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Σταυροπροσκύνηση: Ένα ιδιότυπο εικονογραφικό θέμα

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STAUROPROSKYNÉSIS: AN ICONOGRAPHIC THEME AND ITS CONTEXT

The cross, as a powerful symbol of Christ’s victory over death, as well as Constantine’s victory over his earthly enemies, has held a central place in Christianity through the centuries. Its cult in every part of the Christian world had a number of functions whose nature could vary from liturgical and ceremonial to apotropaic and curative. Many publications have examined the history of the cross, especially concerning its liturgical use, function in imperial ceremonies, and the vast variety of its depiction. Apart from these studies, Titos Papamastorakis published a paper in the 14th tome of Deltion tis Christianínikis Archaiologikís Etaireias twenty three years ago, focusing his attention, inter alia, on the representation of the Exaltation of the Cross in the church of St. George Viannou in Crete. In his article, Papamastorakis attempted to explain the unusual iconographic program of this church.

The present paper focuses on the analysis of a very rare representation of the Veneration of the Cross by angels among the wall paintings of three churches: St. Nicholas tês Rodias, near Arta, the cave-church of the Holy Fathers, at Varasova and the church of Hypapantē, near Sofiko, Corinthia. Aside from its evident eschatological significance, this iconographic theme could also be conveying an important political and ideological message of members of the ruling Kommenos-Doukas and Palaeologan families during the 13th century.

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13th century, Stauroproskynésis, cross, angels, Epiros, Aetolia, Peloponnese.

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Τ. Παπαμαστοράκης, “Η ένταξη των προεικονίσεων της Θεοτόκου και της Ύψωσης του Σταυρού σε ένα ιδιότυπο...”

The present paper, devoted in Papamastorakis’s memory, focuses on the analysis of a very rare representation of the Veneration of the Cross by angels, variously labeled as ἡ Προσκύνησις. Thus, the present inquiry aims to shed light on a subject which has received limited attention in Byzantine art historiography.

The iconographic theme is preserved among the wall paintings of three churches located in three different regions of Greece, namely Epiros, Aetolia, and Corinthia, all dated to the 13th century. Aside from its evident eschatological significance, this iconographic theme seems to convey an important political and ideological message of members of the ruling Komnenos-Doukas and Palaeologan families during the 13th century.

In the Church of St. Nicholas tēs Rhodias, near Arta, the Veneration of the Holy Cross by angels is depicted on the north side of the barrel vault covering the diakonikon (Figs 1-2). The composition, bearing the inscription: ἡ Προσκύνησις, comprises three venerating angels approaching the cross. The leading angel holds one of the instruments of Christ’s Passion, the lance, while with his right hand he touches the cross. Scholars have proposed controversial dates for these frescoes. Judging by iconographic and stylistic features, the decoration of the church can be assigned to the 2nd half of the 13th century.

A very similar representation of two angels adoring a large cross is preserved in the cave-church of the Holy Fathers, Varasova, Aetolia (Fig. 3). Two angels flanking the cross carry a lance and a scepter respectively. Beneath the cross flow the four rivers of Heaven. An inscription identifies the representation: ἡ Ὑψωσθ(ει) τῆς Τιμίου Σταυροῦ. Scholars have expressed diverging opinions regarding the date of these wall paintings. A date in the 13th century, proposed by P. Vocotopoulos, seems more accurate.

The north tympanum of the transverse cross arm at the church of Hypapantē near Sofiko, Corinthia, features a unique representation: two angels bow toward the cross, raising their hands in prayer (Fig. 4). The cross, of the so-called Patriarchal type, is depicted in the middle, standing on a four-stepped base, flanked by the instruments of Christ’s Passion. The inscription, split on its either side, reads as follows: ΣΠ(αμαφθωσθ/νοις). Based on stylistic features, the frescoes could be dated to the 3rd quarter of the 13th century.

