Icons made of relics

Creating holy matter in Byzantium

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This essay deals with the specific tradition of miraculous icons infused with holy matter, focusing on little-known examples of Byzantine images made in wax and mastic relief. This technique made it possible to place relics inside the very material of the icon and, thus, to make holy icons and holy relics inseparable. Though rare, several such objects have survived. The most eloquent case is the Greek icon of the Virgin Mary of Blachernae, now at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, which remains practically unknown in scholarship. Before examining this unique object, however, I would like to make some general remarks concerning the role of relics in Byzantine iconicity and their crucial impact in the creation of sacred space and holy matter more broadly.[1]

Relics played a tremendously important role in the interior of Byzantine churches, which themselves might be regarded as a type of monumental reliquary.[2] Beginning in the early Byzantine era, every altar within these structures was viewed as an image of the Holy Sepulchre, and the sacraments displayed on that altar during the liturgy, the Eucharistic bread and wine, were a manifestation of Christ's sacrifice, acting as the holy relic inside the reliquary. The essence of the Christian liturgy and the center of every church were thus linked to the veneration of Christian proto-relics, that is, the body of Christ in the sepulchre. The artophorion—the tabernacle containing the consecrated sacraments that symbolized Christ in the sepulchre—stood on the altar table as the most precious reliquary of all. It is noteworthy that tiny morsels of the Communion bread could likewise be venerated as relics and worn in pectoral reliquaries. The altar table also contained a cross, in whose center a small fragment of the True Cross was usually placed, or, on occasion, the relics of saints. The reliquary cross did not merely recall the life-giving cross of the Crucifixion and redemptive sacrifice, but also emphasized the idea of the altar table as reliquary.

In an ecclesiastical rule finally confirmed by the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, authentic holy relics were to be preserved in the foundation of every altar or in the antimension cloth placed upon it. Relics within altars were placed in a special reliquary, which liturgical commentaries compared to the Ark of the Covenant.[3] The analogy between Eucharist and relics is confirmed by the description of the Orthodox rite of church consecration recorded by Symeon of Thessalonika around 1400.[4] The liturgy opens with a solemn transfer of relics from a church to be arranged on an altar in a new church, establishing a mystical link between the two sites through a particular saint's relics. In the ritual transaction, the relics were displayed, like the sacraments, on the paten carried by the bishop at the level of his head.

In the context of the present discussion on the creation of holy matter in Byzantium, it is crucial to consider the practice of filling the material and architectural body of the church with relics.[5] The most detailed evidence on this score pertains to Hagia Sophia

1. For the concept of Byzantine iconicity, see A. Lidov, "Iconicity as Spatial Notion: A New Vision of Icons in Contemporary Art Theory," *IKON: Journal of Iconographic Studies* 9 (2016): 17–28.

2. See A. Lidov, "The Sacred Space of Relics," in *Christian Relics in the Moscow Kremlin*, exh. cat., ed. A. Lidov (Moscow, 2000), 17–18.

3. Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, trans. P. Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY, 1985), 58–59.

4. Symeon of Thessalonika, *The Liturgical Commentaries*, ed. S. Hawkes-Teeples (Toronto, 2011).

5. For a general discussion of the phenomenon, see N. Teteriatnikov, "Relics in the Walls, Pillars, and Columns of Byzantine Churches," in *Eastern Christian Relics*, ed. A. Lidov (Moscow, 2003). See also *Saints and Sacred Matter: The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. C. Hahn and H. A. Klein (Washington, DC, 2015), esp. V. Marinis and R. Ousterhout, "'Grant Us to Share a Place and Lot with Them': Relics and the Byzantine Church Building (9th–15th Centuries)," 153–72 (with bibliography).

