

The Date and Patronage of Agios Nikolaos Orphanos in Thessaloniki

Eriko TSUJI

Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece, has several Byzantine monuments in a small area rising northward from the Thermaic Gulf. St. Nicholas Orphanos (Agios Nikolaos Orphanos),⁽¹⁾ a small church with fine frescoes, is situated in a quiet upper town **[Fig.1]**. No historical documents remain to determine the date of its foundation, which is estimated to be the 14th-century based on the style of the church's frescoes. This study attempts to identify the patron from the distinctive iconographic program found in the church.

Of the saints standing at the bottom row of the chancel, St. George, depicted in front across the arch of the templon icon, Mary of Petition, has the inscription Ο ΓΟΠΤΟC (The Swift One) **[Fig.2]**. S. Kissas noted that its characteristic epithet is based on Serbian royal veneration, with the Serbian king Stefan Uroš II Milutin (reigned 1282–1321) being a notable patron of St. Nicholas.⁽²⁾ According to documents, one of the 15 churches said to be built and decorated by Milutin was in Thessaloniki.⁽³⁾ Kirchhainer dismissed the theory that the Ο ΓΟΠΤΟC inscription leads to a connection between the church and the Serbian royal family because the epithet is of Constantinopolitan origin.⁽⁴⁾ However, the inscription is originally Greek, therefore, the Serbian royal family could have venerated a saint of Byzantine origin. In addition, Kirchhainer acknowledged that St. Nicholas adopted a local Serbian saint, St. Clement of Ohrid, making it difficult to deny the church's association with the Serbian cultural sphere.

The saints in the north cloister of the church should also be noted. On the north face of the corner pillar with the templon icon, St. Anne stands with her cheek against the Virgin Mary as an infant. On the west wall opposite Anna across the arch, St. Catherine and St. Irene are depicted wearing royal garb **[Fig.3]**. This wall intersects the aforementioned St. George Ο ΓΟΠΤΟC chancel at right angles. The saints are wearing Palaiologos period costumes of the day, similar to those of Simonis, wife of Milutin, depicted in the King's Church of the Studenica Monastery.⁽⁵⁾ Simonis was the daughter of Andronikos II Palaiologos. The Byzantine liturgy and rituals are known to have been adopted at the court of Milutin.⁽⁶⁾ The two saints, daughters of the kings in imperial dress, may allude to Simonis' beliefs, as they are painted on the wall adjacent to St. George, Milutin's patron saint.

To consider the patron's intentions as seen in the church, we will examine the following deviations from icono-

* This paper is a summary and revision of Chapter 3, "Identification of the Patron of Agios Nikolaos Orphanos, Thessaloniki," in *Ecclesia as the Microcosm: Collected Papers on Medieval Art in Europe* 4, Tokyo, 2016, 376-401 (in Japanese).

(1) For basic research and a discussion of the origin of the church's name, see the following references. A. Xyngopoulos, *Οι τοιχογραφίες του Αγίου Νικολάου Ορφανού Θεσσαλονίκης*, Athens, 1964; T. Velmans, "Les fresques de Saint-Nicolas Orphanos à Salonique et les rapports entre la peinture d'icônes et la décoration monumentale au XIV^e siècle," *CahArch* 16 (1966), 145-176; A. Tsitouridou, *Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική του Αγίου Νικολάου Ορφανού στη Θεσσαλονίκη*, Thessaloniki, 1978; Ch. Mavropoulou-Tsioumi, *The Church of St. Nicholas Orphanos*, Thessaloniki, 1986; K. Kirchhainer, *Die Bildausstattung der Nikolauskirche in Thessaloniki: Untersuchungen zu Struktur und Programm der Malereien*, Weimar, 2001; Ch. Bakirtzis, *Άγιος Νικόλαος Ορφανός*, Athens, 2003; Ch. Mavropoulou-Tsioumi, *Βυζαντινή Θεσσαλονίκη*, Thessaloniki, 2007, 137-144.

