Διασκεδάσεις σκαλισμένες σε ελεφαντοστό: Οι μουσικοί και οι χορευτές στο σκέπασμα του κιβωτιδίου Veroli

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PERFORMANCES ON IVORY: THE MUSICIANS AND DANCERS ON THE LID OF THE VEROLI CASKET*

The Veroli casket, made from ivory plaques and bone strips attached on a wooden core with bone pegs, is probably the most famous middle Byzantine casket, decorated with mythological figures of the highest quality. Its lid preserves a musical ensemble and three dancers of special interest. If we turn our attention from the antique looking guises of the figures to their attributes, that is the musical instruments and the iconography of the dance, we might be able to discern elements of everyday life of the middle Byzantine period hidden under an antique veil.

Λέξεις κλειδιά
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* It is an honour to offer this paper in memory of Titos Papamastorakis, who as my tutor during my undergraduate years in the University of Crete years ago introduced me to the world of Byzantium.

materials they are made of (ivory and bone) and their complex construction, but also in the fact that their decoration comprises the most coherent body of secular art to survive from medieval Byzantium, from gods and heroes of the Graeco-Roman tradition to contemporary Byzantine imperial imagery and ornamental patterns. In the pages that follow, I will focus on the group of musicians and dancers that feature on the lid of the Veroli casket.

The Veroli casket is the most familiar Byzantine casket, and as such it has attracted much scholarly attention. It is a rectangular flat-topped casket, comprised of ivory plaques and bone decorative strips attached on a wooden core with bone pegs. Unlike the majority of the medieval caskets, the Veroli was most likely specially commissioned and not serially produced as indicated by its dimensions. Its decoration comprises mythological figures of the finest craftsmanship. The lid consists of two ivory plaques joined together to form a panel and on the left side preserves the Rape of Europa with stone-throwing male figures, while on the right are a seated Herakles playing the kithara; two Centaurs, one playing a transverse flute and the other the panpipes; two putti playing the cymbals; and three dancers, one of which on the far right seems to be male (Fig. 2). Above the seated Herakles two more putti can be seen, apparently dancing in the air. The front panel preserves two ivory plaques, each one formed by two pieces of ivory joined together. The plaque on the left depicts confronted mythological pairs, while the right plaque illustrates the Sacrifice of Iphigenia together with the figures of Hygeia and Asklepios. The left plaque on the
back panel shows putti and animals, while the right plaque on the same panel shows a mythological couple and putti frolicking with animals. On the short ends of the casket are two further ivory plaques. At the end with the lock a Nereid rides on a hippocampus, with a putto sitting atop an altar, while on the other end the figure of Dionysos rides on a chariot drawn by felines, while above the felines a putto dives into a basket.

The scenes with the dancers and musicians on the lid of the casket are difficult to identify. Kurt Weitzmann has suggested that they form part of a larger repertoire of hypothetical illustrated mythological manuals.4 Erika Simon has identified the image as the nuptial celebration of the marriage between Harmonia, daughter of Ares and Aphrodite, and Cadmus, Europa’s brother, as described in Book V of Nonnus’ 15th-century Dionysiaca.5 More recently, Anthony Cutler, without explicitly disagreeing with Simon’s reading, has preferred a comic reading, underlining the incongruity among the depicted images on medieval caskets.6 Regardless of the precise identification, other elements of this scene are of special interest, and I will begin with the musicians.

Generally speaking, musicians are a common motif on medieval Byzantine ivory and bone caskets. Most of them are depicted as members of the Dionysiac Thiasos, thus exhibiting conventional images of musicians as seen in Late Antique art.7 Within this group of artefacts, and particularly in terms of craftsmanship, the lid of the Veroli casket displays the finest ensemble of musicians seen on medieval caskets, which may be considered an or-