A very similar depiction to those presented so far is preserved in the Hermitage of St. Neophytos, in Cyprus. On its south wall a cross-shaped cavity for a wooden cross still exists in situ, flanked by two painted angels (Fig. 5).

To this may be added two more examples from the late 12th century, a two-sided icon from the Tretyakov Gallery with the Mandylion (front side) and the True Cross with...
Representations of angels flanking a cross were common since the early Christian period in mural paintings and mosaics, as well as in sculpture. Examples include the north wall of the chancel at St. Vitale in Ravenna17 and several marble sarcophagi from the Archaeological Museum in Constantinople.18 In this class of representations, the angels carry the True Cross like a triumphal symbol that overcomes death. A depiction of two angels venerating a large cross, similar to the examples examined in this paper, is preserved on the ampulla no. 2 from Bobio19 and on a silver plate from Syria, today in the State Hermitage Museum, both dating to the 6th century.20

A huge cross lifted by angels is encountered in domes, vaults, and ceilings of numerous churches from late-10th-century Georgia.21 Scholars have labeled this iconographic theme as the Ascension or the Triumph of the Cross.22 Additionally, the iconographic theme of the presentation of the cross by two angels has been included in the depiction of Christ’s Second Coming from very early on.23 Two venerating angels are commonly divided into two groups, flanking the Hetoimasia with a cross, as in the 10th-century steatite icon from the Louvre,24 or in the frescoes of the Metropolis in Mystras.25 Representations of a group of angels holding or surrounding a large cross with the inscription the “Second Coming” show a similar iconographic arrangement and are comparable in meaning; examples are preserved, for instance, at Gračanica,26 while in the church of Panaghia Mavriotissa in Kastoria two angels are censing the cross.27

As is demonstrated by this brief survey of relevant examples, the Veneration of the Cross by Angels is a common motif encountered in a variety of iconographic contexts, having primarily an eschatological meaning. The three examples examined in this paper are not an exception. However, their aforementioned inscriptions also allow us to link them to the veneration of the relics of the True Cross in Constantinople, where the cross played an important role during the liturgical year, much more than any other relic.28

The principal feast of the cross was its Exaltation on September 14, which was preceded by a four-day public Veneration in the church of St. Sophia.29 In addition to the Typikon of the Great Church, the Book of Ceremonies contains detailed information concerning the involvement of the emperor and his court in the celebration of the feast.30 Visual representations of such public rituals are preserved in a number of liturgical manuscripts, as well as in the mural decoration of several Byzantine churches.31

The fresco bearing the inscription η Ὀψω(σ)η τοῦ Τιμήου Σταυροῦ in the cave-church of the Holy Fathers in Varasova does not represent the historical event of the Exaltation of the Cross in the same way as the depictions in the aforementioned manuscripts or in monumental painting. The only relevant examples of the theme, where angels appear, are in the church of St. George at Viannos, Crete32 and in the church of the Holy Cross of Agiasmati

15 V. Lazarev, Die Russisch Ikone, Zürich Düsseldorf 1997, pl. 5.
16 P. Mijović, Umjetničko blago Crne Gore, Beograd Titograd 1980, fig. 76.
18 A. Grabar, Sculptures byzantines de Constantinople (1Ve-Xe siécle), Paris 1963, 30, pl. VII.
19 A. Grabar, Les Ampoules de Terre Sainte, Paris 1958, 33 34, pl. XXXII.
21 T. Velmans A. Alpago Novello, Miroir de l'insolible peintures murales et architecture de la Géorgie (Vre-XVe s.), Paris 1996, 45 47, figs 41, 43, pls 4, 17, 38.
26 B. Todic, Gračanica, Priština 1999, fig. 96.
28 Klein, op.cit. (n. 1), passim with further bibliography and sources.
31 Papamastorakis, “Η ἑτοιμασία τῶν πυροσκονίσεων,” op.cit. (n. 2), 324, for references.
32 Ibid., 323 324, fig. 5.
in Platanistasa, Cyprus, both dated to the 15th century.\footnote{A. J. Stylianou, The Painted Churches of Cyprus, London 1985, fig. 116.} The presence of angels not only at Varasova, but also at St. Nicholas tēs Rodias and in Sofiko mainly indicates an eschatological content.\footnote{Vasilakeris Foudouli, op. cit. (n. 7), 538.} Apart from that, they could also be conveying an ideological and political message and should be seen in the context of ideological confrontation with the Latin occupation of the Byzantine territories during the 13th century.

