Immured Vessels in Churches on Crete: Preliminary Observations on Material from the Prefecture of Rethymnon*

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In the territories of what is now Greece, the exterior walls of an important number of churches from the mid- and late Byzantine periods are decorated with immured vessels,1 the so-called bacini, and their study has already attracted the interest of a number of scholars.2 In Italy, too, numerous studies are devoted to the study of bacini.3

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Venetian period, Crete, immured vessels/bacini, Prefecture of Rethymnon.

The article presents the preliminary observations deriving from the study of immured vessels in churches of the Prefecture of Rethymnon (Crete). Mention is made of the areas where this practice finds its largest diffusion, of the main forms of distribution of the vessels on the façades of churches, of the different categories of glazed wares used as bacini.

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These studies have brought to light a lot of information on the history of the monuments in question and the areas in which they are located. They have also added to our knowledge of Medieval glazed pottery, thus proving the importance of research of this kind.

Turning to the churches on Crete, although a few researchers, first among them G. Gerola, had already by the early 20th century noted the existence of immured vessels in a number of the island’s churches, a systematic and thorough survey had yet to be made. An initial, more systematic cataloguing of those Cretan churches whose decoration includes immured vessels reveals that the practice was especially widespread on the island during the period of Venetian rule. This led to the collaboration of the Institute of Historical Research of the National Hellenic Research Foundation with the 28th and the 13th Ephorates of Byzantine Antiquities on the task of recording the relevant data.

The research programme initially focused on the Prefecture of Rethymnon. References in the current scholarship to churches with this form of decoration were combined with an examination of the photographic archive of the 28th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities and with systematic on-site research carried out by the author in collaboration with colleagues from the Ephorate. As a result, 74 churches (Table 1) were ultimately located with vessels immured in their external wall-faces; there were only fifteen known examples prior to the programme. The identification of an additional 59 churches with immured vessels was also partially the result of restoration work being conducted by the 28th Ephorate. Thus, the removal of plaster from church walls often revealed the existence of immured vessels or empty niches designed for such vessels, which had not previously been visible. Examples of vessels discovered in this way include those found in the katholikon at Chalepa monastery and the neighbouring church of St. Marina, the katholikon of the Asomatlon monastery, the church of St. Nicholas in Apostoloi, and the church of St. Nicholas in Labiotes. In other cases, such as the church of Sts Apostles in Petrohori, the vessels themselves had been entirely covered in plaster prior to the restoration work.

Given the size of the area in question, 74 is quite a large number of churches, especially when compared with the number of churches with immured vessels currently known in mainland Greece. While exploring the origins of this form of decoration, the scholars noted its parallel presence in the territories of what is now Greece and on the Italian peninsula. On Crete, the practice has only been associated, to date, with the period of Venetian rule.
and afterwards. One could thus posit that the large number of churches with immured vessels on Crete can be explained by the powerful Italian presence on the island. However, given that the study of vessels immured in churches of the island is still in progress and given the especially large number of churches on Crete, this hypothesis must be made with reservations. The practice makes its first appearance in the area in the 13th century, and is mainly found in churches dating from the 14th and 15th century.

In the Prefecture of Rethymnon, churches with immured vessels are most densely concentrated in the area of the actual municipality of Amari (Table 1). A study of the practice of immuring vessels based on this numerically large sample of churches allows for observations to be made with greater certainty, and confirms the initial data presented in the recent past.\(^8\) Thus, this form of decoration is mainly found in barrel-vaulted single-cell churches in the area, less frequently in two-aisled churches,\(^9\) and rarely in churches of other architectural types. In the majority of cases (Fig. 1), a group of five (or, more rarely, four) open vessels are found to be arranged in the form of a cross in the western wall above the entrance and usually above the light-holes, if there are any, at the gable. The position of the vessels is inextricably linked with the location of the entrance; thus, when the entrance is found in the southern rather than the western wall, the vessels are also located in the south-facing wall. The second most common position for immured vessels is in a church’s eastern gable, above the apse. In this case, too, the vessels are positioned to form a cross. In roughly 10% of the cases studied, vessels are found similarly arranged on both the eastern and western wall-faces. No vessels have been found immured in a church’s northern facades. We can therefore conclude that the vessels were immured in those sides of the church where they would be visible to the con-

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\(^8\) Yangaki, “Εντοιχισμένα πινάκια,” op. cit., 827-840.

