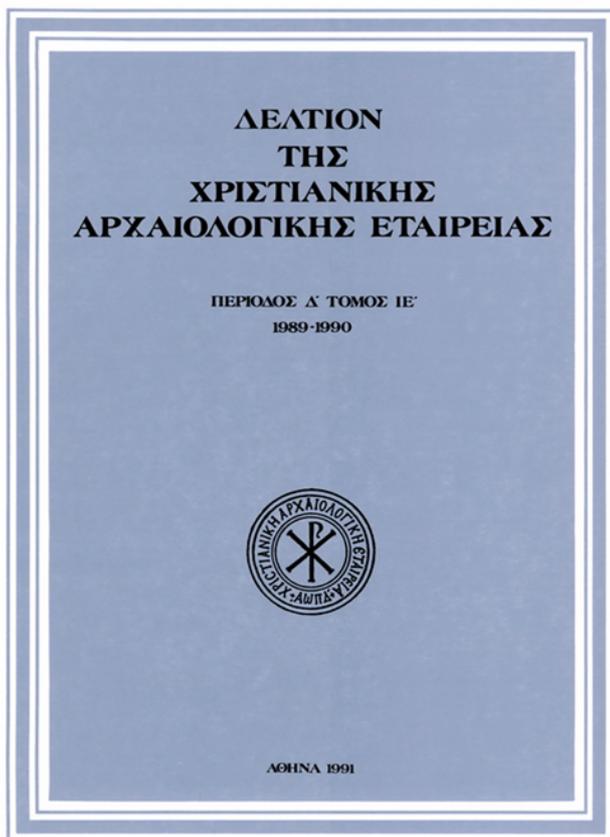


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Three Byzantine Bronze Candelabra from the Grand Lavra Monastery and Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai

Laskarina BOURAS

Δελτίον ΧΑΕ 15 (1989-1990), Περίοδος Δ' • Σελ. 19-26

ΑΘΗΝΑ 1991

THREE BYZANTINE BRONZE CANDELABRA
FROM THE GRAND LAVRA MONASTERY
AND SAINT CATHERINE'S MONASTERY IN SINAI*

Among the numerous candelabra that are still employed in the katholikon of the Grand Lavra Monastery in Mt. Athos there are two identical, that are called by the monks “the Amalfitans’ candelabra” (Fig. 1). They are 141 cm high and—as most Byzantine candelabra—they are cast in multiple units that compose the base, the shaft and the pan with the pricket. The domical base (Fig. 4) is carried by a square frame on four stylized, animal hoof supports and the shaft consists of spherical, faceted biconical or baluster links, with the top flaring one carrying the pan and the pricket. On top of the pan is a wide openwork disc with twelve candle-holders.

The four support base is very rare among the surviving Byzantine candelabra. In fact, the only parallel known to me is that of Dečani. However, baluster and multi-faceted links are quite common, and they are also shared by medieval Islamic stands. The same is true of the stylized animal hoof supports that can be traced back to late antique models. The wide openwork disc decorated with horse-shoe arches on top of the pan (Fig. 5) appears to be a later addition.

On the whole, the Athonite candelabra display pure geometric forms and a rare elegance of proportions. Their rich inlaid decoration (Figs 2-3), based on the abstract, orientalizing palmette vocabulary, is drawn with remarkable precision in strictly symmetrical arrangements, that reveal a fair knowledge of geometry, while two slim friezes show a band of classicizing flutings and a kufic inscription (Fig. 6). The background of these ornaments is raised and filled with niello, recalling some silver jewellery of the 11th and the 12th centuries. As far as I know, this technique is unrecorded on other Middle Byzantine bronzes. Nevertheless, metal fonts depicted in 12th century monumental painting and manuscript illumination often display a very similar effect.

The band of classicizing flutings (Fig. 7) is very rarely employed in the Byzantine decorative arts, for instance, on a marble cornice of the katholikon of Nea Moni in Chios, which is thought to be the single application of the theme in middle Byzantine architectural sculpture. Kufic bands are much more common, especially on

elaborate pieces of metalwork, ceramics, textiles and the architectural decoration. The specific kufic band is even more interesting, because it appears to copy a genuine kufic inscription. Despite certain discrepancies, Helen Philon of the Benaki Museum in Athens suggests the reading “AL-MULK-LILLAH” that may be interpreted “the kingdom is to God”. The type of this inscription and the style of the calligraphy with the humped *alifs* is quite common on Fatimid works of art of the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries.

