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ΔΕΛΤΙΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΗΣ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ

The Olympiotissa Wood-carved Doors, Reconsidered

Charalambos BOURAS

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THE OLYMPIOTISSA WOOD-CARVED DOORS, RECONSIDERED*

1. The main door of the narthex in the katholikon of the Monastery of the Olympiotissa in Elasson, Thessaly, has long been known¹. It is one of the rare examples of Byzantine wooden doors to have survived. This circumstance, together with the fact that it was inadequately documented in the original publication, and with the high quality of the work, is ample justification for a scholarly re-examination. It should be noted that after the war the Olympiotissa door was removed from the church to a secure exhibition room², underwent extensive conservation work in 1964³, and has twice been shown to the public in exhibitions of Byzantine art⁴.

2. The door, which is today in a moderate state of preservation, has two leaves (Fig. 1). On each leaf there are three panels, each of them with its own frame, with their borders defined by the stiles and by four rails. The three panels on either leaf each have a different decorative pattern, rendered in an openwork technique. In the top panels, in a very poor state of preservation, there are four rows of three four-sided shapes, the sides of which are concave; the curved elements that circumscribe them are interlaced. Of the small motifs set within the four-sided shapes, four have survived, two with representations of birds, and another two incised with the date inscriptions.

The central panels are adorned with circles inscribed within interlaced bands. The space between the circles again forms four-sided shapes with concave sides which, like the circles, enclose small independent motifs, some of them geometric (crosses, stars, *lemniskoi*) or plant motifs (palmettes or semi-palmettes), and some of them figures of birds and snakes. The bottom panels are simpler, with intersecting circles of equal size enclosed by bands.

The individual frames of the panels have different decoration on the top, the middle and the bottom panels, while the stiles and the rails are adorned with another, unified motif consisting of a chain of a curved, curvilinear motif with two variations.

The iconographic interest of the monument under examination is thus limited. It has great interest in terms of style and technique, however, for the work gives expression to grand designs, and is unique amongst the

surviving examples of Byzantine wood-carving in combining different ways of working the wood.

From the point of view of its construction, it has an original feature: the system of stiles, rails and panels does not have the structural form known from the ancient world, but is nailed onto a second wooden leaf, which is of a single piece and undecorated. The openwork of the panels is shown off to good effect by the coloured leather⁵ (very few traces of which have survived) that was inserted between them and the back leaf. The semi-spherical brass nails⁶, in addition to their functional purpose, enrich the overall esthetic effect.

On the stiles, the rails and the curved elements of the bands on the surface of the panels, the technique involves the inlaying of strips of bone into the wood, to enrich the decorative effect of the interlaced networks. Usually, two strips of bone are used, with a leaf of dark wood between them; the band thus formed, which is 5-6 mm broad, is set into the wood to a depth of 5-6 mm. Wood of two or three different colours is inlaid in the individual frames of the panels, wood of two or three colours is inlaid, usually in rectilinear shapes. Finally,

* This paper was presented before the 17th International Byzantine Congress in Washington D.C. (1986), Session 3 (Byzantine Ivory and Wood-carving). A brief summary of the paper is published in the Abstracts, p. 41.

1. G. Sotiriou, Βυζαντινά μνημεῖα τῆς Θεσσαλίας ΙΓ' καὶ ΙΔ' αἰῶνος, ΕΕΒΣ 4 (1927), pp. 327-331. Idem, La sculpture sur le bois dans l'art byzantin, Mélanges Charles Diehl, Paris 1930, p. 175. Ch. Bouras, Les portes et les fenêtres en architecture byzantine (Thèse de doctorat), Paris 1964, pp. 57-62. E. A. Skouvaras, Ὀλυμπιώτισσα, Athens 1967, pp. 24-27. A. Chadjimichali, La sculpture sur bois, Athènes 1950, p. 6. A. Kalligas-Geroulanou, in Byzantine Art and European Art, Athens 1964, p. 203. S. M. Houliia, in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art, Athens 1986, p. 32, Figs p. 33-35.

2. After the demolition of the katholikon exonarthex, a building of the Turkish period, in 1960.

3. Done in opportunity of the display of the doors, in the 9th Exhibition of the Council of Europe in Athens (1964).

4. A. Kalligas-Geroulanou, *op.cit.* S. M. Houliia, *op.cit.*

5. Each board in the coresponds with a separate piece of coloured leather. This is clear in the destroyed parts of the openwork panels. The colour for the bottom panels is red and for the central panels bright green.

