Η χρονολόγηση του μαρμαροθετημένου δάπεδου του καθολικού της μονής Μεγάλου Σπηλαίου

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THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE OPUS SECTILE PAVEMENT IN THE MEGA SPELAION MONASTERY KATHOLIKON* 

The present paper re-examines the opus sectile pavement of the katholikon of Mega Spelaion monastery, in terms of its general arrangement, its style and the partial features and forms that it presents, to reach the conclusion of a Post-Byzantine dating, thus corresponding to the chronology of the full reconstruction of the church edifice.

Keywords
Post-Byzantine period, 17th century, opus sectile pavements, Peloponnese, Achaia, Mega Spelaion monastery near Kalavryta.

Preservation of pavements after the destruction of the superstructure is not uncommon,4 so this hypothesis would be technically feasible. However, in order to establish this hypothesis, the form of the pavement should convince us of a Byzantine dating, which is not the case.

The pavement is characterised by a perfectly symmetrical layout of rectangular panels defined by continuous

Christina Pinatsi

THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE OPUS SECTILE PAVEMENT IN THE MEGA SPELAION MONASTERY KATHOLIKON*

Το παρόν άρθρο επανεξετάζει το μαρμαροθετημένο δάπεδο του καθολικού της μονής Μεγάλου Σπηλαίου, από την άποψη της γενικής του διάταξης, του ύφους αλλά και των επιμέρους τεχνοτροπικών χαρακτηριστικών και μορφών που παρουσιάζει, καταλήγοντας στο συμπέρασμα ότι πρόκειται για μεταβυζαντινή έργο, όπου διαλείπει και η ανωδομή του ναού.

Διάστημα κλειδιά
Μεταβυζαντινή περίοδος, 17ος αιώνας, μαρμαροθετημένα δάπεδα, Πελοπόννησος, Αχαΐα, μονή Μεγάλου Σπηλαίου στα Καλάβρυτα.

The katholikon of the Mega Spelaion monastery, near Kalavryta in Achaia, has gone through multiple destructions and successive re-buildings through the ages.1 The present edifice was erected in the year 1641.2 Quite recently, it has been claimed that the pavement adorning the church belongs to a previous (namely, Palaeologan) construction phase.3

* I would like to thank the members of the editorial committee of the Christian Archaeological Society for their uninterrupted efforts for the annual publication of the Deltion and for favourable reception of the present paper. In particular, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the paper’s referees for their invaluable contribution and observations, and to the text editors for their meticulous work and improvements to the English text. Finally, I would like to thank Professors Bouras and Mamaloukos for proof-reading the article before submission.

1 G. Sotiriou, “Περὶ τῆς Μονῆς τοῦ Μεγάλου Σπηλαίου καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ κειμηλίων,” Παράρτημα ΑΔ 4 (1918), 46-61, 47, fig. 8; Ch. Chotzakoglou, Untersuchungen zur Geschichte, Architektur und Wandmalerei der Klosterkirche Mega-Spelaion auf der Peloponnes, Philosophisches Fakultät, Institut für Byzantinistik und Neogriazistik Universität Wien, Austria 1997 (doctoral thesis).

2 Sotiriou, op.cit. (n. 1), 47; Chotzakoglou, op.cit. (n. 1), 124.

3 Ibid., 139, followed by a more extensive analysis by the same author:


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bands of white marble whose width remains unaltered throughout (Fig. 1). The ground is filled by *opus sectile* everywhere executed in black and white and forming the same pattern (rows of triangles), acting as a background for decorative elements of white marble, such as lozenges, circles, X-forming bands, double-headed eagles (Fig. 5), etc. Some sporadic coloured stones are isolated and do not appear in *opus sectile* motifs. The impressive central panels (Fig. 2) include two large symmetrical cypresses flanking the central feature, a double-headed eagle flanked by marble inlays, as in the Stavroniketa monastery (M. Chatzidakis, *Ὁ Κρητικὸς ζωγράφος Θεοφάνης. Οἱ τοιχογραφίες τῆς Ἱ. Μ. Σταυρονικήτα*, Mt. Athos 1986, figs 13, 18, 19).