The ways in which the possession of the True Cross was used by two of the successor states of Byzantium after 1204 (Nicaea, Trebizond), as a means of redefining their power and legitimacy, have been well established by

\textbf{Fig. 1.} Arta, church of St. Nicholas tēs Rhodias. Diakonikon, north side of the longitudinal vault, drawing of the Veneration of the Holy Cross by angels (G. Fousteris).
Antony Eastmond. John III Batatzes, the emperor of Nicaea, used the fragments of the True Cross in his possession, which he gifted to his potential allies, to portray himself as a legitimate emperor of Byzantium. This is the case of the ivory cross-reliquary, today in the church of San Francesco at Cortona. Batatzes gave this staurōthēkē as a gift to Fra Elia de’ Coppi, the envoy of the emperor Frederick II (1246). Besides, according to several sources, a piece of the Holy Cross was presented by Batatzes to the first archbishop of Serbia, Sava Nemanjić, in 1229. In medieval Serbia the True Cross played an important role in the definition and promotion of the identity of the new established Serbian state. The cult grew and received its true ideological structure in the days of the second generation of the Nemanjić family, and it is possible to discern its influence on the fresco decoration of Studenica and Žiča.

In the empire of Trebizond, Manuel I Komnenos “the Great”...
Fig. 3. Varasova, cave-church of Holy Fathers. The Exaltation of the Holy Cross (A. Vasilakeris).
also had a small fragment of the True Cross kept in a reliquary, now in the treasury of Notre-Dame at Paris.41 This faith in the ever-victorious power of the Holy Cross, founded on the legend of the triumph of the founder of Constantinople, Constantine the Great, in the battle of the Milvian Bridge,42 permeated the official imperial ideology through the centuries (Fig. 7). Some of the most prominent Church Fathers contributed to the development of this ideology, like John Chrysostom, who regards the cross as a symbol of victory, upon which brave emperors put the booty of the defeated enemy troops.43 The victorious campaign of Herakleios against the Persians and the recovery of the Holy Cross would further strengthen this conviction. The relics of the life-giving wood were housed in precious staurothēkēs and widely distributed all over the empire. Its central part was preserved in Constantinople, securing in perpetuity the protection of the capital by its divine power.44

During the so-called Iconoclastic period (726-843), which followed the catastrophic loss of huge parts of the empire from the Arabs, almost all the emperors had as their purpose the restoration of the empire under the sign of the Holy Cross. As an expression of this attitude, they had the image of Christ on the Chalke replaced by a cross. Additionally, Leo V (813-820), after the council of 815, ordered four poets to compose epigrams celebrating the iconoclast  

Fig. 4. Sofiko, church of Hypapantē. Transverse cross arm, north tympanum, the Stauroskynēsis (G. Fousteris).