Corroborating dating indication may also be deduced from the appellation “Amalfitans’ candelabra”, for it is well known that an Amalfitan Monastery was founded in Mount Athos shortly after 980. The monks were granted the right to own a boat for the transportation of goods from Constantinople, where the city kept a wealthy community. The Amalfitans were on excellent terms with the Fatimid *chalif* as with the Byzantine emperor. Amalfitans ordered in Constantinople the earliest of the Byzantine bronze doors in Italy that of Amalfi, in the 1060ies, possibly those of Monte Cassino too, and Amalfitans are known to have handled the trade of Byzantine chalices, crosses, candelabra and textiles in Rome. Shortly after the fall of Constantinople to the Crusaders in 1204, the Amalfitan Monastery fell into decay, and by 1287, its possessions were granted to the Lavra Monastery. Now, if our candelabra derive from this Amalfitan Monastery as their name implies, then their date most probably ranges between the 980ies and 1204.

The bronze candelabrum of Sinai is still in use in the Justinianic church of the Transfiguration (Fig. 8). It is

* This paper was presented before the 17th International Byzantine Congress (Washington D.C. 1986), Session 6 (Sculptural relief). A brief summary of the paper is published in the Abstracts, p. 42. I am grateful to prof. N. Niconanos who pointed out to me the Grand Lavra candelabra and to prof. P. Vocotopoulos for the photographs. I am also grateful to Mr. St. Mamaloukos, architect, who provided me with photographs of the Sinai candelabrum and with measurements of both examples.

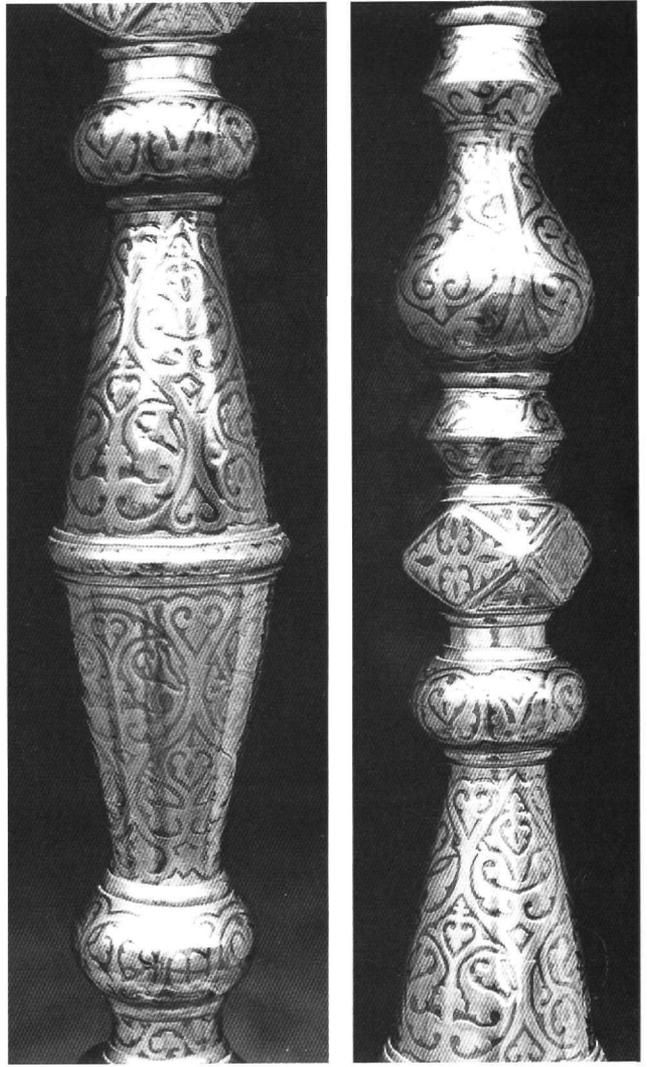
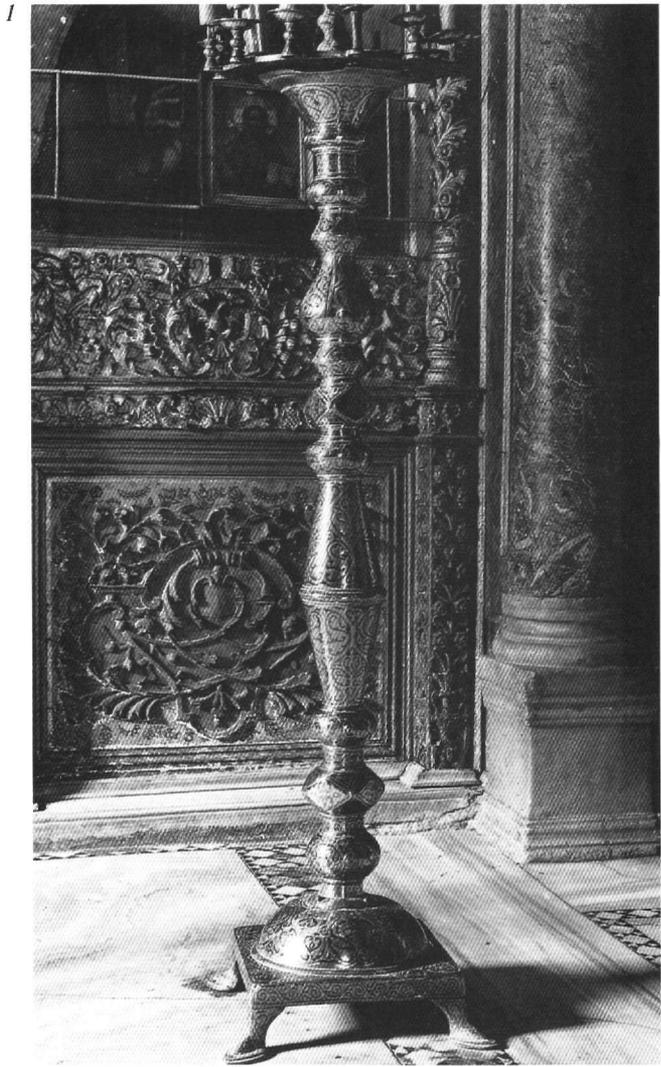