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5 Rows of lozenges have been inserted in modern repairs; however, the extant authentic parts reveal that initially, these were also formed by two triangular *crustae*. The rows of triangles are the simplest and therefore commonest pattern in Ottoman period bands of
two smaller cypresses. In many panels, the central decorative slabs have incrustations (Figs 3, 9, 11) depicting stars and the sun or astragal (bead-and-reel) frames. Finally, the four peripheral disks of each “quincunx” in the north-east and south-east panel of the naos are formed by flower-shaped relief rosettes (Figs 6-7).6

All the above-mentioned features lend the pavement a character unrelated to Byzantine works of this kind. In particular, the absolute symmetry and rigidity of the composition – extending even to the symmetrical arrangement of identical motifs – is not related to medieval art, which consciously sought variety, but rather to an era resonant of the Renaissance, which has brought back the role of discipline to a uniform architectural design. The overall impression and style recall Post-Byzantine examples7 such as the Loukou monastery,8 where of course the existence of readily-available crustae from the nearby villa of Herod Atticus defined the size and patterns of opus sectile.

The lack of variety at Mega Spelaion is also underscored by the recurrence of the same opus sectile pattern (rows of black and white triangles)9 in the background of all the panels. This repetition does not appear in any

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6 For a more detailed description and drawing see Chotzakoglou, op.cit. (n. 1), 102-106, 131.
7 As regards accuracy and symmetry and the filling of panels with opus sectile and the bitalon taste of patterns, cf. the 17th century pavement from a manor house of Cairo, reconstituted in the Islamic art Museum of the Benaki Museum [A. Ballian (ed.), Οδηγός Μουσείου Ισλαμικής τέχνης, Athens 2006, 3] or the 1715 pavement in the central nave of the katholikon of Hagia Aiakaterini's monastery at Mount Sinai (M. Koufopoulou-Myriantheos, “Τεχνίτες στη Μονή Σινά κατά το 18ο αιώνα μέσα από γνωστά έργα τους,” Θυμίαμα στη μνήμη Λασκαρίνας Μπούρα, Athens 1994, 149-154, 150; for a view of the pavement see K. Manafis (ed.), Σινά, οι θησαυροί της Μονής, Athens 1990, 55, fig. 24). The black-and-white impression and the form of the crustae also remind the opus sectile panels in Topkapı palace, as in the portico of Ahmed III’s library.
8 A. Orlandos, “Ἡ Μονὴ Λουκοῦς,” Ημερολόγιον Μεγάλης Ελλάδος 3 (1924), 419-433. In a more recent article, it has been suggested that the Loukou pavement also belongs to an earlier Byzantine construction phase [G. Poulimenos, “Τὸ καθολικὸ τῆς Μονῆς Λουκοῦς,” Πελοποννησιακὰ 24 (2001-2002), 317-354]; however, this is probably based on the erroneous interpretation of the opus sectile as Byzantine, which fails to take into account the fact that the opus sectile at Loukou has merely reused crustae and patterns taken from the nearby Roman villa of Herod Atticus, and is not a Byzantine work.
9 In order to avoid any misunderstandings, I should note that omphalia with circular rows of triangles surrounding a central disc, as in Fig. 8, as well as rectilinear rows of triangles exist in Byzantine works. They are, however, very different in their execution, especially the circular ones, which usually aim to create a visual effect by diminishing sizes or alternating colours. Examples in the katholika of Peribleptos at Políti (supra n. 5), Varnakova (supra n. 5), Lechova (supra n. 5), Iviron monastery [D. Liakos, “The Byzantine opus sectile floor in the Katholikon of Iviron Monastery on Mount Athos,” Zograf 32 (2008), 37-44].
Byzantine floor, where differentiation of patterns is meticulously pursued, even through limited variations in size or colour combinations. Furthermore, the very filling of the “ground” with opus sectile is a feature that does not correspond to Middle or Late Byzantine art, and this is in fact the most substantial difference between Middle/Late Byzantine pavements and contemporary Cosmati work, as well as Early Christian opus sectile.

