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Giornale di cultura artistica



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Seminario di Storia dell'arte medievale
Repertorio *Opere firmate nell'arte italiana · Medioevo*

Scuola Normale Superiore
PISA

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Forme e significati della 'firma' d'artista.
Contributi sul Medioevo, fra premesse classiche e prospettive moderne

a cura di
MARIA MONICA DONATO

THE ARTIST'S SIGNATURE IN BYZANTIUM.
SIX ICONS BY IOANNES TOHABI IN SINAI MONASTERY
(11TH-12TH CENTURY)

MARIA LIDOVA

Byzantine art was considered intrinsically anonymous for rather a long time. This misconception partly owed its longevity to two extremities in the perception of Byzantium. To those who succumbed to its hypnotic charm and created its idealized image under the impact of the romantic world-perception, Byzantium was the exemplary state. To others, supporters of the positivist vision of the world, it was a marginal barbaric land. The former regarded it as excessively pious, while the latter as too backward to endow an artist with a conscious mental outlook.

Both these stances were erroneous. In fact, the profound religious background of Byzantine art and the centuries-long theological tradition, which had ever since the time of iconoclastic disputes promoted the idea of true religious images being created mainly through divine not human effort, appeared to leave no room to the manifestation of the artistic personality in Byzantine culture. It all resulted in the delusion that the recognition of one's authorship was a manifestation of sinful vanity, essentially antagonistic to the Eastern Christian tradition.

A closer analysis of the extant artistic heritage, however, reveals ample testimony of the names of Byzantine masters engaged in every sphere of the arts from architecture, painting and sculpture to illuminated manuscripts, jewelry and luxury items. The evidence of their broad involvement in these activities has come down to us both in historic sources and in artists' signatures as the most precise and positive indications of authorship.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to His Beatitude the Archbishop Damianos for the permission to study the icons and to thank the *skeuophylax* Father Porphyrius and the head of the library Father Justin for their help and support.

Researchers of Byzantine culture are only starting consistent studies of this theme¹ unlike their colleagues who deal with the Medieval art of the West, where numerous studies of the significance of the artistic personality have been made². This belated start enables us to correct many wrong assumptions at the earliest stage – in particular, the ideas of the importance, function and typology of the artist's signature on the surface of the art work.

Of major importance under this respect is the methodological approach advanced in recent years by Maria Monica Donato for the study of Medieval Italian art³. According to Donato, we should not limit our studies to the sheer reading and decoding of the text, because not only the content of the signature matters but also its place, manner of writing, linguistic characteristics and historical context. As I see it, the application of this method to Byzantine art can enrich our idea of the artist's role in the Eastern Christian world, and reveal unique instances of artist's signatures occurring solely in Byzantium, alongside numerous typological examples it shared with Western art.

As said above, the first significant essays at studying artists' signatures and inscriptions mentioning their names were made quite recently. Greek scholar Sophia Kalopissi-Verti inestimably contributed to the analysis of the artist's personality in Byzantium⁴. Her academic interests in the

¹ *To πορτραίτο του καλλιτέχνη στο Βυζάντιο* [The portrait of the artist in Byzantium], ed. by M. Vassilaki, Heraklion 1997; F. PONTANI, *L'artista bizantino: un panorama*, in *Όπώρα. Studi in onore di mgr. Paul Canart per il LXX compleanno*, a cura di S. Lucà, L. Perria, «Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata», n.s. 53, 1999, pp. 151-172; *L'artista a Bisanzio e nel mondo cristiano-orientale*, atti delle giornate di studio (Pisa 2003), a cura di M. Bacci, Pisa 2007.

² The role of the artist and general issues related to the artistic productions in Medieval Europe are widely discussed in scholarly literature. Only few especially relevant collections of articles can be mentioned here: *Artistes, artisans et production artistique au Moyen Âge*, colloque international (Rennes 1983), 3 voll., éd. par X. Barral i Altet, Paris 1986-1990; *Artifex bonus: il mondo dell'artista medievale*, a cura di E. Castelnuovo, Roma-Bari 2004.

³ The project entitled *Opere firmate nell'arte italiana / Medioevo* is being carried under the direction of Maria Monica Donato at Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. See: *Le opere e i nomi. Prospettive sulla 'firma' medievale*, a cura di M.M. Donato, Pisa 2000; M.M. DONATO, *Il progetto 'Opere firmate nell'arte italiana / Medioevo': ragioni, linee, strumenti. Prima presentazione*, in *L'artista medievale*, atti del convegno internazionale di studi (Modena 1999), a cura di Ead., «Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa», s. 4, Quaderni 16, Pisa 2008, pp. 365-400.

⁴ S. KALOPISSI-VERTI, *Painters in late Byzantine society. The evidence of church inscriptions*, «Cahiers archéologiques», 42, 1994, pp. 139-158; EAD., *Painter's portraits in Byzantine art*, «Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας» [«Bulletin of the Christian Archaeological Society»], 17, 1994, pp. 129-142; EAD., *Οι ζωγράφοι στην ύστερη βυζαντινή κοινωνία. Η μαρτυρία των επιγραφών* [Painters in late Byzantine society. The evidence of epigraphs], in *To πορτραίτο του καλλιτέχνη στο Βυζάντιο* [The portrait of the artist in

field started mainly with the images of donors, among which artists' self-portraits occurred. The researcher's attention was drawn to 13th- and 14th-century monumental painting, most of which survived in the Greek lands. Her monograph on dedicatory inscriptions and donor portraits in the 13th-century Greek churches mentions seven instances in which *ktetor's* inscriptions preserved the names of artists who took part in church decoration, and several references to masons⁵. The classification proposed by Kalopissi-Verti for short notices and texts accompanying the name of a painter in church inscriptions possesses a number of interesting insights and very important observations⁶. Of major significance are also the works of Serbian art historian Branislav Todić, who conducted detailed studies on artists' signatures in the Serbian painting of the late Byzantine period and on 16th-century Russian icons⁷.