Fig. 1. Grand Lavra. One of the Amalfitan's candelabra. General view.

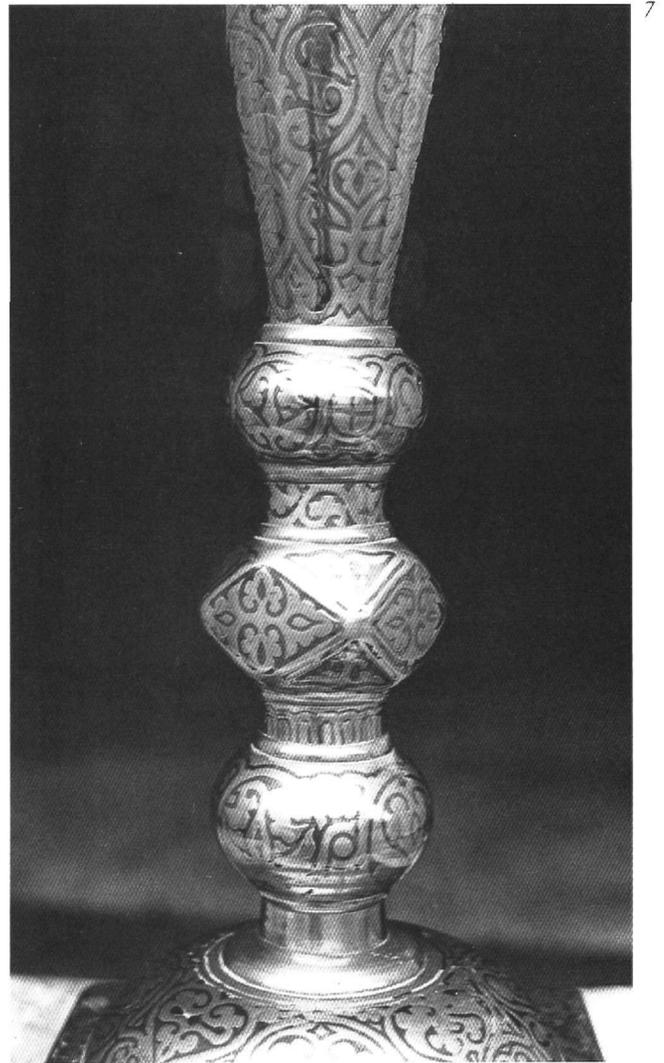
Figs 2-3. Grand Lavra. One of the Amalfitan's candelabra. Inlaid decoration on the shaft.

