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The Byzantine Tradition on the Decoration of a 17th Century *Sakkos* (Inv. No 754) in the Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens

(with plates 33–35)

In the Byzantine and Christian Museum's textile collection there is a gold-embroidered sacerdotal robe, named *sakkos*, which is 120 cm high and 108 cm wide (pl. 33a, figs. 1, 2). Embroidery covers both of its sides. On the front, the dominant composition of Christ the Vine is accompanied by an evangelical scene, the Annunciation. On the back we can see the Virgin enthroned among the Prophets. The *sakkos* came to the Byzantine and Christian Museum through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from Eastern Romylia, a region in the area of Southern Bulgaria, North of Thrace. According to a written document of 4 December 1907, the *sakkos* makes up part of a patriarchal costume¹. Although it has been mentioned in studies such as those of George Soteriou² and Maria Theochari³, this important artifact still remains to be explored.

It is a robe made of red silk cloth, reinforced by thick linen cloth, and lined with a blue cotton cloth. There are sleeves, and an opening for the head. On both sides the *sakkos* remains open, but it can be closed with ribbons at some points, initially from which were hanging little bells. The armpit has a round form, in accordance with the fashion during the time of the Ottoman occupation. The naming of the *sakkos* occurs by the 12th century⁴. It is very similar to the emperor's garment⁵, the *divitision*, a chiton with wide sleeves which did not cover the wrists. By the 11th century it becomes a garment of the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople. By the 13th century excellent bishops can wear it, whereas, by the 17th century, regularly, the *sakkos* makes up part of the ward-robe of high priests⁶. As with all ecclesiastical garments, it is charged with a certain symbolic value. It symbolizes the virtue of the justice according to Psalm 132:9 and must be connected with the Old Testament text referring to the Jewish high priest's robe (Exodus 28, 32–35)⁷.

On the front of the *sakkos* (pl. 33b, fig. 1), we can see the bust of Christ in a vine. He has a cross-nimbus and he makes a gesture of blessing, extending both of his hands. An open book is in front of Him. On both sides, are represented the busts of His disciples, surrounded by vine branches. A special place, which is situated in a spot closer to Christ, is occupied by the first pair of the Apostles, Peter and Paul. The composition is drawn from the Gospel of St. John, IE', 1–2, and the inscription in the open book reads: “Εγώ ειμι ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή, καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργός ἐστιν. πᾶν κλῆμα ἐν ἐμοὶ ...”

¹ I owe this information to my colleague Rania Fatola. According to a document of the Foreign Ministry dated to 24 December 1907, which belongs to the Archives of the Byzantine and Christian Museum (Athens), we learn that Pericles Panagopoulos, vice-consul of Greece in Pyrgos, Eastern Romylia, has succeeded to convince the ecclesiastical committee of the Bishopric of Mesembria to cede to the Foreign Ministry in Greece, ecclesiastical objects of great historical value, in order that they would be kept in the Museum of the Ecclesiastical Archaeological Society. Among them, the *sakkos* makes up part of a patriarchal costume of the Patriarch Konstantinos from Mesembria (?). The information about the provenance of patriarch Constantine from Mesembria is problematic. Actually, Constantine V was Patriarch of Constantinople from 24.1897 until 27. 3. 1901, cf. M. I. GEDEON, Πατριαρχικοί Πίνακες, Athens 1996, 777. As far as I know (cf. Θρησκευτική και Ηθική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια, 7, col. 1246), Constantine V came from the island of Chios and not from Mesembria, as referenced in the above mentioned document.

² G. SOTERIOU, Guide of the Byzantine Museum Athens. Athens 1931, 118, fig. 46.

³ M. THEOCHARI, Εκκλησιαστικά χρυσοκέντητα. Athens 1986, fig. 2.