43 Xvostéritos, PG 49, 394 398.
44 Frolov, Les reliquaires, op.cit. (n. 1), passim.
In the 10th century, before the war with the Arabs, the cult of the cross was intensified once more, as indicates the dedication of a number of precious processional crosses and staurothēkēs to churches and monasteries in Constantinople. The most famous example is undoubtedly the Limburg staurothēkē, made on the order from Basilios the proedros little after 963 (Fig. 8). The inscription on the backside of the cross wishes that the emperors Constantine and his son Romanos will crush the barbarians just like Christ shattered the gates of Hell. Similar inscriptions were common on other reliquary crosses as well, while the way in which the True Cross was perceived to assist Byzantine emperors is explicated in the inscription of the staurothēkē from Cortona, which we mentioned above:

Kaὶ πηνὶ κραταιῶι δισποτῆι Κωνσταντῖνῳ
Χριστὸς δέδωκε σταυρὸν εἰς σωτηρίαν.
Kaὶ νῦν δὲ τοῦτον ἐν Θεῷ Νικηφόρῳ
ἀνεῖ προσάσται φύλα βαρβάρων ἔχων.

The epigram states that Nikephoros II Phokas (963-969), thanks to the True Cross, will defeat the barbarian tribes just like Constantine the Great did.

The Komnenoi, following in their predecessors’ footsteps, defended the integrity of the empire with the power of the cross, as well. This inference can be drawn from the poem inscribed on the cross that Manuel Komnenos carried during his military campaigns against the sultan of Iconium:

... ὅρπηξ Μανουὴλ διπλοφυοῦς πορφύρας... 

For the way in which Alexios Komnenos and his wife Irene used the relics of the Holy Cross see T. Papamastorakis, “Δωρεές γυναικών από τον 8ο στον 12ο αιώνα,” Η Γυναίκα στο Βυζάντιο Λατρεία και Τέχνη (ed. M. Panayotidi Kessissoglou), Athens 2012, 235. The same scholar also mentions some examples of staurothēkēs that were order by women from the immediate environment of Alexios Komnenos. Ibid., 233-235.


49 Ibid., n. 35.


51 For the way in which Alexios Komnenos and his wife Irene used the relics of the Holy Cross see T. Papamastorakis, “Δωρεές γυναικών από τον 8ο στον 12ο αιώνα,” Η Γυναίκα στο Βυζάντιο Λατρεία και Τέχνη (ed. M. Panayotidi Kessissoglou), Athens 2012, 235. The same scholar also mentions some examples of staurothēkēs that were order by women from the immediate environment of Alexios Komnenos. Ibid., 233 235.
The military importance of the relics of the True Cross became even greater in the 13th century, a period with many wars fought for the re-establishment of the fragmented Byzantine empire. The representation of angels venerating the Holy Cross with the inscription ἡ Προσκύνιση at the diakonikon of the church of St. Nicholas tēs Rhodias (Figs 1-2) could also reflect the political situation during the reign of Michael II Doukas (1230-1269) in Epiros. The Epirote state, with the town of Arta as its capital, was one of the so-called successor-states of the former Byzantine empire established by Michael Doukas after the fall of Constantinople in 1204. The fundamental principles of Byzantine political ideology were preserved in Epiros. Its political and military successes predetermined the ideological ambitions and aspirations of the rulers, who sought to assume the leading political role as legitimate successors to the former Byzantine emperors and endeavoured to recover Constantinople. After 1204 a new elite joined the old Constantinopolitan aristocracy in exile in the patronage of the arts. Most of the contemporary monuments in the region are princely foundations sponsored by members of the ruling Komnenos-Doukas family. With these monuments, the Epirote elite continued to demonstrate its Constantinopolitan ascendance. The aspirations of the rulers of Epiros to the imperial succession against the rival claims of their Latin opponents found an eloquent visual expression in some monumental pictorial programs created within their domain, e.g., St. Demetrios Katsouris, the Old Metropolis in Berroia and the Blacherna in the Area of Arta. Unlike Nicaea, Trebizond or Serbia, there is no evidence from Epiros of a reliquary with the True Cross after the catastrophe of 1204. However, this victory symbol of the Byzantine emperors appears on a coin of the Epirote ruler Michael II Doukas after the fall of Constantinople in 1204.
Theodore. On this coin is depicted the patriarchal cross crosslet on a long shaft, standing on a three-stepped base. The cross is flanked by a half-length figure of Theodore to the left and St. Demetrios to the right side. Coinage was always the best place for the expression of political propaganda. The depiction of the cross on a stepped base, introduced in Byzantine coinage by Tiberius II (574-582), symbolizes the triumph of Christian emperors. The coin of the Epirote ruler Theodore has a similar message: his victory and proclamation as a new Byzantine emperor. After the disaster at Klokotnica (1230), where Theodore was defeated and captured by the Bulgarian tsar John Asen II, the state of Epiros was drastically reduced. However Theodore’s successor, despot Michael II Doukas, continued to promote Epiros’s ideological ambitions to recover Constantinople. He was also pitted against Nicaea for 25 years, until his defeat at Pelagonia in 1259; nevertheless, even after the recovery of Constantinople from the Latins in 1261 and the restoration of the Byzantine empire, Michael II and others rulers of Epiros stubbornly refused to recognize the new regime and perpetuated the autonomy of their province.