Fig. 4. Grand Lavra. One of the Amalfitan's candelabra. The base.

Fig. 5. Grand Lavra. One of the Amalfitan's candelabra. The openwork disk.

Fig. 6. Grand Lavra. One of the Amalfitan's candelabra. Partial view of the shaft and kufic inscription.

Fig. 7. Grand Lavra. One of the Amalfitan's candelabra. Partial view of the shaft and band of flutings.



approximately of the same height as the Lavra ones, 139 cm, and it is entirely covered by a rich incised decoration. The six-lobed base (Fig. 11) is supported by three stylized griffins (Fig. 10) and the elaborate shaft is made of hollow cast links of different shapes, the top flaring one carrying the pan and the pricket. The wide disc on top of the pan carrying twelve candle-holders seems to be a later addition (Fig. 9).

The base has the appearance of a hammered one, but the underside proves it to have been cast. It is separated into six lobes by drop-shaped ribs, with the rounded end of each lobe bordered by a "rocaill rib". Two addorsed peacocks, a lion or a griffin in profile and some floral motifs with the characteristic trefoil ends, are incised over the pounced surface of each lobe.

The shaft consists of seven symmetrically arranged hol-

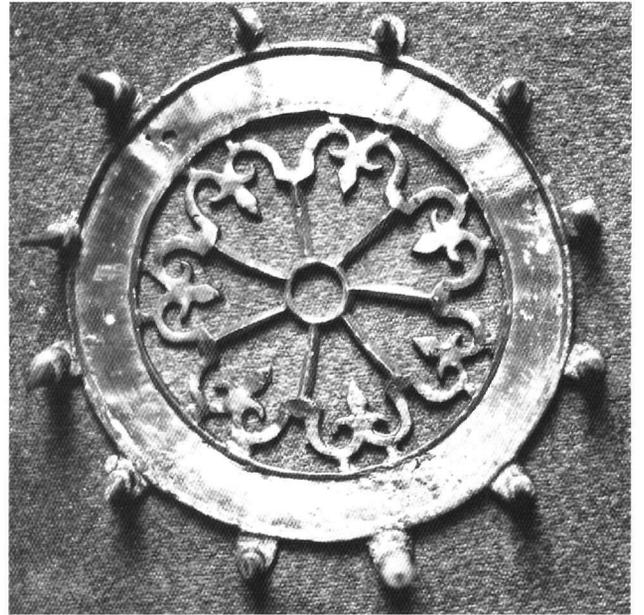


Fig. 8. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. General view.

Fig. 9. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. The openwork disk.

Fig. 10. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. Griffin support of the base.

Fig. 11. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. The base.

low cast links. The central one is spindle-shaped and consists of two halves with spiral gadroons, separated by slim ribs (Fig. 14). The gadroons are incized with foliate scrolls and chain patterns enclosing palmettes. At the two ends of it are spherical links cast into two halves. The upper one shows busts of four military saints enclosed in medallions, namely Saint George (Fig. 12), Saint Theodore (Fig. 13), Saint Procopios (Fig. 16), and Saint Demetrios (Fig. 17), while the other one shows medallions enclosing lions or griffins in profile (Figs 18-20), against the same floral ornament with trefoil ends and the pounced background we saw in the decoration of the base.

The spherical links are followed by two faceted ones with hatched palmettes on a pounced background and two four-lobed baluster links, decorated with chain patterns or medallions and undulating scrolls enclosing lions or griffins in profile, and hatched palmettes. The four lobes are separated by the same slim and hatched ribs we saw on the base and the central link.

