Five Essays on Icons
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THE LOCATION OF ICONS IN THE BYZANTINE CHURCH

ICONS IN CHURCH AND THEIR VENERATION

It is by no means clear when the veneration of the holy images - which among the early Christians had been a popular but private practice - became part of an official spirituality. It seems that initially the scope of this phenomenon was limited, for sources containing old ecclesiastical rules and regulations are silent on this point. But as interest in icons increased over time, they were gradually introduced into church rituals. This was a complicated and protracted process, whose stages cannot be exactly described. There can be no doubt, however, that once the icons found their way into church buildings, their location was decided as much by ideological as by practical considerations.

The crucial purpose of the icons was to make the divine realm accessible to the worshipper. While narrative pictures invited the faithful to contemplate a biblical event and to demonstrate the dogmas, non-narrative, portrait-like representations of holy persons were understood as extremely valuable intermediaries in worship. Remarkable devotional practices were developed in connection with them. Besides reverent bowing and kneeling before the icons, physical contact with them was recommended. Touching an icon was thought to have curative powers (fig. 1), and the feeling of closeness to the holy figures encouraged aspasmos, the practice of kissing them. This practice was even included in prescriptions regulating the veneration of the holy images. It was also important to have the icon at such a height that eye contact with the depicted figure was possible. Gazing into the eyes of the icon inspired deep thought and helped to transmit prayers directly to the saint.

Unhindered access to images was also desirable for the expression of gratitude to the saints through the offering of gifts or by performing ritu-
alised forms of thanksgiving. The icons were decorated with flowers, cloth and jewellery, lit up with candles (proskynema) and censed. They were offered tagmata, usually metal plaques shaped like parts of the body that had been cured (fig. 2), or podeai, precious textiles on which the picture of the holy protector, accompanied by a text of prayer or thanksgiving, was embroidered (fig. 3).

All the desirable conditions for making worship complete and meaningful could hardly be fulfilled by monumental mosaics and wall-paintings. Set high up on walls or ceilings, or in a distant apse, they were literally out of reach for the worshippers. Sometimes, however, less distant representations that occupied the lower parts of walls or pillars became purely devotional pictures. Special arrangements were made to facilitate the practices of worship around them. The figure was illuminated by a lamp and there were nails to attach some votive gifts. Candleholders, sometimes even little altars were set out in front of the representations. The frescoes in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, dating from the mid-7th century, are an early example of such a transformation. Some of the images representing the Virgin Mary (fig. 4) and a group of saints are painted low on the pillars and walls. The objects excavated close to these figures and the holes in the adjacent walls, bear witness to the fact that the images were decorated with precious objects, lit up with lamps and surrounded by ex-vota.
ICONS ON THE TEMPLON

We know that already by the 6th century icons occupied the most holy place in the church, the *templon*, that is, the columned screen surmounted by an entablature that separated sanctuary from nave (fig. 5). This particular placement of the icons gave expression to the belief that the holy figures, in their role as intercessors, should be between the worshipper and...
the inaccessible God, who dwells on the altar inside of the sanctuary. Thus, the chancel screen was conceived as the mystical gate through which two worlds, the terrestrial and the divine were linked.

We know from the sources, that the gilt ornamentation provided by the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora for the templon in the Hagia Sophia included the figures of saints incised on the entablement. A similar example, dating from the 10th century, was discovered in Thessaloniki. It is a marble frieze inlaid with coloured glass that represents the Great Deesis flanked by the Apostles (fig. 6).

At that time, the apertures between the columns were not screened but merely provided with curtains that were drawn when the sanctuary was to be hidden from the eyes of the congregation. However, we learn from the text of Miracles of St Artemios, written in the 7th century, that a large icon of the saint was on the chancel together with those of Christ and St. John the Baptist. Since it is clear from the other sources that at that time the central part of the templon was still open, we may surmise that these icons were attached to the two outer pillars of the chancel.

Another quite early location for icons were the niches in the pillars flanking the main entry to the sanctuary. In the 10th century icons also
began to appear on the epistyle. Finally, paintings on a large scale were placed in the *intercolumnium*, which had previously been screened off by curtains. It is possible, however, that initially they were not permanently attached to the architectural frames but simply placed on stands situated inside the sanctuary.

We may surmise that the icon-bearing chancel as described above was already established by the end of the 10th century. The historian Michael Attaleiates gave a detailed description at the end of 11th century of a fully equipped chancel barrier (fig. 7) in the monastery of Christ *Panoiktirmon* (the All-Merciful) in Constantinople.

In addition to the belief that the holy intercessors were best placed as close as possible to the sanctuary, there was another important reason for displaying the icons on the *templon*. The central part of the service - the sacrificial liturgy - took place inside the screened sanctuary, invisible to the congregation. Since the only way to participate in the ceremony was by listening to the praying and singing of the priests and by observing the clouds of incense rising above the chancel, the contemplation of the paintings displayed on the screen served as a welcome complement to the liturgy. Their subject matter, including representations of holy figures and events from sacred history, both made material the invisible presence of God and the saints in visible portraits and provided a remainder of the essential content of the liturgical celebrations.

