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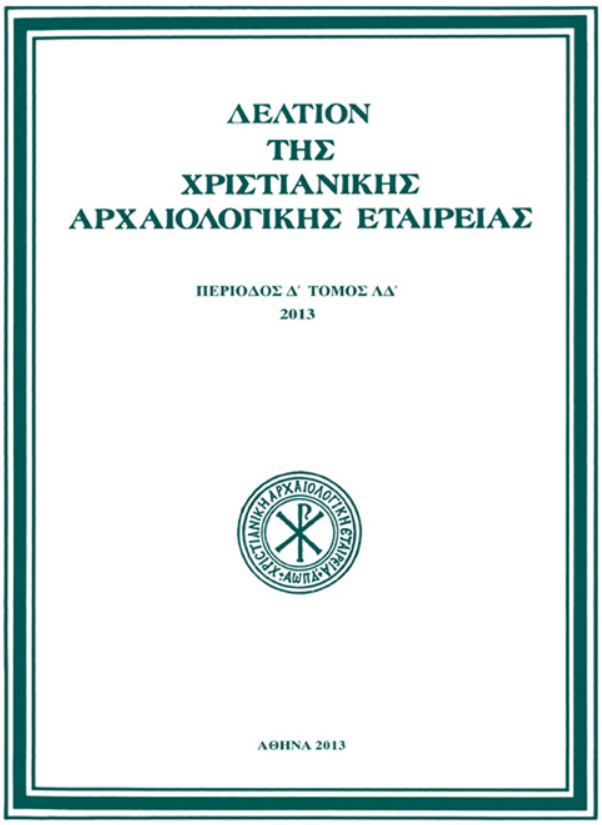

Σταυροπροσκύνησις: Ενα ιδιότυπο εικονογραφικό θέμα

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Leonela Fundić - Michael Kappas

STAUROPROSKYNĒSIS: AN ICONOGRAPHIC THEME AND ITS CONTEXT*

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 ελλαδικού χώρου, στον Άγιο Νικόλαο της Ροδιάς κοντά στην Άρτα, στο ασκητήριο των Αγίων Πατέρων στη Βαράσοβα Αιτωλίας και στην Υπαπαντή Σοφικού Κορινθίας. Εκτός από το προφανές εσχατολογικό τους περιεχόμενο, εξετάζεται το ενδεχόμενο οι τοιχογραφίες αυτές να απηχούν και τις εκκολαπτόμενες πολιτικές φιλοδοξίες, τόσο των Κομνηνοδουκάδων όσο και των Παλαιολόγων μετά τα μέσα του 13ου αιώνα.

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 tēs 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 Komnenos-Doukas and Palaeologan families during the 13th century.*

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.[1] Apart from these studies, Titos Papamastorakis published a paper in the 14th tome of *Deltion tis Christianikis Archaiologikis Etaireias* twenty three years ago, focusing his attention, *inter allia*, 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

Λέξεις κλειδιά
13ος αιώνας, Σταυροπροσκύνηση, σταυρός, άγγελοι, Ήπειρος, Αιτωλία, Πελοπόννησος.

Keywords
13th century, *Stauroproskynēsis*, cross, angels, Epiros, Aetolia, Peloponnese.

* An early version of this paper was presented at the 32nd Symposium of Byzantine and Post Byzantine Art and Archaeology, Athens 2012, see *32ο Συμπόσιο ΧΑΕ*, Athens 2012, 42 43.

[1] Bibliography on the cross is extensive. Here we list some general works: A. Frolow, *La relique de la Vrai Croix. Recherches sur le développement d'un culte*, Paris 1961; id., *Les reliquaires de la Vraie Croix*, Paris 1965. N. Teteriatnikova, "Relics in the Walls, Pillars, and Columns of Byzantine Churches," *Eastern Christian Relics* (ed. A. M. Lidov), Moscow 2003, 77 84; A. Eastmond, "Byzantine Identity and Relics of the True Cross in the Thirteenth Century," *Eastern Christian Relics*, op.cit., 205 215; H. A. Klein, *Byzanz, der Westen und das 'wahre' Kreuz: die Geschichte einer Reliquie und ihrer künstlerischen Fassung in Byzanz und im Abendland*, Wiesbaden: Reichert 2004; id., "Constantine, Helena, and the Cult of the True Cross in Constantinople," *Byzance et les Reliques du Christ* (ed. J. Durand B. Flusin), Paris 2004 (hereafter: *Byzance et les Reliques*), 31 59; J. Durand, "La relique imperiale de la Vraie Croix d'après le Typicon de Sainte Sophie et la relique de la Vraie Croix du Trésor de Notre Dame de Paris," *Byzance et les Reliques*, 91 105; *La Croce, Iconografia e interpretazione (secoli I-inizio XVI)* (ed. B. Unlianich Parente), Napoli 2008; J. Wortley, "The Wood of the True Cross," *Studies on the Cult of Relics in Byzantium up to 1204*, Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate/Variorum, 2009; A. B. Karagianni, *Ο Σταυρός στη Βυζαντινή μνημειακή ζωγραφική*, Thessaloniki 2010, which should be read with caution.

Cretan church by placing it within the ideological and social context of early-14th-century Crete.[2]

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 Προσκύνισης, ἡ Ὕψο(σ)η τοῦ Τιμήου Σταυροῦ* and *ἡ Στ(αυ)ροπροσκύ/νισ(ις)*. Examples of this iconographic theme are 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).[3] The composition, bearing the inscription: *ἡ Προσκύνισης*, comprises three venerating angels approaching the cross.[4] 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.[5] Judging by iconographic and stylistic features, the decoration of the church can be assigned to the 2nd half of the 13th century.[6]

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).[7] Two angels flanking the cross carry a lance and a scepter respectively. Beneath the cross flow the four rivers of Heaven.[8] An inscription identifies the representation: *ἡ Ὕψο(σ)η τοῦ Τιμήου Σταυροῦ*. Scholars have expressed diverging opinions regarding the date of these wall paintings.[9] A date in the 13th century, proposed by P. Vocotopoulos, seems more accurate.[10]

The north tympanum of the transverse cross arm at the church of *Hypapantē* near Sofiko, Corinthia,[11] 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,[12] 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: *ἡ Στ(αυ)ροπροσκύ/νισ(ις)*. Based on stylistic features, the frescoes could be dated to the 3rd quarter of the 13th century.[13]

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).[14] 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

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[2] T. Papamastorakis, "Η ένταξη των προεικονίσεων της Θεοτόκου και της Ύψωσης του Σταυρού σε ένα ιδιότυπο εικονογραφικό κύκλο στον Αγ. Γεώργιο Βιάννου Κρήτης," *ΔΧΑΕ* ΙΔ΄ (1987 1988) 315 328.