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Figure 1. Cross-shaped cavities for relics in the walls of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul. Photo: author.

at Constantinople, conceived by Emperor Justinian (r. 527–65). The *Patria*, a collection of texts dating between the ninth and eleventh centuries, includes an account of the construction of Hagia Sophia's dome, which describes how the priests prayed for the prosperity of the church and "the master-builders made a cavity in every twelfth block and inserted there the precious and holy relics of various saints until they accomplished the construction of the dome."[6] The tradition of inserting holy matter into the material body of the church was noted by later pilgrims from various countries. A Russian pilgrim, who later became Archbishop Anthony of Novgorod, visited Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in 1200 and wrote that "when St. Sophia was built, they put relics of saints in the sanctuary walls."[7]

The written sources are confirmed by archaeological evidence, particularly the presence of numerous cross-shaped cavities in the walls of Hagia Sophia.[8] These suggest there was a long-standing practice of placing relics within the church's sanctuary, naos, and narthex walls, and in its columns. In addition, a great number of devotional crosses were found in the marble facing of the cathedral to mark the spots where holy relics were concealed (fig. 1). In some cases, these cavities had metal covers. Four metal crosses are still visible in the porphyry column bases, facing the nave. The shape of these crosses suggests a general dating between the ninth century and the year 1204, that is, before the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders.[9] It seems most probable that they were installed for the reverence of Orthodox believers, who would have venerated and kissed these holy spots.

6. G. Dagron, *Constantinople imaginaire: Études sur le recueil des "Patria"* (Paris, 1984), 203. English translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

7. "A egda delasha sviatuu Sofiu, v oltarnye steny klali moshi sviatykh." Anthony of Novgorod, *Kniga Palomnik: Skazanie mest sviatykh vo Tsaregrade Antonia Arkhiepiskopa Novgorodskago v 1200 godu* [The book of pilgrimage: The description of the holy places in Tsargrad by Anthony the Archbishop of Novgorod in 1200], ed. K. Loparev (St. Petersburg, 1899), 23.

8. N. Teteriatnikov, "Devotional Crosses in the Columns and Walls of Hagia Sophia," *Byzantion* 68 (1998): 419–45.

9. The interior depth of the cross-shaped cavities is 1.5–2.5 cm, similar to the size of the metal crosses worn as encolpia: N. Teteriatnikov, "The Hidden Cross-and-Tree Program in the Brickwork of Hagia Sophia," *Byzantinoslavica* 56, no. 3 (1995): 689–99 and plates 1–8.

Figure 2. The Miraculous pillar with the relics of St. Gregory the Wonder-Worker. Istanbul, Hagia Sophia. Photo: author.

An important example of the column-reliquary is the miraculous pillar of St. Gregory the Wonder-Worker in the southwest part of Hagia Sophia, which has been venerated by Christians and Muslims up to the present day (fig. 2). St. Gregory's relics were inserted inside the pillar, as medieval pilgrims' accounts inform us. The lower part of the pillar was covered by large brass plates, still surviving, where believers came to rub their backs, on account of the miraculous healings wrought by the holy relics. On particular days, a portable altar was displayed in front of it, and a special celebration took place in honor of St. Gregory and his relics. This implies that the pillar-reliquary was activated on specific days during the liturgical year when this holy matter became most efficacious.[10]

St. Gregory's pillar is just one example of many miraculous columns. Another text from the *Patria* mentions that relics were placed in the columns of Hagia Sophia, at their lower and upper levels.[11] A twelfth-century English traveler to Constantinople informs us that relics were placed in all of the major columns in Hagia Sophia, including in their capitals.[12] The Russian traveler Stephen of Novgorod, who visited Constantinople in 1348 or 1349, described the porphyry columns venerated by pilgrims, who obtained cures from them: "Wonderfully decorated stone columns of beautiful marble stand there with relics of the saints reposing within them. People who are suffering some malady touch what ails them [to these columns] and receive healing."[13]

Inside churches, venerated relics often became pivot points of sacred installations, structuring the environment and providing models of spatial arrangement. Viewed in this way, churches are not merely walls with iconographic programs, but dynamic, performative, potentially miracle-working clusters of relics and highly revered icons. The principal churches incorporated a number of such complexes within them, which were autonomous but interconnected. In Hagia Sophia, the primary space was the main sanctuary, which included the zone of the imperial door, the so-called Samaritan's Well in the southeast part, an enclosed place where the Virgin is said to have appeared, and many others.[14] Sacred spaces were signaled by relics, icons, architectural devices, church decoration, and liturgical rituals oriented toward a particular part of the complex, and also indicated by the recitation of special canticles, incense burning, and various forms of lighting. Overall, the coming together of these various media created what we might define as Byzantine holy matter. The creation of such spaces within the church was a deliberate program, part and parcel of historically concrete moments, yet changing with the times. An original matrix or model could be extended or altered in a later era to be activated at a particular moment in the daily service or in the liturgical calendar.