6. Some of the brass nails are attached to the door during the 1964 restoration works.



*Fig. 1. Olympiotissa. Doors.
General view.*



Figs 2-3. Olympiotissa. Doors. The two bottom panels (actual state).

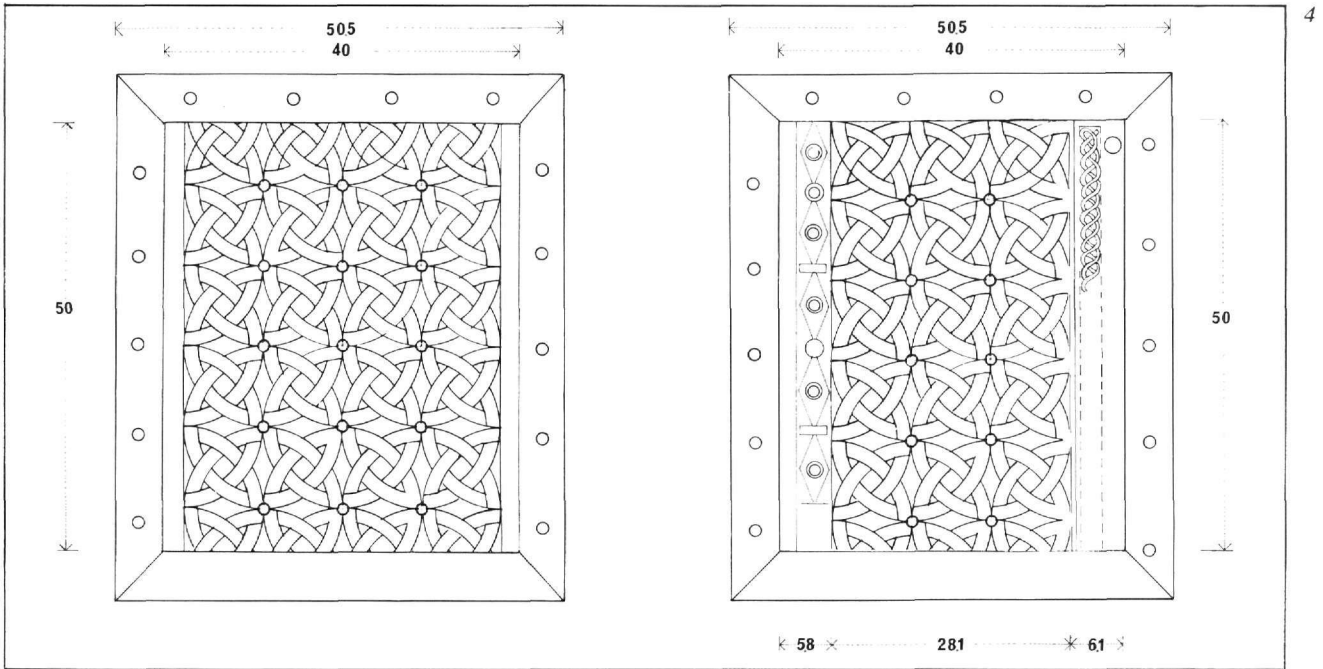
the small decorative motifs set within the panels were of hard wood, carved in a technique reminiscent of that of Middle Byzantine marble reliefs, despite the fact that here the background has been removed to achieve the openwork effect.

3. Since the time of the original publication in 1927, half of the small panel at the top left (one of the two on which is inscribed the date inscription) has been destroyed. I shall not deal again with the ambiguities involved in the reading and interpretation of the inscription⁷, since it is clear, firstly that no sense can be made of the last part of it, and secondly that the information that it contains is that the doors were renewed in the year 1296.

4. The two bottom panels (Figs 2-3) are the most badly worn (which is natural, on account of the moisture in the floor) and also reveal indications that they were radically remodelled at an earlier period. The geometric

motif involving the interlocking circles with which they are decorated, however, makes it possible to study them, and to restore the original form with certainty. The modifications are immediately visible on the right hand leaf of the door (Fig. 4). The two full circles that originally took up the width of the main motif were reduced to one and a half circles by the addition at either side of two upright pieces of wood, the one on the right 58 mm wide, and that on the left 61 mm. The former was decorated with the astragal motif (inlaid in wood of a different colour), and the latter with the braided motif, in a relief technique already known from other wood-carvings of the Byzantine period.