[3] L. Fundić, "Zidno slikarstvo crkve sv. Nikole Rodijasa kod Arte," *Zograf* 34 (2010), 87 110, with further bibliography.

[4] In the earlier bibliography this scene was falsely identified as the Adoration of the Magi, see V. Papadopoulou, *Η Βυζαντινή Άρτα και τα μνημεία της*, Athens 2002, 68; D. Giannoulis, *Οι τοιχογραφίες των βυζαντινών μνημείων της Άρτας κατά την περίοδο του Δεσποτάτου της Ηπείρου*, Ioannina 2010, 32.

[5] A. Orlandos dated the decoration of the church of St. Nicholas *tēs Rhodias* to the beginning of the 14th century. A. Orlandos, "Ὁ Ἅγιος Νικόλαος τῆς Ροδιᾶς," *ABME* Β΄ (1936), 147. Later researches shifted the date to the beginning of the 13th century, to the period up to 1230. For the list of literature, see Fundić, op.cit., 87.

[6] See ibid., 106, 110.

[7] P. Vocotopoulos, *ΑΔ* 22 (1967), Χρονικά, 325; A. Paliouras, *Βυζαντινή Αιτωλοακαρνανία*, Athens 1985, 80, 176 178, εικ. 182; A. Vasilakeris M. Foudouli, "Το ασκηταριό των Αγίων Πατέρων στη Βαράσοβα Αιτωλίας," *Β΄ Διεθνές Ιστορικό και Αρχαιολογικό Συνέδριο Αιτωλοακαρνανίας* (Β΄, Αγρίνιο 2002), *Πρακτικά*, vol. 2, Agrinio 2004, 535 548.

[8] Vasilakeris Foudouli, op.cit., 537.

[9] Paliouras, op.cit., 80, 177 178. Vasilakeris and Foundouli, based mainly on a comparison with the Cappadocian cave churches, accept the early date of the wall paintings, i.e. between the 10th and 11th century (Vasilakeris Foudouli, op.cit., 538 539).

[10] Vocotopoulos, op.cit., 325.

[11] A. Orlandos has proposed a post Byzantine dating for this church (17th 18th c.). A. Orlandos, "Ναοὶ τῆς Ἀνατολικῆς Κορινθίας," *ABME* Α΄ (1935), 53 98. On the basis of the morphological and con structional elements, the building has been recently re dated to the 13th century, see M. Kappas G. Fousteris, "Επανεξέταση δύο ναών του Σοφικού Κορινθίας," *ΔΧΑΕ* ΚΖ΄ (2006), 61 72.

[12] For the Patriarchal cross, which appears in the 10th century, see Frolow, *Les Reliquaires*, op.cit. (n. 1), 124 125.

[13] Kappas Fousteris, op.cit., 62. A. Karagianni in her recent article wrongly dates this representation to the middle Byzantine period. A. Karagianni, "Représentations des croix dans les églises byzantines du Xe au XIe siècle: interprétation et liens avec la liturgie," *Βυζαντιακά* 29 (2010), 246, fig. 11.

[14] C. Mango E. J. W. Hawkins, "The Hermitage of St. Neophytos and Its Wall Paintings," *DOP* 20 (1966), 159, figs 34, 45 46.

angels (back side) (Fig. 6),[15] and a stone panel from Kuti village in Montenegro.[16]

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 Ravenna[17] 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 Bobio[19] 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 *ἡ Ὕψο(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, Crete[32] and in the church of the Holy Cross of Agiasmati

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[15] V. Lazarev, *Die Russisch Ikone,* Zürich Düsseldorf 1997, pl. 5.

[16] P. Mijović, *Umjetničko blago Crne Gore*, Beograd Titograd 1980, fig. 76.

[17] E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making*, Cambridge 1995, 82, fig. 154.

[18] A. Grabar, *Sculptures byzantines de Constantinople (IVe-Xe siècle)*, Paris 1963, 30, pl. VII.

[19] A. Grabar, *Les Ampoules de Terre Sainte*, Paris 1958, 33 34, pl. XXXIII.

[20] *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia. Orthodox Art from the Sixth to the Twentieth Century* (ed. Y. Piatnitsky *et al.*), London 2000, no. B6, 51 52.

[21] T. Velmans A. Alpago Novvello, *Miroir de l'inisible peintures murales et architecture de la Géorgie (VIe-XVe s.),* Paris 1996, 45 47, figs 41, 43, pls 4, 17, 38.

[22] N. M. Thierry, "Peintures du Xe siècle en Géorgie méridionale et leurs rapports avec la peinture byzantine d'Asie Mineure," *CahArch* 24 (1975), 85 94.

[23] M. Angheben, "Les Jugements derniers byzantins des XIe XIIe siècles et l'iconographie du jugement immédiat," *CahArch* 50 (2002), 105 134.

[24] O. Z. Pevny, *The Glory of Byzantium* (ed. H. C. Evans W. D. Wixom), New York 1997, no. 103, 156 157.

[25] M. Acheimastou Potamianou, *Ελληνική τέχνη: Βυζαντινές τοιχογραφίες*, Athens 1994, εικ. 91.

[26] B. Todić, *Gračanica*, Priština 1999, fig. 96.

[27] S. Pelekanidis M. Chatzidakis, *Καστοριά*, Athens 1992, εικ. 14.

[28] Klein, op.cit. (n. 1), passim with further bibliography and sources.

[29] *Le Typicon de la Grande Église* (ed. J. Mateos) (OCA), Rome 1962, vol. I, 24 27.

[30] *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris. De Ceremoniis aulae byzantinae* (ed. I. I. Reiske), *Corpus scriptorum historiae byzantinae*, Bonn 1829, vol. 1, 22, 124 128; A. Cameron, "The Construction of Court Ritual: The Byzantine Book of Ceremonies in Rituals of Roy alty," *Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (ed. D. Canna dine S. Price), Cambridge 1987, 106 136.