10. Anthony of Novgorod, *Kniga Palomnik*, 6.

11. Dagron, *Constantinople imaginaire*, 197 (no. 2), 203 (no. 14), 238n117. See also Archimandrite Leonid (Kavelin), "Skazanie o Sv. Sofii Tsaregradskoi," *Pamiatniki drevnei pis'mennosti i iskusstva* 78 (1889): 22.

12. K. N. Ciggaar, "Une description de Constantinople traduite par un pèlerin anglais," *Revue des etudes Byzantines* 34 (1976): 249, lines 106–11.

13. G. P. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Washington, DC, 1984), 30, 212.

14. On these spatial structures, see A. Lidov, "Leo the Wise and the Miraculous Icons in Hagia Sophia," in *The Heroes of the Orthodox Church: The New Saints, 8th to 16th century*, ed. E. Kountoura-Galaki (Athens, 2004), 393–432.

Figure 3. Saints and the crosses, probably marking the spots with the relics inserted, Saint Sophia in Kiev, eleventh century. Photo: author.

Such spaces became archetypal models—supreme iconic prototypes—for later buildings. The tradition of building churches as reliquaries was not limited to Constantinople. In the time of Justinian, a characteristic example is provided by the basilica of St. Catherine's Monastery at Sinai, where numerous unidentified relics were inserted in all its columns. Today all twelve columns of the central nave have metal crosses, which replaced earlier ones, probably to indicate the location of relics. They are placed at a height where pilgrims could kiss and venerate them.[15] In his description of the Sinai Monastery, the fifteenth-century Swiss Dominican traveler Felix Fabri mentioned the presence of these relics:

> This church has twelve columns upon which the entire structure rests, having six on one side and six on the other, and in length is built after the fashion of our own churches. Within these columns many important relics are enclosed, and upon each column hangs a picture on which is painted the saints whose relics are contained by the column. The feast days of these saints are celebrated in their seasons; for the Greeks have an arrangement of the calendar whereby in every month of every year there is one day on which they simultaneously celebrate all those saints whose relics are in a particular column.[16]

At present, menologion icons still hang on each of these columns, depicting the saints whose feasts fall on each month.[17] Of these icons, the earliest ones are dated to the eleventh century. Fabri's account confirms the correlation between these icons and the relics of the saints placed within the columns.

This practice, which follows an older Byzantine tradition, came to Russia in the eleventh century. The *Paterik*, a medieval collection of texts pertaining to the history of the Kievan Caves Monastery, includes an eleventh-century account stating that the relics of saints were inserted in the walls of the monastery church of the Dormition of the Virgin, and that images of these specific saints were placed above the relics on the walls: "So also from the Greeks came the icon with the craftsmen, and relics of holy martyrs were placed under all the walls, where they themselves are depicted on the walls above the relics."[18] It is noteworthy that this display became a kind of model to be repeated in other Russian churches. For example, Prince Vladimir Monomakh ordered the same combination of relics and images in his new cathedral in Rostov in the early twelfth century. Thus, the relic of a saint and his/her iconic image were considered as a single holy matter to be reproduced in other places as a sort of guarantee of this particular double sanctity. Recently, scholars have suggested that this phenomenon might explain the innumerable images of saints that were combined with painted crosses on the pillars and walls in Saint Sophia of Kiev. In this case, the crosses probably marked the spots for the relics of the saints depicted nearby (fig. 3).[19]

15. For an illustration of these crosses, see G. H. Forsyth and K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Church and Fortress of Justinian* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1973), plate 58.

16. "The Book of the Wanderings of Brother Felix Fabri," in *Felix Fabri (circa 1480–1483 A.D.)*, trans. A. Stewart, vol. 2, pt. 2, Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society 10 (London, 1893), 608–9 (translation modified).

17. See Forsyth and Weitzmann, *Monastery of Saint Catherine*, plates 43, 58, 60.

18. M. Heppell, ed. and trans., *The Paterik of the Kievan Caves Monastery* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 9.

