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Μια ασυνήθιστη Δέηση στον νάρθηκα της Παναγίας της Κρήνας στη Χίο

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AN UNUSUAL “DEESIS” IN THE NARTHEX OF PANAGIA KRENA, CHIOS*

The central part of the east wall of the narthex of the Panagia Krena church in Chios is very poorly preserved, due to the reconstruction of the arches and the barrel vaults. Its decoration consists of a shallow niche with the Virgin and Child, above which is a framed icon of Christ Pantocrator in bust, accompanied by two three-quarter length figures (Figs 1-2). The alcove above the main door on the east wall, framed by red bands to emphasize its privileged position, is occupied by a half-length Virgin and Child. The Virgin’s face is largely destroyed and most of the surface paint is missing from the figures, and especially their background. The Mother of God wears a blue tunic, the cuffs edged with yellow-ochre stripes, and a purple-red maphorion. She is turned to the left and holds the Child with both hands. Christ is dressed in a white short-sleeved tunic and reclines asleep (?) in this mother’s lap (Fig. 3). His left hand rests on her slightly raised left knee, while the right one holds a small white scroll. The top and sides of the arched panel above the alcove are seriously damaged, due to the rebuilding of the narthex roof. A figure is depicted on each side of a framed icon of Christ, while in the lower corners are decorative motifs framed by red borders. The red bands on the main arched panel are totally destroyed. The upper part of the framed icon has also been destroyed. Christ is represented in half-figure on a gold ground (Fig. 4). The left half of his face and hair have been damaged. Only a part of the nimbus remains. Clad in a dark red tunic and dark blue chlamys with white highlights, he blesses with his right hand and holds a closed scroll in his left. Even in bust form and framed the figure of Christ is considerably larger in scale than the three-quarter length flanking figures. This type of bust-length Pantocrator, could be related to those in the main apses of the Norman churches in Sicily, especially the one in the main apse of Cefalu, though in that representation Christ holds in his left hand an open Gospel book with texts in Greek and Latin. The three-quarter length figure on the left is represented emerging from the blue background and turning towards the framed icon of Christ (Fig. 5). His halo and right shoulder have been partly destroyed, while the face and parts of the garments have lost much of their surface paint. Almost bald and white bearded, he wears a red tunic with ochre-brown cuff and a light-green chlamys with white lights, draped over his left shoulder. In his covered left hand he holds an ochre book, drawn in reverse perspective, while with his right he touches the upper left red edge of its leaves. It is as if he raises his right hand with the palm open and points towards the icon. The saint is John the Evangelist, recognizable from the portrait type. The haloed figure on the right has suffered severe damage (Fig. 6). In spite of its very poor condition — most of the left part has disappeared — there are sufficient traces to describe it. Like his counterpart, he is depicted in three-quarter length and has traces of faded, short, curly brown hair and a round beard. Most probably the patron saint of the donor, Eustathius, is represented. He wears a tunic and chlamys, the colours of which are effaced. The saint, in three-quarter pose, extends both hands towards the icon in a gesture of supplication. The figure of Eustathius is required to define Christ’s role, as intended by the donor; an intercessor who prays here for Eustathios Kodratos*. The triadic composition itself, with a blessing Christ in the middle and a figure on either side turning towards him, is very similar to that of the Deesis, particularly

*The photographs are due to the artist restorer Takis Mantzoukis and the drawing to the painter Theodore Papadopoulou.

2. Height 80 cm, width 1.35 m (at the base), depth 10 cm.
3. This part of the figure is partly damaged.
4. Preserved height 68 cm, width at bases 62 cm.
7. “Next to Eustathius, on the south side of the east wall of the inner narthex the founder of the church is depicted offering an architectural model of the church to an enthroned Virgin”. C. Pennas, op.cit. p. 61.
because the figure on the right, most probably Saint Eustathius, extends his hands in supplication to the Saviour. On the left, John’s gesture may call attention to the divinity of the Logos. So, we have “a Deesis with two substitutes”: John the Evangelist instead of the Virgin and Eustathius of John the Baptist.

In general, substitutions of the male figure in the Deesis are not uncommon, with Nicholas being by far the most frequent “stand in”. In the representations on lead seals the frequent appearance of two or more saints, such as Nicholas-Menas, Demetrius-Panteleimon, Procopius-John Theologos, Nicholas-John Chrysostom, Elijah-Panteleimon, Peter-Paul, on either side of the Virgin or of Christ in a medallion above them is interpreted as a Deesis. Nevertheless, in these instances the choice of imagery is made in the context of man’s peculiar quest of the purely personal, so that there are more than two. In San Marco at Venice, there is a Deesis with two substitutes in the Capella di San Isidoro: on the east wall, where Christ is flanked by Mark and Isidore. In the Krena Deesis John the Evangelist replaces San Marco’s Mark. In the frescoes of the Sanctissima Annunciata in Minuto (Amalfi), Italy, a crypt chapel of a church dedicated to the Virgin, the iconographic programme incorporates elements of both Western and Byzantine origin: a half-length Christ Pantocrator is flanked by John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. Most probably this too is a case of “a Deesis with two substitutes”.