[31] Papamastorakis, "Η ένταξη των προεικονίσεων," op.cit. (n. 2), 324, for references.

[32] Ibid., 323 324, fig. 5.

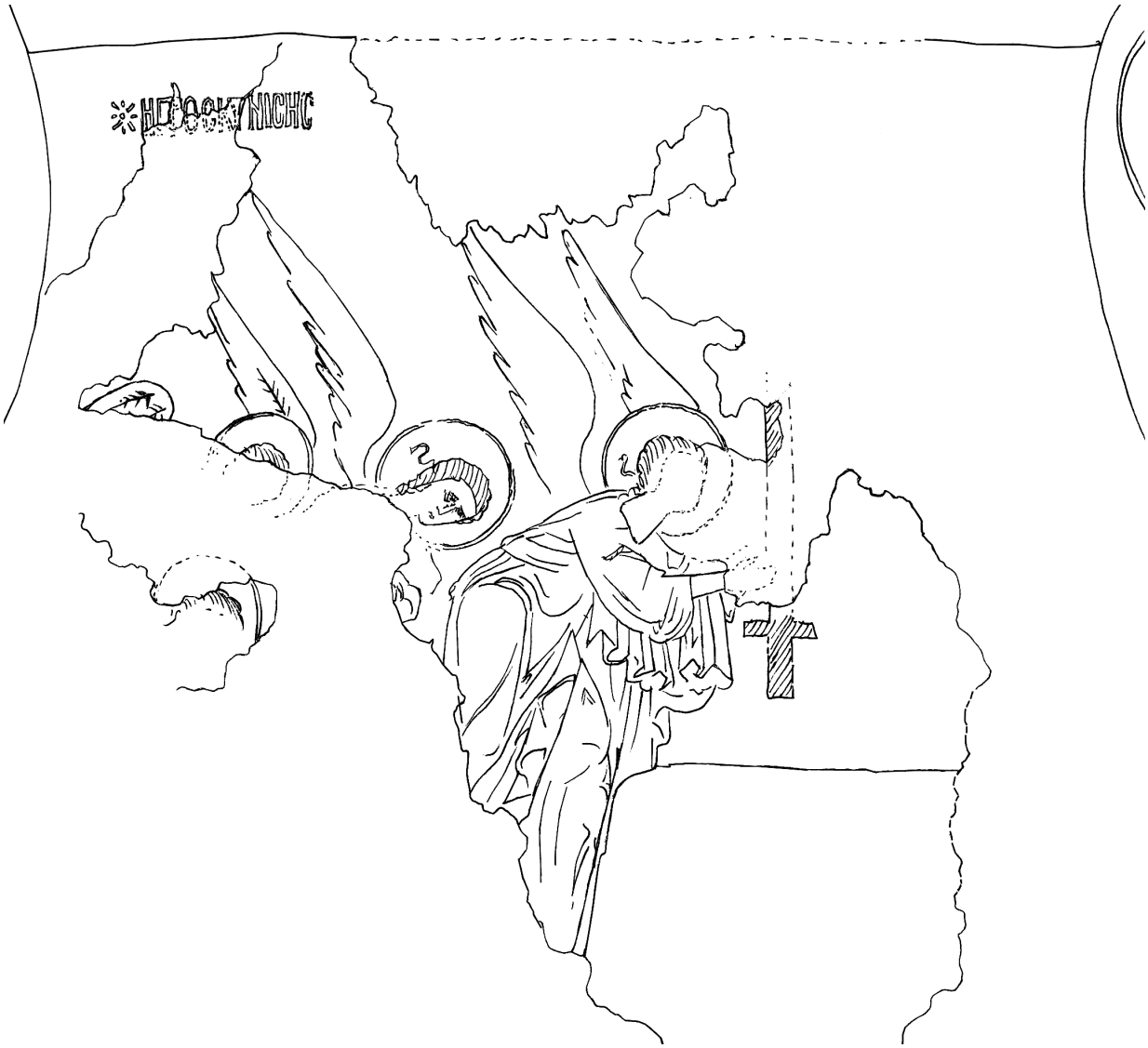

Fig. 1. Arta, church of St. Nicholas tēs Rhodias*. Diakonikon, north side of the longitudinal vault, drawing of the Veneration of the Holy Cross by angels (G. Fousteris).*

in Platanistasa, Cyprus, both dated to the 15th century.[33] The presence of angels not only at Varasova, but also at St. Nicholas *tēs Rodias* and in Sofiko mainly indicates an eschatological content.[34] 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

[33] A. J. Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus,* London 1985, fig. 116.

[34] Vasilakeris Foudouli, op.cit. (n. 7), 538.

Fig. 2. Arta, church of St. Nicholas tēs Rhodias*. Diakonikon, north side of the longitudinal vault, the Veneration of the Holy Cross by angels, detail (G. Fousteris).*

Antony Eastmond.[35] 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.[36] Batatzes gave this *stauro*thēkē as a gift to Fra Elia de' Coppi, the envoy of the emperor Frederick II (1246).[37] 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.[38] In medieval Serbia the True Cross played an important role in the definition and promotion of the identity of the new established Serbian state.[39] 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.[40]

In the empire of Trebizond, Manuel I Komnenos "the Great"

[35] Eastmond, op.cit. (n. 1), 204 216.

[36] Frolow, *Les reliquaires*, op.cit. (n. 1), fig. 40; N. Oikonomidis, "Holy War and Two Ivories," *Peace and War in Byzantium*, Washington DC 1995, 77 79, illus. IV, V.

[37] Frolow, *La relique*, op.cit. (n. 1), 239, 432 433.

[38] B. Miljković, *Žitija Sv. Save kao izvori za istoriju srednjovekovne umetnosti*, Beograd 2008, 92 with references; id., "Hilandarski Časni krst i stara manastirska stavroteka," *ZRVI* 38 (1999 2000), 287 297.

[39] D. Popović, "Relics and Politics in the Middle Ages: The Serbian Approach," *Eastern Christian Relics*, op.cit. (n. 1), 162 163 with ref erences.

[40] D. Popović, *Srpski vladarski grob u srednjem veku*, Belgrade 1992, 38 41; id., "Relics and Politics," op.cit., 164 167.

Fig. 3. Varasova, cave-church of Holy Fathers. The Exaltation of the Holy Cross (A. Vasilakeris).

