

Larysa Členova

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Series Byzantina 1, 18-26

2003

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A Byzantine Relief “St. George with the Scenes of his Life”

Larysa Členova, National Museum, Kiev

The wooden relief icon *St. George with the Scenes of his Life* belongs to a group of rare Byzantine monuments whose number does not exceed a dozen. Its uniqueness consists not only in the fact that it is executed in such a fragile and short-lived medium as wood, but more importantly in its perfect artistic plasticity. However, the accepted date of its creation – the 12th century – remains insufficiently studied and researched.

St. George... is in fact a discovery of comparatively recent times, though interest in it was shown back in the 19th century.¹ Covered by a silver casing, in which state it had been kept in St. Charalambios's Church in the town of Mariupol for a long period, the monument was practically inaccessible to research. When the casing was removed in 1891,² recognition of the icon was still inadequate. In its single representation in the article by A. Berthier-Delagarde, the relief appeared rough and distorted because of numerous additions filling in missing parts.³ On these grounds, the scholar came to an unconvincing conclusion: he attributed the monument to a provincial workshop in one of the Byzantine provinces and dated it to the late 12th or early 13th centuries. More convincing was the opinion of a well-known Byzantinist Professor N. Pokrovsky who was only able to study the photographs sent to him in 1895. Analyzing the iconography, he established

¹ *Saint George with the Scenes of his Life*. Polychrome and gilding on a gesso-grounded panel; bas-relief. 107 x 82 x 7,5 cm (in casing), National Museum of Ukraine. Cf. L. Členova, *Davne ukrajinske mystectvo 12-18 stolit'*, Kyjiv 1988, p. 21, no 1 (with bibliography); *Šedevry ukrajinskoho ikonopisu XII-XIX st.*, Kyjiv 1999, p. 8.

² As one of the most revered holy relics of the Crimea, the icon was brought to Simferopol during the jubilee celebrations on the millennium of Christianity in the Crimea in 1891.

³ A. L. Berthier-Delagarde, 'K istorii hristianisma v Krymu', *Zapiski Odesskogo obščestva istorii i arheologii*, XXVIII, 1910, pp. 1-71.

the ancient origin of the monument, which could have been executed no later than at the end of the 11th or beginning of the 12th century. The well-known Czech scholar J. Myslivec, who wrote a general fundamental work devoted to the iconography of St. George, also paid attention to the relief.⁴ But he also had to use a reproduction that did not give a true idea of the relief's artistic merits and his interest was concentrated on the iconography of the hagiographical scenes. Myslivec's opinion coincided with the dating by Berthier-Delagarde – the late 12th or early 13th centuries.

Through numerous tragic circumstances, *St. George...* escaped the attention of scholars. After the closure of St. Charalambios's Church in the 1920s, the relief came, along with other Greek antiquities, to the Mariupol Museum of Local Lore. Being remote from major centres of Byzantine cultural studies, it was in danger of complete oblivion. But in 1965 *St. George...* was transferred to the National Museum of Ukraine, which undertook the restoration of this unique monument.

The restoration was carried out during 1965-1970 in one of the largest restoration centres: the studio of the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg under the guidance of N. V. Pertsev, a well-known specialist in ancient icon painting.

At that time the state of the relief, because of poor preservation for many years, and the numerous trials that it had undergone, was recognized to be catastrophic: urgent measures were needed to save it. The efforts of the restorers were directed to the strengthening of the panel which had been seriously damaged by insects, and to the removal of all renovations and additions that distorted the original appearance of the work. Some incurable defects – traces of burning visible at many parts of the relief – do not prevent us from getting a clear conception of the artistic peculiarities of its plasticity. In the restoration process fragments of polychrome painting were found to have been preserved. As research has shown, the paint layer had been repeatedly renovated; at some sections there were four layers, but in most parts two. It is now difficult to form an opinion about the original colour scheme because of its poor preservation. In the wide range of colour, bluish and red tones predominate, which in combination with gold lend the relief harmony and clarity. It is a peculiar synthesis of sculpture and painting, a frequent phenomenon in Byzantine plastic art of that period. The restoration and cleaning of *St. George...* meant a new stage in

⁴ J. Myslivec, 'Svatý Jiří ve východokřesťanskem umění', *Byzantinoslavica*, V, 1933-1934, pp. 304-375.

its history which has given the monument a new life and fame. Only after the reconstruction of its original aspect did serious scientific research become possible, and only then did its role and artistic merits become clear. It was “introduced” into the general development of medieval culture and it drew the attention of art historians who realized its unique importance for Byzantology.

