The present paper focuses on the analysis of a very rare representation of the Veneration of the Cross by angels among the wall paintings of three churches: St. Nicholas tês Rodias, near Arta, the cave-church of the Holy Fathers, at Varasova and the church of Hypapantê, 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.

**Keywords**

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

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

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

A very similar depiction to those presented so far is preserved in the Hermitage of St. Neophytops, in Cyprus. On its south wall a cross-shaped cavity for a wooden cross still exists in situ, flanked by two painted angels (Fig. 5). To this may be added two more examples from the late 12th century, a two-sided icon from the Tretjakov Gallery with the Mandylion (front side) and the True Cross with...
angels (back side) (Fig. 6), and a stone panel from Kut village in Montenegro. 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 and several marble sarcophagi from the Archaeological Museum in Constantinople. 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 and on a silver plate from Syria, today in the State Hermitage Museum, both dating to the 6th century.

A huge cross lifted by angels is encountered in domes, vaults, and ceilings of numerous churches from late-10th-century Georgia. Scholars have labeled this iconographic theme as the Ascension or the Triumph of the Cross. 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. 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, or in the frescoes of the Metropolis in Mystras. Representations of a group of angels holding or surrounding a large cross with the inscription “Second Coming” show a similar iconographic arrangement and are comparable in meaning; examples are preserved, for instance, at Gračanica, while in the church of Panaghia Mavriotissa in Kastoria two angels are censing the cross. 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.

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. 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. 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. The fresco bearing the inscription ΗΠΧΙΟΣ(Σ)ΠΙΟΝ ΤΗΝ ΤΗΝ ΣΑΥΡΟΥ 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 and in the church of the Holy Cross of Agiasmati.
The presence of angels not only at Varasova, but also at St. Nicholas tês Rodias and in Sofiko mainly indicates an eschatological content. 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 Platanistasa, Cyprus, both dated to the 15th century.

———


34 Vasilakeris Foudouli, op.cit. (n. 7), 538.
Antony Eastmond. John III Batatzes, the emperor of Nicaea, used the fragments of the True Cross in his possession, which he gifted to his potential allies, to portray himself as a legitimate emperor of Byzantium. This is the case of the ivory cross-reliquary, today in the church of San Francesco at Cortona. Batatzes gave this stauróthēkē as a gift to Fra Elia de’ Coppi, the envoy of the emperor Frederick II (1246). Besides, according to several sources, a piece of the Holy Cross was presented by Batatzes to the first archbishop of Serbia, Sava Nemanjić, in 1229. In medieval Serbia the True Cross played an important role in the definition and promotion of the identity of the new established Serbian state. The cult grew and received its true ideological structure in the days of the second generation of the Nemanjić family, and it is possible to discern its influence on the fresco decoration of Studenica and Žiča.

In the empire of Trebizond, Manuel I Komnenos “the Great”
Fig. 3. Varasova, cave-church of Holy Fathers. The Exaltation of the Holy Cross (A. Vasilakeris).
also had a small fragment of the True Cross kept in a reli-
quary, now in the treasury of Notre-Dame at Paris.41
This faith in the ever-victorious power of the Holy Cross, 
found 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 ideolo-
gy through the centuries (Fig. 7). Some of the most promi-
nent 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 victori-
ous 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 Constantino-
ple, 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 pur-
pose 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. Addi-
tionally, 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 Jahrhun-
43 Χρυσόστομος, PG 49, 394 398.
44 Frolow, Les reliquaires, op. cit. (n. 1), passim.
In the 10th century, before the war with the Arabs, the cult of the cross was intensified once more, as indicates the dedication of a number of precious processional crosses and staurothēkēs to churches and monasteries in Constantinople. The most famous example is undoubtedly the Limburg staurothēkē, made on the order from Basileios the proedros little after 963 (Fig. 8). The inscription on the backside of the cross wishes that the emperors Constantine and his son Romanos will crush the barbarians just like Christ shattered the gates of Hell. Similar inscriptions were common on other reliquary crosses as well, while the way in which the True Cross was perceived to assist Byzantine emperors is explicated in the inscription of the staurothēkē from Cortona, which we mentioned above:

Καὶ πρὸς κράτασιν Κωνσταντίνων Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῶν ἀσεβῶν ποιημάτων

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

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

... ὁρὴν Ἐπὶ τοῦ Κωνσταντίνου Κομνηνοῦ παραγγέλων τὴν σταυροθήκην Λίμπουργκ

The same scholar also mentions some examples of staurothēkēs that were order by women from the immediate environment of Alexios Komnenos. 