(2) S. Kissas, "Srpski srednjovekovni spomenici u Solunu," *Zograf* 11 (1980), 29-43.

(3) J. S. Allen, s.v. "Stefan Uroš II Milutin," A. P. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3vols, New York-Oxford, 1991, 1949-50.

(4) Kirchhainer, *op.cit.*, 17-24.

(5) Mavropoulou-Tsioumi, 1986, 45. Portraits of the King and Queen remain in the Gračanica monastery in Kosovo.

(6) See note 3.

graphic conventions: (1) In The Resurrection of Lazarus, one of the sisters of Mary and Martha, the woman in the red robe, is about to touch Christ's feet **[Fig.4]**; (2) the χαίρετε (the Risen Christ Appears to the Myrrhbearers) on the east gable **[Fig.5]**; (3) the old man with the nimbus behind Adam in the Anastasis **[Fig.6]**; (4) the omission of the Pentecost, one of the Twelve Great Festivals; (5) the Ascension, placed on the west gable out of narrative order; (6) St. George Ο ΓΟΡΤΟC, the patron saint of King Milutin of Serbia; and (7) St. Catherine and St. Irene in imperial dress, placed adjacent to St. George.

Although depiction (1) is not unique iconography in itself, when seen in conjunction with depiction (2), it is clear that the two women occupy important positions in St. Nicholas. In particular, the east gable in which the χαίρετε is placed is the highest direction and layer of the hierarchy in Byzantine churches, and this placement of exceptional iconography indicates the strong intent of the patron.⁽⁷⁾ Furthermore, the χαίρετε is painted on the right



Fig.1 Thessaloniki, Agios Nikolaos Orphanos, East side exterior



Fig.2 St. George Ο ΓΟΡΤΟC



Fig.3 St. Catherine and St. Irene, detail



Fig.4 The Resurrection of Lazarus



Fig.5 The χαίρετε (the Risen Christ Appears to the Myrrhbearers)



Fig.6 The Anastasis

side of the window in the center of the east gable, with the risen Christ standing and blessing the two women kneeling on either side. The woman to the right of Christ, clad in a red robe with her hands wrapped in a robe, is touching Christ's right foot.

The images painted in depictions (1), (2), and (3) are all related to the resurrection, and the fact that there are deviations in them shows that St. Nicholas' program places more importance on the resurrection than the formulae. It would not be strange if the iconography representing the establishment of the church on earth had a low priority when deciding the subject matter that occupies the only two high-wall surfaces, the gables. Therefore, what is shown in this church may be a more personal prayer concerning human death and its repose.

Depictions (4) and (5) should be regarded as measures taken in conjunction with the addition of the *χαίρετε*. The Ascension is a symmetrical figure often placed on the middle axis of the church, and its content also makes a high position appropriate. In this church, the Ascension, which had been pushed out of the east gable by the *χαίρετε*, was moved to the west gable, thus omitting the Pentecost, which would normally occupy the west gable opposite the Ascension. It can be assumed that the image to be paired with *χαίρετε* was considered more appropriate for the Ascension than for the Descent of the Holy Spirit. Regarding depiction (6), it is safe to assume that St. Nicholas had some connection with the Serbian royal family. Moreover, the clothing of the saints in depiction (7) also shows a connection to the Byzantine imperial family. Importantly, these figures are a pair of women. It has been noted above that the Serbian court of the Milutin period adopted the Byzantine style, however, I consider this further in light of the emphasis on women in depictions (1) and (2).