\(^9\) On Crete’s barrel vaulted single and two aisled or double churches, see the recent and thorough treatment by O. Gratziou (O. Gratziou, Η Κρήτη στην Ύστερη Μεσαιωνική Εποχή. Η μαρτυρία της εκκλησιαστικής αρχιτεκτονικής, Heraklion 2010, 93-125), which contains the earlier bibliography.

Fig. 1. Nefs-Amari, church of Sts Theodoroi. Immured vessels in cross formation.
For the rest of Greece, we refer, by way of illustration, to the range of framing modes found in churches in North western Greece (Tsouris, Ο κεραμοπλαστικὸς διάκοσμος, op.cit. (n. 1), 110 111) and the Peloponnese (Velenis, Ερμηνεία, op.cit. (n. 2), 194 195 and note 1 on p. 195). For churches in Italy, see, for instance: Berti, “Baci ni ceramici e strutture architettoniche,” op.cit. (n. 3), 159, fig. 26, 162, fig. 33; O. Mazzucato, “Situzione dei “Bacini” nel Lazio 1993,” Atti. XXVI Convegno Internazionale della Ceramica, op.cit. (n. 3), 162 164, 174 175, figs 2d o; G. Berti F. Gabbrielli R. Parenti, “Bacini e architettura. Tecniche di inserimento e complesso decorativo,” Atti. XXVI Convegno Internazionale della Ceramica, op.cit. (n. 3), 246 250, 259, fig. 9, 264, fig. 21.

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11 Mainland Greece: Velenis, Ερμηνεία, op.cit. (n. 2), 110 111; Tsouris, “Glazed Bowls,” op.cit. (n. 1), 618; Italy: Mazzucato, op.cit., 174, figs 2d e f, 175, figs 2g h 1 m n.

12 This particular category of pottery is already well documented and continues to attract the attention of researchers. A selection of the core studies would include: A. H. S. Megaw, “Zeuxippus Ware,” BSA 63 (1968), 67 87; id., “Zeuxippus Ware Again,” Recherches sur la céramique byzantine (eds V. Déroche J. M. Spieser), BCH Suppl. 18, 1989, 259 266; G. Berti S. Gelichi, “La ceramica bizantina nelle architetture dell’Italia medievale,” La ceramica nel mondo bizantino tra XI e XV secolo e i suoi rapporti con l’Italia. Atti del Seminario Certosa di Ponignano (Siena, 11 13 marzo 1991) (ed. S. Gelichi), Firenze 1993, 173 174, fig. 34, 179, no. 263, 181, no. 271, fig. 38, 1, 182, no. 288, 183, fig. 39, 185, no. 98, fig. 43, 186, fig. 45; Y. Waksman V. François, “Vers une rédéfinition typologique et analytique des céramiques byzantines du type Zeuxippus Ware,” BCH 128 129 (2004 2005), 629 724.
ation covered with dark orange or green glaze, considered to be related to the Zeuxippus Ware Family. The late-Byzantine ceramics workshops are represented by a few examples of incised vessels (Fig. 4) which could be attributed to the production of workshops in Thessalonike.

13 For the use of the term Late Sgraffito Ware, see: G. D. R. Sanders, “Excavations at Sparta: The Roman Stoa, 1988 1991. Preliminary Report. Part I (c) Medieval Pottery,” BSA 88 (1993), 257, and J. Vroom, After Antiquity. Ceramics and Society in the Aegean from the 7th to the 20th Century A.C. A Case Study from Boeotia, Central Greece, Leiden 2003, 164; Διδακτική Συλλογή Βυζαντινής και Μεταβυζαντινής Κεραμικής (ed. S. Kalopissi-Verti), Athens 2003, 89. Late Sgraffito Ware comprises mostly pottery bearing characteristics similar to those of the so called sub categories Ib and Ic of Zeuxippus Ware, which recent research does not connect to the prototype production of Zeuxippus Ware (see, in detail: Waksman François, op.cit., 629 724).