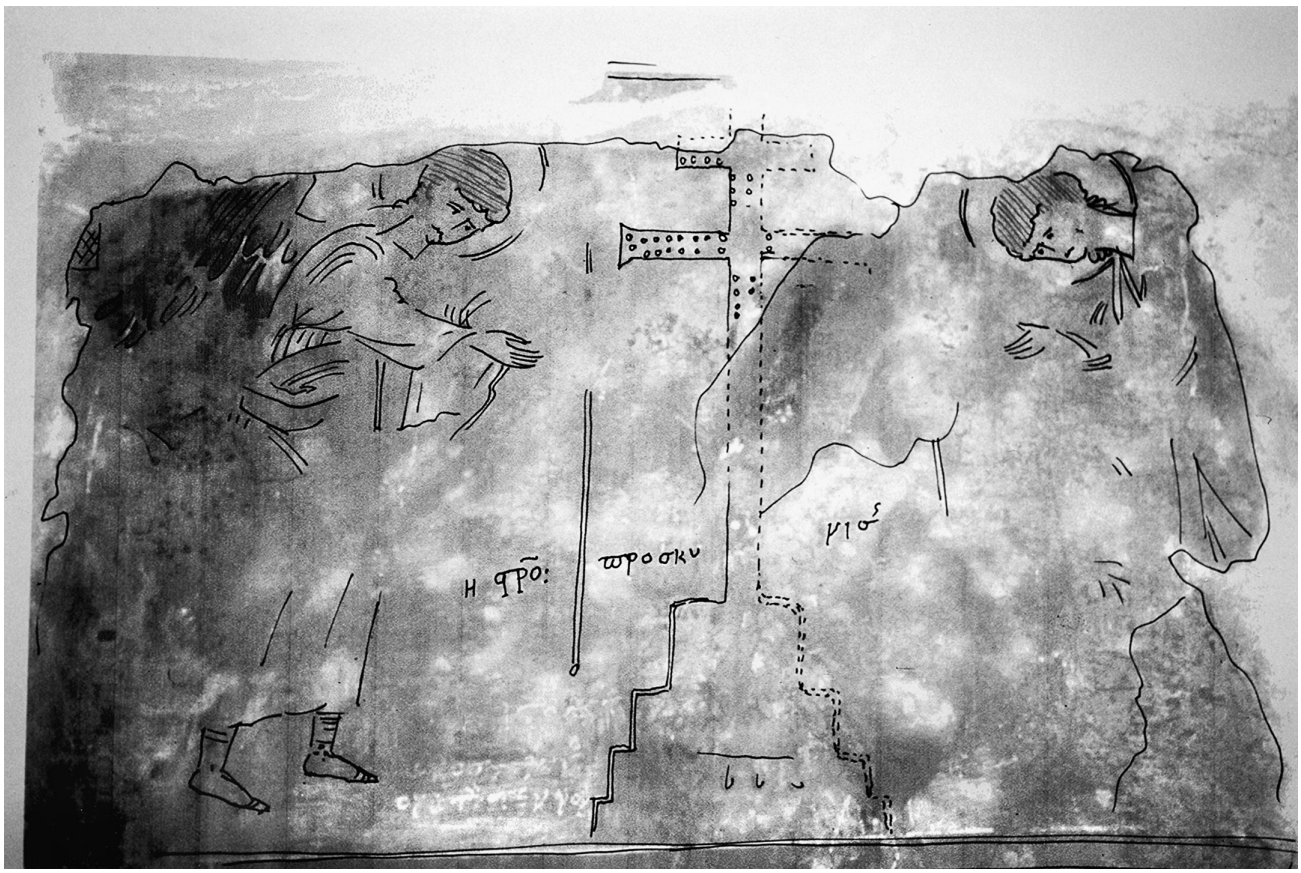

Fig. 4. Sofiko, church of Hypapantē. *Transverse cross arm, north tympanum, the* Stauroproskynēsis *(G. Fousteris).*

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

[41] J. Durand, "La Vrai croix de la princesse Palatine au trésor de Notre Dame de Paris: Observations techniques," *CahArch* 40 (1992), 139 146.

[42] Eusebius, *Über das Leben Constantins* 1, 28, *Eusebius Werke (Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte 7*) (ed. I. A. Heikel), Leipzig 1902, 21.

[43] Χρυσόστομος, *PG* 49, 394 398.

[44] Frolow, *Les reliquaires*, op.cit. (n. 1), passim.

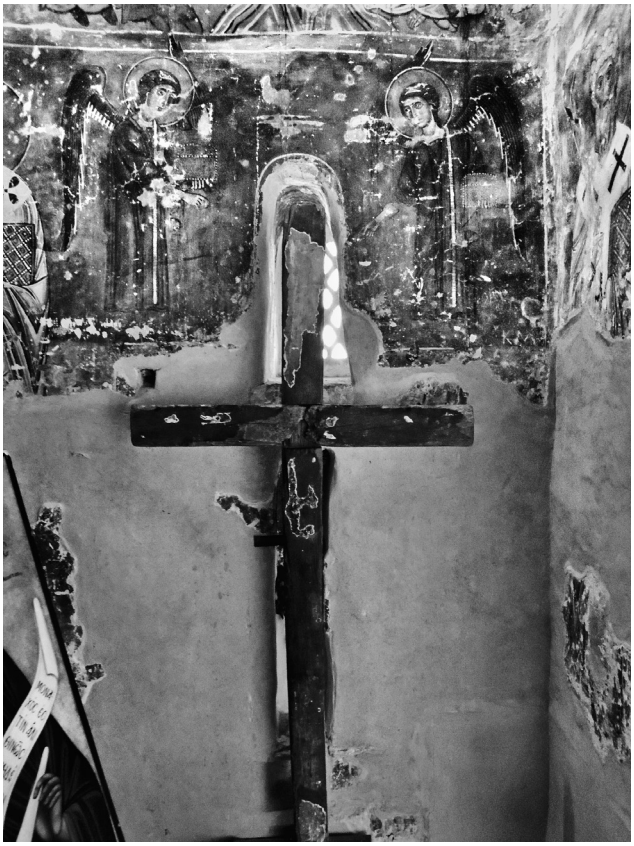

Fig. 5. Paphos, Hermitage of St. Neophytos. Nave, south wall, the cross venerated by angels (G. Fousteris).

