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THE HOLY AND GREAT MONASTERY OF VATOPAIDI

Enkolpia



**THE HOLY AND GREAT MONASTERY OF VATOPAIDI
MOUNT ATHOS 2001**

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Cast bronze
H. 52 - W. 35
6th-7th century

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Flat, cast bronze pectoral cross, with a suspension ring. The arms, slightly flaring, end in pear-shaped extensions. The surface is punched with circular cavities surrounded by circles.

The form of this item links it to a specific group of crosses attributed to the sixth and seventh centuries. One reliably dated item of this group is the Dumbarton Oaks cross with a miniature Christological scene in intaglio, characteristic of sixth and seventh-century metalwork.¹ Other close parallels are provided by Coptic crosses such as those at the University College in London² and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto,³ dated to the sixth-eighth century. One can also note a similar cross with circle ornamentation, suspended by a chain, which served as a decorative motif for the breast fragment of a Coptic tunic, in Brooklyn Museum, New York.⁴ Crosses of the same type

were also widespread in Byzantium. A pectoral cross almost identical to the one at hand, with the same punched circle decoration, comes from a tomb discovered in the region of Ankara.⁵ A second close parallel, found in Pitiunt on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, is dated to the fifth-sixth century.⁶ Another similar example from the Stathatos collection has an arch-shaped border.⁷ Concurrently to their use as pectorals, crosses of analogous type also decorated a wide range of objects such as bronze lamp handles.⁸ Furthermore, a pair of marble screens from the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Nicaea, bearing each a carved cross with semi-circular protrusions similar to the Vatopaidi cross, have been dated to the beginning of the eighth century and thought to be contemporary to the building phase of the church.⁹ Although on the whole the preceding parallel cases take us to

the period prior to iconoclasm, the discovery of a cross of a similar type in Corinth, in a context attributed to the tenth-twelfth century,¹⁰ leads us to assume that the production of aniconic crosses with pear-shaped extensions continued in all periods. Nevertheless, the characteristic design of the protruding ends allow us to favour a pre-iconoclastic date for the Vatopaidi cross.

Flat crosses of this type were cast in bi-valve moulds of stone or terracotta. Terracotta specimens dated to the early Christian period were discovered in the excavations of Delphi.¹¹ Furthermore, the stone most frequently employed is schist.¹² One schist mould destined for casting an aniconic cross is in the collection of Schnütgen Museum in Cologne. Steatite was also used for making this type of mould.¹³

B. P.



Christ Crucified - Virgin *orans*

Cast bronze

H. 93 - W. 40 - T. 11

11th-12th century



Bronze pectoral reliquary cross. The Latin cross with flaring arms and straight terminals consists of two hollow sides joined by hinges. The suspension loop moves freely through the upper rivet. The holes seen on the surface of the front side may have been made in order to let the fragrance of the relics escape (see No. 56).¹ The study of dedicatory inscriptions on more elaborate reliquaries, as well as investigation in church inventories both indicate that these crosses contained various holy relics in addition to the fragment of True Cross.² The few pieces that have kept their content show bone fragments covered with a dusty substance or small pieces of pebbles mixed with earth.³

The bilateral decoration in high relief is cast. The obverse shows Christ Crucified in a colobium, with the head slightly inclined to the right. He appears between two busts, each at a terminal of the vertical arm. Two heads inserted under his arms depict the Virgin and John, usually present at the scene. On the reverse, the Virgin *orans* is surrounded by four busts which may correspond to the Evangelists. The Virgin

is wrapped in a *maphorion*, crossing on the breast and falling lengthwise over a tunic with vertical folds. An item practically identical to the present one was discovered in a reliquary box under the altar of St Stephen's near Fiano in Rome.⁴ Yet another similar specimen is kept in Chicago.⁵ These three crosses belong to a group of reliquary crosses coming from the Balkans and discovered in eleventh and twelfth-century archaeological contexts.⁶ This local production can easily be distinguished from the one imported from Asia Minor in the same period. The main differences between the Balkan specimens and those coming from Asia Minor lie in their forms. The Balkan specimens have a shorter transversal arm than those from Asia Minor. Other differences are iconographic. On the Asia Minor models, the busts surrounding the Virgin *orans* are enclosed in medallions and identified with the Evangelists' initials. The Balkan examples present the busts freely, without the *nomina sacra*. On the Asia Minor pieces, Christ Crucified is always flanked by full-length, although somewhat shortened, figures of the

Virgin and John, inserted in the reduced space of the horizontal arm. Moreover, the terminals of the vertical arm bear iconographic details of the Crucifixion as the *tabula ansata*, the symbols of sun and moon, and the suppedaneum, instead of the bust figures which are seen on the reliquary crosses from the Balkans.⁷

The extensive spread of Byzantine reliquary crosses in the Balkan peninsula, especially during the eleventh century, can be interpreted as a result of movements of Byzantine armies. However, this hypothesis, although very probable, remains restrictive. The prophylactic value ascribed to these objects, originating from the sacred relics which were contained, the type of the cross and its decoration, made them an extremely important element of private devotion among the Byzantines. A study of the find-spots of these items shows that they were worn not only by men and women but also by children, in life and in death.⁸

B. P.



16 MULTI-LOBED ENKOLPION

Christ in bust

Agate cameo, filigree, engraved gold(?),
precious(?) stones, pearls

H. 74 - W. 64 - T. 15

Cameo: 12th century

Mount: Late 15th century(?)

Arch-shaped cameo of two-layered agate. It is difficult to discern the bust of Christ due to the worn out and chipped surface of the cameo. His torso, wrapped in a mantle, is carved

on the white layer of the stone and contrasts with the orange background. The slender proportions of the figure and the style of its carving recall twelfth century cameos, such as the am-

ethyst at the Benaki Museum¹ and the sapphire cameo at Dumbarton Oaks.²

B. P.



The cameo is set in the middle of a gold plate formed by a combination of a quatrefoil and a rectangle. It is framed by four polished stones in plain collets (two of them have not survived) alternating with an equal number of pearls. The composition is enclosed in a row of small pearls which follows the shape of the cameo. In the semi-circles and angles of the border, pin-set pearls alternate with four polished stones (two are missing), held by claws in plain collets. On the surfaces between the stones, there are spirals of fine twisted wire with dense symmetrical shoots; the pearls are pinned to the centre of a wire rosette. The intervening spaces are filled in with filigree ornaments. On the reverse, the plate is engraved with a Golgotha cross

and the inscription IC XC NI/KA (Jesus Christ conquers), enclosed in an engraved scroll with stylised leaves. The pins which hold the pearls on the front in place are visible. The hinged suspension system fixed on the reverse is decorated with large irregular pearls.

The filigree decoration could be described as rather skilful, but the placing of the work in terms of date and place presents difficulties, since, with the exception of the mounting of enkolpion No. 24, other parallel examples with the same characteristics are not known. In works of Russian goldsmithing of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the wire is double and twisted as it is here, but the filler wire units are set in a different manner.¹ Similar filigree work

is, however, to be found on objects of the late fifteenth century, from the time of Stephen the Great, Prince of Moldavia (1457-1502), and particularly on the *hexapteryga* which Stephen himself dedicated to the Monasteries of Zo-graphou on Mount Athos (1488, now in the Monastery of St John on Patmos) and Putna in Romania (1497).² The engraved scroll on the reverse also has similarities to the vegetal motifs which decorate the embossed medallions on these *hexapteryga*, and on a pair which this prince may have donated to the Vatopaidi Monastery.³ The plethora of filigree motifs and the decorative elements on the frame, instead of enhancing the small cameo, in the end work against it.

Y. I.-P.