⁴ On the etymology of the word *sakkos* as a sacerdotal garment see: E. PILTZ, Trois sakkoi byzantins. Analyse iconographique (*Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, Figura, Nova series* 17). Uppsala 1967, 14, note 1; On the history of the garment see: M. THEOCHARI (as n. 3), 14–7; A. SUCROW, Griechische und russische Goldstickereien des Ikonen-Museums Recklinghausen (*Monographien des Ikonen-Museums Recklinghausen* 3). Recklinghausen 1995, 10–1.

⁵ N. GHIOLIS, Τα αυτοκρατορικά βυζαντινά διάσημα, in: Το Βυζάντιο ως Οικουμένη, exhibition catalogue. Athens 2001, 65.

⁶ In Russia the *sakkos* has been in use as an episcopal garment by the 18th century see, A. PAPAS, Liturgische Gewänder. *RBK V* (1995) 741–75, 753–8; SUCROW (see n. 4), 10–11.

⁷ E. TRENKLE, Liturgische Geräte und Gewänder der Ostkirche. Munich 1962, chapt. *Sakkos*; PAPAS (as n. 6), 759.

The iconography of the scene goes back to themes crystallized in Cretan painting during the 15th century⁸ (pl. 33b, fig. 2). It is a liturgical theme of eucharistic character. It refers to the mystical body of the Church, whose head is Christ. The meaning of the vine as the Church can be understood in the prayer of the high priest when he appears in the Bema door invoking God's providence for the vine he has planted⁹ (i.e. for the *Ecclesia* he has instituted). The liturgical character of the composition is pointed out by the presence of a Seraph, on a higher point of the main axis, holding rhipidia and an open scroll with an inscription connected with the gospels of Mark 14' 25, Luke 22' 18, Math. 26' 29: "Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14, 25)¹⁰. Thus, I think, the eucharistic meaning of the composition becomes clear.

The theme of Christ the Vine does occur on the front of such a sakkos during the 17th century, as can be observed also on the sakkos of the archbishop of Sinai, Cyril the Cretan¹¹ (pl. 34, figs. 1, 2).

In the upper part of the sakkos, on the right and on the left sleeve, we can see the two participants in the Annunciation (pl. 33a, fig. 1). Archangel Gabriel with open wings and with hasty steps, tends his right hand towards the Virgin Mary. In his left hand he is holding the sceptre. On the other side, the Mother of God is standing in three quarter view in front of the throne, and she is accepting the angel's greeting. She moves her right hand out of her *maphorion* and she is holding the spindle with the left. On her side, there is a wooden reading stand with an open book.

The poses and gestures of Mary and Gabriel derive from Byzantine iconography, and can be encountered later in Post-byzantine art. We can see this on a bema-door from Patmos¹² as well as on a bema door of the Cretan school in the Byzantine and Christian Museum,¹³ which can be dated to the second half of the 15th century (pl. 34, fig. 3). It is interesting, that in the same place as that of the column with the pot of flowers as seen on the Cretan bema door, there is a column with a book, in the Annunciation on the sakkos. In a previous study I have shown that the column is an Incarnation symbol, very deep rooted within the Byzantine art tradition¹⁴. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the book as an attribute of the Mother of God in the Annunciation scene, derives from the Byzantine tradition¹⁵, as well. The interpretation of this element is connected with the iconography of the 9th Ode, sung by the Virgin Mary after the Annunciation, and after the Visitation to Elisabeth. Eventually, the book was passed across from the scene of the Ode to the scene of the Annunciation in Western and in Post-Byzantine art.

On the back of the sakkos (pl. 33a, fig. 2), the enthroned Virgin is the dominating figure. Over her head is represented a Cherub holding *rhipidia* (pl. 34, fig. 4), and lower down on both sides of her head, and smaller in scale, we can see the busts of two angels in medallions. The inscription refers to *Maria the Lady of the Angels* (ΜΑΡΙΑ ΚΥΡΙΑ ΤΩΝ ΑΓΓΕΛΩΝ) and to the *Mother of God* (ΜΡ ΘΥ). Sixteen prophets and two saints, and John Damascene (characterized by his hat) and probably Kosmas Maiouma, who has written hymns to the Virgin, shown as busts enclosed in branches, flank the central figure. They are holding open scrolls with inscriptions that relate to the Incarnation. Below, at a central point, we can see the bicephalous eagle (pl. 35, fig. 1), which becomes a symbol of the ecumenical patriarchate, after the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans.