creed. One of them, which was inscribed above the gate of the Chalke (either in late 815 or early 816), ended with the following lines: ἰδοὺ γὰρ αὐτὸν <τὸν Σταυρὸν> οἱ μέγιστοι δεσπόται / ὡς νικοποιὸν ἐγχαράττουσιν τύπον.[45]

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.[46] The most famous example is undoubtedly the Limburg *staurothēkē*, made on the order from Basileios the *proedros* little after 963 (Fig. 8).[47] 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,[48] while the way in which the True Cross was perceived to assist Byzantine emperors is explicated in the inscription of the *staurothēkē* from Cortona,[49] which we mentioned above:

Καὶ πρὶν κραταιῷ δεσπότῃ Κωνσταντίνῳ
Χριστὸς δέδωκε σταυρὸν εἰ(ς) σωτηρίαν.
Καὶ νῦν δὲ τοῦτον ἐν Θεῷ Νικηφόρος
ἄναξ τροποῦται φῦλα 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.[50]

The Komnenoi, following in their predecessors' footsteps, defended the integrity of the empire with the power of the cross, as well.[51] 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
Κομνηνοδουκῶν ἐξ ἀνάκτων αὐτάναξ
...

[45] These epigrams are saved in a treatise by Theodore of Stoudios. Θεόδωρος Στουδίτης, *Ἔλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῶν ἀσεβῶν ποιημάτων*, *PG* 99, 436B 437C, esp. 437A. On the base of its acrostic Ἰγνατίῳ καύχημα ἐννοεῖν σταυρόν this epigram is ascribed to Ignatios the Deacon (*ca.* 770 d. after 845). For a detailed analysis see M. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres. Texts and Contexts*, Vienna 2003, vol. I, 274 278, with earlier bibliography.

[46] L. Boura, "Ο Βασίλειος Λεκαπηνός παραγγελιοδότης ἔργων τέχνης," *Κωνσταντίνος Ζ΄ ὁ Πορφυρογέννητος καί ἡ ἐποχή του, Β΄ Διεθνής Βυζαντινολογική Συνάντηση* (Δελφοί, 22 26 Ιουλίου 1987), Athens 1989, 433.

[47] Frolow, *Les reliquaires,* op.cit. (n. 1), figs 38a, b, 39. J. Koder, "Ο Κωνσταντίνος Πορφυρογέννητος καί ἡ σταυροθήκη τοῦ Λίμπουργκ," *Κωνσταντίνος Ζ΄ ὁ Πορφυρογέννητος καί ἡ ἐποχή του*, op.cit., 165 184; Boura, op.cit., 397 434.

[48] A. Grabar, "La précieuse croix de la Lavra Saint Athanase au Mont Athos," *CahArch* 19 (1969), 99 125, esp. 112, n. 24.

[49] Ibid., n. 35.

[50] A. Cutler, "Inscriptions and Iconography on Some Middle Byzan tine Ivories. The Monuments and their Dating," *Libri e Testi nelle Aree provinciali di Bisanzio, 645-660, Atti del Seminario di Erice* (1988) (ed. G. Cavallo *et al.*), Spoleto 1991, 657 659; Oikonomidis, op.cit. (n. 36), 83 85.

[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.

ἐκ μυριάκις μυρίων στρατευμάτων
πρὸς τὴν κατ᾽ ἐχθρῶν τοῦ θεοῦ σπεύδει μάχην
...
Εἰδὼς δὲ τύπου σταυρικοῦ θείου ξύλου
νίκην λαβόντα τὸν μέγαν Κωνσταντῖνον
οὗ στέμμα πίστιν ὀρθοδοξίαν φέρει,
τὸν αὐτὸν αὐτὸς χρυσῷ κόσμῳ τύπον,
Χριστοῦ παθῶν σήμαντρα τιθεὶς ἐν μέσῳ
καὶ λειψάνων τμήματα σεπτῶν ἁγίων,
θαῤῥεῖν ἐπ᾽ αὐτοῖς ἢ στρατοῦ πλήθει κρίνων.
Ναί, σταυρὲ ράβδε, πλῆττε τοὺς ἐναντίους,
ναί, σταυρὲ Χριστοῦ, περσικὰ φῦλα τρέπε,
παρεμβαλών δε τῷ βασιλεῖ κυκλόθεν
νίκης στεφάνῳ στέψον αὐτοῦ τὸ στέφος[52].

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 Προσκύνισης* 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[53] 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.[54] 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 ascendancy. 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,[55] the Old Metropolis in Berroia[56] and the Blacherna in the Area of Arta.[57]

Fig. 6. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery. Icon with the Veneration of the True Cross by angels (after V. Lazarev, Die Russisch Ikone*, Zürich - Düsseldorf 1997, taf. 5).*

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

[52] Sp. Lambros, "Ὁ Μαρκιανὸς κῶδιξ 524," *NE* 8 (1911), 51.

[53] D. Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros*, Oxford 1957. G. Prinzing, "Epiros 1204 1261: Historical Outline Sources Prosopography," *Identities and Allegiances in the Eastern Mediterranean after 1204* (ed. J. Herrin G. Sint Gouillain), Ashgate 2011, 81 99.

[54] A. Stavridou Zafraka, *Νίκαια και Ήπειρος τον 13ο αιώνα. Ιδεολογική αντιπαράθεση στην προσπάθειά τους να ανακτήσουν την αυτοκρατορία*, Thessaloniki 1990; ead., "The Political Ideology," *Urbs Capta, The Fourth Crusade and its Consequences* (ed. A. Laiou), Paris 2005, 311 323; D. Dželebdžić, "Pisma Jovana Apokaka Teodoru Duki," *ZRVI* 45 (2008), 124 140.

[55] T. Papamastorakis, "Το εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα του τρούλου του ναού του Αγίου Δημητρίου του Κατσούρη," *Πρακτικά Διεθνούς Συμποσίου για το Δεσποτάτο της Ηπείρου* (Άρτα 1992) (ed. E. Chrysos), Arta 1992, 419 454.

[56] Th. Papazotos, *Η Βέροια και οι ναοί της (11ος-18ος αι.)*, Athens 1994, 224 226.

[57] M. Acheimastou Potamianou, *Ἡ Βλαχέρνα τῆς Ἄρτας, τοιχογραφίες*, Athens 2009, 78 83, 119 122.