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4 K. Weitzmann, Greek Mythology in Byzantine Art (Studies in Manuscript Illumination 4), Princeton 1951, 183 185.
6 Cutler, “Byzantine Boxes,” op.cit. (n. 1), 32 47. For a comic reading of the figures on the Veroli casket see also H. Hunger, Reich der neuen Mitte. Der christliche Geist der byzantinischen Kultur, Cologne 1965, 208.
7 In medieval Byzantine art images of musicians and musical instruments can be distinguished into two types: biblical and secular, see G. Galavaris, “Musical Images in Byzantine Art,” Athenzeitron, Studien zur byzantinischen Kunst und Geschichte. Festschrift für Marcell Rostle (eds B. Borkopp, Th. Steppan), Stuttgart 2000, 79 84. The biblical images refer primarily to David, to his life and his work as a psalm composer. The secular images can be subdivided into two more categories: a) those directly related to classical antiquity and found within such contexts, and b) those of diverse origins, which are found in illuminated holy books where the image is not directly related to the book’s subject. The mythological representations found on medieval ivory and bone caskets are most often part of the first sub group, while in the second we can rank images of performers found as initials in manuscripts of religious works, including jugglers and snake charmers, as well as musicians.
I call this ensemble an orchestra after J. Thibaut's terminology, who distinguished the following types of Byzantine musical ensembles: the organ, military, and Dionysian (organ, military and concert in modern terminology), see J. Thibaut, "La musique instrumentale chez les Byzantins," EO 4 (1901), 340; see also J. Braun, "Musical Instruments in Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts," Early Music 8 (1980), 318.

In written sources most Byzantine musical instruments retained their classical names, although in form they were different from their ancient prototypes, see M. Velimirović, "Reflections on Music and Musicians in Byzantium," Το Ελληνικόν: Studies in Honour of Speros Vryonis Jr., vol. I, Hellenic Antiquity and Byzantium (eds J. S. Langdon et al.), New York 1993, 455. The works of the Church Fathers are a prime example in terms of nomenclature, for which see J. McKinnon, Music in Early Christian Literature, Cambridge 1987. As a result it is difficult for modern scholars to identify, or classify Byzantine musical instruments, see however N. Μαλιάρας, "Μουσικά Όργανα στο Βυζάντιο," Πολύφωνια 1 (2002), 5 28 and id., "Μουσικά όργανα στους χορούς και τις διασκεδάσεις των Βυζαντινών," Αρχαιολογία και Τέχνες 91 (2004), 68. Furthermore, archaeology is of limited use here since actual examples of musical instruments unearthed are extremely rare, as for example the wooden body of a lute datable to the 10th or 11th centuries discovered in Corinth, for which see F. Anogiannakis, "Ἕνα βυζαντινὸ μουσικὸ ὀργανὸ," ΔΧΑΕ Γ΄ (1962 1963), 115 123.

On the medieval caskets, the transverse flute is a popular musical instrument, and can be found on 16 caskets and loose plaques datable from the 10th century to the 12th. The flute players are usually Centaurs or putti. On caskets datable to the 10th and 11th centuries, the flute players are in mythological contexts, while on caskets datable to the 12th century, the figures seem to float on the plaque surface and they look as if they represent an echo of contemporary musical ensembles.

"Μουσικά όργανα στο Βυζάντιο," Πολύφωνια 1 (2002), 5 28 and id., "Μουσικά όργανα στους χορούς και τις διασκεδάσεις των Βυζαντινών," Αρχαιολογία και Τέχνες 91 (2004), 68. Furthermore, archaeology is of limited use here since actual examples of musical instruments unearthed are extremely rare, as for example the wooden body of a lute datable to the 10th or 11th centuries discovered in Corinth, for which see F. Anogiannakis, "Ἕνα βυζαντινὸ μουσικὸ ὀργανὸ," ΔΧΑΕ Γ΄ (1962 1963), 115 123.

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I. F. Točkaja - A. M. Zajaruznyj, "I musici dell'affresco ditto degli

Fig. 3. Mythological figures as musicians, detail from the lid of the Veroli casket, 10th century. London, Victoria and Albert Museum 216-1865 (photo © V&A Images / Victoria and Albert Museum, London).
ment are six finger holes on the tube. From manuscript illustrations it has been deduced that the length of the transverse flute was approximately 60 cm long, and that it was played right-handed.