Even these preliminary studies of signatures made by Byzantine artists in many languages and in the most diverse artistic contexts give an idea of the richness and versatility of this textual material. Signatures left on icons are especially intriguing, as images of saints painted on wooden panels always possessed a unique status in Byzantium. Their perception formed under the impact of the many miraculous icons, most of which were traditionally presumed to be made through divine intercession. The ability to stream myrrh, heal and even act without human participation was ascribed to icons. Every iconic image possessed a sacral aura, the status of inviolacy (icons

Byzantium], Heraklion 2000, pp. 121-159; EAD., *Painters' information on themselves in late Byzantine church inscriptions*, in *L'artista a Bisanzio*, pp. 55-70.

⁵ EAD., *Dedicatory inscriptions and donors portraits in thirteenth-century churches of Greece*, Wien 1992, p. 26.

⁶ EAD., *Painters' information*, pp. 58-68.

⁷ B. TODIĆ, 'Signatures' des peintres Michel Astrapas et Eutychios. Fonction et signification, in *Αφιέρωμα στη μνήμη του Σωτήρη Κίσσα* [Studies in memory of Sotiris Kissas], Thessaloniki 2001, pp. 643-662; ID., *Nadpisi s imenami hudojnikov v russkoy živopisi XVI veka* [Inscriptions with the names of painter in the Russian painting of the 16th century], in *Drevnerusskoe iskusstvo pozdnego Srednevekovia. XVI vek* [Ancient Russian art of late Middle Ages. 16th century], Saint Petersburg 2003, pp. 202-211; ID., *Lichni zapisi slikara* [Personal inscriptions of painters], in *Privatni život u srpskim zemljama srednjeg veka* [Private life in medieval Serbia], ed. by S. Marjanović-Dushanić et al., Beograd 2004, pp. 493-524. The question of Michael Astrapas' and Eutychios' signatures has been recently reconsidered in a paper by Miodrag Marković: M. MARKOVIĆ, *Umetnichka delatnost Mikhaila i Evtikhija. Sadashn'a znan'a, sporna pitan'a i pravtsi buduchih istrjivan'a* [Michael's and Eutychios's Artistic Work. Present Knowledge, Dubious Issues and Direction of Future Research], «Zbornik Narodnog muzeia» [Recueil du Musée National], 17/2, 2004, pp. 95-117.

could not be destroyed or damaged), and a miracle-working potential. All the more spectacular, then, are traces of human authorship left in icons as Byzantine artists' signatures.

The most fascinating example of this evidence is perhaps a complex of six icons forming a unique group of panels that I would like to discuss here.

- 1 Four of the images are calendar icons. A fifth represents the *Last Judgment* while the last one bears a unique combination of five miraculous icons of the *Mother of God* and a narrative cycle dedicated to the *Miracles and Passion*
- 2 of *Christ*. The design of the reverse is common to all the six. There is a cross set against a bright red background in the centre of each, with an acronym to its sides, consisting of the initial letters of well-known liturgical lines⁸. To the top and the bottom of the cross is a text written in white Greek majuscule letters, which stands out against the red background.

These icons were published all together for the first time in George and Maria Sotiriou's catalogue in 1956-1958⁹. A wide range of opinions have been advanced for their dating since then. Kurt Weitzmann, just as Sotiriou, ascribed them to the latter half of the 11th century¹⁰, while Doula Mouriki and Nicolette Trahoulia attempted to date them to the first half of the 12th century¹¹.

The most peculiar characteristic of these icons is the author's personal project implemented in them. They were painted by a Georgian monk who lived in Saint Catherine's monastery, most probably, in the late 11th century into the beginning of the 12th. His name, Ioannes Tohabi, and status of hieromonk came down to this day thanks to an epigram accompanying

⁸ The four calendar icons, for example, have the following acronyms: Ξ Ζ Σ Κ (Ξύλον ζωῆς σωτηρία κόσμου), Α Π Μ Σ (Ἀρχὴ πίστεως μυστηρίου σταυρός), Ε Ε Ε Ε (Ἐλένη εὖρε ἐλέους ἔρεισμα), Χ Χ Χ Χ (Χριστὸς χάριν Χριστιανοῖς χαρίζει).

⁹ M. SOTIRIOU, G. SOTIRIOU, *Eikónes tῆς Μονῆς Σινᾶ* (Icônes du mont Sinâ), 2 voll., Athènes 1956-1958, I, 1956, figg. 136-143, 146-150, II, 1958, pp. 121-123, 125-130.

¹⁰ K. WEITZMANN, *Byzantine miniature and icon painting in the eleventh century*, in *Studies in classical and Byzantine manuscript illumination*, ed. by H. Kessler, Chicago-London 1971, pp. 271-313, in part. 296-304; ID., *The icon. Holy images – Sixth to fourteenth century*, New York 1978, p. 73, pl. 17. This date was supported by G. Galavaris; see: *Sinai. Treasures of the monastery of Saint Catherine*, Athens 1990, pp. 99-100; ID., *An eleventh century Hexaptych of the Saint Catherine's monastery at mount Sinai*, Venice-Athens 2009.