*Fig. 4 Marian icon inside wall niche, 8th century, Rome, Santa Maria Antiqua.*
Fig. 5 Temple, 10th century, Hosios Loukas.
It seems that initially the themes of the icons for the templon were freely chosen. Later, the pictorial programme assumed a certain formality. The spaces between the columns close to the central door were occupied by two proskyneseis - the genuflection icons - representing to the right Christ giving his blessing and, to the left, either the Virgin Mary with the Infant or an interceding Virgin of the Chalkoprateia type. The choice of these holy figures was not accidental. They formed a couple in dialogue - a permanent intercession passed on to Christ by the Virgin Mary. These icons, placed relatively low and represented in half-figure, but very large, were easily accessible to the faithful. In the rules formulated in the 11th century for the monastery of the Virgin Mary Kosmosoteira (Saviour of the World) in Bera by the Emperor Isaac Comnenos, we find a passage that shows how this arrangement was understood:

"On each side (of the chancel) Christ the Supremely Good (Hyperagathos) and the Virgin Mary Saviour of the World (Kosmosoteira) are depicted with great skill. The icons appear to our eyes as living beings and seem to speak graciously with their mouths to all who look at them. It is truly a
Fig. 7 Central nave with *ikonostasis*, Sinai, Monastery Church of St. Catherine.

...miracle to see these figures as a kind of living painting, which is yet fixed in place and space. We can only praise the artist who received from the original creator of the world the wisdom of painting it in new splendour. Who would not praise him, since the figures seem as if living to the eye and imprint themselves in the heart?"
It was also customary that a picture of the saint to whom the church was dedicated - a titulary icon - would occupy the intercolumnium on the extreme left of the chancel. Consequently, in the case of churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary, often two icons of her would be present on the left side. Sometimes, in order to make a titulary icon even more accessible, a replica of it was displayed on a stand in front of the main representation (fig. 7). On the extreme right, the archangel Michael was usually depicted. The Annunciation, conceived as the gate to the History of Salvation, became the standard subject on the central door. The four Evangelists were also depicted there in order to remind the believers of the message of the Gospels.
Fig. 9 *Pala d’Oro*, Venice, San Marco, gold cloisonné inlaid with precious stones, 1102 - 1105.

In addition to all the icons that came to be permanently fixed on to the architectural frames of the *templon*, there were the changeable parts of the structure. A continuous painted beam atop the colonnade contained a set of narrative icons representing the life of Christ, or later, after iconoclasm the annual cycle of the twelve great Church festivals, the *dodekaorton*. When the feast corresponding to one of these pictures was celebrated, the relevant panel could be specially illuminated or removed from the beam and displayed on a stand at the front of the sanctuary. Another thematic variant, which appeared in the beam in the mid-Byzantine period, was the Great Intercession - the scene depicting the enthroned Pantokrator flanked by rows of saints and angels. In the 12th century, it became common to connect the two beam programmes by an abbreviated formula of Intercession placed in
the middle of the christological scenes and the dodekaortion. The only completely surviving example of this is a painting 1.7 m in length, dating from circa 1200, in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, probably the work of a Venetian painter (fig. 8).

In some churches small chancels were added to the front of the lateral apses, whether there was an altar behind or not. Their programmes were not homogeneous, but usually the figure of the saint who was particularly honoured in the church appeared there in one context or another.

The templon, as an enclosure of the sanctuary, inspired the use of the most luxurious materials, both for the architecture and the pictorial representations. For the columns and entablature coloured stones and fine marble were chosen. These elements might, in addition, be sculpted or even covered in fine metal plates. In later periods, decorative items in gilded wood became popular. The icons and their mountings were of gold, silver, enamel, precious stones, ivory and pearl. Their value increased with the costliness of the material. The Hagia Sophia templon decorated by Justinian and Theodora, bore an extensive set of gilded silver reliefs representing the Virgin Mary, Christ, saints and prophets. Six brilliant large enamel icons, possibly stolen by the Crusaders from the royal monastery of the Pantokrator in Constantinople, were incorporated into the Pala d’Oro in San Marco (fig. 9).

Fig. 10 Miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary called the “Ostrobramska”, 14th and 18th centuries, Vilnius, Ostra Brama.
It seems that the increasing sumptuousness in the decorations of the holy images became an obstacle to direct and spontaneous acts of veneration. An icon almost totally encased in precious metal casing and surrounded by rich decorations was no longer accessible for direct touching and kissing (fig. 10). However, the metal cover not only protected the holy image from everyday reality but also stressed its transcendental character and incorruptibility.

**ICONS OUTSIDE THE TEMPLON**

The *templon* was the focal point for veneration of icons but there were other places in the church where holy images were exposed to view. The icon of the saint of the day was displayed in front of the *templon* on a stand called a *proskynetarion*, *signon* or *stasidion* (fig. 7). This was often a costly piece of furniture, sculpted, painted or inlaid with *intarsia* (fig. 11). Also, the icons representing the feast of the day - *heortazomenes*, for instance the Entry into Jerusalem - were displayed in the same way. Sometimes replicas of a titulary icon and of genuflection icons were placed on the stands in front of the *templon*. We learn from the work defending the cult of icons, entitled *Antirrhetic* and written by the patriarch of Constantinople Nikephoros I, that such an arrangement was already in use in the early 9th century.
Fig. 12 Preaching stool decorated with icons, Athos, Xenophontos Monastery.

