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THE CROSS-CULTURAL HERITAGE OF A BYZANTINE RELIQUARY

Abstract/Summary

A unique artefact from the late XIIth or XIIIth century, the staurotheke of the Cathedral Treasury of Esztergom has frequently been discussed in the context of Byzantine art during the Komnenian period. Being one of the highlights of later Byzantine cloisonné enamel work, its centrepiece, containing a relic of the True Cross, can justly be regarded as a classical example of its kind. However, it features other aspects through which the Byzantine makers of the staurotheke endeavoured cross-cultural communication, and these aspects, which might reflect the shock of the Seljuq conquest of Anatolia, as well as the more recent Latin conquest of Constantinople, have not yet been sufficiently explored. Moreover, the object should not be regarded as a one-layered piece of art because it includes, on the one hand, an elaborate frame which has often but perhaps incorrectly been identified as a later addition by Balkan metalworkers, and, on the other hand, it also features a precious silk cover of the back, which is most probably the product of a Near Eastern loom. Taken together, the Esztergom reliquary, attributed in this study to the Empire of Trebizond, illustrates the ways in which a society can negotiate, using the creative visual language of an artefact, the perilous geopolitical constraints which were imposed on it by external forces.

Key words

Byzantine, Islamic, Komnenian period, reliquary, Trebizond



Fig. 1. Reliquary of the True Cross, Esztergom Cathedral Treasury. Photograph: Iván Szántó with permission of the Archdiocese of Esztergom-Budapest

THE CROSS-CULTURAL HERITAGE OF A BYZANTINE RELIQUARY¹

Scholarly interpretation of historical art objects, including their attribution, dating, and localization, is almost inevitably bound to tradition, and when this occurs prejudices may be easily mistaken for verified facts. Famous artworks, occupying well-established places in museums and in specialist literature, are especially prone to carry diverse discursive layers, some of them eventually becoming “definitions”, which stick to the object inseparably and affect contemporary assessments, regardless of their historical veracity. This essay investigates one such object. By doing so, it serves two purposes. Confined to this artwork, the first aim is to reconsider previous suggestions regarding its origins and propose a different cultural context instead. The second and more general purpose is to use this object as an example and point out that a multivalent understanding of pre-modern art can give rise to more inclusive referential frameworks which can replace the rigidity of previous, inherited cultural models.

Despite being one of the most frequently illustrated and discussed Byzantine enamelworks, the reliquary of the True Cross in the Archiepiscopal Treasury of Esztergom, Hungary, is a rather poorly understood object (Fig. 1).² Its general function and iconography, shared by a few related examples, such as the Xth-century Limburg Staurotheke,³ are relatively clear, it is chiefly the history and geographic origin of the Esztergom reliquary that has not been sufficiently elucidated. One group of scholars uphold the possibility, based on a vague reference by an inventory datable to 1609, that the arrival of the artefact to Hungary took place in the XIIth-XIIIth centuries, i.e., not long after the panel had been supposedly made.⁴ Some modern authors even attempt to link this event to a diplomatic alliance between King Béla III of Hungary (r. 1172-1196) and Emperor Isaac II Angelos (r. 1185-1195), the successor of the Komnenos Dynasty of Byzantium, on the basis of a reference which was made in the abovementioned 1609

1 This study was supported by the János Bolyai Research Fund of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

2 For the most recent studies, see György Ruzsa, Quand la staurothèque byzantine d'Esztergom est-elle arrivée en Hongrie?, Anna Tüskés (ed.), *Omnis creatura significans: Essays in Honour of Mária Prokopp*, Budapest, CentrArt, 2009, 47-48; Philippa Couch, *Esztergom Staurotheke*, undergraduate thesis, London, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2010.