Naturally, the question of its attribution arose. But at that stage, scholars adhered to (or at least did not repudiate) the first conclusions by Berthier-Delagarde and Myslivec who dated the icon to the late 12th or early 13th centuries. This date was established in many publications, beginning from those by H. Lohvyn and L. Milaeva in 1970 (it was they who had rescued the monument).⁵ This dating was also accepted by the well-known Byzantinist A. Bank,⁶ and is in the catalogue of the exhibition “The Glory of Byzantium” held at the Metropolitan Museum in 1997 where *St. George...* was exhibited.⁷ But with a more profound and detailed study of the relief, the date of its creation became “older”. In the Museum’s publications, in particular in the latest album on the Museum collection of icons the date is defined as the 12th century.⁸ L. Milaeva, whose contribution to the study of the relief is especially significant, in her report at the symposium at the Metropolitan Museum advanced a theory about the correctness of N. Pokrovsky’s opinion, who had dated the relief to the late 11th or early 12th centuries.

So, the amplitude of variation in dating the relief was rather considerable and additional research was needed to establish the truth. The method, used for the first time for a monument, was radiocarbon analysis of the panel, made at special laboratories in Holland and the Kiev Center for Radio-geochemical Research. This method was supposed to put an end to the debates that had lasted for more than a century. The result of the research has shown that the date of the creation of *St. George...* is the mid-11th century. No scholar has proposed this date but, in my opinion, it is quite convincing. The entire spectrum of iconographic analysis, of the style of imagery and technical methods substantiates the accuracy of the dating established by isotopic analysis.

⁵ H. Lohvyn, L. Milaeva, ‘Novoe o drevnem ukrainskom iskusstve’, [in:] *Nauka i čelovečestvo*, Moskva 1970, pp. 31-32.

⁶ A. Bank, *L’art byzantin dans les musées de l’Union soviétique*, Leningrad 1985, pp. 322-323, il. 264-266.

⁷ *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era AD 843-1261. The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York 1997, pp. 299-300.

⁸ *Šedevry ukrajinskoho...*, p. 18, no 1.

The iconography of St. George as a young warrior had been formed in the post-iconoclastic period and was widely spread in all countries of the Byzantine region. In the pantheon of the holy warriors, who were of great significance in the Byzantine ideological system, St. George took one of the major places. He represented an idealized embodiment of military valour and courage. In the 11th century the representation of the saint is supplemented by scenes and episodes of his legendary life, thus forming the type and composition of hagiographical icons. The Museum relief belongs to an early and rare variety of hagiographical icons. Its shortened, "abridged" cycle of ten scenes showing the main episodes of the saint's life, his tortures and miracles, and their free treatment testify to the fact that the iconography had not yet acquired a strict canonical system, characterizing the period of its establishment and crystallization.

One of the earliest hagiographical cycles of St. George – the most popular saint in Georgia – known to us is represented on the so-called Mestia silver cross (village of Seti, Svanetia) of the first half of the 11th century.⁹ The chased relief representation of hagiographical scenes (there are nine of them) is the closest analogy to the Museum monument. Also, we cannot but mention an early hagiographical cycle reproduced on the walls of St. George's Chapel in the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Kiev, also of the 11th century.

The first scene from the hagiographical cycle, *St. George before Diocletian and Maximian*, seems to be non-canonical. The representation of the two Roman co-emperors, who carried out the last large-scale persecution of Christians in 303-305, lent the legend of St. George some historical meaning. In literary sources, in particular the Cappadocian version of the legend, this duumvirate is mentioned on the eve of events preceding the persecution.