¹¹ D. MOURIKI, *La présence géorgienne au Sinâ d'après le témoignage des icônes du monastère de Sainte-Catherine*, in *Βυζάντιο και Γεωργία. Καλλιτεχνικές και πολιτιστικές σχέσεις. Συμπόσιο* [Byzantium and Georgia. Artistic and cultural relationships. Symposium], Athens 1991, pp. 39-40; N. TRAHOULIA, *The truth in painting: a refutation of heresy in a Sinai icon*, «Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik», 52, 2002, pp. 271-285. The same dating has been proposed in A. LIDOV, *Vizantijskie ikoni Sinaia* [Byzantine icons of Sinai], Athens 1999, p. 60.

one of the six panels. The origin of the painter is revealed in the bilingual captions running near the figures of the depicted saints. They are made in two languages, Greek and Georgian, and come as the most spectacular evidence of the icons belonging to a crossroad of several cultures.

Let us start by describing the complex with the tetrptych formed by four calendar icons. The plots portrayed are directly linked with *Vitae* texts – in particular but not only, with an updated complete version of the *Menologion*. Made by Symeon Metaphrastes in the end of the 10th century, it was a compendium of concise lives of the saints and martyrs for every day of the year. Its appearance was of tremendous significance. First, excerpts from it were recited in church on a daily arrangement in honor of the saint worshipped that day. Second, it promoted the creation of a number of new iconographic cycles, in which the long and monotonous narration characteristic of the *Menologion*, which divided the liturgical year into independent semantic parts, received an unprecedented artistic embodiment¹². The most unconventional treatment of all was found for the icons. It was determined by the necessity of creating an integral pictorial image that would bring numerous scenes together within a limited space¹³, scenes mostly placed on different pages in the illuminated manuscripts.

This treatment is also characteristic of the four calendar Sinai icons. Every icon is divided in nine horizontal stripes, each of them usually displaying ten small scenes. Each icon thus reflects the lives of three months of the year. The Sinai tetrptych represents all martyrs at the instant of their cruel death, while the other saints are depicted frontally, standing full-size. The hagiographical scenes are arranged in a precise chronological order, eventually interrupted with representations of the Feasts. The first icon begins with Simeon Stylites, celebrated on September 1st, the beginning of the Byzantine liturgical year. Accompanying each saint is a caption bearing his name and specifying either his martyrdom or peaceful death.

3

4

¹² WEITZMANN, *Byzantine miniature*, pp. 281-285; N. ŠEVČENKO, *Illustrated manuscripts of the Metaphrastian Menologion*, Chicago 1990; P. MIJOVIĆ, *Menolog*, Beograd 1973.

¹³ On calendar icons, see: WEITZMANN, *Byzantine miniature*, pp. 296-304; MIJOVIĆ, *Menolog*, pp. 218-220; K. WEITZMANN, *Icon programs of the 12th and 13th centuries at Sinai*, «Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας», 12, 1986, pp. 107-112; H. BELTING, *Likeness and presence: a history of the image before the era of art*, Chicago 1994, pp. 249-256; N. ŠEVČENKO, *Marking holy time: the Byzantine calendar icons*, in *Byzantine icons: art, technique and technology*, ed. by M. Vassilaki, Heraklion 2002, pp. 51-62.

5 The next icon of the complex is dedicated to the *Last Judgment*, whose iconography, just as that of calendar icons, took final shape in Byzantine art as late as the 11th century¹⁴, that is, shortly before the painting of the icon under consideration. This scene immediately became widespread as west wall church decoration. The iconographic treatment of the *Second Coming* we see in the Sinai icon bases primarily on the vision of Daniel and fairly accurately reflects the Scriptural text, focused on the image of the fiery stream springing from the throne of the Ancient of Days. The stream compositionally divides the icon in two. To the right of the Savior are the groups of the righteous and saints arranged according to their status in the Church hierarchy: among them the prophets, martyrs, bishops, monks and holy women. To the left of Christ are scenes of sinners' torments.

6 The last icon of the cycle is a combined representation of several subjects, unique in its kind. The *Miracles of Christ* are depicted in the centre of the panel, arranged in four horizontal rows. The two bottom rows continue the narratives complementing the *Passion* cycle. The top row displays the five
7 principal Byzantine miraculous icons of the *Mother of God*. All except the central image of the enthroned *Virgin holding the Child Christ* in her lap are inscribed by their Greek name: *Blachernitissa*, *Hodegetria*, *Hagiosoritissa* and *Chemevti*¹⁵. These icons of the Virgin are mutually contrasted, in a way. To the left are images of the two principal Constantinopolitan icons, which show the *Mother of God* with the Child Christ in her arms, and express the theme of Incarnation¹⁶. The two other icons to the right embody another iconographic type, which discloses the role of Mary as the principal advocate before the Lord. The contrast is also manifested in the color treatment of the vestments of the *Theotokos* – the icons to the left represent her in a red *maphorion*, while those to the right in a blue one.

¹⁴ B. BRENN, *Die Anfänge der Byzantinische Weltgerichtsdarstellung*, «Byzantinische Zeitschrift», 57, 1964, pp. 106-126; M. ANGEBEN, *Les Jugements derniers byzantins des XIe-XIIe siècles et l'iconographie du jugement immediate*, «Cahiers Archéologiques», 50, 2002, pp. 105-134; *Alfa e Omega. Il Giudizio Universale tra Oriente e Occidente*, a cura di V. Pace, Milano 2006.