19. V. Sarabianov, "Relikvii i obrazy sviatykh v sakralnon prostranstve Sofii Kievskoi," in *Spatial Icons: Performativity in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. A. Lidov (Moscow, 2011), 364–92.

Figure 4. *Left*: Composite icon with various relics inserted in the margins, eleventh–twelfth century, with later additions. Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum. *Right*: Detail showing the relic of the Holy Blood of St. Demetrios and two unknown relics. Photos: author.

Relics inserted in the walls were regarded as ensuring the safety of the house of prayer and mystically related to the host of saints who guard the border of Heavenly Jerusalem, of which every Christian church was the earthly embodiment. These relics provided invisible but effective protection. According to the Eastern Christian ideal, relics transfigured the body of the church, imbuing matter with holiness, and an iconic image on the wall testified to this, marking the place of a special and concrete veneration by pilgrims and all beholders. Pierced with divine energy, the entire space of the church was transformed into a mystically fleshless body, at once one vast icon and relic.

A total identification of relic and church found its substantiation in Byzantine theology as well. In the face of the iconoclastic controversy of the eighth century, John of Damascus, the defender of both icons and relics, summarized the patristic tradition related to relics. The concept of relics as "animated temples of the Lord" was his basic thesis, for the Holy Spirit permanently abides within them.[20] Thus, for the Byzantine theologians, ideally the icon and the relic should be one and the same object. In the practice of veneration, all miracle-working icons were perceived as such: icon and relic were inseparable, presenting a unified holy matter. In this context it is noteworthy that relics were inserted into the wooden boards of several icons. These were sometimes displayed to allow for the kissing of special cavities within or around the image; in other cases they were hidden on the back of the panel. In the latter case, believers might have known that the relics were there, but could not see them. A composite icon from the State Hermitage Museum provides a characteristic example of a Middle Byzantine icon-reliquary (fig. 4, *left*).[21] The central Crucifixion is framed by images of saints and by various relics, some of which are accompanied by inscriptions, such as the one labeling a relic of the blood of St. Demetrios the Martyr (fig. 4, *right*). It was preserved in a special container filled with wax, similar to all the other relics in the frame. Here, the function of wax is important, and it leads to an extraordinary example of the relationship between icons and holy matter.

The little-known icon of the Virgin Mary of Blachernae now in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, which has been dated in the scholarly literature from the seventh to the seventeenth century, is a relief made of

20. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. A. Louth (Crestwood, NY, 2003).

21. A. Bank, *Byzantine Art in the Collections of Soviet Museums* (Leningrad, 1977), 306 and figs. 190–93. It consists of separate parts of different dates mounted on a wooden panel. The relics on the margins probably belong to the original work of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The icon was purchased by G. Stroganov in Rome in 1892.

Figure 5. Icon of the Virgin Mary of Blachernae, Constantinople (?), seventh–seventeenth century, repainted in the nineteenth century. Wax and mastic relief on wooden board, 46 x 37.5 cm. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery, inv. 28864. Photo: author.

wax and mastic on a wooden panel (fig. 5).[22] According to a tradition related to this icon, it was sent to the Russian tsar Alexei Mikhailovich in 1653 from Constantinople as a special gift from the protosyncellus Gabriel, the representative of the Jerusalem Patriarchate in the city.[23] It was among the many holy relics and venerable icons that came to Moscow from the Christian East.[24] In this period, many Eastern churches and their parishes and monasteries were regularly sending icons and relics to the rich and powerful Russian tsars, in search of financial support to help them survive the difficult circumstances of Ottoman rule. This generated a competition between the post-Byzantine monasteries to present the most sacred and symbolically precious items. These monasteries sought not only to receive money from the tsars, but also to preserve their religious treasures in Moscow as a new capital of the Orthodox world, perceived as the third Rome.

