Steatite icon with the Deposition at the monastery of Iveron on Mount Athos*

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This paper deals with a steatite icon of the Deposition, which is enshrined in the sacristy of Iveron monastery. The icon consists of two parts, one rectangular of light grey-greenish colour, with a smooth surface, and one arched of a darker colouring, porous texture and a rougher surface. The rectangular, older part of the icon is a fragment of a twelfth century icon from which the lower left angle and fragments of the right and upper side are lost. The fracture of this twelfth century icon led to its restitution which took place in the fourteenth century (the arched part), as it appears by the stylistic data and the inscriptions. At the same time the icon was embedded in the wooden panel.

Keywords: Byzantine art, steatite icon, iconography, Deposition, Iveron, Mt. Athos

Research of sacristies of Athonite monasteries has so far confirmed the existence of twenty three steatite artworks which are dated between the eleventh and the fourteenth century. Most of them (icons and encolpia) are kept in the Vatopedi monastery, two panagia are in the Xenophontos and Pantelemon monasteries respectively, and one icon is found in the Xenophonos monastery.1 The catalogue of these artworks is now expanded by one more entry, previously unknown. It is preserved in the sacristy of Iveron monastery and is the main subject of this paper.

This is an icon 9.5 cm in height and 7 cm in width (fig. 1). It consists of two parts, one rectangular and one arched. An exergue frame of varying width is preserved only on the upper, the left and the lower side. The right side and the lower left angle of the frame are broken. The icon is embedded in a wooden panel, 14 cm in height and 12 cm in width, which was the central panel of a triptych, as shown by the two dredged openings on its vertical sides, created by the detachment of the metallic pivots. On the front side of the wooden panel a preparatory layer ready for painting, with a large number of nails used for the mounting of the metallic revetment, is partially preserved. From this revetment only a small and very decayed part of the left side is conserved. The back side of the wooden panel (fig. 2) bears an engraved leaf cross of the Resurrection type with the cryptograms: I(ΣΗΟΥ)C (PICTO)C Φ(ΙΤΗΣ) C (PICTOY).

The icon shows the Deposition (fig. 3). This balanced composition includes Joseph of Arimathea who takes down the lifeless body of Jesus Christ from the Cross, the Virgin who holds His left hand, the evangelist John and Nikodemus who by the use of pincers (elagra) is removing the nails from the feet of Christ. On the upper left Archangel Michael is depicted. The scene is identified by the engraved inscription Η ΑΠΟΚΑΘΑΡΔΙΣΕ ΣΕΥ, whereas the abbreviations I(ΣΗΟΥ)C Χ(ΣΗΟΥ)C, M(ΗΤΗΣ) Θ(ΘΗΣ)Y and Μ(ΙΧΑΗΑ) support the faces respectively.

This iconographic type is often found in variations in all categories of Byzantine art: in monumental mural painting,2 on icons,3 illustrated manuscripts,4 ivories5 and metalwork.6 It is also found on a limited number of steatite icons. Among them is a fragment of an icon from the twelfth century with Christological scenes, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art.7 There is also a minor plaque embedded in the wooden core of a reliquary cross from the late fourteenth–early fifteenth century, now in the Byzantine Mu*

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2 A. Tsitouroudi, Ο ζωγραφικός διάσκοπος του Αγίου Νικολάου Ορφείου στη θεσσαλική Συμβολή στη μελέτη της Παλαιολόγιας ζωγραφικής κατά τον πρώτον 14ο αιώνα, Thessaloniki 1986, 125–126, pl. 43.

3 Treasures of Mount Athos, 59–61 (no. 2.4) (E. N. Tsigaridas).


6 The Glory of Byzantium, 81 (no. 40) (J. C. Anderson).

7 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 157–159 (no. 61).
The same scene is depicted in a fourteenth century icon which, along with one other icon, was embedded in the seventeenth century in a wooden panel, now kept in Berlin (Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Staatliche Museen). The last two icons are consigned to be of steatite although the issue of identification of the material, as far as I know, remains open. Moreover, a small steatite fragment with a partially preserved figure of a soldier laying on the ground, originating from Veliko Tarnovo and dating from the twelfth century, is presumed to be a part of an icon depicting the Deposition. However, this point of view does not seem convincing, for the soldier’s figure refers to the scene of the Lithos.