1st half of the 14th and from the 15th century, and incised pottery from Cyprus, dated to the 13th-14th centuries, are represented by a limited number of richly decorated vessels. However, the bulk of the ceramics imported into Crete — much of which was incised — were from centres in Italy. The “San Bartolo” type, which is attributed to workshops in Venice and dates from the latter half of the 13th and the 14th centuries, accounts for some of the earliest Italian ceramics found in the area. The examples of Italian “graffita arcaica” (Fig. 7) and the Italian incised polychrome pottery of the Renaissance (“graffita rinascimentale canonica”) (Fig. 8), which


17 For the main centres of pottery production on Cyprus during the Medieval period, and the most characteristic categories of Cypriot glazed pottery, see D. Papanikola Bakirtzis, Μεσαιωνική Εφυαλωμένη Κεραμική της Κύπρου. Τα Εργαστήρια Πάφου και Λαπηθού, Thessalonike 1996. For pottery of the 13th century with simple, incised decoration: Papanikola Bakirtzis, Μεσαιωνική Εφυαλωμένη Κεραμική της Κύπρου, op.cit., 70 81.


stands out for its rich and especially well executed decoration, are highly typical of the Italian ceramics found on Crete. Painted Italian pottery is limited to examples of “polychrome glazed pottery” (Fig. 9) with a lead glaze (“RMR Ware”). Other common categories of ceramics include monochrome glazed pottery covered with a dark – usually brown, and particularly glossy – glaze, and vessels whose slip-painted decoration comes in the form of simple, broad, thick bands. This form of decoration is a continuation of that found in a category of pottery which was especially widespread during the mid-Byzantine period, although the later, slip-painted category differs from this earlier category in that its slip is applied to the surface in a deliberately slap-dash way.

Additional processing of the sample in question will clearly contribute to our knowledge of various aspects of bacini practice. For instance, limiting ourselves to a superficial account of two of these, researchers have noted that the study of churches with immured vessels in other areas has provided additional data on the dating of at least the sec-


tion of wall in which they were immured,\textsuperscript{25} if not the monument as a whole.\textsuperscript{26} This appears to largely hold true on Crete, too, since churches in the Prefecture of Rethymnon built in different periods are indeed adorned with different categories of ceramics, while similar types of ceramics are encountered in churches built during much the same period. For example, in the Amari region, examples of Late Sgraffito Ware (see above) have been found in the churches of St. Georgios in Opsigias, Afentis Christos in Voliones, and Sts Theodoroi in Amari itself, all of which date from the 13th or 14th century. Furthermore, in the Mylopotamos area, four churches built between the mid-14th and early 15th century are adorned with examples of RMR Ware. As the systematic recording of the data proceeds further, it should be possible to create sub-categories of churches which are decorated with the same types of ceramics, and which can probably be grouped together on the basis of their architecture and their architectural and painted decoration.

The research programme may also shed light on differences in the practices relating to the immuring of vessels in monastic institutions, on the one hand, and in churches not associated with a monastery, on the other. The data that has emerged from the area in question would indicate that this form of decoration is more common in churches unattached to monasteries. However, in those rare cases where katholika were decorated with bacini, usually their number was not limited to the usual four or five ceramics, as in churches unattached to monasteries, but the vessels were more numerous and they belonged to high-quality productions. For example, the practice is only encountered in four of the numerous monasteries in the Prefecture of Rethymnon which date from the period of Venetian rule and in two of the four instances – in the church of the Zooodochos Pigi at Prinos and the katholikon of Chalepa monastery – extremely fine, imported ceramics were used as bacini. A comparison between these monasteries and monasteries in the Herakleion region – where, once again, only very few of the numerous katholika were adorned with vessels – allows us to conclude that here, too, the immured vessels were, in each case, both of extremely good quality and more numerous than those immured in churches unattached to monasteries. The large number of vessels immured in katholika, the use of ceramics from the Iberian peninsula, Italy and Syria – examples from the first two of which were expensive and have only been found in katholika to date – and the fact that the vessels were not usually arranged in a particular pattern raise questions as to whether the choice of a particular type of ceramics was random or prompted by specific considerations, thus probably serving, a symbolic role in addition to a decorative one.