7. G. Sotiriou in *ΕΕΒΣ* 4 (1927), pp. 324, 329. E. Skouvaras, *op.cit.*, pp. 28-29, n. 4. A. K. Orlandos, 'Η Κόκκινη Ἐκκλησιά, Ἡπειροχρον 2 (1927), p. 158.



4

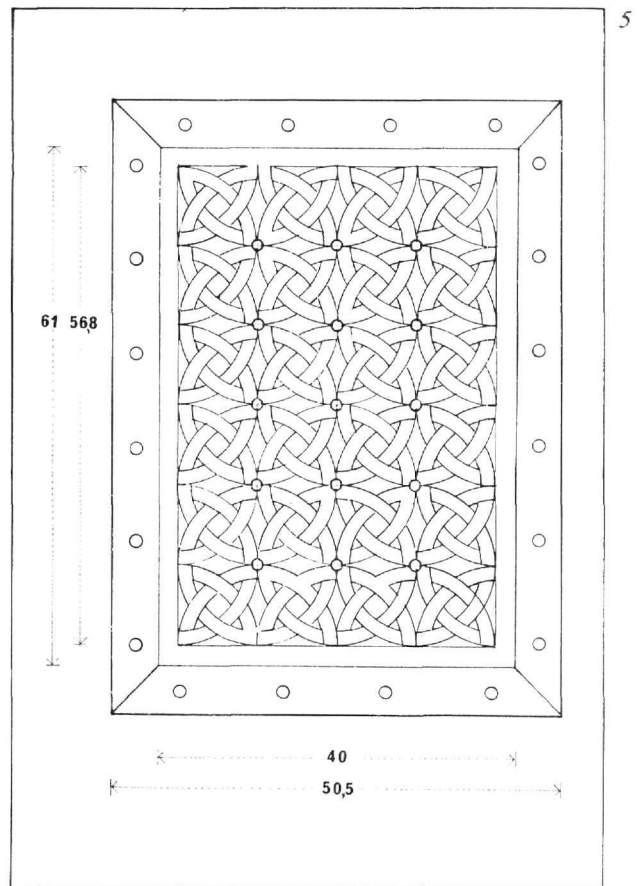
On the left hand leaf of the door, the geometric motif retained its full breadth (35.8 cm, increased to 40 cm by the addition on either side of a plain frame), but was obviously cut away at the top. It is impossible to take accurate measurements at the bottom of either of the two panels under examination, because of the damage they have suffered.

It is clear from the left hand leaf that the geometric motif was originally more than two and a half circles in height. If we assume that vertically, as horizontally, there was a whole number of circles, it seems almost certain that there were three of them. We may thus calculate the original height of the bottom panels (Fig. 5). Assuming that there were frames at the top and the bottom like those at the sides of the left hand panel, and a vertical diameter of 18.9 cm⁸, we have:

$$H = (3 \times 18,9) + (2,1 \times 2) = 61 \text{ cm.}$$

The result of this calculation has some significance, because it coincides precisely with the height of the other two panels on each leaf (61 cm). This circumstance confirms the assumptions above, and is evidence that simple proportions formed part of the original conception of the door.

It is important that the style of the additions to the panel at the bottom right has no connection with the crude modifications made during the Turkish period⁹. The use of the inlaid technique on the left reveals an attempt to conform with the general style of the work,



5



Fig. 4. Olympiotissa. Doors. Schematic drawing of the two bottom panels.

Fig. 5. Olympiotissa. Doors. Schematic drawing of one of the bottom panels in its original form.

Fig. 6. Olympiotissa. Doors. Reversed palmette on the middle panel of the left leaf.

but the size of the astragal in the decoration betrays an improvisation and ignorance of the earlier technical methods.

The braided pattern to the right, carved in relief, with the background cut away, finds no parallel in the original form of the door, but recalls late Byzantine wood-carvings¹⁰ rather than more modern techniques.

It is clear, then, that the door was modified in a way that involved a reduction in the height of the bottom panels, and consequently in its overall height¹¹. Moreover, the lower hinges of the door-leaves are not the original wooden ones (like the upper hinges in the extension of the outer stiles), but are later ones made of bronze. It is also certain that all the above modifications were made during the Byzantine period.