3 See most recently, Brad Hostetler, The Limburg Staurotheke: A Reassessment, *Athanos*, 30, 2012, 7-13.

4 Lyn Rodley, *Byzantine Art and Architecture: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 241-243.

inventory.⁵ It is true that there are – also not fully proven – precedents for the donation of recently created enamelworks by Byzantine emperors to their Hungarian allies, notably the lower section of the Hungarian royal crown by Michael VII Doukas (r. 1071-1078) to King Géza I (r. 1074-1077) in 1075.⁶ However, the early arrival of the reliquary to Central Europe can be safely dismissed on the basis of the same 1609 inventory because 1) its vague hint on 1190 refers to its supposed production and not its acquisition, 2) it lists objects which entered the Esztergom treasury from the private collection of the seasoned diplomat and Primate of Esztergom, János Kutassy (d. 1601), who is, therefore, the first documented owner of the staurotheke. Thus, another group of experts maintains that the Esztergom reliquary may have stayed in the East until as late as one of the embassies to the Ottomans undertaken by Primate Kutassy.⁷ Among the arguments in support of this theory we may mention that, firstly, even if the style of the central panel can be related to a late or post-Kommenian imperial environment, why this should mean that the icon was donated or captured immediately after its production. In fact, we know about imperial reliquaries now in Western Europe that were kept in Constantinople for an extended period after their making. This is the case with the Limburg Reliquary of the Cross which was looted from the imperial treasury during the Fourth Crusade in 1204, more than two centuries after it had been made, and which ended up in Germany as the gift of one of the plunderers. Secondly, and more importantly, this extended stay in Asia Minor may have started even after 1204 because the object may well post-date the Middle Byzantine period, either partially or completely. Not a single element of the staurotheke justifies an exclusively Komnenian dating while there are considerable arguments in favour of a later one. The imperial tradition of Byzantium lived on after 1204 in the three exiled empires of Epirus/Thessalonica, Nicaea, and Trebizond. Their arts and crafts are inadequately known, but they all laid claim to the custodianship of the True Cross as a source of Constantinian legitimacy, and they, especially the two latter, managed to evacuate a number of reliquaries from Constantinople before the

5 *ibid.*, 243.

6 János M. Bak, Géza I, in Mathias Bernath, Felix von Schroeder (eds), *Biographisches Lexikon zur Geschichte Südosteuropas*, 2, München, Oldenbourg, 1976, 45–46 2-6.

7 Árpád Somogyi, *Az esztergomi bizánci sztaurothéka*, Budapest, Múzeumok Központi Propaganda Irodája, 1959, 32-34; Ruzsa, *op. cit.*, 47-48: Ruzsa proposes an intermediary station for the reliquary in the Balkans, possibly Ohrid, where, according to him, the frame was made.

plundering of the Latins, to uphold these claims.⁸ However, the power of these exiled empires was limited and they were forced to coexist with other states, some of them Orthodox, some others Latin, still others, indeed, Muslim. I believe that the Esztergom reliquary was made in one of these exiled empires where, under the pressures of coexistence, “foreign”, or non-Byzantine elements crept in the artistic production.

There are three non-Byzantine features of the reliquary which this paper aims to draw attention to, with the intent to show that a “Byzantine” reliquary may, at closer look, encompass something geographically much wider.



Fig. 2. Christ being led to the cross, detail from the Esztergom Staurotheke, Esztergom Cathedral Treasury. Photograph: Iván Szántó with permission of the Archdiocese of Esztergom-Budapest

Fig. 3. Abu Zayd in front of the governor, detail from a manuscript of the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri (38th *maqama*), Iraq, second quarter of XIIIth century, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. Ar.3929, fol. 129 r.. Source: gallica.bnf.fr

⁸ For standard reference works on these empires, see Donald M. Nicol, *The Despotate of Epiros 1267-1479: A Contribution to the History of Greece in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984; Michael Angold, *A Byzantine Government in Exile: Government and Society under the Laskarids of Nicaea, 1204–1261*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975; Anthony Eastmond, *Byzantium’s Other Empire: Trebizond*, Istanbul, Ege Yayınları, 2016.

The first such detail is one of the eleven cloisonné enamel figures on the main panel (Fig. 2). The panel is organized around an openwork cut-out in the shape of the cross which used to incorporate the actual relic. Its uppermost part is occupied by two busts of angels, below which Emperor Constantine and Empress Helena are depicted in three-quarter view, turning to the cross in praise. In the two lower sides of the cross we see, on the left, the road to Calvary, while, on the other side, the descent from the cross is shown. Of all the eleven figures these scenes include only one does not conform to the Komnenian traditions of religious iconography. The figure in question is the Pharisee, pointing to the cross while turning back to Christ behind him, who is being dragged to Calvary by the Roman (or “Latin”?) soldier. The Pharisee, I would like to argue, assumes a distinctly Middle-Eastern character not only on account of his turban but also because of his posture. This figure reminds us of XIIth and XIIIth-century ‘Abbasid painting in Mosul and Baghdad and the art of the Artuqid Empire of Diyarbakir in Eastern Anatolia (Fig. 3). It was during this time that in these centres a new style of book painting evolved in which we find the closest parallels of what we see in the Calvary scene: a sort of agitated dialogue between people, often of different ethnic background, which involves eye contact and gesticulation. The best-known examples are XIIIth-century illustrations of the so-called *Maqamas* of al-Hariri which almost always include conversant figures with hand gestures, indicating a debate, often between Arabs and Turks.⁹ Similar illustrations in Arabic or Persian translations of the Indian *Panchatantra* from the same period depict dialogues between Muslims and Hindus.¹⁰ Christ flanked by the “Latin” soldier and the Arab-looking Pharisee, may have been an apt and realistic rendition of the situation in which Byzantium found itself after 1204.