47 Frolow, Les reliquaires, op.cit. (n. 1), figs 38a, b, 39. J. Koder, “Ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος Παραφυσιγγέννητος καὶ ἡ σταυροθήκη του Λίμπουργκ,” Κωνσταντῖνος Ζ΄ ὁ Παραφυσιγγέννητος καὶ ἡ ἑποχή του, op.cit., 165-184; Boura, op.cit., 397-434.

45 These epigrams are saved in a treatise by Theodore of Studios. Θεόδωρος Στουδίτης, Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῶν ἀσεβῶν ποιημάτων, PG 99, 436B 437C, esp. 437A. On the base of its acrostic Ιγνατίῳ 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.


49 Ibid., n. 35.


51 For the way in which Alexios Komnenos and his wife Irene used the relics of the Holy Cross see T. Papamastorakis, “Δωρεές γυναικών από τον 8ο στον 12ο αιώνα,” Η Γυναίκα στο Βυζάντιο Λατρεία και τέχνη (ed. M. Panayotidi Kessissoglou), Athens 2012, 233-235.
The military importance of the relics of the True Cross became even greater in the 13th century, a period with many wars fought for the re-establishment of the fragmented Byzantine empire. The representation of angels venerating the Holy Cross with the inscription ἡ Προσκύνησις at the diakonikon of the church of St. Nicholas tēs Rhodias (Figs 1-2) could also reflect the political situation during the reign of Michael II Doukas (1230-1269) in Epiros. The Epirote state, with the town of Arta as its capital, was one of the so-called successor-states of the former Byzantine empire established by Michael Doukas after the fall of Constantinople in 1204. The fundamental principles of Byzantine political ideology were preserved in Epiros. Its political and military successes predetermined the ideological ambitions and aspirations of the rulers, who sought to assume the leading political role as legitimate successors to the former Byzantine emperors and endeavoured to recover Constantinople. After 1204 a new elite joined the old Constantinopolitan aristocracy in exile in the patronage of the arts. Most of the contemporary monuments in the region are princely foundations sponsored by members of the ruling Komnenos-Doukas family. With these monuments, the Epirote elite continued to demonstrate its Constantinopolitan 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, the Old Metropolis in Berroia and the Blacherna in the Area of Arta.

Unlike Nicæa, 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.
Theodore. On this coin is depicted the patriarchal cross crosslet on a long shaft, standing on a three-stepped base. The cross is flanked by a half-length figure of Theodore to the left and St. Demetrios to the right side. Coinage was always the best place for the expression of political propaganda. The depiction of the cross on a stepped base, introduced in Byzantine coinage by Tiberius II (574-582), symbolizes the triumph of Christian emperors. The coin of the Epirote ruler Theodore has a similar message: his victory and proclamation as a new Byzantine emperor. After the disaster at Klokotnica (1230), where Theodore was defeated and captured by the Bulgarian tsar John Asen II, the state of Epiros was drastically reduced. However Theodore’s successor, despot Michael II Doukas, continued to promote Epiros’s ideological ambitions to recover Constantinople. He was also pitted against Nicaea for 25 years, until his defeat at Pelagonia in 1259; nevertheless, even after the recovery of Constantinople from the Latins in 1261 and the restoration of the Byzantine empire, Michael II and others rulers of Epiros stubbornly refused to recognize the new regime and perpetuated the autonomy of their province.

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

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 (Χωρίς Βυζαντίου, Το Βυζάντιο ως Οικουμένη, Athens 2001, fig. 2).

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

The inclusion of another iconographic theme at St. Nicholas tēs Rodhias could also be connected with contemporaneous historical and ecclesiastical events. At the lower zone of the Bema apse, in the centre, between the officiating hierarchs, the Holy Mandylion is depicted. It is well known that this relic was one of the most venerated objects in the Byzantine empire. After the capture of Constantinople in 1204, it was transported to the West. This event induced more frequent depiction of this relic in Byzantine monumental painting.64 In St. Nicholas tēs Rodhias, the Holy Mandylion is presented in the lower zone of the Bema, namely the place normally hosting the Melismos.65 Therefore, it can be asserted that in the Bema and the diakonikon of St. Nicholas tēs Rodhias were depicted the two most important relics of Constantinople: the True Cross and the Holy Mandylion. This iconographic choice reiterates in a sense the program of the above mentioned two-sided icon, now in Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow (Fig. 6), on which is represented an illustration of the precious contents of the church of Pharos – the Holy Mandylion and the True Cross, with two archangels holding in a raised position the other two important relics: the sponge and the lance.66