In Myrrhbearing Women at the Tomb of Christ iconography, an example of Patroness's self-transference to a woman visiting Christ's tomb is exemplified in the 11th-century manuscript, *Dionysiou Lectionary*.⁽⁸⁾ In this manuscript, the wife and daughter of emperor Isaac I Komnenos saw themselves mourning the emperor in an image of saints visiting Christ's tomb with myrrh. There are also several instances in which the emperor is depicted in Anastasis. An example of a living emperor being depicted is Constantine IX Monomachos of the Nea Moni in Chios, whereas an example of a posthumous depiction is Isaac of the *Dionysiou Lectionary* is also mentioned above. Therefore, was St. Nicholas decorated for Milutin by the Serbian king's wife and daughter? The two women represented in *χαίρετε* are depicted in privileged positions. Furthermore, the two women witnessing the Resurrection of Christ

(7) As for the relationship between the patrons and painters in Byzantine art, there are almost no surviving historical documents; therefore, it is not possible to go further than to say that what remains today should naturally reflect the will of the person who provided the coinage and commissioned the work. For convenience, the terms 'donor', 'patron', 'painter', and 'viewer' are used in the description, but each of these terms should be used neutrally and with no more connotations than necessary.

(8) T. Masuda, *Η εικονογράφηση του χειρογράφου αριθ.587μ της Μονής Διονυσίου στο Άγιο Όρος: Συμβολή στη μελέτη των βυζαντινών εναγγελιστάρων*, diss., Thessaloniki University 1990.

and its prefeast (Lazarus), as well as the saints associated with the Serbian royal family, are placed inside and outside the sanctuary. As a woman who left behind the iconography of family repose, Simonis, wife of Milutin, who married into the Serbian royal family from the Byzantine imperial family, seems to fit the patronage conditions perfectly; however, she did not bear children during life, and unlike the case of Isaac's wife and daughter, the puzzle pieces do not fit neatly together. If she impersonated herself as one of the highlighted women, then who was an other woman?

Simonis, the daughter of Andronikos II,⁽⁹⁾ born in Constantinople in 1294, married Milutin at the age of five. They married in Thessaloniki and left for Serbia in April 1299. Their marriage was political to ensure peace with Serbia. Simonis was Milutin's fourth wife, and their age gap was larger than that of a parent and child. Milutin vigorously restored and built churches, including the King's Church at Studenica Monastery constructed in 1313/14 and the Gračanica Monastery⁽¹⁰⁾ that features frescoes dating from before 1321; both the sites include portraits of the king and queen from these distinct periods. In the Gračanica Monastery fresco, Milutin is depicted with white hair, and even in the schematic nature of the depiction of real women in Byzantine art,⁽¹¹⁾ an age difference between him and his wife can be seen. After Milutin's death in October 1321, Simonis returned to her native land and entered a monastery in the capital city. Andronicus II was deposed in 1328, but Simonis remained a good confidant of her father until his death. She nursed her father until he died in 1332 and died in her homeland after 1336. It is difficult to trace the footsteps of women who did not hold real power as rulers in history; however, Simonis seems like a woman who deserved in the memory of the deceased in the church because of the way she stood by her father after they were separated at the age of five following his fall from grace. It is, therefore, possible to assume that she is the Patroness and her husband, Milutin, or father, Andronicus, are candidates for the old man inserted in the Anastasis. However, as previously mentioned, she did not have any children; to fulfil the St. Nicholas-specific element of two women who are repeated in important layouts within the church, we must identify the other woman. Simonis' mother, Yolanda.

Yolanda, also known as Violante di Monferrato,⁽¹²⁾ was a descendant of Bonifacio, Marquis of Monferrato, leader of the Fourth Crusade and ruler of the Kingdom of Thessaloniki, and Andronicus II's second wife. Her dowry was under the suzerainty of the Thessaloniki kingdom.⁽¹³⁾ She and her husband had three sons and one daughter, Simonis. Yolanda seems to have had a strong personality; she brought up the Western feudal system and insisted that her husband let her sons divide and rule the empire. She further interfered with her son-in-law, Milutin, and when it became clear that her daughter and son-in-law were unable to have children, Yolanda plotted to make her own son Serbia's heir. Although she understood Greek and the Byzantine liturgical rites, she appeared to have had disputes with her husband.⁽¹⁴⁾ Estranged from her husband in the early 14th century, she settled in Thessaloniki in 1310 and conducted her own diplomacy,⁽¹⁵⁾ dying nearby in 1317. The Greek name Yolanda received at the time of her marriage and conversion was Irene Palaiologina.