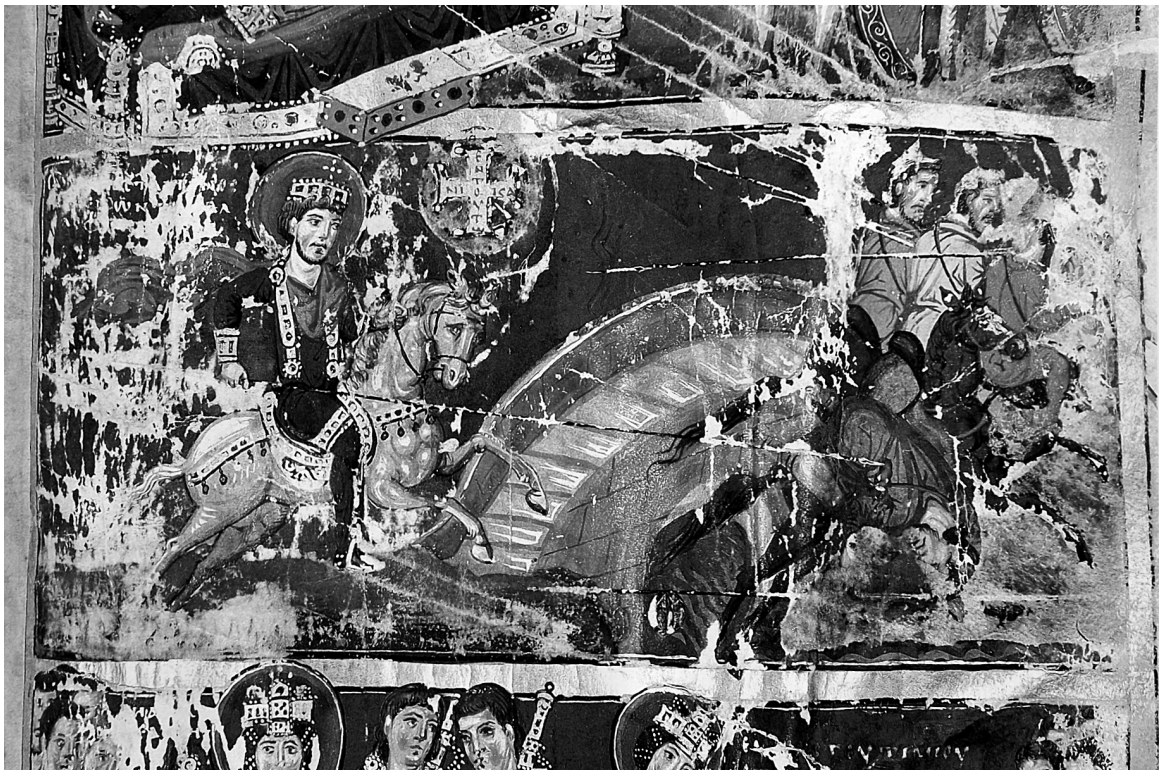

*Fig. 7. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, cod. Par. Gr. 510, fol. 440r, Homilies of Gregory Nazianzenus. Scenes from the Life of Constantine and Helene: Constantine's vision "ἐν τούτῳ νίκα," detail (*Ὧρες Βυζαντίου, Το Βυζάντιο ως Οικουμένη, *Athens 2001, fig. 2).*

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.[58] 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),[59] symbolizes the triumph of Christian emperors.[60] 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;[61] 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,[62] 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.

[58] M. Handy, *Coinage and Money in the Byzantine Empire. 1081-1261*, Washington 1969, 272 273, pl. 38.10, 11.

[59] K. Ericsson, "The Cross on Steps and the Silver Hexagram," *JÖBG* 17 (1968), 149 164.

[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]

Fig. 8. Limburg an der Lahn, the Limburg staurothēkē *(J. Durand,* Byzantine Art*, Paris 1999, 146).*

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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[63] G. Babić, *Les Chapelles annexes des églises byzantines*, Paris 1969, 64.

[64] N. Gioles, "Εικονογραφικά θέματα στη βυζαντινή τέχνη εμπνευσμένα από την αντιπαράθεση και τα σχίσματα των δύο εκκλησιών," *Θωράκιον, αφιέρωμα στη μνήμη του Παύλου Λαζαρίδη,* Athens 2004, 275 276.

[65] Ch. Konstadinidi, "Τό Ἅγιο Μανδήλιο μεταξύ τῶν ἱεραρχῶν: Ἕνα ἀκόμα σύμβολο τῆς θείας Εὐχαριστίας," *Λαμπηδών. Ἀφιέρωμα στη μνήμη της Ντούλας Μουρίκη* (επιμ. M. Aspra Vardavaki), Athens 2003, 483 498.

[66] I. Kalavrezou, "Helping Hands for the Empire: Imperial Ceremonies and the Cult of Relics at the Byzantine Court," *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (ed. H. Maguire), Washington 2004, 57.

[67] S. Kissas, "Όσιος Ανδρέας ο ερημίτης ο εκ Μονοδένδρι, Ιστορία, λατρεία, τέχνη," *Πρακτικά Διεθνούς Συμποσίου για το Δεσποτάτο της Ηπείρου,* op.cit. (n. 55), 210 237; S. Kalopissi Verti, *Dedicatory Inscriptions and Donor Portraits in Thirteenth Century Churches of Greece,* Vienna 1992, 57 59; Paliouras, op.cit. (n. 7), 313 316.

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, Nicaea and Epiros, expecting the moment when the orthodox rulers will return them to the *New Zion*, i.e. Constantinople.

