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The Representation of Donors and Holy Figures on four Byzantine Icons

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Byzantine images of donation and dedication exist in virtually every medium. Thanks to the studies of Tanya Velmans and Hans Belting on late monumental painting and manuscripts, interest has focussed recently on donor images of the Palaiologan period; the book of Sophia Kalopissi-Verti now brings renewed attention to fresco works of the 13th century. In this note I will deal with donor images on icons only, in honor of Doula Mouriki's outstanding studies of Byzantine icons which form such a significant part of her scholarly oeuvre.

An icon of St. Irene on Mount Sinai, dated by Kurt Weitzmann to the 8th-9th century (Fig. 1) shows two features that generally distinguish icons from donor compositions in other media: the utter obliviousness of the towering saint to the presence of the donor at his feet, and the fact that the donor is not carrying any sort of gift. Elsewhere, the holy figure is more responsive: in monumental painting, the donor, bearing a church model, may be ushered by a saint into the presence of Christ or the Virgin, who acknowledges his gift with a wave of the hand; in manuscript painting, the donor offers a book to a holy figure, usually the Virgin, who alerts Christ in the arc of heaven above, and Christ gestures back down in recognition.

On an icon, the image we see does not merely record a larger commission — a fresco program or illustrated book — but reenacts the donation; it is both a commemoration of the gift and the very gift itself. The holy figure painted on the panel must therefore be able to maintain its integrity as a devotional image despite the presence of the donor. Hence the remoteness we have noted, the spiritual distance between image and donor which we find especially on icons. If the saint is depicted in motion — a holy rider, say, or Moses in the act of receiving the law — the saint's aloofness to the donor beneath his feet or beneath the thundering hooves of his steed can almost reach comic proportions.

Some 13th century icons on Mount Sinai, such as the one commissioned by a monk-priest by the name of John (Fig. 2), differ from that of Irene not only in that the donor stands upright close by the image of St. George and addresses his prayer to the saint with outstretched arms, but also in that saint and donor are now surrounded by a sequence of narrative panels illustrating the life of St. George, twenty scenes which form a frame around the central image. The distinction between central panel and frame that evolved over the course of the 12th and 13th centuries may be connected with the Comnenian practice of rejuvenating and adorning older panels by applying new silver revetments, or "peripharia" to them. A portrait of a donor may now be commemorating this kind of secondary gift — not the creation of the central panel, but its later adornment — and even be relegated to the frame, which further intensifies the spiritual distance.


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sifies the donor's remoteness from the holy figure. On a late 13th century icon in Moscow with the portraits of Constantine Akropolites and his wife Maria (Fig. 3), the separation of the central panel from the frame is complete, and the silver-gilt figures of the donors now appear to be recording their benefaction to the particular painted image of the Virgin Hodegetria seen in the central panel, rather than appealing directly to an awesome holy figure, as was the case when the donor was represented crouched at his very feet.

There are, however, certain Byzantine icons which diverge from these traditional icon formulae, and attempt to represent the holy image on the panel actually responding to the presence of the donor; it is to four of these icons that this paper is dedicated. One is the famous 13th century Vita icon of St. George from Kastoria, now in the Byzantine Museum in Athens (Fig. 4). Here we see a carved and painted standing figure of St. George, in ¾ view and in full military attire, praying up to Christ, who listens eagerly from the arc of heaven at the upper right. An inscription, by now virtually illegible, fills the area before the saint, and behind him, on the ground at the left, is the tiny figure of a donor. The figure kneels in proskynesis, and wears long dark robes adorned with fur strips over the shoulders, and a black hood. The combination of garments rules out our identifying this figure as a monk or nun in a monastic hood or koukoulion; the fur trim suggests rather that the donor is a lady of some rank, and that the "hood" is a mourning veil such as that donned at the moment of her husband's death by Irene Dukaina, wife of emperor Alexios I, or that worn by the lady who clasps the foot of the mounted St. Sergios on a Crusader icon on Mount Sinai, or that of the Romanian Princess Militsa after the death of her son, on a 16th-century icon she commissioned. On the back of the icon are painted two standing female saints, Sts. Marina and Irene (?), who raise a joint prayer to Christ above.