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Fig. 13 Icon depicting the relics of St. Spyridon in the crystal coffin and his icon, 18th/19th century, Genève, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire.
Fig. 14. Coffin with the relics of St. Euphemia and her icon, Istanbul, Greek Patriarchal Church.

Another regular location for displaying holy images was the church vestibule. They were placed over the doors leading to the naves, displayed on stands in front of the main entry and hung on the walls to the extreme right and left of the vestibule where small chapels were arranged. One can surmise that the main role of these icons was to protect the church and its congregation. Their apotropaic function became more striking when the icons represented the military saints, the archangel Michael or the patrons of the church.

Somewhat in the same way one can interpret the placement above the main entry to a church of an icon connected with its dedication, for instance the Dormition. According to sources from the 7th century, they were provided with "perpetual lamps", *kandelai akoimetoi*, an illumination that was augmented on their feasts days. For practical reasons these images usually took the form of stone relief or mosaics.
The other icons were dispersed about the church and no special rules concerning their placement were noted. Their location varied from church to church and often depended on the nature of the icon in question. For instance the picture of Christ as the High Priest was sometimes placed on the throne of the bishop while the icons depicting different biblical episodes were displayed from the ambon (fig. 12). In some monastic churches small bilateral icons were installed on the chandeliers.

In order to reassure worshippers as to the correctness of their veneration, icons corresponding to the liturgical calendar were made easily accessible. Those so-called menologia icons displayed on a singular panel the saints and feasts commemorated during a particular month or even during the whole liturgical year (Fig. C). In the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai, the set of twelve calendar icons are attached to the pillars along the naves. Each panel contains the figures of the saints of the month in chronological order, and on the reverse sides scenes from the life of Christ.

Icons with a reputation for working miracles needed extra space. Usually their shrines were large enough to allow for many visitors and included in addition to the standard furnishings a place from which medicinal eulogiai and pilgrims’ tokens could be distrib-
uted: holy water, holy oil, pieces of textiles which had been sanctified by contact with the wonder-working icon etc. In the Blachernai Church in Istanbul a basin of water drawn from the holy spring is still situated near to a miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary. In the Seidnaya Monastery near Damascus people receive holy oil from a fire that burns in front of the famous icon of St. Mary. The miraculous painting is placed in a separate little chapel, all of whose walls are decorated from top to bottom with icons of different sizes and types.

If a church owned the relics of a saint, his portrait would be placed close to the reliquary. This arrangement is clearly depicted in a group of icons representing the shrine of St. Spyridon on Corfu. The body of the saint, miraculously preserved from corruption, is visible inside a crystal coffin, in front of which is his effigy (fig. 13). Even today in the Greek patri-
archal church in Istanbul the coffins of three holy women, St. Salomonis, the Empress Theophano, and St. Euphemia (fig. 14) are accompanied by their respective images. For this purpose so-called biographical icons are often used, in which the central portrait of a saint is surrounded by scenes from his or her life and martyrdom (fig. 15).

From many sources it appears that icons were displayed close to the tombs of the founders of a church. Their kneeling or bowing figures are often introduced into these representations. A mosaic from the Pammakaristos Church in Istanbul - the burial chapel of the Glabas family - may be a case in point. It represents St. John the Baptist venerated by the little figure of an anonymous donor (fig. 16).
In some mausoleums of emperors or other prominent people, entire installations of different icons were arranged around their graves. In the case of the Comnenos family’s funerary chapel, i.e. St. Michael’s Church in the Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople, the set of icons belonging to that place was not sufficient for the donors. According to the monastery’s rules, every Friday icons from another church were brought to the chapel in order to add splendour to the ceremonies commemorating the founders. Moreover, on the anniversaries of the donors’ deaths, the famous painting of the Hodegetria Blachernitissa was present during the solemn commemorative celebrations.

Sometimes the icons were located outside the church. In the monastery of Kosmosoteira in Bera a stone figure of the Virgin Mary was placed on the bridge leading to the monastery and passers-by were expected to pray there for the soul of the monastery’s founder. In the women’s convent next to the Monastery of Christ Philanthropos in Constantinople a Dormition icon situated on the outer wall of the dormitory was the destination of customary processions from the church.

Finally, it is worth remembering that every church owned a collection of processional icons, often mounted on a wooden pallet, which were carried around the city on festive occasions or transported from one church to another (fig. 17). A detailed description of “holy processional icons”, laimion sign, used as such every Friday is to be found in the rules, previously mentioned, of the Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople.

After the ceremonies the processional icons were displayed in the church, but for want of a permanent place, they tended to be moved around within the building. Icons of the bilateral type, painted on both sides for simultaneous double viewing (fig. 18), were placed on suitable stands away from walls and pillars in order to guarantee access to both sides of the painting.
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Photo Credits

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