There are four contemporary written testimonies related to the transfer of the Blachernae icon to Moscow. The most important is the charter of 1653 issued by Paisios, the Patriarch of Constantinople, which was sent with the icon and signed by seventeen of the other highest clerics of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate, including five bishops.[25] The charter claimed that the icon was the famous miracle-working image of the church of the Virgin Mary in Blachernae (the major church of the Mother of God in the Byzantine capital).[26] The charter confirmed the authenticity of the object and stated that it was the very icon that saved the Byzantine capital from the siege of the Sassanians and Avars in 626, in the time of Emperor Heraclios and Patriarch Sergios I. According to this narrative, following the destruction of the Blachernae church by the Turkish army in 1453, the icon was hidden inside the wall of the Pantocrator monastery, where it was discovered sixty years later and eventually purchased by the syncellus Gabriel, who then sent it as a precious gift to Moscow. That story was confirmed by Gabriel himself a year later in a letter he sent to the Russian tsar thanking him for the two hundred rubles (an enormous amount of money)

22. The most detailed study of the object is G. Sidorenko, "Ikona 'Bogomater Vlakhernskaia' v sobranii Tretyakovskoi galerei: Nekotorye itogi issledovaniia" [The icon of the Mother of God of Blachernae in the collection of the Tretyakov Gallery: Some results of the research], in *Rossija i vostochno-khristianskij mir: Drevnerusskaia skulptura* [Russia and the Eastern Christian world: Old Russian sculpture] (Moscow, 2003), 67–77. In English, see the catalogue entry by G. V. Sidorenko in *Greek Documents and Manuscripts, Icons and Applied Art Objects from Moscow Depositories*, ed. B. L. Fonkich (Moscow, 1995), 76–77, cat. no. 50.

23. For the relevant documents, see B. Fonkich, "Chudotvornye ikony i sviaschennye relikvii v Moskve serediny XVII veka" [Miraculous icons and sacred relics in mid-seventeenth-century Moscow], *Ocherki feodal'noi Rossij* 5 (2001): 83–89. All sources related to this event are analyzed in V. Tchentsova, "Ierusalimskij protosynkell Gavriil i ego okruzhenie: Materialy k izucheniju grecheskikh gramot ob ikone Bogomateri Vlakhernskoi" [The Protosynkellos Gabriel and his environment: Materials for the study of the Greek charters pertaining to the icon of Our Lady of Blachernae], *Paleoslavica* 15, no. 1 (2007): 57–136. The story is quite complex because there are multiple icons of Our Lady of Blachernae that have been connected with these documents. But among these, only the icon from the Tretyakov Gallery is made of wax and mastic.

24. On the transfer of such objects to Moscow, see Fonkich, *Greek Documents and Manuscripts*, 71–95.

25. The charter is published in Fonkich, *Greek Documents and Manuscripts*, 73, cat. no. 48.

26. C. Mango, "The Origins of the Blachernae Shrine at Constantinople," in *Acta XIII Congressus internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae* (Vatican City, 1998), 2:61–76. See also "Blachernae," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A. Kazhdan (New York, 1991), 1:293; J. B. Papadopoulos, *Les palais les églises des Blachernes* (Thessaloniki, 1928).

Figure 6. Detail of the icon of the Virgin Mary of Blachernae, showing the lower part of the panel with a piece of the black cloth between two layers of the wax and mastic relief. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery. Photo: author.

he had received as gratitude for the miraculous icon. In this letter Gabriel repeated the crucial statement: "the miracle-working icon of Our Lady of Blachernae is the same that was once the patroness of Constantinople and the Greek emperors, which Emperor Heraclios took with him on his campaign against the Persians, and whose miracles are detailed in history."[27] Some particulars of this story were added by Dimitrij Ostafiev, a Greek merchant who brought the Blachernae icon to Moscow and gave special testimony about it in the Posol'sky Prikaz (the Moscow ministry of foreign affairs at that time).

The charter of the Constantinopolitan Patriarch also provides very important information about the sacred materials of the Blachernae icon. It states that it was made by "the most precious mixing of the holy relics of various saints and different perfumes."[28] Regarding the unique material composition of this icon, there is another beautiful passage by Paul of Aleppo, who had seen it at the Jerusalem *metochion* (ecclesiastical embassy) in Constantinople shortly before it was taken to Russia: "Paints have not touched it. The image of mastic appears to be of living flesh, and parts of the body spectacularly stand out above the surface of the board."[29]