John Apokaukos, Demetrios Chomatenos, and George Bardanos, characterize the Epiros ruler Theodore Dukas 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 *Stauroproskynēsis* from Sofiko (Fig. 4) might be seen in the light of the historic events in the Peloponnese after 1260, with protagonists Michael VIII Palaiologos 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 Σιὼν ὁ νέος Δαβὶδ ἐπὶ τὴν βασιλίδα ὁ βασιλεὺς ὁ τοῦ Μεγάλου Κωνσταντίνου ζηλωτὴς ἄκρος ἐπὶ Κωνσταντινούπολιν.[71] Additionally, the repatriation of the imperial and ecclesiastical authories 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 *sebastokratōr* Constantine Palaiologos, 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.
[70] For the epithet "Νέος Κωνσταντίνος," see H. H. Buschausen, *Die Marienkirche von Apollonia in Albanien*, Vienna 1976, 153 154; R. Macrides, "The New Constantine and the New Constantinople 1261?" *BMGS* 6 (1980), 22 24; T. Papamastorakis, "Ενα εικαστικό εγκώμιο του Μιχαήλ Η΄ Παλαιολόγου: Οι εξωτερικές τοιχογραφίες στο καθολικό της Μονής της Μαυριώτισσας στην Καστοριά," *ΔΧΑΕ* ΙΕ΄ (1989 1990), 237 238; M. Talbot, "The Restoration of Constantinople under Michael VIII," *DOP* 47 (1993), 259 260; V. Foskolou, "*In the Reign of the Emperor of Rome...* Donor Inscriptions and Political Ideology in the Time of Michael VIII Paleologos," *ΔΧΑΕ* ΚΖ΄ (2006), 456 457.
[71] Papamastorakis, "Εικαστικό εγκώμιο," op.cit., 237.
[72] D. Angelov, *Imperial Ideology and Political Thought in Byzantium, 1204-1330*, Cambridge 2007, passim.
[73] A. Failler, "Chronologie et composition dans l'histoire de Georges Pachymère," *REB* 38 (1980), 88.
[74] D. A. Zakythinos, *Le Despotat grec de Morée*, vol. I, *Histoire politique*, Paris 1932, 16 17, 22 23.
[75] Zakythinos, op.cit., 27 77; D. J. Geanakoplos, *Emperor Michael Paleologus and the West*, Cambridge Mass. 1959, 157 158; A. Bon, *La Morée franque. Recherches historiques topographiques et archéologiques sur la principauté d'Achaie (1205-1430)*, Paris 1969, 122 123, 503 508; N. Nikoloudes, "The Theme of Kisterna," *Porphyrogenita: Essays on the History and Literature of Byzantium and the Latin Eat in honour of Julian Chrysostomides* (eds L. Chrysostomides Ch. Dendrinos), London 2003, 85 89.
[76] N. Drandakis, *Βυζαντινὲς τοιχογραφίες τῆς Μέσα Μάνης*, Athens 1995, 70 100 with earlier bibliography.
[77] Foskolou, op.cit. (n. 70), 456 457 with earlier bibliography.
[78] N. Drandakis, "Δεόμενοι ἅγιοι ἐπὶ τοῦ τεταρτοσφαιρίου ἁψῖδος εἰς ἐκκλησίας τῆς Μέσα Μάνης," *AAA* IV, 2 (1971), 232 240.

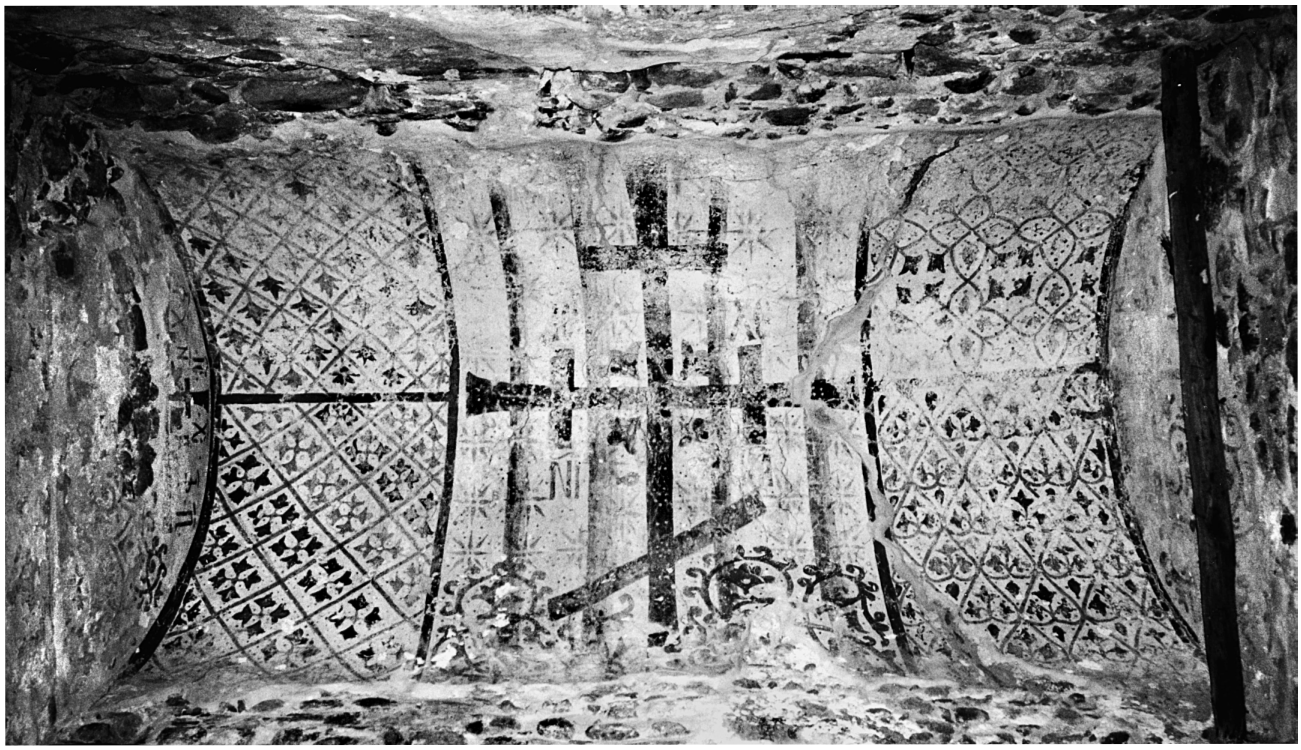

Fig. 9. Euboea, Bounoi, church of the Holy Apostles. Transverse barrel-vault, a huge leaf-bearing resurrection cross (M. Kappas).

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-

[79] M. Kappas, "Ο ναός του Αγίου Νικολάου στο ρέμα του Σωφρόνη Λακωνίας," *Βυζαντινά Σύμμεικτα* 21 (2011), 300 301, n. 150 151.