¹⁵ For general analysis of these images besides already cited works, see: A. WEYL CARR, *Icons and the object of pilgrimage in middle Byzantine Constantinople*, «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 56, 2002, pp. 77-81.

¹⁶ I. ZERVOU TOGNAZZI, *L'iconografia e la 'vita' delle miracolose icone della Theotokos Brefokratoussa: Blachernitissa e Odighitria*, «Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata», n.s. 40, 1986, pp. 215-287.

As it was already mentioned, the Sinai complex, with its sophisticated theological content, was inspired by a profoundly personal project, whose conceptual depth and complex message is clearly emphasized by the five epigrams and two self-portraits of the artist¹⁷. Four of the epigrams, in Greek, are on the reverse of all the six panels and have a unified artistic treatment. The inscription on the four calendar panels is the most unconventional of all. Consisting of eight lines, the epigram is evenly split among all the four icons. The text begins in the upper part of the icon dedicated to the summer months, which chronologically ends the cycle, then it proceeds from icon to icon. When the top of all the four panels is filled, the inscription goes back to the first icon to continue in the bottom of the tetrptych:

Τετραμερῇ φάλαγγα κλεινῶν μαρτύρων
 σὺν τῷ προφητῶν καὶ θεηγόρων στίφει
 <πάν>των θυηπόλων τε καὶ μονοτρόπων
 στηλογραφήσας εὐστόχως Ἰω(άννης)
 πρέσβεις ταχεῖς ἀφῆκε πρὸς τὸν δεσπότην
 τούτου λαβεῖν τὸ λύτρον ὥνπερ ἐσφάλῃ¹⁸.

[The four-part phalanx of glorious martyrs
 together with a multitude of prophets and theologians,
 all priests and monks successfully painted Ioannes
 as he sent them as prompt mediators before the Lord
 in order to receive redemption from what he is sinful of].

It would be unreasonable to make this inscription unfolding from icon to icon if the artist expected from the start that the panels would be divided in the church or hung on the wall forever to make the reverse invisible. It would be possible, on the contrary, to read the whole of the inscription and restore the epigram from the beginning to its end if the four icons were placed close to each other. Therefore, they should have been installed for the

¹⁷ The presence of the epigrams and the self portraits on these icons was already analyzed in the article: KALOPISSI-VERTI, *Painter's portraits*, pp. 134-136.

¹⁸ Andreas Rhoby has just recently reconstructed the correct order of the lines of this epigram. After George and Maria Sotiriou these verses were often reproduced with the last two lines wrongly interchanged. I would like to thank Andreas Rhoby for sharing with me his ideas on the matter and allowing me to consult the unpublished chapters on the epigrams of the six icons by Ioannes Tohabi from the forthcoming second volume of the corpus on byzantine epigrams. See: A. RHOBY, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Ikonen und Objekten der Kleinkunst*, in *Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung*, 4 voll., hrsg. von W. Hörandner, A. Rhoby, A. Paul, II, forthcoming.

reverse to be as well seen as the obverse. According to the original concept, the obverse of the chronologically arranged icons illustrated all the events of the liturgical year, while the reverse allowed to read the epigram, in which Ioannes prayed for grace and salvation to the infinite number of saints and martyrs he painted.

8 The reverse of the icon with five images of the *Mother of God* bears two epigrams, one of which concerns the icons of the *Virgin*:

[Πό]θω [μον]αστῆς εὐτε(λῆς) Ἰω(άννης)
 τὰς ἱερὰς ἔγραψε ταύτ(ας) εἰ[κόνας]
 [ἄ]ς κ(αὶ) δόμῳ δέδοκε [τ]ῷ π[οθοῦ]μέν[ω]
 [εὐρῶν] ἀνεξάλειπτον ἐν τούτῳ χάριν
 τ(ῇν) [μητ]ρικὴν ἔντευξιν [ῶ] τέκ[νον δέχου]
 κ(αὶ) παντελῇ λύτρωσιν ἀμπλακη[μά]τ(ων)
 [αἰτου]μένῳ βράβευσον οἰκτρῷ πρεσβύτ(η)¹⁹.

[The humble monk Ioannes
 painted with desire these holy images
 which he gave to the famous church
 where he found everlasting grace.
 O Child, accept maternal intercession
 and grant full redemption from sins
 to the pitiable old man who asks it²⁰].

The other epigram refers to the scenes of the *Miracles and Passion of Christ*:

Τὰ κοσμοσωτήρια σοῦ πάθ(η) Λόγε
 σὺν τοῖς ὑπὲρ νοῦν κ(αὶ) λόγον τερα[στί]οις
 [γράφ]α[ς μ]οναχὸς(ς) εὐφύως Ἰω(άννης)
 ἐρυθροβαφῇ πταισμάτων αἰτεῖ λύ[σιν].

[Thy salvific Passion, o Word, with miracles too great
 to be conceived by the mind and expressed by words,
 were beautifully painted in red by the monk Ioannes,
 who implores for forgiveness for his sins²¹].