The saint on this icon is not an oblivious frontal figure, but one who actively attempts to mediate with Christ. This kind of intercessory composition is extremely rare on icons, although the ingredients are all Byzantine. Some contemporary panels show a standing profile saint

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9. K. Weitzmann et al., The Icon (as in note 5 above), pl. 35. G. Sotiriou, La sculpture sur bois dans l'art byzantin, Mélanges Charles Diehl, Paris 1930, II, p. 178-180, fig. 4. R. Lange, Die byzanti-
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Fig. 2. Icon of Saint George with scenes from his life and a donor, the monk and priest John. Sinai, Monastery of Saint Catherine. (Published through the courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai).
praying to Christ, though none of these includes the figure of a donor, and there are 11th and 12th century manuscript compositions showing the Virgin as advocate mediating between the donor and Christ. The carved image of St. George reminds us of the huge wooden sculpture-icon or xoanon (2.90 meters tall) in the church of St. George at Omorphokklesia near Kastoria.

Unlike the manuscript Virgins, however, and like the earlier icons, St. George remains aloof from the donor he is apparently representing; he is absorbed in his own dialogue with Christ. The two figures, donor and saint, are separated in other ways as well; though the donor is painted onto the central panel, as is Christ, George himself is carved in relief. It is possible to argue that it was not on her own behalf that this lady commissioned the icon, but on behalf of her dead husband. The scenario could be reconstructed thus: a certain lady with connections to Kastoria and with particular affection for Sts. Marina and Irene, lost her husband (a soldier?) and commissioned on his behalf an icon of St. George. For the figure of the saint, she used a specific local image, a xoanon; this miraculous image she put to work, so to speak, making it turn and pray to Christ on behalf of her dead spouse; she then "adorned" the image with a narrative frame and inserted her portrait as donor. She herself does not expect a response from George: he is there to intercede for her husband. Her own personal protectors and intercessors are the two female saints on the back.

Another icon that could be read as showing a saint actually responding to the plea of a specific donor is a curious 12th century icon on Sinai (Fig. 5)14. Here again we encounter a near profile figure of St. George, hands raised in prayer to Christ. But this time George is interceding for someone virtually his equal in size, namely a Georgian king of the Bagratid dynasty15. As on the manuscript pages which show the mediating words of the Virgin, and as (presumably) on the Athens icon, St. George's words on behalf of the king are written in gold lettering in the space between the figures16. But there is no longer a natural progression from a small prose intercessor through a large saint to Christ in the arc of heaven at the upper corner, as in the traditional formula; instead there is a symmetrical pairing of the two figures, king and saint, with Christ in the centre hovering over both their heads. The composition evokes that of a coronation, or the headpiece of a chrysolobion, wherein Christ confirms the authority of the emperor, more than it does a traditional donor composition. And there are other oddities: George turns on axis to direct a prayer to Christ and to assert his role as an intermediary, but meanwhile Christ is seen communicating with the king directly: he looks back over his shoulder at George, but his right hand stretches out to the frontal king. St. George, though depicted as intercessor, is actually somewhat superfluous in this composition: the royal figure is apparently capable of receiving Christ's response to the saint's entreaty without the need of an intermediary.

This is of course the hope of any donor, whatever his rank: to evoke from Christ an explicit response to his prayer or gift. On a tiny 14th century icon on Mount Sinai of the Virgin with her parents Joachim and Anna we find another rare attempt to show the response as well as the donor's appeal (Fig. 6)17. Here a monk is shown kneeling at the feet of the standing Virgin, who gestures toward him with her right hand. Christ, whom she holds in her left arm, also addresses him with both gesture and glance. Joachim and Anna flank the Virgin...
Fig. 3. Icon of the Virgin Hodegetria with the donors Constantine and Maria Akropolites on its metal frame. Moscow, Tretjakov Gallery.
in a sort of modified Deesis, and they also point down, both of them, toward the donor. The core of the composition, the figure of the Virgin with child acknowledging a donor at her feet, is found in frescoes and manuscripts from 11th century on, but is to my knowledge unique on Byzantine icons. The donor has in this case actually altered the nature of the whole image, by demanding a visual response from the very holy figures he has commissioned.