[80] For this rare iconographic theme, see, *inter alia*: N. Drandakis, "Πόκος ἢ Νεφέλη; Ἀσυνήθιστη λεπτομέρεια τῆς παραστάσεως τοῦ Εὐαγγελισμοῦ στὴ βυζαντινὴ εἰκονογραφία," *ΕΕΦΣΠΑ* ΚΣΤ΄ (1977 1978), 258 268; Ch. Konstantinidi, *Ο ναός της Φανερωμένης στα Φραγκουλιάνικα της Μέσα Μάνης*, Athens 1998, 55 59; A. Euthimiou, "Ευαγγελισμός Πόκος. Η Ταυτοποίηση μιας εικονογραφικής λεπτομέρειας παραστάσεων του θέματος στην περιοχή της Λακωνίας," *30ο Συμπόσιο ΧΑΕ*, Athens 2010, 39 40.

[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.[82] 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.[83]

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).[84] 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.[85] 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.[86] 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.

[84] H. M. Küpper, *Der Bautypus der Griechischen Dachtranseptkirche*, Amsterdam 1990, vol. I, fig. 66, vol. II, 93 94.

[85] Ibid., vol. II, 93 94.

[86] J. Koder, *Negreponte*, *TIB* 1, Vienna 1973, 47 50.

Leonela Fundić - Μιχάλης Κάππας

ΣΤΑΥΡΟΠΡΟΣΚΥΝΗΣΙΣ: ΕΝΑ ΙΔΙΟΤΥΠΟ ΕΙΚΟΝΟΓΡΑΦΙΚΟ ΘΕΜΑ

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 ελλαδικού χώρου, στον Άγιο Νικόλαο της Ροδιάς, κοντά στην Άρτα, στο ασκητήριο των Αγίων Πατέρων στη Βαράσοβα Αιτωλίας και στην Υπαπαντή Σοφικού Κορινθίας.

Στον Άγιο Νικόλαο της Ροδιάς, όμιλος αγγέλων καταλαμβάνει το ήμισυ της καμάρας του νοτιοανατολικού γωνιαίου διαμερίσματος, συγκλίνοντας προς την αψίδα του διακονικού. Ο προεξάρχων άγγελος κρατά θριαμβευτικά μεγάλο ξύλινο σταυρό. Την παράσταση συνοδεύει η εξής επιγραφή: *ἡ Προσκύνισης*. Για τη χρονολόγηση της ζωγραφικής του συγκεκριμένου ηπειρωτικού μνημείου έχουν διατυπωθεί αντικρουόμενες απόψεις. 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. Πειστικότερη θεωρούμε την ένταξή τους εντός του 13ου αιώνα (Π. Βοκοτόπουλος), εποχή κατά την οποία τοποθετούνται και οι ανάλογες θεματικά παραστάσεις από την Ήπειρο και την Κορινθία. Ανάμεσα στις τοιχογραφίες της εκκλησίας του Σοφικού, εξαίρεται μια μοναδική παράσταση που καταλαμβάνει τμήμα του βόρειου τυμπάνου της εγκάρσιας σταυρικής κεραίας: διάλιθος σταυρός υψώνεται σε βαθμιδωτή βάση· 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 *Σπ(αυ)ροπροσκύ/νισ(ις)*. 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.

Σε εικονογραφημένα χειρόγραφα και στη μνημειακή ζωγραφική δεν είναι άγνωστες, ήδη από τη μεσοβυζαντινή περίοδο, πολυπρόσωπες παραστάσεις της Ύψωσης του Τιμίου Σταυρού, με διαφορετικό ωστόσο εικονογραφικό περιεχόμενο από εκείνο των τριών εξεταζόμενων μνημείων. Οι παραστάσεις αυτές φαίνεται ότι εμπνέονται από τις αντίστοιχες τελετές που λάμβαναν χώρα στον άμβωνα της Αγίας Σοφίας στην Κωνσταντινούπολη.

Οι περιπτώσεις απεικόνισης του σταυρού πλαισιωμένου από αγγέλους κάνουν την εμφάνισή τους ήδη από τους παλαιοχριστιανικούς χρόνους, τόσο στη μνημειακή ζωγραφική όσο και σε έργα μικροτεχνίας. Το θέμα, ωστόσο, της Προσκύνησης του Σταυρού από αγγέλους, ως αυτοτελής παράσταση, γνώρισε περιορισμένη διάδοση στη μνημειακή ζωγραφική, τουλάχιστον με τα σημερινά δεδομένα. Η εικονογραφική σύλληψη παραστάσεων με παρεμφερές περιεχόμενο φαίνεται ότι διαμορφώνεται στα όψιμα χρόνια της δυναστείας των Κομνηνών. Την εποχή αυτή χρονολογείται ο μεγάλος εντοιχισμένος σταυρός στο νότιο τοίχο της Εγκλείστρας του Αγίου Νεοφύτου στην Πάφο της Κύπρου. Ο ξύλινος σταυρός έχει σήμερα καταστραφεί ολοσχερώς. Σώζεται, ωστόσο, η εσοχή για τη στερέωσή του και δύο τοιχογραφημένοι άγγελοι εκατέρωθεν του σταυρού, σε στάση προσκύνησης. Παραπλήσια εικονογραφική σύνθεση επισημαίνεται και σε δύο φορητά έργα του όψιμου 12ου αιώνα, σε αμφιπρόσωπη εικόνα σήμερα στην Πινακοθήκη Tretiakof της Μόσχας και σε λίθινο θωράκιο τέμπλου από το χωριό Kuti του Μαυροβουνίου.

Στην παρούσα δημοσίευση εξετάζεται το ενδεχόμενο οι σπάνιες εντοίχιες παραστάσεις στις ελλαδικές εκκλησίες του 13ου αιώνα, εκτός από το προφανές εσχατολογικό τους περιεχόμενο, να απηχούν και τις εκκολαπτόμενες πολιτικές φιλοδοξίες, τόσο των Κομνηνοδουκάδων όσο και των Παλαιολόγων. Την κρίσιμη αυτή εποχή διεξάγονται σε διάφορα μέτωπα μάχες για την ανασύσταση της βυζαντινής αυτοκρατορίας. Ειδικά μετά

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 βυζαντινά στρατεύματα, εδραιώνοντας το θρίαμβο της ανάκτησης της Κωνσταντινούπολης και σηματοδοτώντας το στόχο για την επέκταση της αυτοκρατορίας στα παλαιά της σύνορα.