Even though the Veroli musical ensemble depicts a mythological group, it could in fact reflect an early representation of a medieval musical ensemble. With the exception of the panpipes and the archaic kithara, the rest of the musical instruments can all be seen in later depictions of musical ensembles. Good examples are the 11th-century manuscript illuminations of the Homilies of St. Gregory Nazianzenus in the Greek Patriarchate in Jerusalem (Taphou 14) and the Psalter in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Vat. gr. 752), as well as the 11th- or 12th-century fresco in Kiev mentioned above. The first example comes from a Pseudo-Nonnus manuscript and illustrates the Birth of Zeus (Taphou 14, fol. 310v). An ensemble of four Corybantes is depicted playing the cymbals (or maybe rattles), a fiddle, a drum, and a transverse flute. The ensemble seems to be conducted by a leader, suggesting a contemporary group, a view strengthened by the presence of this image in at least two more illuminated manuscripts. The same can be deduced from the Vatican Psalter, even though it lacks the presence of a conductor. The latter depicts the Canticle of Moses, sung after the Crossing of the Red Sea, and at the centre of the illumination eight musicians are depicted, playing a variety of instruments. Lastly, on the Kiev fresco, one more ensemble can be seen together with acrobats, representing contemporary court entertainment.

If we accept that the iconography discussed above may indeed refer to contemporary entertainment, then we could also entertain the idea that these images may potentially offer us a glimpse into the secular side of Byzantine music, the style, genre, and form of which are largely unknown. This secular side was an important part of daily life, in the


Hippodrome and the imperial court, in banquets and taverns, and in marriage celebrations, while the art of instrumental performance was a feature of noble breeding. For example, in the medieval epic poem of Digenis Akrites, the love struck young hero expresses his emotions by playing his kithara, in which, the poet informs us, he had been instructed, as well as in other musical instruments. At the same time, however, music in secular contexts, and especially musical instruments, received, together with dancing and the theatre, the attention and fierce criticism of the Church Fathers. Patristic puritanism targeted entertainment and especially music and dancing because of their close association with pagan cults and rites. John Chrysostom’s preaching against secular music particularly singles out certain social contexts, including theatrical performances, marriage songs and the female musicians employed at private banquets. Still, the presence of contemporary musicians and musical instruments in Byzantine iconography may provide musicologists with enough information to potentially reconstruct, at least to a certain extent, the sounds and combinations of musical instruments preferred in the secular realm of the Byzantine Empire.

A second element of interest on the lid of the Veroli casket is the dancers (Fig. 4). The medieval Veroli dancers are mythological dancers, and thus the scholarly convention is that they are mainly to be identified as “Maenads.” The primary characteristics of Maenads can be summarised as follows: the make intense dance moves; appear either nude or with revealing garments; play cymbals or frame drums; hold torches, and/or there is a billowing mantle (Heraion Schema) over their heads. They are usually accompanied either by a Dionysian ensemble formed mainly by Centaurs and putti, or by a Silenus. There is a plethora of examples mainly from Late Antiquity demonstrating this iconography, with the 4th-century silver plates from the Mildenhall Treasure, today in the British Museum, London preserving well-known examples (Fig. 5). It should be noted, however, that even though the medieval images on the Veroli caskets represent an echo of earlier mythological models, Asimakopoulou-Atzaka has suggested that the Late Antique dancing Maenads possess many of the same characteristics as real Late Antique dancers.
In artistic representations, professional dancers are depicted according to classical models until about the 11th century. Up until this period, their iconography consists of a billowing mantle over their heads and garments light enough to expose the curves of their bodies, as seen on the silver plates of the Mildenhall Treasure. As one may expect, this did not go down very well with the Church Fathers, who did not pass on the opportunity to hurl their barbs against both dancers and dancing. The relationship of dancing to the worship of pagan divinities associated with fertility, such as Rhea or Cybele, together with their association with sexual license led to the frequent assimilation of performers to prostitutes, since the ecstatic and sensual dance moves of Late Antiquity went against the feminine ideals of modesty and above all sexual purity that the Church was trying to promote. The example of Salome was used to epitomise the evil of dance and its consequences: lust and murder.