The evidence provided by the written sources found confirmation in the technical analysis of the Blachernae icon in the Tretyakov Gallery that began in 1987. It proved that the icon was made of wax and mastic attached to a wooden base of a later date (the board probably was replaced in the early nineteenth century). The wax and mastic mixture contains additional elements, including several minerals, metals, remains of wood and textile, as well as traces of perfumes (incense): under the light of a strong lamp the icon emits a smell. The relief consists of two layers: the lower is a half-centimeter thick, and the upper is 1.5 centimeters. Yet the most interesting detail revealed in this research was the piece of cloth found between the two layers of wax and mastic in the damaged lower part of the relief (fig. 6).[30] It consists of a narrow strip of a black wool woven textile. It is clear that the cloth was deliberately placed between the two layers, but it does not seem to have any practical function. It appears to be ancient, and some scholars have pointed out its similarity to Coptic

27. Fonkich, *Greek Documents and Manuscripts*, 77, cat. no. 50.

28. *Mnogotsennoe sokrovische: Ikony Bogomatery Odigitrii Vlakhernskoi v Rossii* [The most precious treasure: The icons of Our Lady of Blachernae in Russia], ed. S. V. Gnutova, G. V. Sidorenko, and I. M. Sokolova (Moscow, 2005), 14.

29. *Puteshestvie antiokhiiskogo patriarkha Makarija v Rossiju v polovine XVII veka, opisannoe ego synom arkhidiakonom Pavlom aleppskim* [The travels of Patriarch Makarios of Antioch in Russia in the seventeenth century, described by his son, Archdeacon Paul of Aleppo], trans. from the Arabic by G. Murkos, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1898), 11.

30. Sidorenko, "Ikona 'Bogomater Vlakhernskaia,'" 70–72.

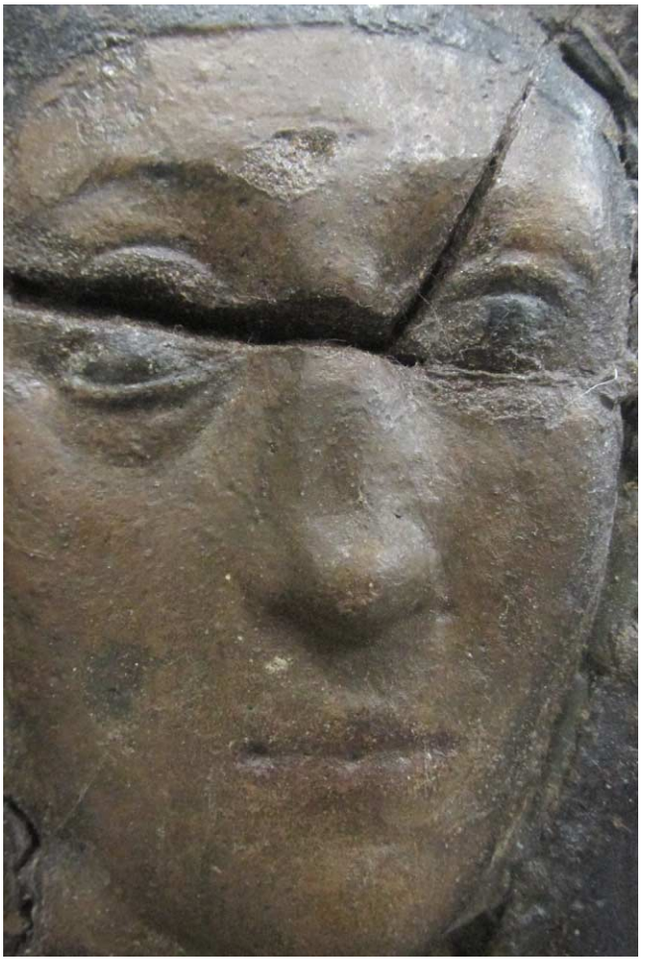

Figure 7. Detail of the icon of the Virgin Mary of Blachernae, showing the face of the Virgin. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery. Photo: author.

textiles. One hypothesis is that this piece of cloth is itself a relic of great significance. The historical context points to the Blachernae church and its most venerable relic: that of the Virgin's robe, which had been preserved and venerated there since the fifth century.[31] According to tradition, it was this robe, together with the miraculous icon of the Mother of God, that had saved Constantinople during several sieges. While this remains a hypothesis, it seems probable in the context of the entire story related to the Blachernae icon in the Tretyakov Gallery.