9 Oleg Grabar, *The Illustrations of the Maqamat*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.

10 Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009, 9-11.

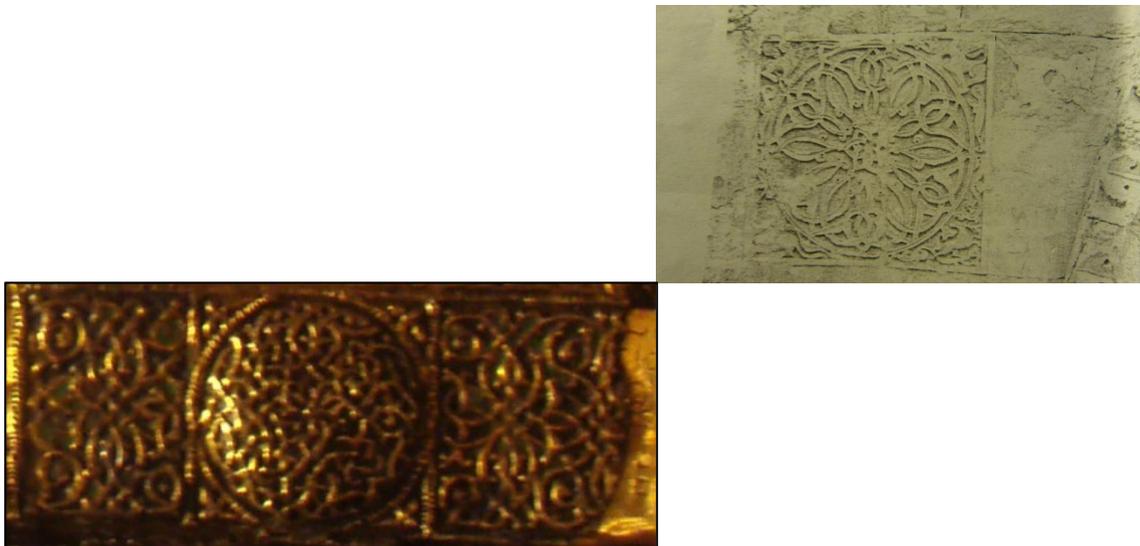


Fig. 4. Geometric squares and roundel from the frame of the Esztergom Staurotheke, Esztergom Cathedral Treasury. Photograph: Iván Szántó with permission of the Archdiocese of Esztergom-Budapest

Fig. 5. Carved geometric pattern from the Hagia Sophia, Trebizond. After Anthony Eastmond, *Art and Identity in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium, Hagia Sophia and the Empire and Trebizond*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, fig. 58.

The second “un-Byzantine” element is the embossed, carved and applied silver frame of the enamelled central panel, or, more precisely, the elaborate arabesque cartouches which divide the frame into 24 square compartments, together with eight more squares which had – or still have – figural decoration (Fig. 4). The intricate and infinite patterns occupying these cartouches do not simply recall Islamic art but show that the craftsmen had a profound expertise in this fundamentally non-Christian style. Earlier scholars (Somogyi, Ruzsa) pointed to the Balkans for analogies, and shown that for example some icon frames from Ohrid (e.g. Liège Cathedral Treasury, or Ohrid Museum) and Salonica (e.g. Freising Diözesanmuseum) display a related pattern ensemble.¹¹ Indeed, we know that reliquaries of the True Cross were given by the Serbian

¹¹ Georgievski, Milčo, *Icon Gallery – Ohrid*, Ohrid, Institute for Protection of the Monuments of Culture and National Museum, 1999, cat. nos. 17, 19; Cristina Thieme, & L. Sand, *Kunsttechnische Beobachtungen am Freisinger Lukasbild*, in *Internationales Symposium zum Freisinger Lukasbild*, 21-22 April 2016 (in preparation).

rulers to monasteries in Studenica and Sopoćani throughout the XIIIth century.¹² In sum, this arabesque ornament became popular in every Orthodox land after the Fourth Crusade. Considering that these icon frames are generally dated to the XIVth century, the supposition that the Esztergom frame was also made at this time implies that the central panel might have been made separately and much later than its frame. Considering, furthermore, that enamelwork of this quality is not known to have been typical in the Balkans, the Balkan theory requires also a geographic separation of the central panel and the frame.