As regards the main decorative themes, in Mega Spelaion there is no intricate interlacing of circles or marble strips, which is the hallmark of Byzantine omphalia. Although there are arrangements combining more than one circle or rectilinear shape, the more complicated connection so dear to the Byzantines that involved the linking and interlacing of marble bands is avoided (Fig. 3). In addition, some easily-created patterns common to the majority of Byzantine decorated pavements are absent (such as variants of an oblique chessboard, where either the dark or light squares are formed by more complex combinations of triangles and squares parallel to the main axis of the decorative band).

11 The only Byzantine omphalion known to me that bears an arrangement similar to the easternmost panel of the naos of Mega Spelaion (Fig. 5 below; details in Figs 6-7), combining a lozenge with five circles without interlacing, is found in Andromonastiro in Messenia (C. Bouras – L. Boura, Η Ελλαδική ναοδόμια κατά τόν 12ο αἰώνα, Athens 2002, fig. 482); nevertheless, it is totally different in style, its chromatic preferences, and the scale and variety of its motifs.
In contrast, the incorporation in the pavement of features typical or even peculiar to the art of the Ottoman period attests to its chronology. The presence of cypresses in Early Christian and Byzantine sculpture does not suffice as an argument for the Late Byzantine dating of the pavement, since the cypress, especially in the particular stylized form, it appears mostly in the form of relief slabs in pavements dated to the Ottoman period (the Loukou monastery, incorporation of the eagle slab at Hagios Demetrios of Mystra, the Prophet Elijah of Siatista, the Three Hierarchs, and the Hypapante church on Hydra, Panaghia ta Gournia on Sifnos, to name only a few), and have in fact been linked to the desire for national liberation. The rich delineation of the eagle's plumage at Mega Spelaion (Fig. 5), which achieves a mood of baroque decorative exaggeration, recalls Post-Byzantine models rather than the stylized Byzantine representations of the same figure.
The four relief rosettes (Figs 6-7) adorning the corners of the easternmost panels of the naos, 27 which were placed from the outset and have a clear ornamental purpose, are characteristic works of stone carving during the Ottoman period, analogous to the typical Turkish rose. 28 The incorporation of reliefs other than champlevé - incrustation slabs is very unusual in Byzantine pavements, whereas it became fairly common in Post-Byzantine times. 29 The rosette with two concentric rings, the inner one forming the core of the flower and the outer one depicting its petals, is a feature found in Byzantine sculpture through the last centuries of the first millennium. 30 but the pieces in Mega Spelaion do not seem to be spolia, 31 since this element enjoyed a revival in the Ottoman decorative arts during the 16th and 17th centuries (as did comparable capitals with reed leaves), 32 expressing the period's tendency towards rich floral ornamentation, 33 and adorning as a leitmotiv Ottoman mosques, mihrabs, and fountains from the time of Sinan. 34 In Greece they often appear in stone-carved works of the Ottoman period (fountains, baths,

27 Chotzakoglou, op.cit. (n. 1), 105.
28 For reference to the motif and its diffusion in Post-Byzantine architecture in Greece see C. Bouras, "Τὸ καθολικὸν τῆς μονῆς τῆς Μαλεσίνας στήν Λοκρίδα," Ἐκκλησίες IV, 135, 138, fig. 8. Further examples in D. Liakos, Τα λιθανάγλυφα του Αγίου Όρους (doctoral thesis), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki 2000, figs 158, 159, 197. For additional examples see also infra, nn. 35-36.
29 Floral relief slabs are prominently incorporated in the Post-Byzantine pavement at the entrance to the katholikon of Loukou monastery (see supra, n. 9). For the incorporation of Post-Byzantine relief slabs within the pavements of the katholika of Mount Athos, see Liakos, op.cit. (n. 28), 42-43, figs 129-132, where some additional instances of the double-headed eagle motif are presented.
30 Examples in Scripou (M. Sotiriou, "Ὁ ναὸς τῆς Σκριποῦς τῆς Βοιωτίας," ΑΕ 1931, fig. 19) and on the bottom face of an epistyle from Corinth (R. L. Scranton, Medieval Architecture, Corinth XVI, Princeton 1957, pl. 33, no. 157), which was recently dated to the 8th-9th century [D. Athanasoulis – G. Velenis, "Σύμπλοκομυχούμενα επιγραφών Κορίνθου," 33ο Συμπόσιο ΧΑΕ (2013), 17-18].
31 Even if the rosettes were Byzantine works, this would not indicate a Late Byzantine dating rather than a Post-Byzantine one for the pavement, since either way the motif should be attributed to much earlier times and considered as spolia.
34 See for instance the Sokullu mosque (Cadirga) and Suleyman’s Mausoleum in R. Günay, Sinan, the Architect and his Works, Istanbul 1998, 95 and 153, respectively. Examples on stone-carved fountains and mihrabs in G. Goodwin, A History of Ottoman Architecture, Baltimore 1971, figs 228, 387, 390. Rosettes of simpler form appear in earlier Islamic art, but the richly ornamental and composite form of a more naturalistic flower is characteristic of Ottoman art from the 16th century onwards [Ballian - Moraitou - Sardi, op.cit. (n. 33), 154]. Other examples, almost identical to the Mega Spelaion rosettes, are found in Ahmed III’s fountain near Topkapı palace in Constantinople, and at the wall fountain just inside of the second courtyard main gate (Bab-ıs Selam or Orta Kapı) at Topkapı palace (Fig. 8).
gates, etc.). It has been suggested that the flowers depicted are tulips. However, tulips, which were actually a flower cherished by the Ottoman court and perhaps the most celebrated floral figure in Ottoman art during the 16th and 17th centuries, are preferentially depicted frontally due to their characteristic shape, and do not have as many petals; thus I believe the rosettes must represent other multi-petal flowers.