The lower rectangular part of the steatite icon from Iveron is made of steatite of light grey-greenish colour, with a smooth surface. The figures have been carved in low relief, the height of which does not exceed that of the surrounding frame. Their outline is either rounded or almost vertically sharp. However, the incised execution of the ladder used for ascending the Cross reveals the intention of creating different layers in the compilation. The figures are calm, with moderate moves and schematic drapery folds. The heads, despite the rest of the body, are carved in high relief and the foreheads are executed on a higher layer. The eyes of the figures, apart from Christ’s, are enlivened by holes drilled in the material. The halo of Christ bears a cross while the halos of the other figures are decorated with semi-acanthus leaves.

The carving execution of the figures from this part of the Iveron icon are similar to those commonly found on steatite objects from the twelfth century. I quote as indicative of the most similar artworks the icon with the enthroned Virgin with Child from Stuttgart (Württemberg Landesmuseum),11 the encolpion with the Virgin with Child from the Cleveland Museum of Art,12 a part of the encolpion with the figure of St Nicholas from Paris (Cabinet des Médailles)13 and a fragment of an icon with the Virgin from Veliko Tarnovo.14

The upper arched part of the icon is made of a darker coloured steatite of porous texture and a rougher surface. As for carving technique, the figure of Joseph is produced in low relief whereas that of the Archangel Michael is executed in higher relief. The figures are voluminous and the drapery folds of the clothing are executed with deep and wide incisions. Their eyes are also highlighted by drilled holes. Compared to those of the figures in the rectangular part the halos are bigger and much more exergue. In addition, the halo of Christ bears a cross, whereas the halo of John is plain, despite its continuity on the lower rectangular part which is decorated with semi-acanthus leaves. The hair of Christ reaches the shoulder whereas the hair of John is indicated by a few incisions.

The execution of the figures on the icon’s arched part with their massive molding, the use of deep and wide incisions on the drapery folds, the higher relief of the figure of Archangel Michael, but also the bigger and more exergue halos, are features referring to artworks of the fourteenth and fifteenth century. I point out the panagiaion from Xeropotamou monastery,15 the double-sided icon with the Virgin and Child and mounted saints, embedded in an icon from Vatopedi monastery, the icons from Cologne (Schnütgen.

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11 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 122–124 (no. 31).
12 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 124–125 (no. 32).
13 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 176–177 (no. 96).
14 Totev, op. cit., 129.
15 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 204–205 (no. 131); Treasures of Mount Athos, 324–325 (no. 9.5) (K. Lovedou-Tsigarida).
As we have ascertained, the stylistic diversity of the figures depicted on the two parts of the icon is accompanied also by a different execution of the inscriptions on them. In the abbreviation MH(TH)P Θ(EO)Y (fig. 4) by the figure of the Virgin on the rectangular part, the letters are almost of equivalent height and executed diligently with thin incisions. On the contrary, in the inscriptions of the upper, arched part, the letters are of varied height and executed negligently with thin incisions. The abbreviation I(CHOY)C X(PICTO)C; fig. 5) was incised perfunctorily, resulting in an inadequate space for the last letter C. Therefore, the artist was forced to execute it on a lesser scale and rounded, despite the angular form of the same previous letter. The inscription Η ΑΠΟΚΑΘΛΟΕΥ (fig. 6), which is misspelled and incised sloppily as well, combines majuscule 19 and minuscule. From the latter, the execution of the final letter ν is typical of the period beginning with the fourteenth century onwards. 20 This data offers reliable indication of the possible time of engraving of the inscriptions as well as the carving of the relief on the arched part of the icon.

