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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

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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

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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*, *Athanon*, 30, 2012, 7-13.

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