The iconography of the Virgin surrounded by prophets goes back to a 12th century representation on a well known Constantinopolitan icon of Sinai¹⁶ and in creations of a later period, as for example, on an icon

⁸ Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art, exhibition catalogue. Athens 1985, nos 10, 101, 122 sq.

⁹ "Κύριε, Κύριε, ἐπίβλεψον ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἰδὲ καὶ ἐπίσκεψαι τὴν ἄμπελον ταύτην καὶ κατάρτισαι αὐτήν, ἣν ἐφύτευσεν ἡ δεξιὰ σου" (Ps 79' 15).

¹⁰ Literally, in Greek the inscription reads: "Ὁ Χριστός, ἡ ἀλήθεια, ἔφησ τοῖς ἀποστόλοις: ἄρτι οὐ μὴ πῖω ἐκ τῆς ἀμπέλου πῶμα, ἀλλ' ἕως ἄν πῖω αὐτὸ καινὸν ἐν τῇ δόξῃ τοῦ πατρὸς μου μεθ' ὑμῶν τῶν κληρονομούντων".

¹¹ M. THEOCHARI, Gold Embroidered Sacerdotal Vestments. In: K. MANAFIS (ed.), Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery. Athens 1990, 237, fig. 24.

¹² M. CHATZIDAKIS, Icons of Patmos. Questions of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Painting. Athens 1985, no. 11, 61 ff., pls. 80 and 81.

¹³ Ch. BALTOYANNIS, Παράσταση Ευαγγελισμού κάτω από νεώτερη επιζωγράφηση στο βημόθυρο Τ. 737 του Βυζαντινού Μουσείου. *Archaiologika Analekta ek Athenon XVIII* (1984) 43–72.

¹⁴ H. PAPANASTAVROU, Le symbolisme de la colonne dans la scène de l'Annonciation. *DChAE IV 15* (1989–90) 145–60.

¹⁵ H. PAPANASTAVROU, L'idée de l'*Ecclesia* et la scène de l'Annonciation: Quelques aspects. *DChAE IV 21* (2000) 227–40.

¹⁶ D. MOURIKI, Icons from the 12th to the 15th century, in: Sinai (as in note 11) 105, fig 19.

of the 15th century in the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin¹⁷. According to the Hermeneia of Dionysios of Fourni¹⁸ this theme is called “The Prophets High” and it has received this name from the starting verse of a hymn to the Mother of God. It is about a representation with very dense theological meaning in relation to the Incarnation. The presence of the Prophets indicates the Era before the Grace and announces the Resolution through the mission of the Theotokos. Because of Her contribution, all human beings have the possibility of consanguinity with God. This can only be understood, through the experience of the holy sacraments, by the faithful. In this sense, very soon the theologians have seen in the person of the Virgin the Salvation and the prefiguration of the Church¹⁹.

In the embroidery composition, Maria is represented in a frontal position holding the Child to her body, a Byzantine composition favoured in Cretan art. Her throne and footstool shown in perspective render this representation very similar to those on icons of the late 16th and early 17th century²⁰ (pl. 35, fig. 2). Our composition is also related to Cretan pictorial tradition with regard to another feature. The branches around the busts connect our composition with a related theme, the Tree of Jesse²¹. Here again, the major role of the Virgin in the Incarnation is pointed out by persons of the Era before that of Grace, who are typifying her. As Michael Taylor has already pointed out, the Tree of Jesse has an eucharistic connotation. It is a common theme in Post-Byzantine art occurring also on garments. It is found on the back of the sakkos of Cyril the Cretan, of the 17th century²² (pl. 34, fig. 2). Another sakkos bearing the same theme on the back is found in the ecumenical patriarchate of Constantinople and it can be dated to the 19th century²³.