However, despite the Christian efforts to construct female dancers as dangerous sexual beings, the reality seems to have been less clear-cut. To begin with, there seems to be a distinction between professional dancers and amateurs, followed by a second distinction regarding the quality of performance. Male and female dancers, whose services were employed in private banquets and weddings, were professionals, and their presence is a feature of the imperial court and wealthy households, not only in the capital but also in the periphery. The early 3rd century contract of Artemisia the krotalistria (castanet dancer) from Egypt recorded in a papyrus document offers an insight into what seems to be a fairly organised body of professional performers. According to this contract, Artemisia the krotalistria Isidora to bring two more krotalistries with her. The existence of such a
contract, with payment details, insurance for the dancers’ garments and gold ornaments and with provided transportation, suggests a profession more respectable than the one described later by the Church Fathers. This is further confirmed by the presence of dancers on the 4th-century base of Theodosius’s obelisk (Fig. 6). 29 This monument was erected in the Hippodrome of Constantinople in 390, and its base depicts the emperor Theodosius I (378-395) with his sons and court officials crowning participants in the games, while spectators watch dancers escorted by musicians. C. J. Simpson argued that the scene on the obelisk depicts two groups of dancers and musicians standing for musical activities that took place at the races in the Hippodrome. He suggested that they were perhaps members of the circus factions, and their purpose was to rouse partisan enthusiasm during the games. 30 Simpson’s argument is reasonable, and it implies that those dancers were organised professionals. At the same time, these dancers are depicted in the presence of the emperor. Therefore, we might subsequently entertain the possibility that this is a further sign of their status as professionals.

From the 11th century onwards, contemporary women wearing contemporary garments replace the classical image. The light garments change to long brocade dresses with pointed sleeves and elaborate designs of the type worn at court. 11th-century examples of such images can be found on the so-called crown of Constantine IX Monomachos (1042-1055) currently in the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest and on an illumination from the Vatican Psalter mentioned earlier. 31 Other interesting depictions of the same theme come from the contemporary Book of Job in Sinai (Cod. Sin. 3, fol. 13v) depicting male dancers in similar attire and from a 12th-century silver gilded bowl decorated with figures beneath arches today in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. 32 The crown, dated to 1042-1050, depicts the emperor Constantine IX Monomachos, the empress Zoe, and her sister Theodora, together with the virtues of Truth and Humility and two dancers. The latter wear long dresses with long sleeves and the Heraion Schema, and scholars have proposed a number of identities for them, ranging from the daughters of Jerusalem dancing in honour of King David to Skleraina, the mistress of Monomachos, performing in the private gardens of the palace. 33 The Sinai illustration (Cod. Sin. 3, fol. 13v) depicts two male dancers in contemporary costume performing during a banquet, while the Hermitage bowl depicts a dancer in a long brocade dress with pointed sleeves.

In later Byzantine art such scenes of individual dancers and intense motion are progressively transformed into group scenes of calmness and modesty, where the female dancers are linked together by holding each other’s wrists or shoulders. 34 That is the nature of the dance depicted on an illumination from Vat. gr. 752, a full-page illustration of the Canticle of Moses, sung after the Crossing of the Red Sea. Fourteen women are depicted dancing in a circle holding each other around the shoulders. Their dress is like that worn at the court in the 11th century, while each dancer also wears a long hat extending to either side of their head. 35 It has been suggested that the model used for these images were the professional dancers of official ceremonies, since their body parts are covered. 36 The “Maenads” on the Veroli (Fig. 4) do not bear similarities with the standard image of dancers as depicted on the Midenhall dishes. They dance with intense moves in what appears to be a circular dance, holding each other with short kerchiefs and accompanied by an orchestra playing the kithara, panpipes, transverse flute, and cymbals. These are new elements introduced into the iconography.