- Stars, suns, and the like also appeared in Late Byzantine pavements, but with a totally different style. Besides, they are the rule in the decorative trends of Post-Byzantine church pavements (church of the Nativity of the Virgin at Gortsouli, Mantiniea, Pr. Eliaj in Statista, and most of the Post-Byzantine Athinite katholika).

The presence of the aforementioned figures (double-headed eagles, cypresses, celestial bodies) is also common in stone reliefs on the façades of Post-Byzantine churches.

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36 Chotzakoglou, op.cit. (n. 1), 105.

37 In the Ottoman court the love for tulips was due not only to the attractiveness of the plant, but also to a symbolism attributed to it because the shape recalled the script for the word “Allah.” The extensive use of the flower in the decorative arts during the 16th and 17th centuries re-lects its star and radically-disposed pointed hexagonal gaps, derives from a previous work; thus, the introduction of Ottoman ornament which gradually took place after 1453 constitutes a terminus post quem for the date of the Stavroniketa pavement has also been questioned [Chotzakoglou, op.cit. (n. 1), 116 n. 75]; nonetheless, the central slabs with specifically inlaid incrustations to depict rays (Fig. 6) [cf. the more recent (early 19th century) pavement of Holy Golgotha in the Resurrection church, seen in Al. Kariotoglou, Μέ τε των Εκκλησιών Ιεροσολύμων, Έκδοσις καταλόγων, Athens 1998, 145, or the 1833 cobbled courtyard of the church of the Virgin on Tinos, in D. Filippidis, Διασημοηγημένες τέχνες Τρεις αιώνες τέχνης στη νεοελληνική αρχιτεκτονική, Athens 1998, fig. 256 or more recently, in particular, a pavement of the Stavroniketa church].

39 D. Konstantinidis, “Τὸ ομφάλιον τῆς Παναγίας τοῦ Γκουρτζούλη στον Βυζαντινό ναό της Βουρνίου Μαντινείας,” Πελοπονησιακοί Παραδείγματα, Athens 1998, 145, or the 1833 cobbled courtyard of the church of the Virgin on Tinos, in D. Filippidis, Διασημοηγημένες τέχνες Τρεις αιώνες τέχνης στη νεοελληνική αρχιτεκτονική, Athens 1998, 256 or specifically inlaid incrustations to depict rays (Fig. 6).}

bibliography, merely include roundels surrounded by opus sectile hands with radically-disposed triangles, a common theme with many variations. The suns of the Mega Spelaion pavement are in a totally different, more “realistic” style, with wavy rays (Fig. 9) carved in marble [cf. Liakos, “The Byzantine floor,” in D. Filippidis, Δια κοσμη τικές τέχνες. Τρεις αιώνες σχεδιασμού και κατασκευή στη ναοδομία του 18ου αιώνα, Athens 1998, fig. 256 or specifically inlaid incrustations to depict rays (Fig. 6)].