The theological content of such compositions is, on the whole, the same as that of the “normal” Deesis, whether it is a part of the Last Judgement or an independent image: namely intercession. There are several Deesis-like compositions without rigidly defined rules of content, such as the “normal Deesis”, a “Deesis with two substitutes” and “a developed Deesis with extra figures”.

These three types bear witness to transitions in Deesis compositions. Apart from the representations, varia-
tions of the Deesis are known also from texts, as for example the Life of Lazarus the Galesiote, written by his disciple Gregory at the end of the eleventh century11. In the case of Krena the posture of Eustathius in supplication reinforces the meaning of intercession (παράκλησις), which was a function of the Deesis image, while that of John the Evangelist witnesses the divinity of the Logos, even if it does not belong to the earlier “visionary” type of the Deesis but to the later “interces-


Fig. 2. Chios, Krena. Central part of the east wall of the narthex (drawing).

Fig. 3. Chios, Krena. Christ Child.
This visionary type, “contaminated” with intercessory figures such as John the Evangelist and Eustathius, acquires an intercessory sense, with connotations of prayer, in the Last Judgement. According to the publications of Walter and Thierry the primary and principal meaning of the representation of the Deesis was the witness and acknowledgement of the divinity of the Logos, not that of the intercession. This was the case in Cappadocia, as well as in regions within the sphere of influence of Constantinople, such as Hosios Loukas, St Sophia, Kiev, St Sophia at Ochrid, St Nicholas Kasniti, Kastoria, St Anargyroi, Kastoria, the chapels of the Cave of Penteli. Concerning the cases of St Sophia at Ochrid and the Cave of Penteli, Wharton Epstein and Mouriki respectively recognize only the liturgical character of the Deesis representation. The element of the divinity of the Logos, expressed by the presence of John the Evangelist, proves that the monument belongs within the sphere of influence of the Capital. The element of intercession is of secondary importance, since it is represented by the patron saint of the donor, Eustathius, and only indirectly by the Virgin. In the Krena church the esonarthex functions as a funerary chapel, in view of the presence of arcosolia. The dominant compositional scheme in the narthex repertoire is the Last Judgement into which are incorporated the following representations: the donors, on the south arcosolium and the arched upper corner of the SE wall; the Lamentation on the north arcosolium; the Deesis above the main entrance, which, while preserving its autonomy, attaches great importance to the prayers of intercession. It could be present in the main apse, as observed in the provincial monuments of Cappadocia, Crete, Rhodes and Southern Italy. Due to the fact that the Krena narthex is a funeral chapel, the central part of the east wall is equivalent to the Bema apse, where Deesis figures are normally shown in such chapels.

It was the artist’s intention to create a monumental composition which would strike the eye as soon as the visitor entered the church. The artist had to rearrange the composition in the central part of the east wall in order to combine the principal figures of the narthex which are: Christ, in the Last Judgement, and the Virgin, to whom the church is dedicated. This is successfully achieved by combining the Deesis composition with substitutes on the arched-top panel, and the Virgin in the alcove, indirectly incorporated in the Deesis composition. The manner in which the Virgin is separated from the “Deesis-like” composition was doubtless meant to underline the fact that the church of Krena was dedicated to her. Judging by the surviving compositions, in addition to this representation, the Virgin’s patronage is expressed by: a. the orans Virgin in the main apse; b. the standing Virgin between the donors on the back wall of the south arcosolium in the narthex; c. the seated Virgin receiving the model of the church from the donor Eustathios Kodratos on the south part of the east wall of the narthex.

Concerning the uneasy-recumbent pose of the Christ Child in the Virgin’s lap, this is occasionally assumed in images of the so-called “Virgin of the Passion” where Christ is depicted lying horizontally in the Virgin’s arms, turning his head away from her, gripping her garments at the chest to steady himself, and blessing with the other hand. The pose of the Christ Child in Krena combines also the image of Christ Anapeson “the reclining one”: the image of Christ asleep, awaiting resurrection.

The representation of the Virgin with the Child sleeping could be related to the Pantocrator’s blessing. Possibly the artist did not wish to represent Christ blessing twice:
both as the Pantocrator in the framed icon and as a Child in the Virgin’s lap.
On the other hand the incorporation of the Virgin in the “real” Deesis would have annulled the importance of the Virgin, to whom the Krena church is dedicated. For this reason there is a representation of the Deesis with two substitutes on the large panel, while the Virgin and Child in the small alcove indicates the pathonage of the church.

In the monumental painting of the late twelfth century there is a distinct attempt to break away from the Comnenian hieratic style, particularly evident in two characteristic representations in the church of Panagia tou Arakou, 1192, near Lagoudera in Cyprus: the Virgin Arakiotissa or Kecharitomene, where the Christ Child is represented in a recumbent pose to the side, blessing and with his gaze averted from the beholder, and the devout Symeon holds the Christ Child reclining in his arms. In the former representation Christ’s pose in the Virgin’s

Fig. 5. Chios, Krena. St. John the Evangelist.