As shown by all of the above, the differences concerning the quality of the material, the style and the inscriptions on the two parts of the icon indicate that there is at least two centuries of chronological distance between their respective making. It is also obvious that the upper part completes the lower.

The lower and older part of 7 cm in height and 7 cm in width is the biggest preserved fragment of the twelfth century icon, the lower left angle and fragments of the right and upper side of which are lost. The scale of the missing part of the lower left angle is completely measurable, while the width of the lost right part, including a part of the scene’s depth, a part of the Virgin’s halo and a part of the exergue frame, can be measured with relative safety. If we assume that the Cross stood at the center of the composition, which is by far the most logical assumption due to the subject’s common depiction and taking into consideration the whole conserved width of the scene’s part to the left of the Cross by 4,5 cm that can be measured starting from the middle of the vertical arm, then it can be estimated that 1,46 cm is missing from the now preserved right side of 3,04 cm. The icon’s height, where the upper side is missing, this comprising a part of Joseph’s figure, upper fragments of John’s and Christ’s head, the distinct upper part of the Cross behind Joseph and probably two angels along side of the Cross that were included, can be measured approximately up to 5 to 5,5 cm.

Based on all the above, the original measurements of the twelfth century icon are approximately between 12 to 12,5 cm in height and 9 cm in width. Similar measurements are found among steatites with one or two scenes, such as the examples from the museum in Kherson 21 or the Hermitage. 22 The possibility that the fragment at hand could be derived from an icon with more than two scenes must be excluded because in this case the known examples, such as the icon from Toledo or the one from Vatopedi monastery, show scenes of miniature or smaller scale, the height and width of which does not exceed the 6,5–7,5 cm. 23

The fracturing of the twelfth century icon led to its completion which took place in the fourteenth-fifteenth century, as indicated by stylistic data and the differences in

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18 Oikonomaká-Papadopoulou, Pitarká, Loverdou-Tsigarida, Eγκ. Κώστα, 158–159 (no. 60) (B. Pitarká).
19 The form of the majuscule indicate the provenance of Thessaloniki in the middle-fourteenth century. I extend my thanks to Prof. G. Velenis for this information.
20 I would like to thank Dr. Zisis Melissakis for valuable discussion.
21 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 132–133 (n. 41).
23 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 41, 143–150 (no. 52), 217–218 (no. 149).

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Fig. 3. Iveron monastery. The two parts of the steatite icon

Fig. 4. Iveron monastery. The abbreviation MH(TH)P Θ(EO)Y in the lower rectangular part of the steatite icon
scriptions. This restoration could not have taken place later than the fifteenth century because the manufacturing of steatites, as the research shows, was gradually decreasing since that time.24 The small piece of steatite that the artist had at his disposal defined the extent of the repair of the upper part. The craftsmen who carved the missing fragments of the figures on this part readjusted only the figure of Joseph to the same exergue frame and height of the relief in proportion to the existing icon. However, as it obviously shows, the limited space obstructed the execution of the Cross.

With the completion of the icon in the fourteenth-fifteenth century it is clear that at the same time it was also embedded in the wooden panel. Also the leg of Nicodemus that existed in the middle Byzantine icon’s broken left angle must have been carved into it back then. Following the restoration, the two parts of the icon were set in a wooden panel for practical reasons, to keep them attached and to avoid further damage. A more specific dating to the fourteenth century can be made for the setting of the icon’s two parts in the wooden panel because of the stylistic execution of the leaf Cross of the Resurrection on its back. This form with the widened and curved points of the arms, the epimela and the radial decoration on the crossing of the antennas, is also found in works of the fourteenth century such as, for example, the frescoes of St. Nicholas Orphanos in Thessaloniki25 or the hexapichton from the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai.26

The completion of the middle Byzantine icon and its mounting in the wooden panel implies the conversion from its original status to a complex icon,27 which was the central panel of a triptych. Featured examples of complex icons from the thirteenth century onward28 are found in the Vatopedi monastery,29 in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai,30 in the Vatican,31 etc.