As established above, depictions (4) and (5), the omission of the Pentecost and the Ascension being moved to

(9) J. S. Allen, s.v. "Simonis (Σιμωνίς)," *ODB*, 1901.

(10) Ch. Walter, "The Iconographical Sources for the Coronation of Milutin and Simonida at Gračanica," *L'art byzantin au début du XIV^e siècle*, Belgrade, 1978, 183-200; idem, "Marriage Crowns in Byzantine Iconography," *Zograf* 10 (1979), 1-17.

(11) Portraits of Milutin can be seen depicting old age as time went on, but as can be seen in the relatives of Theodore Metochites in the Parecclesion of the Chora Monastery in Constantinople, depictions of women of the same period are little more than an egg-shaped outline with eyes and nose, and there is little expression of age.

(12) A. M. Talbot, s.v. "Irene-Yolanda of Montferrat," *ODB*, 1010; D. M. Nicol, *The Byzantine Lady: Ten Portraits 1250-1500*, Cambridge, 1994, 48-58.

(13) J. W. Barker, "Late Byzantine Thessalonike: A Second City's Challenges and Responses," *DOP* 57 (2003), 12-14; M. Dąbrowska, "Is There Any Room on the Bosphorus for a Latin Lady?" *Byzantinoslavica* 12 (2008), 232. It was not accompanied by real power. Nicol, 1994, 49.

(14) Dąbrowska, 2008, 234, n.18.

(15) S. Ćurčić, "The Role of Late Byzantine Thessalonike in Church Architecture in the Balkans," *DOP* 57 (2003) 75.

the west gable, respectively, are probably in their current arrangement to prioritize the iconography of depiction (2), the χαίρετε on the east gable. The presence of St. George Ο ΓΟΠΤΟC, depiction (6), demonstrates a relationship with the Serbian Royal Family. Therefore, Kissas attributed this to Milutin's patronage; however, the emphasis on women in the program suggests that Simonis' involvement in St. Nicholas should be considered. The appearance of the two women in depictions (1), (2), and (7), and the fact that the images in depictions (1), (2), and (3) are related to the resurrection, suggest that Simonis endowed the church for the mourning of a woman of status. She saw herself and her late mother, Yolanda, or Irene Palaiologina, in the image of two saints depicted in privileged positions. For Yolanda, Thessaloniki was the kingdom her ancestors had gained and the land where she spent her last years. St. Irene, dressed in imperial garb in depiction (7), is a saint with the same Greek name as Yolanda. It would have been ideal if there had been a discernible relationship between Simonis and St. Catherine, another saint alongside St. Irene, who wears a crown and jeweled garments similar to those of Simonis depicted in Studenica and Gračanica; however, it is unlikely that this will ever be known of the lost country and its art. Yolanda married into the Byzantine family at the age of 11 and died in a foreign country, albeit on the land of her forefathers. It is too sentimental to speculate Simonis' feelings towards her mother, given that she was forced into a political marriage at the age of five; however, considering her relationship with her father Andronicus II in his last years, it seems suitable that she would build a church in Thessaloniki dedicated to the memory of her mother who died there. The date of St. Nicholas' fresco production is given as the decade 1310–1320 based on stylistic comparisons; however, there is no concrete evidence confirming this. The author estimates that it was produced between 1317 and 1321, the four years spanning from the death of Simonis' mother, Yolanda, to the death of her husband, Milutin. After Milutin's death, she entered a monastery in her native Constantinople and left Thessaloniki. It is more natural to assume that St. Nicholas' frescoes were painted during her husband's lifetime following her mother's death rather than being dedicated to her mother and husband. However, the old man added to the Anastasis, although he has a nimbus, is not wearing a crown but a horn-like object in his hand. If this man had been depicted as a royal figure, it would be likely to have been a consideration for representing her husband, Milutin. However, this should be checked in the Church of the Resurrection of Christ the Savior in Veria, which, in addition to David and Solomon, depicts two other figures in the Anastasis on the south wall of the church in a style similar to that of the old man of St. Nicholas. According to Gounaris, these two figures wear scripture boxes on their foreheads and carry vials of oil, and one of the figures is probably Samuel, who anointed David the Younger.⁽¹⁶⁾ While this iconography should be discussed within the local context, it is known that the emperor was superimposed on David at Nea Moni in Chios, and the deceased emperor was added to the Dionysiou Lectionary. There is no positive element to deny the possibility that Samuel, who came to be depicted in Anastasis during the Palaiologos period, could have imitated an emperor.