Sixty years ago, Georgios Sotiriou believed that the Olympiotissa door, despite the damage it had suffered, retained its original form, and maintained that the word "*anekainisthesan*" in the inscription here referred to the original creation of the work. From the foregoing discussion, however, and from the further observation that the small wooden panels with the inscriptions could also have been incorporated into the top panels at a later date, we are led to conclude that the date, $\Sigma\omega\Delta' = 6804 = 1296$ refers to the modification and renewal of the door, and not to its original construction, which is clearly earlier. The dating of the frescoes of the katholikon of Olympiotissa on stylistic grounds to the period around

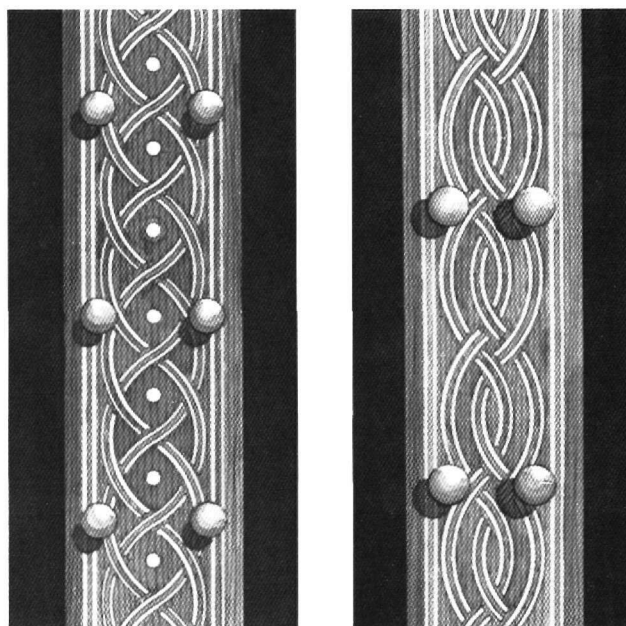


Fig. 7. Olympiotissa. Doors. Decorativ motifs of the rails.

1300¹², and the consequent assigning of a probable date in the same decade for the katholikon, furnishes good grounds for the presumption that the wood-carved door of Elasson came from some earlier monument and was modified in order to be used in the church of the monastery in 1296.

5. There are in the nature of things only limited opportunities for comparisons of the door under examination with others like it, and the dating of the original construction is uncertain.

Small motifs enclosed in circles are familiar in Byzantine architectural reliefs. In particular, crosses, rosettes,

8. Really the cycles are not perfect. Their diameters measure horizontally 17,9 cm and vertically 18,9 cm.

9. The additions are clearly visible in comparison with the Sotiriou photographs (ΕΕΒΣ 4 (1927), pp. 328, 329, Figs 11 and 12).

10. As the bema-doors from Ioannina. See Ar. Zachos, Βυζαντινόν ἐν Ἠπειρῷ βημόθυρον, Ἠπειρῶν 3 (1928), pp. 220, 222, D. Constantios, in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art, Athens 1964, p. 32, Fig. 21, G. Sotiriou, La sculpture sur le bois (see n. 2), pp. 175-176.

11. To 11 cm approximately.

12. M. Sotiriou, Ἡ πρόμος παλαιολόγειος ἀναγέννησις εἰς τὰς χώρας καὶ τὰς νήσους τῆς Ἑλλάδος κατὰ τὸν 13ον αἰῶνα, ΔΧΑΕ Δ'-Δ' (1964-65), p. 271. D. Mouriki, Stylistic Trends in Monumental Painting of Greece at the Beginning of the 13th Century, in L'art byzantin au debut du XIVe siècle, Beograd 1978, pp. 69-70. Euth. Constantinides, The Question of the Date and Origin of the Earliest Akathistos..., XVI. Intern. Byzantinistenkongress, Akten II/5, JÖB 32 (1982), p. 503 ff.

lemniskoi, birds or an eagle attacking a snake or another bird, were current motifs in the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries¹³, as were the stylised palmettes (Fig. 6) and half-palmettes¹⁴. Four-sided figures with concave sides, like those in the top panels, occur singly on column capitals of the 11th century, while the intersecting circles in the bottom panels are found in manuscripts of a somewhat earlier date¹⁵. By contrast, the chain motif that adorns the stiles and rails (Fig. 7) does not seem to be known elsewhere. The individual elements of which it is composed suggest rather the standardised work involved in the inlaying of an inflexible material, bone, into wood. It is indicative that similar shapes were adopted in works unrelated either locally or chronologically with the one under examination when this same technique was applied.