A silver-gold revetment, of which only a small part with leaf decoration is preserved, was moulded into the main side of the wooden panel at an unknown time. This layer obviously replaced the damaged painting. However we are not in the position to know whether it was pre-manufactured for this particular artwork or whether it was dismantled from another and reassembled on this wooden panel. In addition to these enquiries there is also the revetment’s bad state of preservation and the fact that it cannot be dated with reliability on that account.

The case of the hearth in the monastery of Iviron, whose successive readjustments were made according to a fragment of a middle-Byzantine icon, is also known from other works of arts.

One of those is a part of a steatite icon with St. Theodore Stratelates which is in the Vatican (Museo Sacro) and is dated from the eleventh century.32 This part must have belonged to a more extensive composition including one other saint, St. Theodore of Amaseia to the left of St. Theodore Stratelates, and Christ in the upper part of the composition. After the fracture, the upper side of the icon was transfigured so that could take a curved shape, therefore obscuring the break. Later on it was embedded — at an undetermined time — in a wooden panel. Of course in this case the icon’s missing part was not replaced but on the left side of the wooden panel a dual pillar was curved in proportion to the pillar on the right side of the icon in order for a certain balance to be achieved in the composition.

A second example is that of an artwork of greater scale and different material. It concerns a marble icon of the Virgin which is built into the outer face of the south wall of the Archimandriion church in Ioannina, Epirus. According to Barbara Papadopoulou, the icon dates back to the thirteenth-fourteenth century and it was built into the church wall during the nineteenth century.33 The icon consists of four marble parts of different quality which, in my point of view, do not constitute a homogeneous group as previously suggested.34 The two bigger dark-coloured marble parts on the upper side and on the lower part must be the only ones deriving from the original Byzantine icon. In my opinion, the other two smaller parts of a light-coloured marble in the middle and on the lower left angle of the icon are later additions. They must have been assembled during the nineteenth century in order for the missing parts of the Byzantine icon to be completed and the original shape to be restored in order for it to be successfully built into the church wall. Serious evidence to support this point of view is the sudden interruption

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24 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 49; Oikonomakē-Papadopoulou, Pitarakis, Loverdou-Tsigarida, Ευκλήτη, 17 (B. Pitarakis).
25 Tsitouridou, Ο ζωγραφικός διάκοσμος, 217-218, pl. 117.
28 Vokotopoulos, Σύνθετες εικόνες, 299.
29 Treasures of Mount Athos, 326–328 (no. 9.6) (K. Loverdou-Tsigarida), with the former literature cited.
31 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 127–129 (no. 35).
32 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 99–100 (no. 6); The Glory of Byzantium, 157–158 (no. 104) (A. W. Carri).
33 V. Papadopoulou, Βυζαντινή μαρμάρινη εικόνα της Παναγίας στο Αρχιμανδριόν των Ιωαννίνων, in: Διάδρομοι Τιμητικής τής στο, Καθηγητής Νίκος Νικολάκης, Thessaloniki 2006, 189–196.
34 Papadopoulou, op. cit., 189.
of the Virgin’s throne in the lower left angle of the icon, on the light coloured marble part. This peculiarity can only be interpreted as an omission or weakness, even indifference on the part of the craftsman who carved this part during the nineteenth century in order to finish off the Virgin’s throne that existed on the Byzantine icon. It is also obvious that in the additional parts of the icon, the craftsman tries to follow the existing pattern of drapery folds of the older parts but fails due to his poor skills. Another evidence of the later dating of completion of the Virgin’s icon is the difference between the high relief of the Byzantine parts and the low relief of the more recent additions.