The above mentioned iconographical study of the Byzantine and Christian Museum sakkos suggests that it can be dated to the 17th century.

The whole iconographical decoration of the garment is coherent. The basic doctrines of Christian faith are elucidated by an iconological relationship between themes. In the Annunciation, is affected the union of the human race with God. Whereas the figures of the Old Testament typify the Incarnation, the Virgin Mary, and the Institution of the Church, Christ the Vine recalls the eschatological triumph of the Church. Thus, in this program, the beginning and the end of the divine Economy is highlighted through the accentuation of the sacramental life of the Church. The richness of the decoration as well as its dogmatic meaning are rooted in Byzantine pictorial tradition. It is worth recalling, for instance, three very well known Byzantine sakkoi. At first, let us pay attention to the Vatican sakkos of the 14th century²⁴. On the front side, is Christ Emmanuel surrounded by the triumphant church of the righteous. Juxtaposed, on its reverse is the Transfiguration of the Saviour, which emphasizes his divine nature. On the sleeves, the Communion of the Apostles accentuates the fact that the eucharistic theme, which presupposes the Incarnation, is a necessary presumption for the Salvation.

Secondly, the soteriological character of the Divine Economy is also stressed on two other sakkoi of the 15th century²⁵. I refer, at first, to the greater sakkos of Photios, bishop of Kiev, which not only shows the whole programme of a church decoration, but which also bears the *Credo* in an inscription (second decade of the century). Then, the smaller sakkos of Photius (thought to be Russian work) shows religious feasts.

The decoration of the 17th century sakkos of the Byzantine and Christian Museum does not repeat mechanically the Byzantine iconography. New themes created in part during the Post-Byzantine period are

¹⁷ D. and T. TALBOT RICE, *Icons, The Natasha Allen Collection*. Dublin 1968, 13–8; D. ΜΟΥΡΙΚΙ, Αἱ βιβλικαὶ προεικονίσεις τῆς Θεοτόκου εἰς τὸν τροῦλλον τῆς Περιβλέπτου τοῦ Μυστρᾶ. *AD* 25 (1970) 217–51.

¹⁸ Α. ΠΑΠΑΔΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ-ΚΕΡΑΜΕΥΣ (ed.), Διονυσίου τοῦ ἐκ Φουρνᾶ, Ἑρμηνεία τῆς ζωγραφικῆς τέχνης. St Petersburg 1909, 146.

¹⁹ Η. ΠΑΠΑΣΤΑΥΡΟΥ, *La scène initiale de l'Incarnation à Byzance et dans l'art occidentale à la fin du moyen âge*. Thèse de l'Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne 1992–93, *passim*.

²⁰ Icon of the Virgin enthroned from Kephallonia, *Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art* (see above note 4) no 148; icon from Paros, Th. ΑΛΙΠΡΑΝΤΙΣ, Εἰκόνες τῆς Πάρου, Ἐκκλησιαστικὸ Μουσεῖο Μαρπήσσης. Paros 1999, no 8 and 12. Εἰκόνες τῆς Κρητικῆς Τέχνης. Ἀπὸ τὸν Χάνδακα ὡς τὴν Μόσχα καὶ τὴν Ἁγία Πετροῦπολη. Exhibition Catalogue. Herakleio 1993, no 90.

²¹ *Ἑρμηνεία* (as in note 18) 84. Μ. D. ΤΑΥΛΟΡ, A Historiated Tree of Jesse. *DOP* 34–35 (1980–1981) 125–76.

²² ΤΗΟΧΑΡΙ, *Sacerdotal Vestments* (see above note 11), fig. 25.