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

---

63 G. Babić, Les Chapelles annexes des églises byzantines, Paris 1969, 64.
64 N. Gioles, “Εἰκονογραφικά 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.
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.
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. 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. 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 Stauroprosthenēsis 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.” 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 ἥλιος ἔπληκτος Κωνσταντινοπολίων. Additionally, the repatriation of the imperial and ecclesiastical authorities to the liberated Constantinople provided legitimacy to the Palaiologan dynasty and revived the forgotten idea of oecumenicity. 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; these had been ceded to the Byzantines by the Frankish prince Guillaume II de Villehardouin in exchange for his freedom. As a result, less than a decade after the recapture of Constantinople a small Byzantine bridgehead was established in Laconia. 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. The preserved dedicatory inscription mentions Michael VIII and his brother Constantine, who recaptured this region from the Franks. According to an old iconographic custom familiar in Mani, the most prominent warrior saint, Theodore, is placed in the apse wearing a military uniform. The dedication of the Metropolis

68 Stavridou Zafra, op.cit. (n. 54), with references.
69 Papamastorakis, “Το εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα,” op.cit. (n. 55), passim.

76 N. Drandakis, Βυζαντινές τοιχογραφίες τῆς Μέσας Μάνης, Athens 1995, 70 100 with earlier bibliography.
77 Foskolou, op.cit. (n. 70), 456 457 with earlier bibliography.
of Mystras to the patron saint of the Palaeologan dynasty, St. Demetrios, also nicely fits into this context. 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. The fleece, according to the Church Fathers, is a victorious symbol, 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 Hypapante, might have wanted to express their desire that the New Constantine, i.e. Michael VIII, and his brother Constantine, liberate the rest of the Peloponnese. It should also be noted that the area across from the depiction of the Stauroproskynēsis is dominated by a triumphal scene of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, where Christ is talking with Moses and Elijah. Slightly lower, on the same wall, are represented the greatest two warrior saints, George and Demetrios. The choice of the Transfig-

---

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

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.

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

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

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

Στον Άγιο Νικόλαο της Ροδιάς, ομίλος αγγέλων καταλαμβάνει το ήμισυ της καμάρας του νοτιοανατολικού γωνιακού διαμερίσματος, συγκλίνοντας προς την αψίδα του διακονικού. Ο προεξάρχων άγγελος κρατά θρασυβουλικούς μεγάλους ξύλινους σταυρούς. Την παράσταση συνδέει η εξής επιγραφή: ἡ Προσκύνησις.

Για τη χρονολόγηση της τοιχογραφίας 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 ὡς 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 θεματικές παραστάσεις από την Ήπειρο και την Κορινθία.

Ανάμεσα στις τοιχογραφίες της εκκλησίας του Σοφικού, εξαίρετη μια μοναδική παράσταση που καταλαμβάνει τμήμα του βόρειου τυμπάνου της εγκάρσιας σταυρικής κεραίας: διάλιθος σταυρός υψώνεται σε βαθμιδωτή βάση, το νικοποιό σύμβολο πλαισιώνουν η λόρδη 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 Σταυροπρόσκυνης.

Ο επαναπροσδιορισμός της χρονολόγησης τόσο της αρχιτεκτονικής όσο και του σωζόμενου εικονογραφικού 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 διαφορετικά ιστοτόπου εικονογραφικό περιεχόμενο από εκείνο των τριών εξεταζόμενων μνημείων. Οι παραστάσεις αυτές θα ένταξαν από τις αντίστοιχες τελετές που λάμβανες χώρα στον άμβωνα της Αγίας Σοφίας στην Κωνσταντινούπολη.

Το θέμα της Προσκύνησης από αγγέλους καταλαμβάνεται στη μνημειακή ζωγραφική και σε έργα μικροτεχνίας. Οι παραστάσεις αυτές φαίνεται ότι εμπνέονται από τις αντίστοιχες τελετές που λάμβαναν χώρα στον άμβωνα της Αγίας Σοφίας στην Κωνσταντινούπολη.

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 Κομνηνοδοκών 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 «αηττήτου τροπαίου τοῦ φιλοχρίστου στρατού» 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.