Apart from the example discussed above and others similar to the icon from the monastery of Iveron, I point out additionally two steatite artworks which were only slightly more recent additions. The first is a fragment of a twelfth century icon with the Virgin with Child in the Vatopedi monastery, which in 1720 was embedded in a rectangular casket, resulting in its transformation into an encolpis.

In conclusion, the relic of the monastery of Iveron is added to the exceptional category of complex artworks such as those where an older steatite icon is transfigured into a newer painting. The thought that leads to a certain practice is inseparable from the material of its realization, the emotional and devotional value of the older steatite artwork led to its transformation into a greater artwork of higher merit and with artistic figures that enrich it with possible new theological meaning.

At the same time this specific artwork is also representative of another case of restoration or even better of an aesthetic restoration of an object of devotion in Byzantine times. This could very well be one of a number of known cases of restoration (of wall-paintings, icons, manuscripts, sculptures and miniature art) that were carried out during the Byzantine period of which we learn equally from artworks as much as from historical sources.

But beyond the problem addressed in the course of studying this artwork, specific and important enquires remain. Were the transfigurations on the middle Byzantine icon made in the same monastery or in another center and what could this center be? If the fracturing of the middle Byzantine icon took place in the monastery, why was it not decided directly for the broken parts to be put back together, as the most logical solution, but instead the restoration took place at least two centuries later? Could the monks in this case have disposed of the fragments of this sacred object? Is it possible that the relic reached the monastery in its present condition, restored by someone who had the ability to find the proper material and also possessed the necessary skills? I believe it is important to investigate these questions even though they may never be answered.

ЛИСТА РЕФЕРЕНЦИ — REFERENCE LIST


Chichinadze N., Some compositional characteristics of Georgian triptychs of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, Gesta 36/1 (1996) 71, 73.


33 Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, op. cit., 126–127 (no. 14).
34 Oikonomak-Papadopoulou, Pitarakis, Loverdou-Tsagarida, Εγκύκλιον, 122–123 (no. 42) (B. Pitarakis). For similar works of art in ivory or steatite v. Cutter, The Hand of the Master, 131; N. Chichinadze, Some compositional characteristics of Georgian triptychs of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, Gesta 36/1 (1996) 71, 73 (fig. 10).
Стеатитска икона са Скидањем с крста у манастиру Иvironу на Светој гори

Димитриос Лиакос

Основна тема овог текста је стеатитска икона са представом Скидања с крста, која се чува у ризници манастира Иvironа и није била публикована до сада. Икона има димензије 9,5 × 7 cm, а састоји се од два дела, једног скоро правоугаоног, светле сивозеленкасте боје, глатке површине, и другог, лучно завршеног, тамније боје, порозне структуре и грубље површине. Само на горњој, левој и донjoj страни сачуван је избољен оквир икона. Икона је уклопљена у дреvну плочу, димензија 14 × 12 cm, коja је некада представљала средишњи део тринтиха, о чему сведоче издубављања на њеним вертикалним странама. На предњој страни плоче сачувани су остаци грунта, као и неколико чавала коришћених за намештање металног окова. Од тог окова сачуван је само један фрагмент на левој страни. На позадини плоче насликан је разлиста крст украшен криптограмиma I(HCOY) C X(PICTO)C N(I) K(A) и Ф(ΩC) X(PICTOY).

Доњи и старији део иконе припада првоbитној икони, коja потиче из XII века. Она је била висока око 12–12,5 cm, а широка 9 (димензије сачуваног дела износе око 7 × 7 cm). Горњи део те иконе је у непознато време био уништен, па је морао да буде изнова урађен. Судећи по стилу и словима исписаним на обновљеном делу иконе, то се највероватније десило у XIV веку. Изгледа да је у исто време икона уклопљена у правну плочу.

Слични примери обнове икона из средњевизантиjскe епохе у доба Палеолога одавно су познати (на пример, стеатитска икона са представом св. Теодора Стратилата у Ватицанском музеју, мермерна икона Богородице узидана у спољашњи јужни зид архимандриjске цркве у Јавини итд.).