The scene of the Veneration of the Cross in St. Nicholas tēs Rhodias, apart from its correlation with the rest of the iconographic program in the diakonikon, has also a decidedly ideological and political resonance. On the south side, across from the angels, in the lower zone, there is an image of Constantine and Helene with the wooden cross.

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60 Ibid., pls I, II, III, esp. pl. II, no. 38 and pl. III, no. 40, 42.
61 Nicol, op. cit. (n. 53), 128 185.
62 Fundić, op. cit. (n. 3), 95 96.
It should be kept in mind that the fresco-decoration in this Epirote church was executed during a period of incessant conflict against the Latins in different parts of the highly fragmented Byzantine empire. Any success of the Byzantine part in this conflict was perceived as a victory of the Orthodox faith as well. This suggests that the presence of the theme of the cross in the church of St. Nicholas tēs Rodhias should also be seen in this context, namely as a symbol of victory already from the epoch of Constantine the Great, who is depicted exactly opposite the Veneration of the Cross by Angels. Moreover, the choice of the space where the theme is depicted lends further support to the possibility that it carried an ideological message. That place is the diakonikon, whose purpose is, among others, to house and preserve relics.63

The inclusion of another iconographic theme at St. Nicholas tēs Rodhias could also be connected with contemporaneous historical and ecclesiastical events. At the lower zone of the Bema apse, in the centre, between the officiating hierarchs, the Holy Mandylion is depicted. It is well known that this relic was one of the most venerated objects in the Byzantine empire. After the capture of Constantinople in 1204, it was transported to the West. This event induced more frequent depiction of this relic in Byzantine monumental painting.64 In St. Nicholas tēs Rodhias, the Holy Mandylion is presented in the lower zone of the Bema, namely the place normally hosting the Melismos.65

Therefore, it can be asserted that in the Bema and the diakonikon of St. Nicholas tēs Rodhias were depicted the two most important relics of Constantinople: the True Cross and the Holy Mandylion. This iconographic choice reiterates in a sense the program of the above mentioned two-sided icon, now in Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow (Fig. 6), on which is represented an illustration of the precious contents of the church of Pharos – the Holy Mandylion and the True Cross, with two archangels holding in a raised position the other two important relics: the sponge and the lance.66

The representation from Varasova should be placed within the same ideological framework. Aetolia and Akarnania formed an important part of the state of Epiros since its establishment. The foundation and decoration of some churches and monasteries there, could also be connected with the Komnenos-Doukas family, as well as the military and civil aristocracy of the Epiros state.67

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The four rivers of Heaven, flowing from the cross in the Varasova frescoes, allude to the New Zion, i.e. Constantinople. Byzantine imperial ideology sought to sacralize the emperor’s power by identifying it with the most powerful Old Testament rulers of Israel. Some written sources of the 13th century evoke a parallel between the chosen people of Israel exiled to Babylon, where they expected a savior from the tribe of David to lead them to Jerusalem, and the New Israelites exiled from the New Zion to the new established states, Nicea and Epiros, expecting the moment when the orthodox rulers will return them to the New Zion, i.e. Constantinople.