This very rare treatment of the subject evidently goes back to an early stage of establishing the iconography of thematic cycles that had not yet become a "legitimate" dogma. In all later versions, the representation of Diocletian alone is traditionally used, and thematic cycles eventually expand following a single iconographic scheme.

The dating of the relief to the mid-11th century becomes even better established when analyzing its idiom and artistic devices. This important criterion has always been basic in attributing various works of past times, the more so if it is confirmed by a combination of technical and physical research.

⁹ R. Lange, *Die Byzantinische Reliefikone*, Recklinghausen 1964, pp. 121-122, il. 49, 50.

While attributing *St. George...*, many scholars tried to find analogies, mostly among monuments of wooden sculpture. This method turned out to be ineffective, mainly because of the absence of preserved wooden monuments. Including the wooden reliefs *St. George with the Scenes of his Life* from Castoria (Byzantine Museum, Athens) and *St. George...* from Gallista (Greece) as analogies was untenable because of their complete stylistic difference.¹⁰ Both monuments date from the 13th century and present artistic aspirations of a later epoch.

It is more logical, in my opinion, to examine the Museum relief in the general context of the development of Byzantine sculpture, disregarding the medium of sculpture but proceeding from major artistic tendencies of the time. Byzantine plastic art of the post-iconoclastic period, notwithstanding the ban on sculpture in the round, experienced a new flowering evident in beautiful reliefs executed in different media – marble, bronze, metal, ivory, semi-precious stones, and wood. This heyday was based on the return to the perfect forms of antique sculpture, to the epoch of the so-called Macedonian Renaissance of the 10th-11th centuries, imparting a new meaning to them.

The Museum relief is also permeated with an antique spirit that gives us reason to refer it to this period of Byzantine art. It blends with the epoch when Hellenistic traditions enriched methods of Byzantine plastic art, most obviously in sculpture. There is no doubt that our monument belongs to the classicizing trend covering the period of the 10th-13th centuries. This gives grounds for searching for closer analogies in the art of that time, as well as starting points for the attribution and more correct dating of the monument.

Towards the 11th century, the image of St. George acquired typological features, accumulating in itself the qualities of a young warrior and being embodied in the art not only of Byzantium but of Georgia, Serbia, and Old Rus as well. The figure of St. George on the Museum icon does not deviate from this traditional representation of the saint. In this treatment however a sensual element still prevails, so the representation lacks canonical severity. The Hellenistic beauty of the type, the slender classical proportions and flowing lines of his silhouette create a feeling of free treatment not bound by tradition, which has still retained the principles of ancient plasticity. It is quite evident in the relief despite lacunae and other damage.

¹⁰ *The Glory of Byzantium...*, nos. 79, 80, pp. 131-132, 133-134.

The three-dimensional modeling of figures, the freedom of their distribution in space, their gestures and movements – everything in the relief is permeated by the sense of reality that Byzantine masters had retained, being inspired by antique patterns.

In search of stylistic analogies, I have turned to works of ivory that had attained the peak of perfection at the turn of the 11th century, embodying ideals of antique sculptural form. Perhaps this comparison may seem to be unexpected and even daring, but the analysis of artistic peculiarities and technical devices of carving, more similar than in other media, gives grounds for such a comparison.

A wide cohort of Byzantine holy warriors was portrayed in ivory reliefs in famous triptychs *The Deesis with the Saints* of the late 10th – mid-11th centuries from Venice, the Vatican and the Louvre. St. George from the famous Harbaville triptych (Louvre, 11th century), set in the upper register to the right of the Deesis, is notable for the peculiar beauty of his antique type and belongs to the early portrayals of the saint which could be the prototype of St. George from the Museum relief. Among numerous relief representations of the saint dating from that time and made in different media – marble, chased metal, and especially in small sculptures – wooden reliefs are more comparable with articles of ivory by the technical devices of carving and softness of the medium. Their comparison nevertheless should not be taken straightforwardly. The simpler and more laconic manner of the wooden relief ranks below the refined and exquisite technique of ivory carving with its intricate details. Nevertheless, this allows us to see the stylistic and typological affinity of representations derived from a common artistic and aesthetic ideal. This is of great importance for the attribution of the Museum monument.