It should be noted that there was one region where the gesticulating figure of the “Arab”, the Islamic-inspired geometric ornament, as well as the cloisonné enamel technique, can be collectively accommodated in a XIIIth century imperial milieu: this region is the Empire of Trebizond. Tucked between the Latin Empire, the Seljuq successor states of the Mengujukids of Erzincan and the Artuqids of Diyarbakır, as well as the Caucasian kingdoms, it was in Trebizond that the Komnenian dynasty attempted to reconfigure its concept of empire after 1204. We know one reliquary of the cross, now in the treasury of the Notre Dame in Paris, which was made for an emperor of Trebizond, although it is much more modest than the Esztergom example.¹³ Certainly, there were more. Trebizond had ample resources of silver from local mines as well as a growing wealth from the transit trade of silks from the Mongol Empire, in addition to close access to the best experts of enamel art from neighbouring Georgia.¹⁴ Surviving architectural monuments of Trebizond, first of all the Church of Hagia Sophia, display a wealth of Islamic arabesque patterns, often in squares or roundels like on the Esztergom reliquary (Fig. 5).¹⁵ These “Seljuq” associations on a Christian building have been interpreted either as a display of subservience to the nearby Muslim emirates, or contrary to it, a claim for superiority, which triumphs over all the manifestations of different cultures. In our opinion we see something very similar on the Esztergom reliquary of the cross which therefore might have been made in Trebizond.

12 Antony Eastmond, *Art and Identity in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium, Hagia Sophia and the Empire of Trebizond*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, 59.

13 Eastmond, op. cit., 58, fig. 28.

14 Scott Redford, How Islamic Is It? The Innsbruck Plate and its Setting, *Muqarnas*, 7, 1990, 119-135.

15 Eastmond, op. cit., 79-88, figs. 52-67.



Fig. 6. Silk fragment covering the back of the Esztergom Staurotheke, probably XIVth century, Mamluk Empire, Egypt or Syria, Esztergom Cathedral Treasury. Photograph: Iván Szántó with permission of the Archdiocese of Esztergom-Budapest

Fig. 7. Inscribed silk fragment, XIVth century, Mamluk Empire, Egypt or Syria, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund 1946, acc. 46.156.17. Photograph: Metropolitan Museum of Art

For the third and last foreign feature we need to turn around the reliquary. What we see there is a piece of gold and yellow silk fabric which was cut into the exact size and shape of the reliquary to cover its back (fig. 6). When and where this happened we do not know. Although more than a century of textile research has not yet been able to recover another piece of the same fabric, very similar specimens, originating from the same loom, are known, of which a fragment in Gdansk

must be mentioned.¹⁶ On stylistic and technical grounds, the silk might well have been woven in Mamluk Egypt or Syria; related examples with generic inscriptions in Arabic are also known (fig. 7).¹⁷ Trebizond could have been a convenient location for the creation of the composite object, comprising icon, frame, and textile, as we know it today. Imperial aspirations through the exaltation of the True Cross, expertise in polychrome enamel technique, and the integration of Islamic elements, including the textile, were all readily available in Trebizond after the Fourth Crusade. If this project took place there, it would show us the versatility of this post-Komnenian state and its ability to forge a harmonious whole, at least in art, out of a seemingly irreconcilable diversity. Regardless of the exact place of manufacture, we see how a masterpiece of Byzantine art can accommodate and present the most dissimilar elements in a way that their opposing forces are played out in a pleasing result. On a more general level, the Esztergom reliquary, attributed in this study to the Empire of Trebizond, illustrates the ways in which a society can negotiate, using the creative visual language of its artisans, the perilous geopolitical constraints which were imposed on it by external forces.

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¹⁶ Otto von Falke, *Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei*, Berlin, Ernst Wasmuth, 1921, 34, fig. 307; for a Georgian example of an icon with a silk cover, Nina Chichinadze, *Medieval Georgian Icon Painting*, Tbilisi, G. Chubinashvili National Research Centre for History of Georgian Art and Monument Protection, 2011, cat. no. 9.

¹⁷ Maryam Ekhtiar, Sh. R. Canby, N. Haidar, & P. P. Soucek, ed., *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011, cat. no. 115, 166-167.

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