John Apostolatos, Demetrios Chomatenos, and George Bardanos, characterize the Epiros ruler Theodore Doukas as the New David, who will rescue the western provinces (Epiros) from the Latin rule.68 Moreover, he will defend the Orthodox faith and, in the end, he will liberate the New Zion. Titos Papamastorakis proposed that the texts written on the scrolls of the prophets in the church of St. Demetrios Katsouris are composed in accordance with this ideology of the Epirote state at the peak of its political power during the reign of Theodore Doukas.69 In this context the fresco from Varasova could be seen as a wish: to recapture Constantinople by the power of the True Cross.

The depiction of the Stauroprosynētis from Sofikó (Fig. 4) might be seen in the light of the historic events in the Peloponnese after 1260, with protagonists Michael VIII Palaeologus and Guillaume II de Villehardouin, prince of Achaea. The liberation of the City founded by Constantine the Great had impressed the orthodox subjects of the empire so much that they nicknamed Michael the “New Constantine.”70 Moreover, in a praise, which is almost contemporary with the mentioned historic events, Michael is characterized as follows: ἐπὶ δευτέραν Σιών ὁ νέος Δαβὶδ ἐπὶ τὴν βασιλίδα ὁ βασιλεύς ὁ τοῦ Μεγάλου Κωνσταντίνου ζηλωτὴς ἄκρος ἐπὶ Κωνσταντινούπολιν.71 Additionally, the repatriation of the imperial and ecclesiastical authorities to the liberated Constantinople provided legitimacy to the Palaeologan dynasty and revived the forgotten idea of oecumenicity.72 Michael, redefining the foreign policy of the recovered Empire, had an ambition to restore the Byzantine rule in the Balkan area as well. To achieve this ambitious goal, he sent his brother, the sebastokrator Constantine Palaeologus, to the Morea at the head of an armed expedition aiming to take possession of the fortresses of Monemvasia, Mani, Mystras, and, probably, Geraki;73 these had been ceded to the Byzantines by the Frankish prince Guillaume II de Villehardouin in exchange for his freedom.74 As a result, less than a decade after the recapture of Constantinople a small Byzantine bridgehead was established in Laconia.75 The effects of these historical events can be seen in hundreds of monumental paintings in Laconia dated to this period, as well as all over the Frankish-dominated Peloponnese. It would seem that these ideas also inspired the iconographic program of the church of Sts Theodores at Kafiona.76 The preserved dedicatory inscription mentions Michael VIII and his brother Constantine, who recaptured this region from the Franks.77 According to an old iconographic custom familiar in Mani,78 the most prominent warrior saint, Theodore, is placed in the apse wearing a military uniform. The dedication of the Metropolis

68 Stavridou Zafraka, op.cit. (n. 54), with references.
69 Papamastorakis, “Το εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα,” op.cit. (n. 55), passim.
71 Papamastorakis, “Εις εικοστότο εγγύμιο,” op.cit., 237.
76 N. Drandakis, Βεζοντινές τοιχογραφίες της Μέσα Μάνης, Athens 1995, 70 100 with earlier bibliography.
of Mystras to the patron saint of the Palaeologan dynasty, St. Demetrios, also nicely fits into this context.79 The Byzantine expectations for the complete expulsion of the Franks from the Peloponnese could also be reflected in a rare representation of the fleece of Gideon, included in the depictions of the Annunciation in Laconian churches mainly of the 13th century.80 The fleece, according to the Church Fathers, is a victorious symbol,81 because it was an object through which God revealed the appropriate moment for Gideon’s victorious campaign against the Midianites, who tyrannized and plundered the towns of Israel.