¹⁹ Cited transcription and reconstruction was made by W. Hörandner and A. Rhoby. See: A. RHOBY, W. HÖRANDNER, *Beobachtungen zu zwei inschriftlich erhaltenen Epigrammen*, «Byzantinische Zeitschrift», 100, 2007, pp. 162-167. For other transcriptions see: SOTIRIOU, SOTIRIOU, *Εἰκόνες τῆς Μονῆς Σινῶ*, II, p. 128; KALOPISSI-VERTI, *Painter's portraits*, pp. 134-135.

²⁰ The cited English translation of this epigram is by N. Trahoulia. See: TRAHOULIA, *The truth in painting*, pp. 272-273.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The Greek epigram extant on the reverse of the *Last Judgment* icon also runs above and below the cross, saying:

Ὡς Δανιὴλ προεῖδε φρικώδη κρί(σιν)
 ὃ παντάναξ ἄβυσσε τῆς εὐσπλαχνίας
 εἰς νοῦν βαλὼν γράψας τε πλαξὶ καρδίας
 Ἰω(άννης) δύστηνος ἐν μονοτρόποις
 σεπτῶς ἀνιστόρησε σὴν παρουσίαν
 αἰτῶν δυσωπῶν σοῦ τυχεῖν παντεργάτα
 οἰκτίρμονος μάλιστα μὴ κριτοῦ τότε.

[As Daniel, who foresaw Thy terrible Last Judgment,
 o Almighty Abyss of Mercy, having it in mind
 and written on the tablets of his heart,
 the miserable among the monks Ioannes
 has reverentially painted Thy Second Advent,
 importunes Thee, o Maker of the Universe,
 to be merciful not wrathful Judge on that day].

All epigrams on the reverse of the icons are written in dodecasyllable meter and in exquisite Greek. Their character and content allow us to assume that Ioannes himself was their author. As the texts testify, he was also the painter of the images. His superb Greek and gift of making refined poetry show that Ioannes was an erudite intellectual who probably spent a long time in Constantinople²².

No doubt, the epigrams were composed for the icons. They make precise references to the subjects of the panels. The text of the prayer echoes the painted image, and occasionally complements it. The epigram of the calendar icons clearly refers to a four-part structure, the tetraptych. In the icon of the *Last Judgment*, the artist compares his painted image with Prophet Daniel's image created in text. All epigrams end with Ioannes' traditional prayer to the portrayed saints for forgiveness, intercession and mercy, evidently having always in mind the *Last Judgment*. As the iconic images represent *de facto* the entire Church in Heaven and on earth, his supplication acquires a universal scope and the icons come as an effective instrument that Ioannes conceived and made in the hope of being saved.

From what we can gather, his sophisticated signature written as a poetic

²² KALOPISSI-VERTI, *Painter's portraits*, pp. 134-136.

devotional text could not represent an independent genre or a widespread Byzantine artistic phenomenon. Its appearance in the Sinai icons under consideration was predetermined by a unique situation in which the icon painter combined the artist's and the donor's functions. In fact, a conventional practice in Byzantium was to leave an epigram in a work of art to preserve the donor's memory²³, a tradition which finds numerous examples in decorations of different monuments contemporaneous to the Sinai icons.

9 Besides the Greek epigram on the reverse, the icon of the *Last Judgment* bears on the obverse an epigram of seven lines in Georgian. Placed under the throne of the Savior and running to the two sides of the fiery stream, it reads:

ქ. მ(ე)უფ(ე)ო ი[ეს]ო[ვ] | ქ(რ)ისტ(ე), მეორედ მო
სლვასა შ(ე)ნ[სა] | დ(ი)დ(ე)ბით ღირს შუავ
დღესა მას ნა[წ(ი)ლსა] | მარჯუე
ნითთასა სურვილით მომგე
ბელი ხატ(ი)სა მ(ე)ორედ მოსლვისა
შ(ე)ნ(ი)სა და ყ(ოვე)ლთა წ[ა]წ(ი)ლთა | შ(ე)ნთასა უღირსი
ხუცეს მონ[ა]წ(ი)ლნი ი(ოვან)ე თოკაბი, ამინ.

[O Jesus Christ, the Everlasting King,
grant me the lot of the righteous
on Thy Second Coming in glory,
me – who had remunerated for this icon
in ardent waiting for Thy Second Coming with all Thy Saints.
Humble hieromonk Ioane Tohabi. Amen²⁴].

The combination of several dedicatory inscriptions in different languages and mutually close in content might appear baffling at first sight. It is not unprecedented, however, and has parallels on other icons extant in Sinai²⁵.

²³ For the general analysis of dedicatory epigrams in Byzantium and further bibliography, see: A. RHOBY, *The structure of inscriptional dedicatory epigrams in Byzantium*, in *La poesia tardoantica e medievale*, atti del IV convegno internazionale di studi (Perugia 2007), forthcoming. Several examples cited in this paper are very close in content and form to the discussed epigrams on Sinai icons.

²⁴ I would like to express my deep gratitude to Marina Chkhartishvili for the help with the translation of this text. For Georgian translation of all Greek epigrams and the transcription of the Georgian verses on the *Last Judgment* icon see: Z. SKHIRTADZE, *Ioane Tokhabi – sinaze moghvats kartveli mkhatvari [John Tohabi the Georgian artist from Sinai], «Literatura da Khelovneba» [«Literature and Art»]*, 3, 1998, pp. 61-72.

²⁵ See, for example: C.D. K'LDIAŠVILI, *L'icône de saint Georges du Mont Sinai avec le portrait de Davit Agmašenebeli*, «Revue des Études Géorgiennes et Caucasiennes», 5, 1989, pp. 107-128.