31 For the so called crown of Constantine IX Monomachos see Evans Wixom (eds), op.cit. (n. 2), 210 212, no. 145. Oikonomides, on the other hand, has disputed the authenticity of the Monomachos Crown, see N. Oikonomides, “La couronne de Constantin Monomaque,” TM 12 (1994), 241 262.
33 Evans Wixom (eds), op.cit. (n. 2), 206 207, cat. no. 147.
34 Voutsa, op.cit. (n. 29), 45.
of dance around the time the casket was created. Even though the Veroli images retain their classical appearance, the circular dance, kerchiefs and orchestra represent the transition from classical imagery to medieval, as seen on the 11th-century artefacts discussed earlier, such as the Monomachos crown and the Vatican Psalter. Elements of this transition include professional dancers performing circular dances, contemporary garments (long brocade dresses with pointed sleeves, instead of lighter ones, and kerchiefs instead of a billowing mantle over the dancer’s head), and the presence of a musical ensemble instead of one musician only.

To conclude, despite the profound, and well publicized, dislike of the Church Fathers towards secular music, the Byzantines ignored their moral preaching and continued to entertain themselves, either in public or in private. This frivolous atmosphere is reflected on medieval Byzantine caskets, where it is possible that medieval orchestras are depicted, though under a Late Antique veil, such as the orchestra seen on the Veroli casket. Church Fathers did not deter the Byzantines from dancing any more than their warnings against music did. On the contrary, dancing retained a central role in ceremonial rituals, first at the Hippodrome and then in the court. A shift in the iconography of dance in Byzantine art also demonstrates this change from dancers with diaphanous garments we now see figures covered with heavy ornamental garments and holding kerchiefs instead of the Late Antique peplos. These elements of contemporary life, hidden under antique looking figures and side by side with diluted motifs derived from earlier models, are depicted on medieval caskets, and are particularly visible on the Veroli casket, offering an insight into the everyday life of the Byzantines.

37 A circular dance can also be seen in the iconography of the Three Graces throughout antiquity and beyond. However, the circular dance of the Three Graces has nothing in common with the circular dance of the figures on the Veroli casket: the Three Graces dance in a calm manner and close to each other and not in an elongated and vivid circular dance like the one seen on the medieval casket.
Το κιβωτίδιο Veroli στο Victoria and Albert Museum στο Λονδίνο, χρονολογείται γύρω στο 10ο αιώνα και ανήκει στα «κιβωτίδια με διακόσμηση ροδάκων», μια ομάδα πολυτελών επαγγελματικών κατασκευασμένων από ελεφαντοστέινες και οστέινες πλάκες/πλακίδια και ταινίες. Η διακόσμησή τους αποτελεί το πιο ολοκληρωμένο σύνολο μεσοβυζαντινής κοσμικής τέχνης που έχει διατηρηθεί έως τις μέρες μας, και η θεμελιωδής τους καλλιτεχνική ταλαντούχευση τους καλύπτει το θέατρο της ελληνορρωμαϊκής μυθολογίας με την καθαρή και διαφανή έκφραση της κλασικής θεωρίας του μουσικού πλαγίου μέσω των οργάνων και της εικονογραφίας του χορού.

Αυτή η δυσκολία είναι εμφανής, για παράδειγμα, στις μορφές του κιβωτίδιου, στις οποίες έχουν εκφραστεί πολλές απόψεις. Ωστόσο, οι μυθολογικές μορφές, η αναγνώρισή τους και η αναγνώριση τους με συγκεκριμένα μυθολογικά πρότυπα, υπάρχουν επακόλουθοι στη συγκεκριμένη παράσταση του κιβωτίδιου, για τις οποίες έχουν εκφραστεί πολλές απόψεις. Ωστόσο, πέρα από την αύξηση της αναγνώρισης των μορφών τους και των ταυτίσεων τους με συγκεκριμένα μυθολογικά πρότυπα, υπάρχουν επακόλουθοι στη συγκεκριμένη παράσταση του κιβωτίδιου, για τις οποίες έχουν εκφραστεί πολλές απόψεις.

Διάσκεδασεις σκαλισμένες σε ελεφαντόστο: Οι μουσικοί και οι χορεύτες στο σκέπασμα του κιβωτίδιου Veroli

Ανθούσα Παπαγιαννάκη