One final icon at first glance appears to take this involvement one step further still, not only introducing a donor into an actual Biblical event but even depicting Christ stepping out of the action to acknowledge the donor's presence. In the Metamorphosis monastery of Meteora is a small 14th century icon of the Incredulity of Thomas (Fig. 7). Its iconography is fairly traditional, though brought up to date with Palaiologan architectural motifs and a dramatic emotional figure style. But at the right of Christ, standing in among the apostles and behind Thomas himself, is a woman dressed in glorious red robes, a jewelled loros, and a crown. Christ's long arm stretches right over the head of Thomas to touch her forehead.

This bold lady, who is not named, has been identified as Maria Palaiologina, daughter of Symeon Uros Palaiologos and wife of the despot of Ioannina, Thomas Preljubovíc. Thomas was assassinated in 1384; Maria herself died to 1394. According to Xyngopoulos, Thomas too can be spotted in this icon, but it is certainly Maria who dominates.

This icon, whose donor has arranged to make herself a participant in a Christological event is, as far as I know, unique in Byzantine art. To be sure, other important donors have been thought to have slipped themselves into sacred compositions: Kurt Weitzmann has seen the features of Constantine Porphyrogenitus in the figure of King Abgar on the 10th century Sinai Mandylion icon; Doula Mouriki has proposed seeing the features of emperor Constantine IX Monomachos, the patron of Nea Mone on Chios, in the face of Solomon in the 11th century.
century mosaic of the Anastasis in that church. But these people are only inserting their faces. For a patron to walk straight into the holy scene, dressed in her own clothes, is something quite different.

It is not, to be sure, entirely without precedent in the strictly Byzantine tradition. On a 10th century ivory in Berlin, an unnamed bishop kneels beneath a scene of the Crucifixion; a miniature of the Last Judgement in the 11th century Studite Gospel Book in Paris, B.N. gr. 74 (f. 93v), the abbot for whom the manuscript was made and to whom various poems in it are addressed appears.

18. Two of the earliest examples have presumably lost their donor figures, and so remain somewhat hypothetical. One is a fresco in the Southwest chapel at Hosios Loukas, where the figure of the donor has been effaced, but presumably drew the gesture and glance of Christ down to him at the lower left of the composition; on a 12th century marble relief in the Byzantine Museum in Athens, the gestures of both mother and child, which are not the usual ones of the Hodegetria, suggest that the panel, which is cut at the sides, may also have once included the figure of donor. Th. Chatzidakis-Bacharas, Les peintures murales de Hosios Loukas. Les chapelles occidentales, Athens 1982, p. 9-10.


20. There are twelve apostles, not the eleven that there should be, given the absence of Judas, but see the note below.

21. He is identified as the figure standing behind St. Thomas and Maria. However, the fact that this figure looks straight at the camera, so to speak, does not necessarily mean this is Thomas Preljubovic masquerading as an apostle: such faces are common enough in the art of the region in the 14th century (cf. Nicholas Orphanos in Thessalonica and Markov Manastir, and the remarks of P. Mijovic (as in note 19 above). The fact that there are twelve, instead of the usual eleven, apostles, is perhaps relevant, but, as Xyngopoulos has noted, there are roughly contemporary depictions of the Incredulity of Thomas with the full twelve (Xyngopoulos op. cit. (as in note 19 above), p. 56).

at the head of the line of his monks in Paradise itself, standing alongside the Virgin. According to Mesarites' description of the mosaic decoration of the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, the artist Eulalios depicted himself, in his own street clothes, "like a watchful guard" in the scene of the Three Mariæ before the Tomb. Serbian rulers are depicted participating in the celebration of liturgical hymns such as the Akathistos and the Nativity hymns, though never apparently in actual Gospel events. And Byzantine ekphrastic literature of all periods dwells upon the emotion a listener might feel were he actually present at the sacred event.