Unfortunately, very few comparisons of the techniques used in the door can be made with those of other Byzantine wood-carvings. The method by which stiles¹⁶, rails and panels are nailed onto a second leaf is found in the doors of the Monastery of Rila¹⁷ and that of the Molyvoskepasti¹⁸. However, the association of it by Soteriou¹⁹ with the pulpit of Cairwan, solely on the grounds that in the latter the small motifs were rendered in open-work, is almost certainly wide of the mark. As for the technique involving the inlaying of materials, which was so popular in Byzantium²⁰ in other media, very few examples survive of its use in wooden objects. In the *bema* doors of the Protaton²¹ and of Chelandari²², which are of an uncertain, though probably late date, the inlaying of plaques of ivory or bone was done in a completely different manner. As for the inlaying of different coloured wood, one example is cited which is of little importance²³, but which is of interest in that it could also be dated to the 12th century. Elements of western origin are completely lacking in the work under consideration. The date, then, of the first phase of the Elasson door is imprecise —somewhere between the 11th and the beginning of the 13th centuries. It may be added, however,

that the grand artistic design, the variety of expression, with the use of different materials, and the exceptionally fine execution of the details are evidence of a mature work, which was made in some artistic centre rather than at Elasson²⁴. Perhaps the door was originally used in a church in Thessalonike, or even in Constantinople itself.

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13. As for instance on a slab in the British Museum (E. Kitzinger, *Early Medieval Art in the Br. Museum*, London 1969, p. 58, Pl. 34) and on another in the Chios Museum (G. Sotiriou in *ΑΔ 2* (1916), Par., Pl. 4, Fig. 4).

14. As for instance in the church of the Virgin in Hosios Loukas. L. Bouras, *Ὁ γλυπτός διάκοσμος τοῦ ναοῦ τῆς Παναγίας στό μοναστήρι τοῦ Ὁσίου Λουκά*, Athens 1980, pp. 31, 62, 63-68, 106 and Figs 6-7.

15. Alison Frantz, *Byzantine Illuminated Ornament*, *ArtB XVI* (1934), p. 51, Pl. IV, no. 11 (of the Patmos Codex 33, dating 941). Similar motifs on screen-slabs (θωράκια) see in *ΑΔ 16* (1960), Pl. 196b. The motif was also used in the medieval art of the West (C. Bayet, *L'art byzantin*, Paris 1904, p. 313, Fig. 102).

16. As for instance on the small stiles of the wooden chest no. 881 of Questul. See W. B. Emery, *The Royal Tombs of Ballana and Questul*, II, Cairo 1938, pp. 383-384, Pl. 109.

17. B. Filow, *Early Bulgarian Art*, Berne 1919, p. 34, Pl. XXXV. G. Sotiriou, *La sculpture sur le bois* (see n. 2), p. 175.

18. Fr. Kyrieleis, *Kunstdenkmäler in Griechenland*, I, Darmstadt 1982, p. 437, Pl. 248.

19. G. Sotiriou, *op.cit.*, p. 177.

20. A. Grabar, *Sculptures byzantines de Constantinople*, Paris 1963, pp. 109-113. Idem, *Byzantium*, London 1966, p. 52 ff.

21. Στ. Πελεκανίδης, *Βυζαντινόν βημόθυρον ἐξ Ἁγίου Ὁρους*, *ΑΕ* 1957, pp. 50-67.

22. Sv. Radojčić, *Monuments artistiques à Chilandar (Requiel de travaux d'Etudes Byzantines, no. 3)*. Verena Han, *Chilandar Altar Door Adorned with Bone Intarsia*, *Musej primenbene umetnosti Sbornik 2* (1956), p. 5 ff.

23. *Istoriija primenbene umetnosti Kod Serbia*, 1, Beograd 1977, pp. 198, 206, 211, Fig. 1.

24. The view of Chadjimichali (*op.cit.*, p. 7) that the doors under discussion are possibly the work of Epirote artisans, is without any support.