40 Theocharidou, op.cit. (n. 21), 55-66, figs 6, 9, 10, 11.

41 Cf. M. Polyviou, Το καθολικό της Μονής Ξηροποτάμου. Σχεδιασμός και κατασκευή στη ναοδομία του 18ου αιώνα, Athens 1999, pl. 39; N. Harkidas, Παράδοση και εξέλιξη στην αρχιτεκτονική της Ιεράς Μονής Αγίας Αθηνάς, Mt. Athos 1999, 41. It is noted that the date of the Stavroniketa pavement has also been questioned [Chotzakoglou, op.cit. (n. 1), 116 n. 75]; nonetheless, the central slabs with inlaid lead present a design of utterly Ottoman taste, with a morphological correspondence to the aesthetics of typical Islamic traceries or even timber artwork [cf. Liakos, “The Byzantine floor,” op.cit. (n. 9), 39, fig. 2]. In fact it has been constructed by rearranging a previous work; thus, the introduction of Ottoman ornament which gradually took place after 1453 constitutes a terminus post quem for the final laying of the pavement. The central motif in particular, with its star and radically-disposed pointed hexagonal gaps, derives from the most emblematic motif of Ottoman geometric decoration (example at the Mihbari of Selimiye mosque in Adrianople, A.
in Greece. Two slabs on the façade of the later church of Hagios Georgios in Solos near Kalavryta\textsuperscript{42} may be mentioned as indicative, because of their close geographic proximity: one bears a double-headed eagle and the other the sun, surrounded by the names of the months and symmetrically flanked by two cypresses.

History of Ottoman Architecture, Baltimore 1971, fig. 253) and the Mihrimah Sultan mosque in Chryssoupolis [Günay, Sinan, op.cit. (n. 34), 239] as well as on many doors (Ibid., 229).

\textsuperscript{42} A. Agoropoulou-Birbili, “Η εκκλησία του Αγ. Γεωργίου στον Σόλο Καλαβρύτων,” Εκκλησίες VI, 2002, 111-126, fig. 19.

\textsuperscript{43} Chotzakoglou, op.cit. (n. 1), 103-104, 113.


Fig. 9. Mega Spelaion, katholikon. A sun incrustation on a marble slab.

Fig. 10. Mega Spelaion, katholikon. A sun motif on a marble slab.

With regard to iconography, figurative representations lost from the Mega Spelaion pavement (a heart with two arrows, a soldier with a lance, a siren), known from texts,\textsuperscript{43} are not suitable for technical comparisons to Middle Byzantine works, since we have not seen their execution or technique. The specific figures mentioned, however, may lead to some thoughts and observations. Either way, the technical and stylistic differences between the Mega Spelaion pavement and Middle Byzantine ones that contain figurative elements (persons or mythical creatures)\textsuperscript{44} or heart-shaped crustae,\textsuperscript{43} renders any relevance of these works to the Mega Spelaion implausible. There is no reason to assume, therefore, that the lost figures had

\textsuperscript{42} ΔΧΑΕ ΛΕ´ (2014), 65-76

\textsuperscript{43} http://epublishing.ekt.gr | e-Publisher: EKT | Downloaded at 11/06/2021 09:42:32 |
any similarity to the respective Byzantine ones. Besides, even in the hypothetical case that there were technical or stylistic similarities, a Palaeologan date is almost two centuries away from the works proposed for comparison. The misunderstanding is largely due to the lack of a comprehensive study on the Byzantine pavements of Greece,46 which has so far led some scholars to regard medieval opus sectile as a uniform phenomenon without geographical and chronological differentiations.

In any case, even in Middle Byzantine pavements and Byzantine iconography more generally, a heart pierced by two arrows is unusual. In Western dogma, where we have the worship of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of the Virgin,47 these can be present even on blazons of monastic orders of the Catholic Church.48 In centuries featuring hearts are known, but of course a positive donor. Greek coats of arms of the 17th and 18th centuries – is perhaps the most widespread and appealing.45 There is a heart-shaped element mentioned falls within the spirit and aesthetics of heraldry.