The Georgian epigram extends our information about the painter, since it mentions not only his Christian name but also his surname, Tohabi, which was omitted by the Greek texts.

Written in *nusha-hutzuri* (Medieval Georgian monastic script) along with the surname, it clearly indicates that the painter was himself Georgian; it is not an outstanding fact, as evidences of Georgian presence in the monastery of Saint Catherine have been reported since the early Middle Ages. This presence finds ample proof in Georgian manuscripts preserved in the monastery library²⁶ and in several icons surviving in the Sinai collection²⁷, some of which bear explicit indications of their direct connection with the Georgian world.

The Sinai monastery icons provide several more examples of icon-painters' signatures, though all of them are far more unassuming than hieromonk Ioannes' extensive epigrams. Of the greatest interest is a series of four small icons ascribed to the brush of painter Peter. Mutually identical in style and typology, they were made in the second quarter of the 13th century²⁸. They all represent groups of saints, mostly in the frontal arrangement. The figure of the Virgin dominates two of the icons. Indicatively, the monk painter chose two different iconographic types of Mary – *Blachernitissa* and *Kyriotissa*. Most probably, he was referring to particular, especially worshipped icons. Moses and patriarch Euthymios II of Jerusalem are portrayed to each side of the *Blachernitissa*. Standing by the side of the *Kyriotissa* are four holy monks who had lived in Saint Catherine's monastery and earned ardent veneration there. The combination of these figures is unique in Byzantine art, and it indicates a personal choice directly connected with the Sinai monastery and determined by the donor's preferences. Red inscriptions run on both obverses to the sides of the central image of the *Theotokos*. The verbal formula chosen in this case, and characteristic of donor inscriptions, says: Δε(ησις) Πέτρου ζογράφου (Prayer of the painter Peter), proving that

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²⁶ For recent publications, see: Z. ALEXIDZE *et al.*, *Catalogue of Georgian manuscripts discovered in 1975 at Saint Catherine's monastery on mount Sinai*, Athens 2005.

²⁷ MOURIKI, *La présence géorgienne*, pp. 39-40; N. CHICHINADZE, *Georgian icons on mount Sinai*, «Dzeglis megobari» [«Friends of monuments»], 2, 2000, pp. 3-9.

²⁸ SOTIRIOU, SOTIRIOU, *Εικόνες της Μονής Σινᾶ*, I, fig. 158, II, pp. 138-139; D. MOURIKI, *Four thirteenth-century Sinai icons by the painter Peter*, in *Studenica et l'art byzantine autour de l'année 1200*, Beograd 1988, pp. 329-347.

he was not only the author of both icons but also made them on his own commission.

Thus, Byzantine artists signed the surface of the icons rather frequently, though the appearance of such textual testimony was determined by a great number of circumstances. We cannot rule out that the painter signed his icon when he was responsible not only for its artistic aspect but also for an innovative iconographic treatment paving the way to a thoroughly new religious content. In other words, the artist came not as a craftsman making an ordered replica of a certain original but as a full-fledged author. Possibly, the monastic milieu provided especially favourable conditions for such creative self-fulfillment. It was not by chance that, in her analysis of monk Peter's icons, Doula Mouriki described them as «works of a more personal character within the context of the monastic community», which offer «evidence for some special groups of icons made at Sinai»²⁹.

The extant testimony on Byzantine artists rather often indicates their belonging to the ecclesiastical circles, thus proving that the combination of the two missions – the icon painter's and the priest's – was fairly frequent³⁰. It is hard to say whether this combination promoted signing icons, and whether the ecclesiastical status provided greater freedom in indicating the artist's name when he was painting for his own church or monastery. Was it the desire to leave devotional memory of himself, of which a monk or a priest was more conscious than others? Did signatures reflect the author's responsibility for his work? Or were they mere testimony to better education of the clerical circles, enabling their representatives, unlike craftsmen, to compose a polished text and read it? The answer to all these questions cannot be found before artists' segmentary signatures extant in many places are thoroughly studied.

It is worthwhile, however, to pose another – and possibly the most important – question of the unique typology of Ioannes Tohabi's signatures in the form of sophisticated epigrammatic verse. On the one hand, they possess an essential characteristic that determines the nature of the signature – the declaration of authorship. The painter's reference to his own name and his poetic words that clearly indicate the act of his conscious

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

³⁰ KALOPISSI-VERTI, *Painters' information*, p. 64.

artistic creativity – up to the graphic parallel between art and Daniel's verbal prophecies in the epigram to the icon of the *Last Judgment* – reveal this content. On the other hand, the pronounced devotional nature of these inscriptions differs graphically from what we usually mean by a master's autograph, implicitly suggesting another goal, thoroughly different from the conventional function of a signature, thus implying a different mission and, most importantly, a different recipient. Ioannes Tohabi did not pursue worldly boons as he stressed his artistic achievement with his signature – he was after a more sublime reward³¹.

Ioannes Tohabi's two self-portraits are also parts of his personal concept. He portrays himself before the image of the enthroned *Mother of God*, and at the gates of paradise on the *Last Judgment* icon. Both images were programmatic and came as visual expression of prayer for salvation. The better preserved is the one on the icon with five miraculous images of the *Virgin*. True to himself, the painter here, too, chose a sophisticated artistic concept to combine several mutually echoing semantic accents. Portraying himself as a kneeling worshipper at the feet of the enthroned *Mother of God*, Ioannes appears appealing to the *Child Christ* in her lap for forgiveness of his sins. In that, his eyes are fixed on the image of the *Virgin Paraklesis* to produce another scene of prayer, in which Ioannes appeals for intercession to the miraculous icon of the *Mother of God*, to which such prayers are so often addressed.