It has been proposed that the icon was commissioned by Maria in honor of her husband after his assassination on December 23, 1384. The caption to the scene, «Η ψωλάφισις του Θωμά», "the touching of Thomas" instead of the more usual "the doors being closed," does tend to affirm a connection with her husband Thomas. But there are some problems with the traditional interpretation. Maria, unlike the lady from Kastoria on the St. George icon, is not clad in mourning. Is this because of her speedy remarriage, little over a month after her husband's death? Or is there another explanation? Why does Christ so clearly favor Maria? His attention here is fixed not on Thomas, but on her; his arching gesture of benediction is every bit as important as that of Thomas' probing finger. Is this because of the magnitude of her donation?

The clue to the meaning of this icon lies in this gesture of Christ. Christ favors Maria over Thomas in accordance with his own words in the Bible: "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20, 29). Dressed in a costume far removed in time from that of the apostles, Maria shows herself as one of those who were not present in that room, those who "have not seen, and yet have believed"; her faith, greater than that of Thomas or even the apostles themselves, is being recognized by Christ.

This icon should be seen, then, not merely in the context of the death of the despot Thomas Preljubović, but in relation to the well-attested piety of this couple during their lifetime. Together in 1375 they gave to the Great Lavra monastery the church they had founded and adorned at Vodena, along with its substantial collection of liturgical implements and books; together they commissioned two reliquary diptychs, one in Meteora, the other now in Cuenca, Spain; Thomas gave a chalice to Vatopedi and possibly an icon to Chilandari, and Maria in 1386 gave her uncle's staurothek to Meteora, where her brother, the monk John-Joasaph, was honored even then as the monastic complex's second founder. The icon, though perhaps commissioned in honor of her husband, celebrates her faith, not the gift. Maria's presence on this icon is not the bold intrusion of an arrogant donor drawing attention to her donation and demanding a response from Christ, nor the fantasy of a wishful participant in a holy event. She belongs there: for Christ, as his words indicate, was thinking of people like her all along.

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24. "But our discourse... has recognized the man who with his own hand has depicted these things, as he may be seen standing upright by the Lord's tomb like a watchful guard, dressed in the same robe and other garments which he wore to adorn his outer appearance when he was living and painting these things...". Description of the Holy Apostles XXVIII: 23, trans. C. Mango, The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1972, p. 233. O. Demus has disputed the identity of the figure in this lost mosaic, and suggests the writer was actually seeing a figure of David, "The Sleepless Watcher": Ein Erklärungsversuch, JÖB 28 (1979), p. 241-245. But Eulalios would scarcely have been wearing the royal robes in which David is traditionally depicted.


26. E. Fisher, Icon and Ekphrasis in Michael Psellos' Sermon on the Crucifixion, Byzantinoslavica (in press). I take this occasion to thank Professor Fisher for kindly sharing her article with me before its publication. See also H. Maguire, Art and Rhetoric in Byzantium, Princeton 1981.

27. Xyngopoulos, op.cit. (as in note 19 above), p. 61. According to Subotic, this was for the memorial services 40 days after his death, according to Mijovic for those one year afterwards.

28. Her wedding to Esau Buondelmonte took place soon after January 31, 1385.

29. The theme is picked up in the 9th ode of the canon for orphans on the Sunday of Thomas: ΣΣ τὸν ὡς θέων ἐν τάφῳ, δυνάμις Χριστοῦ, οὐ βλέφαρός ιδόντες, ὅλα κεφαλέα πόθφ πεπιστευκότες ἐν ὄροις μεγαλόνουν.

30. G. Subotić, Dvija i dvije, točno šestnažatih, sestvata θυμίσιων Μαρίας Παλαιολογίνας, Kopacke novine, 1985, p. 417. O. Demus has disputed the identity of the figure in this icon, as he may be seen standing upright by the Lord's tomb like a watchful guard, dressed in the same robe and other garments which he wore to adorn his outer appearance when he was living and painting these things...". Description of the Holy Apostles XXVIII: 23, trans. C. Mango, The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1972, p. 233. O. Demus has disputed the identity of the figure in this lost mosaic, and suggests the writer was actually seeing a figure of David, "The Sleepless Watcher": Ein Erklärungsversuch, JÖB 28 (1979), p. 241-245. But Eulalios would scarcely have been wearing the royal robes in which David is traditionally depicted.


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