The restoration of Byzantine rule in Laconia strengthened the hopes of Greeks for the liberation of the rest of the Peloponnese. In the light of the above-mentioned considerations, the rare representation in Sofiko acquires a distinct dimension. Through this unusual way of promotion of the most important victorious symbol diachronically, by the force of which Constantine the Great established the new capital of the empire, the anonymous donors, who inspired the iconographic program of the church of Hypapantē, might have wanted to express their desire that the New Constantine, i.e. Michael VIII, and his brother Constantine, liberate the rest of the Peloponnese. It should also be noted that the area across from the depiction of the Stauroproskynēsis is dominated by a triumphal scene of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, where Christ is talking with Moses and Elijah. Slightly lower, on the same wall, are represented the greatest two warrior saints, George and Demetrios. The choice of the Transfig-

81 Ἰωάννης Δαμασκηνός, PG 96, 692, 696.
uration was certainly not fortuitous, since one of the protagonists of the scene, Moses, is associated in Byzantine theological literature with the cross. According to the panegyric homilies, which are read on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Moses made the sign of the cross in order to achieve the miraculous passage through the Red Sea, releasing the Israelites from the Egyptian slavery. Therefore, it is possible to say that in this way was somehow expressed a hope that the whole of the Peloponnese would soon be liberated from the Latin rule.

We conclude this article with a brief reference to a unique representation, which decorates the transverse barrel-vault of the church of the Holy Apostles in Bounoi, Euboea (Fig. 9). The centre of the vault is dominated by a huge leaf-bearing Resurrection cross that occupies most of the barrel-vault. The church has been dated to the 15th or 16th century. However, its mural decoration, as well as some of its constructive and morphological details, indicate an earlier date. On the basis of the analysis developed in this paper, we propose the 7th or 8th decade of the 13th century as the most probable time for the creation of this theme in Euboea. In this period, Byzantine troops, under the command of the famous knight Licario, recaptured almost all of Euboea in the name of the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII. The goal of this hypothesis, which is, admittedly, difficult to test, is to inspire a more thorough examination of this monument in the future.

82 Νικήτας Παφλαγών, PG 105, 28 37; also Papamastorakis, “Η ένταξη των προεικονίσεων,” op.cit. (n. 2), 324 325.
83 In the same ideological context we could inscribe the triumphal scene of the Hetoimasia in the diakonikon of the Mistra’s cathedral, where an impressive cross is presented on the throne. The unusual representation of the Hetoimasia in the paintings of the diakonikon of this important church might be related to the practice of housing relics in this certain place. See supra, n. 62. For a photo from the Mistra’s cathedral see Acheimastou Potamianou, op.cit. (n. 25), fig. 15.
85 Ibid., vol. II, 93 94.
86 J. Koder, Negreponte, TIB 1, Vienna 1973, 47 50.
Το παρόν άρθρο πραγματεύεται παραστάσεις προσκύνησης του Τιμίου Σταυρού από αγγέλους, ένα σπάνιο εικονογραφικό θέμα που εντοπίζεται στις τοιχογραφίες τριών απομακρυσμένων μεταξύ τους μνημείων του ελληνικού χώρου, στον Άγιο Νικόλαο της Ροδίας, κοντά στην Άρτα, στο ασκητήριο των Αγίων Πατέρων στη Βαράσοβα Αιτωλίας και στην Υπαπαντή Σοφικού Κορινθίας.

Στον Άγιο Νικόλαο της Ροδίας, ομίλος αγγέλων καταλαμβάνει το ήμισυ της καμάρας του νοτιοανατολικού γωνιακού διαμερίσματος, συγκλίνοντας προς την αψίδα του διακονικού. Ο προεξάρχων άγγελος κρατά θρηαμβευτικά μεγάλο ξύλινο σταυρό. Την παράσταση συνοδεύει η εξής επιγραφή:

ἡ Προσκύνησις

Για τη χρονολόγηση της ζωγραφικής του συγκεκριμένου ηπειρωτικού μνημείου έχουν διατυπωθεί αντικρουόμενες άποψεις. Σε πρόσφατη δημοσίευση προτάθηκε η ένταξη των τοιχογραφιών στο β’ μισό του 13ου αιώνα, βάσει εικονογραφικών και τεχνοτροπικών κριτηρίων.