It is thus clear that there are many additional aspects of bacini to be studied relating to the history of the area and the architecture of the churches in which they are found, and to the types of ceramics immured. One of the more interesting aspects of bacini relates to the study of Mediaeval pottery on the island. As we now know, most of the bacini on Crete were imported from various Mediterranean regions, and most commonly from Italy. Since only a limited number of publications have concerned themselves with these categories of pottery found on the island, studying bacini could enhance our knowledge of Mediaeval glazed pottery.

### Table 1. Distribution of churches with immured vessels in the Prefecture of Rethymnon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Number of Churches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rethymnon</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mylopotamos</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anogeia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amari</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Vasilios</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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γράμματος, το Ινστιτούτο Ιστορικών Ερευνών σε συνεργασία με την 28η και τη 13η Εφορεία Βυζαντινών Αρχαιοτήτων αρχίζει την καταγραφή και τεκμηρίωση των εντοιχισμένων σε ναούς αγγείων.

Με βάση την πορεία αυτής της καταγραφής, η οποία αρχίζει επικεντρωθεί στο νομό Ρεθύμνου, και σε συνεργασία με το προσωπικό της 28ης Εφορείας Βυζαντινών Αρχαιοτήτων, εντοπίστηκαν 74 ναοί με εντοιχισμένα αγγεία στις εξωτερικές πλευρές, οι περισσότεροι εκ των οποίων βρίσκονται στην περιοχή του Δήμου Αμαρίου. Ο αριθμός ναού στους παραπέμποντα είναι αρχέτα μεγάλος, σε σχέση με τους ναούς που έχουν εντοπιστεί στην ηπειρωτική Ελλάδα. Ειδικά σε αυτό το μέρος στην Κρήτη, η πρακτική αυτή μέχρι στιγμής εμφανίζεται από το 13ο αιώνα και μετά και ιδιαίτερα σε ναούς που χρονολογούνται από το 14ο αιώνα, παρατηρήσει που ενισχύει την υπόθεση ότι ο μεγάλος αριθμός αγγείων με εντοιχισμένα αγγεία στα νησιά μπορεί, πιθανότατα, να εξηγείται από την αιχμηρή ιταλική παρουσία.

Η μελέτη της πρακτικής εντοιχισμού αγγείων σε αυτό το μεγάλο, αριθμητικά, δείγμα ναού επιτρέπει τη με μεγαλύτερη ασφάλεια διατύπωση παρατηρήσεων αναφορικά με αυτή και την επεξεργασία της πρακτικής και επιβεβαιώνει τα πρώτα σχετικά στοιχεία που έχουν παρουσιαστεί κατά το πρόσφατο παρελθόν. Ειδικότερα, αυτή η μορφή διακόσμησης απαντά και την παρατήρηση σε μονόχρωμους και καμαρακοπετάτους ναούς και στην περιοχή του Δήμου Αμερίου. Αυτό σημαίνει παρατηρήσεις που ενισχύονται για εκείνον το μνημείο, καθώς και την ανοιχτή εξέλιξη της τοιχοδομίας στον οποίο αυτά έχουν εντοιχιστεί μονοχρωμάτικα. Κατά κανόνα δεν παρατηρείται ιδιαίτερη μέριμνα για την πλαισίωση των αγγείων.

Την περαιτέρω επεξεργασία των δεδομένων είναι βέβαιο ότι θα συνδράμει στη διερεύνηση επιπρόσθετων πτυχών του θέματος. Ενδεικτικά, η μελέτη των εντοιχισμένων αγγείων σε ναούς της Κύπρου παρείχε ενσωματωμένες πληροφορίες είτε για την καταγραφή του μνημείου κατηγορία αντικειμένων που αποδίδονται σε εγχώριες παραγωγές, εντοπίζονται σε ναούς που δεν απέχουν χρονικά μεγάλο διάστημα από την ηπειρωτική Ελλάδα. Ειδικά σε υποκαταστήματα της τοιχοδομίας στην περιοχή του Δήμου Αμερίου, οι περισσότεροι από τους αγγείους συνδέονται με την καταγραφή των αγγείων και την παρουσία ειδικών κατηγοριών αγγείων της 28ης Εφορείας Βυζαντινών Αρχαιοτήτων. Αυτό σημαίνει προσφέρει περαιτέρω στοιχεία στην καταγραφή των αγγείων και την αξιοποίηση των δεδομένων.

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