46 This is the subject of the author’s doctoral research, currently being carried out at the National Technical University of Athens.
47 The Virgin’s heart in particular is portrayed as pierced by one or seven lances, recalling Symeon’s prophecy: “καὶ στὸν δὲ αὐτῆς τὴν ψυχὴν βαλεῖται φωμέα” (“Ye, a sword shall pierce through thine soul also”) (Luke 2.35).
48 Cf. from the Greek region the 18th century blazon of the Mi-

424. 49 Cf. also a verse by Epiphanius Demetriades (1760-1827): (η θάλασσα / π’ οὖναι γυναικοψάρια) = “(the sea) also has sirens, who are fish-women” [Παγκόσμιος Πανήγυρις, συντεθέν τοῦ Θεοτόκου, ἐκ νήσου Σκιάθου, “Δείγματα μαρμαρογλυπτικής του Αιγαίου στο Μουσείο Μπενάκη” (1884), 408]. In many languages the terms are used interchangeably.

50 This identification of sirens and mermaids at the time of the descrip-
51 tions is certain [N. Politis, “Νεοελληνική Μυθολογία, Τόποι και Θρε-
52 tατες Γοργόνες,” Πανοραμικά Β. τγ. Δ’ (April 1879), 259-275, 262-
53 264]. Cf. a verse by Epiphanius Demetriades (1760-1827): (η θάλα-

54 σα) «ἔχει καὶ σειρήνας / π’ οὖναι γυναικοψάρια» = “(the sea) also has sirens, who are fish-women” [Πεντηκόσιος Πανηγύρις, συντεθέν 
55 τοῦ Θεοτόκου, ἐκ νήσου Σκιάθου,” Πανοραμικά Η’ (1884), 408]. In many languages the terms are used interchangeably.

52 Apart from being a mythical sea creature, the mermaid carries a special meaning because she is connected with popular beliefs about Alexander the Great. Of all the legends that tradition attributes to the life of Alexander, the one about his sister (or daughter) who is thrown into the sea and becomes an immortal mermaid after having drunk and then accidentally poured out the Water of Life before Alexander has had the chance to drink it – and who, ever since, has dominated the fate of ships – is perhaps the most widespread and appealing.53 Thus, in connection with Alexander, the mermaid acquired nationalist dimensions, particularly as regarded the preemi-

53 nence of the Greek fleet.56 Alexander’s personality had become the bearer of the desire for liberation from the time of Byzantine authors, around the period of the Fall of Constantinople; they had connected his victories over the Persians to

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the Emperor’s possibility of victory against the Turks. From the 17th century onward, such parallels became more frequent, assuming either an inspirational-national character, as after the death of Michael Gennaios, who rebelled against the Turks at the end of the 16th century, or the form of a summons to the Tsar and other Orthodox rulers, who are paralleled to Alexander, to liberate the Greeks from the “tyrant.” During the 18th century and the years prior to the Greek Declaration of Independence, this phenomenon became more pronounced, and it continued even after the War of Independence within the framework of irredentist ideas. Indeed, the mermaid’s obsession with Alexander’s immortality can be interpreted as a substitute for the immortality of the nation (something expressed in Modern Greek literature). I believe the presence in Mega Spelaion of the so-called “soldier” with a long lance, positioned as equivalent to the mermaid, represents Alexander himself, holding a spear – the characteristic weapon of antiquity – and alludes to the legend. N. Politis notes that until the 19th century, armed ancient warriors found in popular art were called “Macedonians.” Furthermore, the representation of a military figure as purely apotropaic would be rather weak semantically, given that the powerful symbolic significance of such figures derives from their identity, whether saint, hero, or king. The pavement cannot host a saint’s form, so it would make sense that the representation refers to a mythical or historical hero. The mythical narratives surrounding Alexander’s life had already been written by Pseudo-Kallisthenes, and various versions were known during the Middle Ages in Byzantium and the West. Variations in the demotic language were in circulation in the 16th century, and it seems that the narratives were particularly popular during the 17th century, when the Pylades tou Megalexandrou (1680), a printed pamphlet that became very popular during the 17th century, when the War of Independence within the framework of irredentist ideas. Even the use of opus sectile could be interpreted as such a conscious turn to Byzantium. In fact, it seems plausible that a Late Byzantine opus sectile floor may have pre-existed the present one, as part of an imperial patronage, and influenced the 17th century restorers of the church to create an opus sectile pavement for the new church, repeating some of the previous patterns. This hypothesis would explain why the present floor might mislead us to assign it a Byzantine date, despite the fact that in conception, traits, style, and taste it is Post-Byzantine.