Στο αιτωλικό ασκητήριο δύο μετωπικοί ολόσωμοι άγγελοι κραδαίνουν ένα μεγάλο σταυρό Αναστάσεως. Μεγαλογράμματη επιγραφή βοηθά στην ταύτιση της παράστασης:

ἡ Ὕψο(σ)η τοῦ Τιμήου Σταυροῦ

Οι απόψεις για τη χρονολόγηση της τοιχογραφίας των Αγίων Πατέρων διίστανται. Πείστικτερά θεωρούμε την ένταξή τους εντός του 13ου αιώνα (Π. Βοκοτόπουλος), εποχή κατά την οποία τοποθετούνται και οι ανάλογες θεματικές παραστάσεις από την Ήπειρο και την Κορινθία.

Ανάμεσα στις τοιχογραφίες της εκκλησίας του Σοφικού, εξαίρετη μια μοναδική παράσταση που καταλαμβάνει τμήμα του βόρειου τυμπάνου της εγκάρσιας κεραίας: διάλιθος σταυρός υψώνεται σε βαθιά καταστάση, το νικοποιό σύμβολο πλαισιώνουν η λόγχη και ο σπόγγος αναρτημένος σε κάλαμο, ενώ προς το σταυρό συγκλίνουν δύο σεβίζοντες άγγελοι. Η συνοδευτική επιγραφή, μοιρασμένη εκατέρωθεν του ζωοποιού ξύλου, βοηθά στην ταύτιση της παράστασης: ἡ Σταυροπροσκύνησις.

Ο επαναπροσδιορισμός της χρονολόγησης τόσο της αρχιτεκτονικής όσο και του σωζόμενου ζωγραφικού διακόσμου της εκκλησίας του Σοφικού, περί τα μέσα ή το β’ μισό του 13ου αιώνα, θεμελιώθηκε σε πρόσφατη σχετική δημοσίευση.

Στη συνέχεια εξετάζεται το ενδεχόμενο οι σπάνιες εντοίχιες παραστάσεις στις ελλαδικές εκκλησίες του 13ου αιώνα, εκτός από το προφανές εσχατολικό περιεχόμενο, να απηχούν και τις εκκολαπτόμενες πολιτικές φιλοδοξίες, τόσο των Κομνηνοδουκών όσο και των Παλαιολόγων. Την κρίσιμη αυτή εποχή διεξάγονται σε διάφορα μέτωπα μάχες για την ανασύσταση της βυζαντινής αυτοκρατορίας. Ειδικά μετά οι περιπτώσεις απεικόνισης του σταυρού πλαισιωμένου από αγγέλους κάνουν χώρα στην σκηνή της Αγίας Σοφίας στην Κωνσταντινούπολη.
την ανακατάληψη της Κωνσταντινούπολης το καλοκαίρι του 1261, ο Μιχαήλ Η΄ εξυμνείται από τους ιστορικούς της εποχής του ως ο Νέος Κωνσταντίνος. Μέσα στα συμφραζόμενα αυτά εγγράφεται αρμονικά η προβολή του Τιμίου Σταυρού, συμβόλου νίκης ήδη από την εποχή του Μεγάλου Κωνσταντίνου, ως του «ἀηττήτου τροπαίου τοῦ φιλοχρίστου στρατοῦ» που θα εμπνεύσει εκ νέου τα μικροεποχικά στρατεύματα, εδραιώνοντας το θρίαμβο της ανάκτησης της Κωνσταντινούπολης και σηματοδοτώντας το στόχο για την επέκταση της αυτοκρατορίας στα παλαιά της σύνορα.