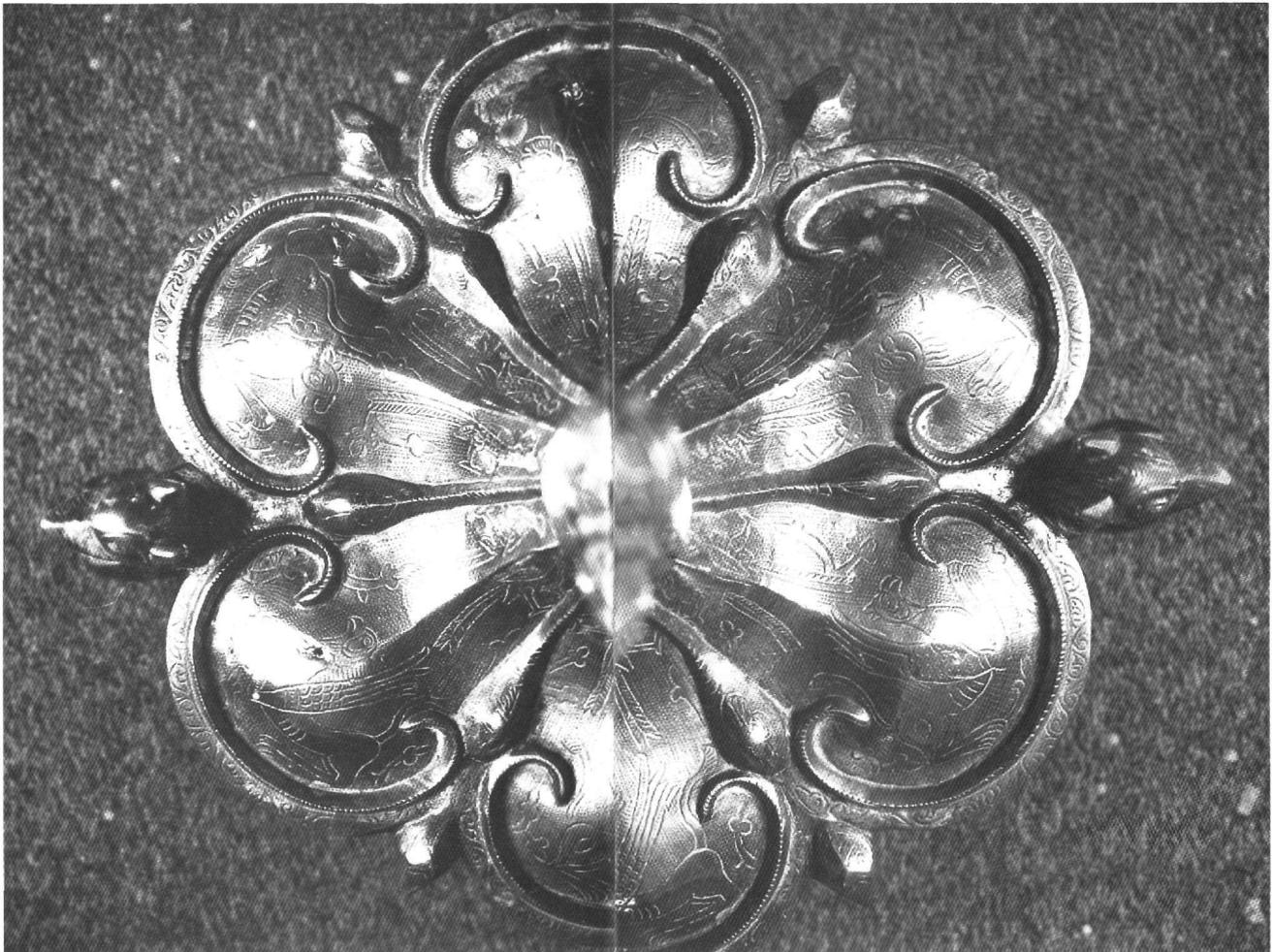
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The rim of the pan shows a frieze of running animals: a leopard, a horse, a dog, a fox, another dog and another hare, alternating with stylized floral motifs (Fig. 15). The animals obviously compose a hunting scene, probably inspired from earlier models; they are summarily drawn and evoke a lively sense of movement.