Everything mentioned above also applies to the borders with hagiographical scenes. Made in high relief and placed on both sides of the central figure, they are an integral part of the icon. They characterize that early period of formation of the hagiographical icon when a basic iconographic scheme and compositional structure had already been established. The compositions of hagiographical scenes representing episodes of the saint's martyrdom and miracles are worked out according to the iconographic scheme but they have retained a certain freedom – the surface is filled with moving and gesticulating figures presented in classical proportions. Reproducing the forms of the figures, their movement, foreshortening and space, the master followed those principles of constructing the relief where antique reminiscences were still alive. He was probably familiar with ancient



Fig. 1. St. George, wooden relief, National Museum of Ukraine, Kiev

sculpture, judging from the treatment of the scene *Overthrowing of the Idols*. A high round column serving as a pedestal for the sculpture is treated in three dimensions; in later variants and compositions this is not repeated.

So, the all-round analysis of *St. George...* with the use of radio-carbon dating has permitted us to draw a convincing conclusion concerning its date. The significance of this discovery is quite evident. Incorrect opinions about its having been influenced by romanesque art, which was not characteristic of that time, can no longer be maintained. This icon has retained

in many respects a more lively sculptural technique, which in Byzantine art eventually became a strict dogmatic and flattened treatment.

St. George... comes from the medieval Crimea. It got its name of the “Mariupol relief” much later, in connection with the last place where it was kept. The proposed identification of the place of its original location – St. George’s Monastery in Balaklava – is the most plausible at present and has not been refuted. Attempts to identify it with the miracle-working icon that saved Greek sailors who suffered a shipwreck near Cape Fiolent, at the site of which a monastery was later built, seem to be very doubtful. But the legend associated with it favoured the popularity of the relief as one of the major and most revered holy relics of the Crimea. This, however, did not save the monument from “banishment”; it shared the fate of the Greeks exiled in 1778–1779 to the coast of the Sea of Azov, where they built the town of Mariupol. The subsequent fate of the monument can be traced briefly. Sources mention that it was first kept at the residence of the Greek Metropolitan Ignatios and that later it was set above his burial place. In 1848 it was transferred from the old Cathedral of St. Charalambios into the newly built one where it was clad in a silver casing and stayed there till the closure of the cathedral. The Crimean provenance of the relief does not rule out its Byzantine origin but on the contrary supports it. Balaklava, a suburb of Sevastopol, also situated near to old Korsun (Chersonesos) – the main stronghold of Byzantine culture – has an indisputable significance for defining its sources and roots. That is why it is not so important whether the relief was created in one of Constantinople workshops (which seems to be most likely), or made by a visiting Greek master in the Crimea. In any case, it is an excellent example of Byzantine plastic art, having a unique importance.

No records have survived of where and how the relief was placed in St. George’s Cathedral. In the absence of sources, it is doubtful whether we can clear up the question. Still it is known that despite the priority of monumental painting and icons, sculpture also played a certain role at that time. Relief polychrome representations of the saints were close to icons in their significance and were a part of the general ensemble of church decoration. Beginning from the 9th century, medallions with representations of saints made in marble, bronze or other metal decorated the architraves of altar rails in Byzantine churches. The latest researches confirm the existence not only of marble but also wooden templons, prototypes of later iconostases.

In the 11th-12th centuries large relief plates were either placed between the columns of altar rails, attached to the architrave, or on pillars; as the iconostasis was developed they were supplanted by icons. In the Crimea, however, as in medieval Greece, the tradition of decorating churches with sculptured reliefs turned out to be more lasting and was been retained into the 14th century. None of the representations of St. George, much revered and popular in the Crimea, resembles our monument; the saint is more frequently represented mounted. This monument stands apart in Byzantine art as well, because no analogies to it have been found.

The relief belongs to the period when sculptural representations played a notable part in the artistic decoration of churches, before the introduction of the iconostasis. Its significance is fully evident in the grandeur of artistic ideas that characterize art of one of the most brilliant epochs in the development of Byzantine culture.