²³ Το Οἰκουμηνικὸ Πατριαρχεῖο. Ἡ Μεγάλη τοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἐκκλησία, Editor Α. ΠΑΛΙΟΥΡΑΣ, 112, Fig. 99.

²⁴ G. MILLET, *La dalmatique du Vatican*. Paris 1945; P. JOHNSTONE, *The Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery*. London 1967, 15 and 94–7, pl. 1–6; PILTZ, *Trois sakkoi* (see above note 4), 27 ff. and 58 ff.

²⁵ On these two sakkoi see, PILTZ, *Trois sakkoi* (see above note 4), *passim*.

combined in such a way as to render the same theological message as that which appears on the Byzantine sakkoi. Our sakkos is an important sample among ecclesiastic garments of the Post-Byzantine period, which reveals the importance of its owner, and probably also the significance of the occasion on which it was made.

In the period we refer to, the 17th century, the doctrine of the Incarnation, with emphasis upon the eucharistic theme, acquires a special importance during theological discussions amongst Orthodox, Latins, and Protestants in Constantinople. The writings of George Koresios (ca 1566–1659), a central figure among the Orthodox theologians of the 17th century, refer mostly to the discussions between the author and the Calvinist Antoine Léger. The core of these discussions is of course the doctrine about sacraments and particularly about the Transubstantiation of the species, the bread and the wine, during the Mass²⁶.

This historical context created the conditions for the appearance of new themes with special eucharistic meaning. I evoke above all the Allegory of the Eucharist (pl. 35, fig. 3), which appears in the second half of the 16th century²⁷. On the other hand, the eucharistic symbolism may be emphasized within the theme of the Nativity, as we can see in the 17th century Nativity icon Inv. no T 396 of the Byzantine and Christian Museum²⁸ (pl. 35, fig. 4). (I refer to the two angels each holding bread over the new born Christ child). This icon bears the date 1638, the year during which a synod in Constantinople had condemned the Calvinist *Confessio fidei* of the patriarche Cyril Loukaris²⁹. I think that the iconographic program of our sakkos is inscribed in the same historical context.

In this study the main emphasis has been upon the iconography of the embroidered composition, which has led us to date the robe in the 17th century. The visual impression that we receive from the technique of this embroidery is, that of a flat surface, which could also indicate the same date. The workshop of this piece was aware of the pictorial creations of the time, and especially of that of the Cretan school of painting. George Soteriou had arbitrarily suggested its creation in a workshop in the region of Epiros³⁰. Of course, the high artistic quality of the sakkos corresponds to a big center of embroidery production such as, for instance, Constantinople. Also the fact that, most probably, it belonged to a personality who had previously served as Patriarch of Constantinople, indicates its creation in that centre. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the fact that the place from which the garment came, is Eastern Romylia, from where a series of different ecclesiastical garments came to the Byzantine and Christian Museum. I mention an omophorion, a bishop's garment, which bears an inscription of dedication to Virgin Mary of Backovo, 1757 (ΑΨΝΖ). I also know of an epitrachilion of the Bishop of Varna, and an epigonation of the 18th century.

We know that in the same region, in centres like Varna or Philippopolis, icon- and metal-workshops were flourishing during the Post-Byzantine period. This fact might suggest that we should also extend our investigation to cover possibility of the existence of embroidery workshops in Eastern Romylia.

²⁶ G. PODSKALSKY, *Griechische Theologie in der Zeit der Türkenherrschaft 1453–1821*. Munich 1988, 179–87.

²⁷ P. VOCOTOPoulos, *Εικόνες της Κέρκυρας*. Athens 1990, 59–61, N° 39, figs. 40, 148–50.

²⁸ H. PAPAStAVROU, L'icone de la Nativité No T396 des Collections du Musée Byzantin à Athènes. *Cahiers Balkaniques* 27 (1997) 93–104.

²⁹ See PODSKALSKY, *Theologie* (as n. 26) 187.

³⁰ See above, note 2.