Finally, some remarks regarding the relation of the pavement to the building may also be of relevance. The limitation of the width of the central zone of decoration in the side aisles of the naos, as opposed to those of the Bema, may attest to an effort to avoid hiding these panels through the placement of stalls, something that would not have occurred during the Byzantine period. Furthermore, there is no construction evidence to indicate that the pavement preceded the building of the church. The octagonal built piers of the actual building show no indication of having tampered with a pre-existing pavement (Fig. 11). Of course, this argument does not entirely preclude such a possibility, since the piers could have taken the exact place of the previous ones. In that case, the destroyed church would have been of the cross-in-square type, like the existing one. However, the actual pavement’s design tends to reflect a basilica plan, which perhaps demonstrates the craftsmen’s experience with Post-Byzantine spatial arrangements. Byzantine pavements normally display a clearer correspondence to their superstructures, and a hypothetical earlier basilica would have left traces of the positions of additional columns on its pavement.

In conclusion, any attempt to resort to iconographic and technical comparisons to otherwise dissimilar Middle


Byzantine pavements or their contemporaries in Romanesque Italy to conclude that the subject is Late Byzantine suffers due to the tendency to regard medieval floors as an integral unity independent of their geographic and chronological parameters. Apart from the stylistic differences mentioned above, a pavement of such uniformity in design and execution would be highly unexpected in the 13th-century Peloponnese, and even more so in the 14th century. A Late Byzantine pavement would normally include elements absent from Mega Spelaion, including polychromy, a variety of motifs (including combinations of crustae of different sizes, e.g. among intersecting quatrefoils or variations of chessboard patterns), an eclectic spirit in the mix of forms and techniques, and a willingness to present interlacing circles, despite a decline in the accuracy of execution, as we see in the churches of Mystra and the Despotate of Epirus. Therefore, the quality expressed in the accurate execution of a rich but simple design should not be confused with the well-known exquisiteness of Middle Byzantine works and lead to an early dating, trying to approach that period of acme; on the contrary, it points to a later (Post-Byzantine) one.

Thus, given that the pavement of a church dated to ca. 1641 presents a plethora of features befitting the 17th and, perhaps even more so, the 18th century, in order to prove that it is an earlier work, it would take more compelling evidence than general technical similarities, which pertain to a very wide range of this kind of work, and iconographic comparisons with examples indirectly chosen from a broad span of historic periods, styles, and geographic regions, even from beyond the limits of the Empire. The comparison to Late Byzantine examples in Greece and Asia Minor provides some similarities only in terms of repertoire, whereas references become far more lucid and numerous when the pavement is examined within the artistic context of the Ottoman period. In any case, what must not be overlooked is the fact that the pavement of the Mega Spelaion katholikon is an outstanding work, and its dating to the period of Ottoman rule by no means reduces its value. On the contrary, it reveals a creative tendency in the art of Greece at the time and may possibly attest to a conscious ideology of national aspirations in a monastery that was to become one of the cradles of the struggle for Greek independence.

Illustration Credits
Figs 1-11: Ch. Pinatsi.

Ibid., 108-120.
For an attempt to approach local trends, see Pinatsi, “Regional Trends and International Exchange,” op.cit. (n. 44), 101-117.
The Late Byzantine pavement of the Vlatadon monastery chapel is also not offered for comparison, since that too has been constructed of crustae in second use from an Early Christian pavement or wall revetment [see E. Chatzitryfonos, “Τὸ μαρμαροθετημένο δάπεδο στὸ νότιο παρεκκλήσιο τοῦ καθολικοῦ τῆς Μονῆς Βλατάδων,” Κληρονομία 14 (1982), 375-406, 381-387].
Of course the Mega Spelaion work is nowhere near the superb quality of Middle Byzantine opus sectile, and therefore an even earlier date is excluded.
Chatzakoglou, op.cit. (n. 1), 107-110.
Ibid., 108-116, 120, 130. The typological similarity with Monte Cassino, an 11th century pavement, derives rather coincidentally from the similar process of their composition: the integration of a Byzantine technique, on the one hand, in the Monte Cassino basilica, where it is introduced to serve a general layout from the local tradition, which is considered, in point of fact, as the major difference with Byzantine works themselves, and on the other hand, in Mega Spelaion, to serve a new tendency in design, has led to analogous results in terms of their general plan.