One might note that the style and form of the relief image do not have direct analogies to other images of

31. On this relic, see A. W. Carr, "Threads of Authority: The Virgin Mary's Veil in the Middle Ages," in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. S. Gordon (New York, 2001), 61–68.

Figure 8. Icon of the Virgin of the Acathistos (or the Myroblitissa), eleventh–fourteenth century (?), with silver revetment of 1786. 31 x 27 cm. Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos. Photo: from O. V. Orlova, *Chudotvornye Ikony Bozhiei Materi na Afone* [The miraculous icons of the Mother of God at Athos] (Moscow, 1997), 65.

Byzantine or Russian art of any period. Yet the form of the *maphorion* (headdress) of the Virgin and the characteristics of her face resemble early Byzantine encaustic images and even the Fayum portraits (fig. 7). Thus, in the context of the available historical, technical, and stylistic evidence, the ancient provenance of the Tretyakov icon does not seem improbable, although this does not preclude the possibility that it could be a precise replica made sometime before 1653. Moreover, we know that the technique of making images of wax and mastic was known since antiquity; the Romans, for example, used it to make votive gifts.[32] The fourth-century historian Eusebius of Caesarea provided important evidence of the technique, describing an image of Emperor Constantine killing the dragon at the entrance to the imperial palace as an "encaustic

32. J. Hughes, *Votive Body Parts in Greek and Roman Religion* (Cambridge, 2017). Mastic has been cultivated on the Greek isle of Chios since the Middle Ages; see P. Freedman, "Mastic: A Mediterranean Luxury Product," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 26 (2011): 99–113.

painting," that is, a representation cast in wax and painted.[33]

According to one tradition, icons "made of wax and paints" (i.e., in relief) were made by St. Luke the Evangelist himself.[34] One such icon is in the Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos. It is a small icon of the Virgin and Child made of wax and mastic, now displayed in the iconostasis of the so-called Acathistos Chapel to the right of the main altar (fig. 8).[35] It is considered the most ancient icon on Mount Athos, and according to legend is one of the seventy images painted by St. Luke. The icon has been known as the Myroblitissa (exuding myrrh) and the Virgin of the Acathistos. It has an elaborate gilded silver revetment made in 1786. On the reverse is a depiction of Emperor Alexios III Comnenos of Trebizond (r. 1349–90), who gave the icon to St. Dionysius of Korisos, the founder of the monastery (perhaps in 1374). An inscription in the eighteenth-century revetment claims that it is the same icon that the Patriarch Sergios carried along the walls of Constantinople during the siege of 626.[36] The image of the Virgin is badly damaged and practically illegible, but the position of Mary and Christ suggests that it could not have been made before the eleventh century. The original low-relief image of wax and mastic was later repainted, and made more similar to common icon paintings not made in relief. The Acathistos Virgin is thus the closest analogy to the Blachernae icon from the Tretyakov Gallery, and it seems significant that the legends of both icons were connected with the miraculous salvation of Constantinople in 626 and the intercession of the Virgin Mary in this event.

Another important Byzantine icon made in wax and mastic relief is the Panagia Megaspilaiotissa from the Monastery of Mega Spileo (Great Cave) in the north Peloponnese, near Kalavryta (fig. 9). This icon of the

Figure 9. Panagia Megaspilaiotissa, eleventh–thirteenth century (?), inserted into a post-Byzantine frame with *vita* cycle. Icon made in wax and mastic relief on wooden board, 45 x 45 x 3 cm (central image of wax and mastic). Mega Spileo Monastery, near Kalavryta. Photo: Σαλαμούρας Σπ, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=56865671 (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Virgin was mentioned in a chrysobull of 1350 issued by Emperor John VI Kantakuzenos, addressed to the "venerable Peloponnesian monastery of my queen, known by the name of the honorable and all-pure Lady and the Mother of God called Megaspilaiotissa."[37] It is the most important relic of the monastery and the goal of numerous pilgrims to the shrine.

33. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, trans. A. Cameron and S. G. Hall (Oxford, 1999), 122.

34. I. Zervou Tognazzi, "L'iconografia e la 'Vita' delle miracolose icone della Theotokos Brefokratoussa: Blachernitissa e Odighitria," *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata* 40 (1986): 218, 250.