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The example of the personal program of salvation discussed here is not unique in the Byzantine art. The icon cycles seem to be the monastic counterparts of big enterprises undertaken by prominent donors, who were building churches and commissioning monumental decorations throughout the empire in the hope of redemption. This specific type of artistic creativity allowed individuals to interweave their names in an extensive history of salvation. The painted images themselves served as a silent prayer, addressed by the painters to the portrayed saints, whereas their names inscribed on the surface – which often is the case with Sinai icons – guaranteed the artists liturgical memory within the monastic community.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Abstract

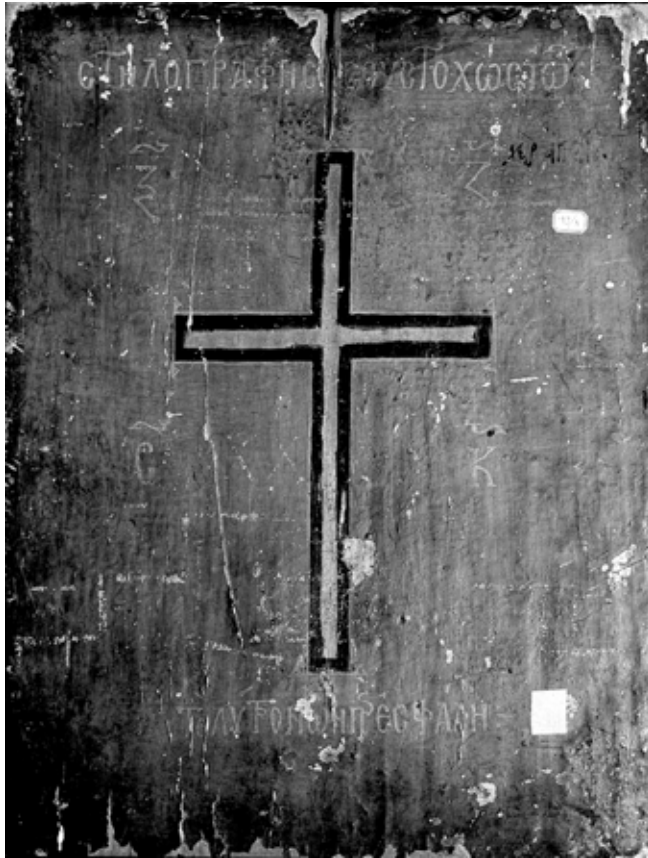
In questo articolo viene preso in esame un complesso di sei icone conservate presso il monastero di Santa Caterina sul monte Sinai, in Egitto. Quattro dei pannelli sono icone calendariali. La quinta raffigura il *Giudizio universale*, mentre l'ultima presenta una combinazione unica di cinque immagini miracolose della Vergine e di un ciclo narrativo con *Scene della vita di Cristo*. Per le tavole sono state avanzate diverse proposte di datazione, dal tardo XI secolo al primo XII secolo.

Una breve iscrizione in georgiano posta sotto il trono del Redentore nella scena del *Giudizio universale* menziona il prete Ioannes Tohabi come committente dell'opera. Il nome Ioannes compare altresì in quattro lunghi epigrammi composti in un greco raffinato e distribuiti sul tergo delle icone. Queste iscrizioni indicano chiaramente che Ioannes fu anche il pittore dell'opera – esecutore materiale e responsabile delle sue peculiarità iconografiche.

L'articolo si concentra sull'analisi delle preghiere in versi, in quanto esse costituiscono un caso straordinario di 'firma' da parte di un pittore, tale da occupare un posto rilevante nel dibattito sul ruolo dell'artista nel mondo bizantino.



1. *Calendar icon (September, October, November). Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery (from Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine, Athens 1990, p. 147, pl. 16).*



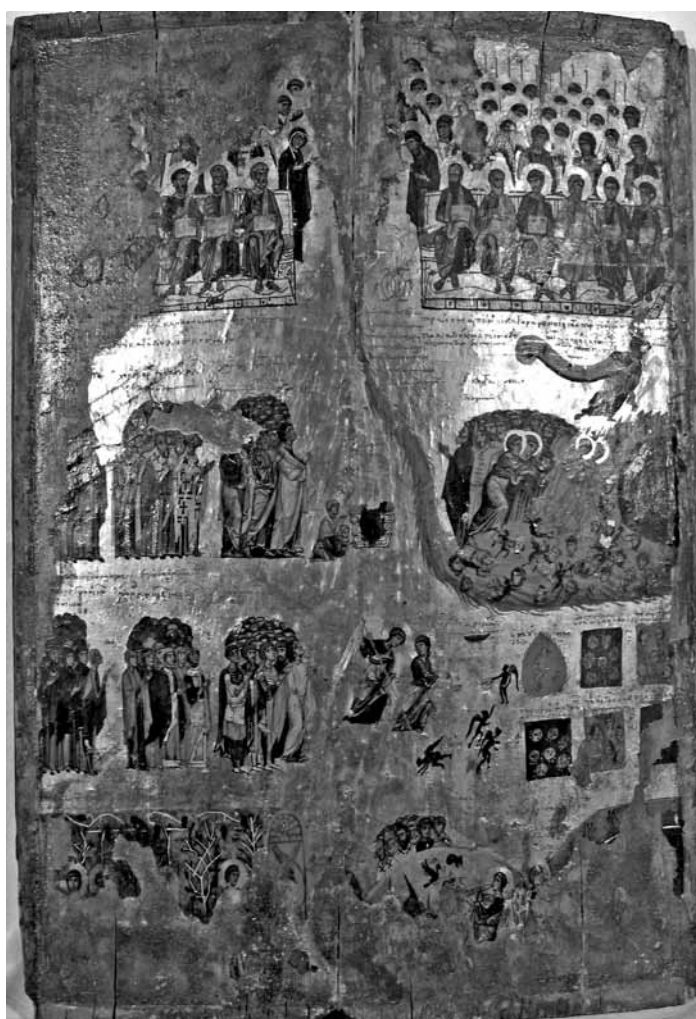
2. *Calendar icon* (September, October, November), reverse. Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery. Above the cross one can read: «στηλογραφίσας εὐστόχως Ἰω(άννης)» (from GALAVARIS, *An eleventh century hexptych*).