What remains is the woman in the red robe who is reaching for Christ's feet in the two resurrections depicted in depictions (1) and (2). In The Resurrection of Lazarus in the Church of the Virgin of the Studenica Monastery (fresco 1208/09), one of the sisters of Martha and Mary is kneeling in the foreground in red, wrapping the toes of

(16) G. Gounaris, *The Church of Christ in Veria*, Thessaloniki, 1991, 31, Pl. 21. The church also has portraits of St. Catherine and St. Irene on the lower part of its north wall. Idem, 41-42; 47-51, pl. 41.

Here are some examples of the presence of the prophet Samuel in the Anastasis given by Professor Semoglou from the following monuments:

- a. In a Crusader icon from the Sinai monastery (end of 13th century. D. Mouriki, *Σινά, οι θησαυροί της Ι. Μονής Αγίας Αικατερίνης*, Athens 1990, 118-119, fig.64, 386 note no 89)
- b. In Christos Sotiras in Veroia (14th century, mentioned above)
- c. In the church of Agios Vlasios in Veroia (beginning of 14th century. A. Papazotos, *Η Βέροια και οι ναοί της (11ος-18ος αι), Ιστορική και αρχαιολογική σπονδή των μνημείων της πόλης*, Athens 1994, 174, fig.41a)
- d. In the catholicon of the Vatopaidi monastery on Mount Athos, 1312 (G. Millet, *Monuments de l'Athos*, Paris 1927, pl.85)
- e. In Saint Nicolas Bolnicki in Ohrid (1480-1481. G. Subotic, *Ohridska slikarska skola XV veka*, Beograd 1980, pls.64, 67)
- f. In saint John the Theologian in Poganovo (Serbia) (1499. I. Zivkovic, *Poganovo, crtezi fresaka*, Beograd 1986, p.301).

Prof. Semoglou also gave me a new paper which discusses the Anastasis scene in Chola Monastery. A. Semoglou, "The Anastasis in the Funerary Chapel of Chora Monastery in Constantinople: Meaning and Historical Interpretations," *Biography of a Landmark, The Chora Monastery and Kariye Camii in Constantinople/Istanbul from Late Antiquity to the 21st Century*, Brill, 2023, 74-99.

Christ in the two palms of her robe, and kissing him. In contrast, Mary's hands in St. Nicholas' Lazarus are only very close to touching Christ. In either case, the church's emphasis on the two women witnessing the miracle of the resurrection and the obsession of one of them with the feet of Christ can be seen. If the two saints were superimposed on Yolanda and Simonis, a mother and daughter, which would be the woman in the red robe? Unlike the *Noli me tangere* of the Gospel of John, the *χαίετε* allows the ladies to have access to Christ's feet (Matt 28:9); in this depiction, the woman in red who touches Christ's feet is kneeling on his right side, a more important position. She gently reaches out to Christ in the Resurrection of Lazarus and touches his feet in the Resurrection of Christ. Is this not the hand of someone who has already left this world? When Christ descends to earth again in the same manner as the Ascension, it will be at the end of the world; therefore, Christ will meet this layperson only after their death. Simonis may have prayed for the repose of her mother's soul by having Yolanda witness the Resurrection of Lazarus overlaid on Mary Magdalene and having her touch the risen Christ in a privileged place.

【Acknowledgment】 This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Numbers JP 24K03483 and JP 22H00621.

【Photo Credit】 Figs.1-6: Professor Tomoyuki Masuda (Waseda University)