The incized decoration of the Sinai candelabrum recalls that of the bronze doors of Vatopedi in Mt. Athos, that are vaguely attributed to the Palaeologan period. Especially close are the types of hatched palmettes employed and the bands of the chain pattern, that is accentuated by a dotted line. Even closer parallels can be found for the hunting scene on the rim of the pan, in two silver-gilded bowls found in Russia and decorated with mythological subjects. These are the Beriozovo bowl, or scaled bowl, and that of the Basilewsky collection, both now in the Hermitage. The two bowls show very similar hunting scenes, and the same floral ornament with trefoil ends we have observed on the Sinai candelabrum. Moreover, they show the same systematic use of a pounced

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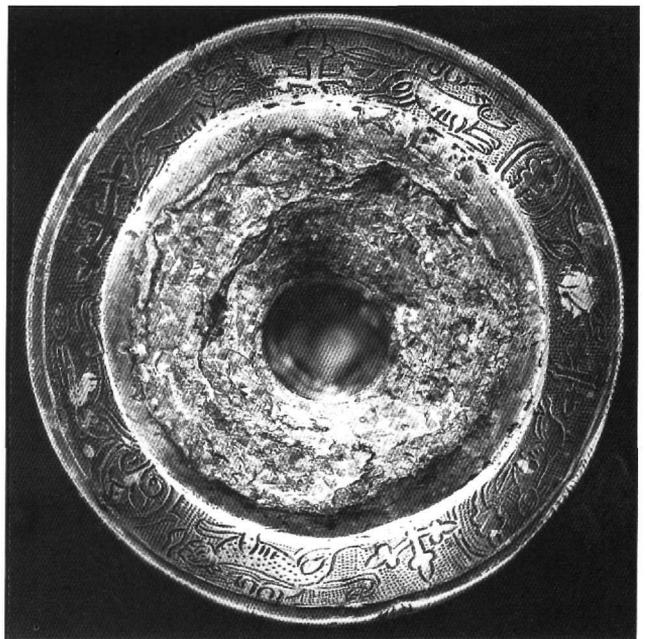


Fig. 12. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. Bust of Saint George.

Fig. 13. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. Bust of Saint Theodore.

Fig. 14. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. Partial view of the shaft.

Fig. 15. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. The pan.

Fig. 16. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. Bust of Saint Procopios.

Fig. 17. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. Bust of Saint Demetrios.

Figs 18-20. Sinai Monastery candelabrum. Partial views of the shaft.

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background that has been created with some pricketed wheel. Close stylistic affinities can also be established between the medallions of Saint George on horseback in the bottom of the Beriozovo bowl and the busts of saints on the spherical links of the candelabrum. The Russian bowls are accompanied by Greek inscriptions. Darkeritch who has studied them systematically attributes them to Constantinopolitan workshops in the reign of Manuel Komnenos, associating their iconography with the ideals of Byzantine feudalism of the twelfth century, pointing out that even if they are somehow later than that they certainly underdate the Mongol invasion of the 1230ies. We may conclude that the Sinai candelabrum shares a number of structural similarities with the Lavra ones, mainly in the casting technique and the general form of the links. However, the Athonite examples display a rare technique of niello inlay on bronze which was previously unrecorded in the Middle Byzantine period, while the Sinai candelabrum with its rich incized decoration provides a useful link between

the group of the Russian bowls and the bronze doors of Vatopedi.

The Lavra and the Sinai candelabra appear to be the most elaborate Byzantine examples that have survived to this day, and they are invaluable for the study of Byzantine decorative arts and metalworking techniques. Despite their formal similarities, these candelabra differ in character. Thus, the first two display a rare elegance of proportions, pure geometric forms, and an unparalleled virtuosity of the abstract, orientalizing palmette vocabulary, while their kufic inscription points to a date in the late eleventh or the twelfth centuries. The Sinai candelabrum on the other hand, though inspired from similar models, is obviously more baroque. Its rich incized decoration may lack to accuracy and the technical perfection of the Athonite candelabra, but reveals the rising interest in figural representation, in the depiction of animal forms in movement and the rising interest in plasticity that are characteristic of the turn of the twelfth century.