3. *Calendar icon* (March, April, May). Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery (from SOTIRIOU, SOTIRIOU, *Eikónes tēs Monḗs Sinā*, I, fig. 136).



4. *Calendar icon (December, January, February), detail. Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery (from WEITZMANN, *The Icon. Holy Images*, p. 73, pl. 17).*
5. *Icon with Last Judgment. Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery (from GALAVARIS, *An eleventh century hexptych*).*

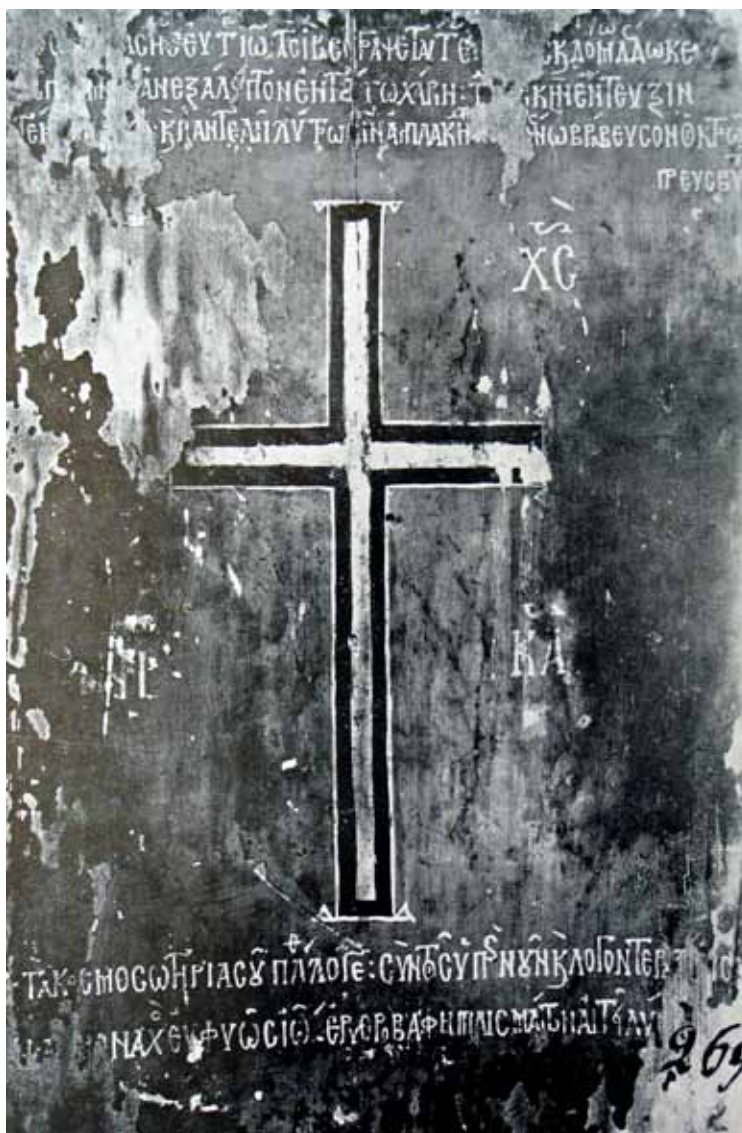




6. Icon with five icons of the *Mother of God* and scenes of the *Miracles and Passion of Christ*. Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery (from *Byzance Médiévale: 700-1204*, éd. par A. Cutler, J.-M. Spieser, Paris 1996, p. 390).



7. Icon with five icons of the *Mother of God*, detail. Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery.



8. Icon with five icons of the *Mother of God*, reverse. Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery (from SOTIRIOU, SOTIRIOU, *Εἰκόνες τῆς Μονῆς Σινᾶ*, I, fig. 149).



9. Georgian epigram, icon with *Last Judgment*, detail. Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery.



10. Icon with *Virgin Blachernitissa*, signed by painter Peter. Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery (from Sinai. *Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, p. 175, pl. 48).



11. Icon with *Virgin Blachernitissa*, signed by painter Peter, detail (signature). Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery.



12. Icon with five icons of the *Mother of God*, detail of the self-portrait of Ioannes Tohabi in front of the Virgin in throne appealing for the intercession to the miraculous icon of the *Mother of God Hagiosoritissa (Paraklesis)*. Sinai, Saint Catherine's monastery.

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