Fig. 11. Mega Spelaion, katholikon. A star incrustation on a marble slab. The relation of the pavement to the pier is noted.
Το καθολικό της μονής Μεγάλου Σπηλαίου, κατά την Καλόβρυτα, έχει υποστεί πολλαπλές καταστροφές και αντίστοιχες διαδικασίες ανακατασκευής. Το σημερινό καθολικό χρονολογείται αμέσως μετά το 1641. Σχετικά πρόωρα υποτιθέθηκε ότι τότε το δάπεδο του ήταν πολλαπλάσιο χρόνος. Ωστόσο, η μορφή του δαπέδου δεν πείθει για μια βυζαντινή χρονολόγηση. Συγκεκριμένα, η απόλυτη συμμετρία και ο σχεδιασμός δεν προδιαγράφει στη μεσαιωνική τέχνη, που επιμετά την ποικιλία, αλλά μάλλον σε μια εποχή στον απόχο της Αναγέννησης, που έχει επαναφέρει στο προσκήνιο το ρόλο της πειθαρχίας στο σχεδιασμό. Η επανάληψη μάλιστα του όνομα θέματος στα μαρμαροθετήματα είναι στοιχείο που δεν απαιτεί ανάλογα χρόνο που προστέθηκε στην ουσιώδη διαφορά ανάμεσα στα μεσοβυζαντινά παραδείγματα, που είναι γνωστές από τα κείμενα. Η μορφή του δαπέδου με μαρμαροθετήματα αποτελεί στοιχείο που δεν χαρακτηρίζει την χρονολογήσεις. Παράλληλα, απαντάνει στον Μέγα Σπήλαιο η πολύπλοκη συμπλοκή κτελών και εν γένε ταυτίσιμων μαρμάρων, που χαρακτηρίζει χρονολογικά ομοιόμορφη, καθισμός και αλλα: ακόμα και ακολούθη τάματα που συνιστά στη βυζαντινή διάπεδο. Αντιθέτως, η ενέπλοη μορφή προσφερόν της σέβης της οικονομίας περιόδου με τεχνοτροπική απόδοση της εποχής αυτής συνολικικά, αναφέρεται σε μια σύνθεση (μεταφορά σώματα) μαρτυρία της χρονολογήσεις του. Οι ευκονικιακές παραστάσεις που έχουν χαθεί από το δάπεδο του Μεγάλου Σπηλαίου (κατά τη δύο βέλη, στρατηγική με λόγχη, σφιχής) και του ένας γνωστός από το σέβης δεν προφερούνται για την ανακούφιση της τεχνοτροπικής απόδοσης της εποχής αυτής. Παραλληλά, αποδεικνύεται καθισμός της χρονολογήσεις του. Είναι πάντως μορφές που συνιστά στη βυζαντινή διάπεδο και τη νεότερη λαϊκή τέχνη. Μάλιστα η γοργόνα, η φορείς στην πολιτική της εποχής, είναι μορφές που συνηθίζονται στη μεταβυζαντινή τέχνη, καθώς και άλλες μορφές που συνηθίζονται στο κείμενο. Είναι πάντως μορφές που συνιστά στη βυζαντινή διάπεδο και τη νεότερη λαϊκή τέχνη. Μάλιστα η γοργόνα, η φορείς στην πολιτική της εποχής, είναι μορφές που συνηθίζονται στη μεταβυζαντινή τέχνη, καθώς και άλλες μορφές που συνηθίζονται στο κείμενο. Είναι πάντως μορφές που συνιστά στη βυζαντινή διάπεδο και τη νεότερη λαϊκή τέχνη. Μάλιστα η γοργόνα, η φορείς στην πολιτική της εποχής, είναι μορφές που συνηθίζονται στη μεταβυζαντινή τέχνη, καθώς και άλλες μορφές που συνηθίζονται στο κείμενο.