Fig. 6. Chios, Krena. St. Eustathius.

18. N. Thierry, op. cit., p. 5-22.
arms is not organically integrated. There is an awk-
wardness in the linking of the figures. In the devout
Symeon the movements of the young Christ clutching
the garments of the old man at the chest and raising his
left lag, are somewhat excessive. In Krena the Christ
Child turns his head away from the Virgin, as he lies
horizontally in her arms. This represents a transitional
stage from the hieratic formulation to the “Anapason”
type. It also reflects the late twelfth-century tendency
to break away from the hieratic severity of the Commen-
ian era, leading either to the extravagant representations of
Mannerism or to a monumental dynamism in the fig-
ures, which presages the Palaeologan era.

The compositional scheme on the central part of the
east wall of the Krena narthex corresponds to the inno-
vations of the Comnenian period in the iconography of
the “evangelical scenes”. These reveal two tendencies,
accentuated in the second half of the twelfth century.

On the one hand there is an intensification of the super-
natural aspect of the “divine acts”, and on the other the
underlining of the human side of Christ’s life.

Both are visible in the compositional scheme. The trans-
cendent element is stressed by the representation of the
Deesis “with two substitutes”. The transcendance culminates
in the icon-palladium of Christ Pantocrator, to whom both figures pay homage.

There are mural painting portraits in bust, primarily of
bishops at the base of apses, each within a round or
square frame ending above in a hook and nail, imitating
icons hung on the wall21. According to Grabar these are
simulations of panel icons on the iconostasis which do
indeed reproduce, at the base of the side walls of the
iconostasis, large icons before which the faithful is
called upon to pray. Representations of panel icons in
wall paintings are found in the Backovo monastery (os-
suary chapel, second half of twelfth century), in the Zica
monastery (katholikon, end of twelfth century), in
Djurdjevi Stupovi (early thirteenth century). The Krena
example is unusual in that, instead of the portrait of
some bishop or martyr, Christ Pantocrator is so depict-
ed in the pre-eminent scene of the Deesis. The icono-
graphic type of the Krena Saviour, brings to mind the
icons in a rectangular frame with arched top, in the
twelfth-century Skylitzes manuscript in Madrid, where a
deacon standing on a ladder tries to erase icons on an
epistle of an ambiguous structure, either a templon or
a ciborium. In this twelfth-century representation,
Christ, between the Virgin and an archangel, blesses
with his right hand and holds a closed scroll in his left,
as in the Krena depiction22. These icons on the epistle
are shown in ordered arrangement, required by the sto-
ry of the text. While, the framing of the figure of Christ,
at once defines and accentuates its cult significance. The
representation of Christ All-Ruler as a framed icon re-
calls corresponding cult icons of the Virgin23. It is thus
possible that this type of Christ Pantocrator in bust
copies some well-known cult icon of the period, in the
possession of a noble family in the Capital. This image
of Christ in an icon is reminiscent of lead seals with
representations of the Deesis, on which Christ is shown
within a medallion, higher than the other figures, as
mentioned above24.

On the other hand the Virgin, surrounded by red
borders in her own panel and alcove, is represented self-
contained and yet creates the feeling of intimacy and
familiarity, marking the fact that the church is dedicated
to her. From the intimacy and tenderness of the Virgin
and Child, however, the spectator goes directly to the
“Deesis” image above, with the centrally placed impres-
sive and unusual depiction of Christ, which is the focal
point of the programme of the narthex25.

The peculiarities in the iconographic programme of the
Krena narthex need not be considered as necessarily
reflecting the iconographic trends of the Commen-
ian era. The sepulchral function of the Krena narthex,
combined with the fact that the Panaghia Krena was
the private church of Kodratos and his family, account for
an iconographic schema determined by a personal in-
tervention of the owner. The iconographical arrange-
ment submits to his desire to project himself, while also
accommodating the patronage of the Virgin and the
dominant presence of Christ who constitutes the focal
point of the representation of the Last Judgement.

20. Especially, L. Hadermann-Misguich, La peinture monumen-
21. A. Grabar, Les representations d'icônes sur les murs des églises
22. A. Grabar, M. Mandassaças, L'Illustration du manuscrit de
Skylitzes de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Madrid, Venise 1979, fig. 66
(f. 64va).
23. The Cult of the Virgin in Constantinople had a dominant place in
the religious life of the city. Indeed after she had proved her powers in
626, her place as the principal patron of CP was assured. According to
Cameron “the Virgin of 6th-century CP is before all the most potent
intercessor before God” (A. Cameron, The Theotokos in 6th-cen-
24. Concerning the representation of Christ as an icon in a circular
form, in manuscripts referring to Iconoclasm, we find portraits of ecclesias-
tics (patriarchs, bishops, and so on) holding in one hand an
icon, usually in the form of a disc.
25. C. Walter, Bulletin on the Deesis and the Paraklesis, REB 38
(1980), p. 261-269, where the author presents, in the form of a bulletin,
with essential commentary, the various studies on the place of the
Deesis and Paraklesis in Byzantine religious art.