35. O. Meinardus, "A Typological Analysis of the Traditions Pertaining to Miraculous Icons," in *Wegzeichen: Festgabe zum 60. Geburtstag von Prof. Dr. Hermenegild M. Biedermann* (Wurzburg, 1971), 216. For an old but detailed description of this icon, see Episcopi Porfirij Uspenskij [Porphyrius Uspensky], *Pervoe puteshestvie v Afonskie monastyri i skity v 1845 godu* [The first journey to the Athonian monasteries in 1845] (Kiev, 1877), 95. See a recent discussion of this icon in Tchentsova, "Ierusalimskij protosynkell Gavriil," 94–96.

36. N. Oikonomides, *Actes de Dionysiou*, Archives de l'Athos 4 (Paris, 1968), 26.

37. F. Miklosich and J. Müller, *Acta et diplomata monasteriorum et ecclesiarum orientis* (Vienna, 1887), 5:191.

According to legend, the Panagia Megaspilaiotissa was made by St. Luke and given to the ruler of Achaia, Theophilos, together with the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. The icon thereafter belonged to Theophilos's descendants and, during religious persecutions, it was hidden in the large cave, where it was discovered miraculously by the shepherdess St. Euphrosine following a vision of the icon. This miracle story recounts that Euphrosine was instructed in her vision to wait for two brothers named Simeon and Theodore, who separately had visions impelling them to travel from Jerusalem to Achaia in order to find the icon of the Virgin. Once they arrived in Achaia, they met the young shepherdess, who led them to the icon in the cave. They removed it from the cave and began cleaning the sacred place from plants and rubbish. When they burned the branches, a dragon jumped out of the cave and was killed by lightning that emanated from the icon. They then found another great relic in the cave, the desk upon which St. Luke wrote his Gospel. As a practical outcome of the miracle, Simeon and Theodore founded the monastery in 362, the oldest in Greece according to tradition.

This original miracle is commemorated in the monastery, where the dragon's bones have been venerated as a relic. In the Great Cave a kind of installation of the story can be seen. It includes the figures of the two monks, St. Euphrosine, the dragon, and a replica of the icon on the rock. The original miraculous icon is displayed nearby in a stone case next to a miraculous spring. The central image of wax and mastic is inserted in a wooden frame decorated with post-Byzantine paintings and surrounded by a gilded silver revetment with a crown, grid, and several ex votos. The icon was badly damaged in a number of fires, which changed the plastic forms of the faces and made the image entirely black. Yet the representation of the Virgin Mary with the Christ child on her right hand is recognizable. Christ's playful gesture suggests that the image belonged originally to the category of "living painting" (Hans Belting's term), which became widespread beginning in the late eleventh century in Byzantium.[38] An eleventh-century icon at St. Catherine's in Sinai, the Madonna of Kykkos, is one of the earliest examples of the image of the playing Christ child, symbolizing through his movement Christ's Passion on the cross.[39] Based on my own observation of the Megaspilaiotissa icon in 1999, I believe that the wax and mastic image may date between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

Icons made in wax and mastic relief were a key phenomenon of Byzantine art and religious culture but have yet to receive adequate scholarly and scientific analysis. The three examples discussed above, however, allow us to make some preliminary conclusions. For one, the technique was widely known but rarely used: as a rule, it was reserved for the most venerable miraculous icons. It provided an opportunity to create an ideal holy matter, through the inclusion of relics and perfumes in the wax and mastic paste.[40] This phenomenon should be considered in the context of the more general practice of creating holy matter in Byzantium—one of the most important yet mostly neglected subjects in art history. It contributed to many aspects of medieval visual culture, including the perception of sacred spaces, and deepens our understanding of the specific materiality of these religious objects, which was integral to the miraculous environment.

38. H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago, 1994), chap. 13.

39. Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 290, figs. 174 and 178.

40. The wax certainly also relates to the production of seals and related metaphors of seal, matrix, and the image made by impression, rather than by human hand, ideas that are intrinsic to icons. On this topic, which is beyond the scope of this essay, see, e.g., H. Kessler, "'Pictures Fertile with Truth': How Christians Managed to Make Images of God without Violating the Second Commandment," *Journal of the Walters Art Museum* 49/50 (1991–92): 62–63.