Middle Byzantine Altars with Sculpted Decoration*

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ABSTRACT

The altar, the most sacred structure of the Middle Byzantine church, is one of the less known works of this era involving sculpture. Depending on the dimensions and the funds available to each church, the form of the Middle Byzantine altars varies from rectangular slabs based on free-standing posts to slabs placed on built bases. Sculpted decoration can be found on the frame of the upper surface of the slab, leaving the main space empty and flat, probably in order to receive safely the holy vessels. However, there are some cases where the whole surface is covered with relief. The main questions about Middle Byzantine altars concern the selection of decorative patterns in use and their function on a structure which was out of sight, hidden behind the templon screen and under the vestments.

The altar or holy table, namely the place where the bloodless sacrifice is performed,[1] is a rather neglected element amongst the marble equipment of the Middle Byzantine church. This omission is due to the fact that only a restricted number of altars are preserved in Middle Byzantine monuments. Merely fragments of such elements exist, usually detached from their original place; hence, it is often difficult –even impossible– to identify them at first glance. Furthermore, many altars were made of marble *spolia* coming from monuments dating before the Middle-Byzantine times.[2] Despite these problems, the study of altars of this era is intriguing, as it involves elements charged with a great liturgical and symbolic value. In this study, I will attempt to make some comments on their form, as well as on the placement and significance of sculpted decoration on them.

FORM

In the Early Christian period, the free-standing altar table supported on colonettes predominated in the Mediterranean.[3] This type consisted of a base in the form of a slab, on which the colonettes holding the altar top stood. These elements were usually four or six in number and had integral relief bases and capitals. The altar top had a raised border with

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[1] Wessel 1966a; Taft and Bouras 1991.

[2] Bouras and Bouras 2002, 532.

[3] Orlandos 1954, 444–52, figs. 403–13.

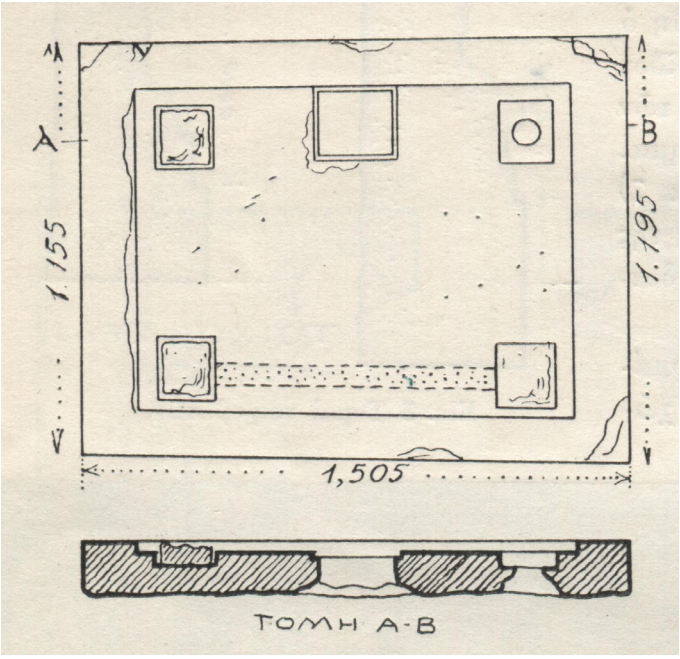

Fig. 1. Attica, katholikon of the Daphni monastery, altar base, ca. 1080.

decoration in relief or inscriptions. The *enkainion*, which was obligatory after the Seventh Ecumenical Council, was placed in a special hollowed out space on or under the base of the altar.[4]

This altar type continued to be in use throughout the Middle Byzantine period, mainly in exceptional monuments. The Middle Byzantine free-standing altar table supported by colonettes is a fragile element composed of the slab of the base, the colonettes and the table's top slab. The undecorated base bears recesses for the placement of the colonettes, whose number may vary, ranging from three[5] to five,[6] with four[7] being the commonest. On the surface of the base, one more hollow may occur and this is where the enkainion would be embedded. At the katholikon of the Daphni monastery in Attica, traces of a slab on the west side of the altar-base indicate that it was blocked by a panel (**Fig. 1**), which was visible from the nave: unfortunately it is not preserved today.[8] In other cases, the altar-base could be omitted, so that the colonettes stood directly on the floor pavement.[9]

The colonettes are usually octagonal; their capitals are of a piece with the shaft and so may be their bases, although more rarely so. In the altar of the katholikon of the Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos the colonettes stand on a plinth; their shafts are octagonal and their capitals are impost-like.[10] In general, altar-colonettes only slightly differed from those used in templon screens or windows; where, as often, identical it is not easy to determine their original place, when separated from it. For this reason, it is rather difficult and sometimes risky to restore dismantled or destroyed altars in monuments: for example, the altar of the late 10th century church of Agioi Apostoloi at the Athenian Agora was reconstructed on the basis of a single colonette fragment that was unearthed in the interior of the edifice, without adequate evidence about its original location.[11] The impressive altar of the katholikon of the Hosios Meletios monastery on mount Kithairon is the result of the restoration by Anastasios Orlandos, who used a 12th century colonette and four later ones, all of them with integral capitals and simple plinths as bases.[12] In smaller monuments, the altar stands on a single support, usually

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[4] Orlandos 1954, 466–8, figs. 429–30.

[5] Serres, Old Metropolis, 11th century (Orlandos 1939–40c, 162, fig. 5).

[6] Kithairon, katholikon of Osios Meletios monastery, ca. 1100 (Orlandos 1939–40b, 75–6, fig. 25).

[7] Attica, katholikon of Daphni monastery, ca. 1080 (Orlandos 1955–56, 76–7, fig. 10), Thrace, mount Papikion, church at Kerasia I, mid-11th century (Zekos 1983, 337, dr. 2), Euboea, Agia Trias of Kriezotis, late 12th century (Orlandos 1939–40a, 10, fig. 2).

[8] Orlandos 1955–56, 77, fig. 10. Orlandos suggested that this lost panel was decorated.

[9] Thrace, mount Papikion, church at Kerasia II, late 11th-early 12th centuries (Zekos 1988, 443, dr. 1).

[10] Pazaras 2001, 141–2, dr. 23α–δ.

[11] Frantz 1971, 41–2, pl. 26a.

[12] Orlandos 1939-40b, 75–6, fig. 25.

Fig. 2. Peloponnese, monastery of Gorgoepikoos at Nestani, Doric capital converted into an altar, ca. 1100.

a reused cylindrical column from an earlier building.[13] In several cases, spolia of various types may replace the column.[14]

The altar top is a square or rectangular slab with a smooth upper surface, which can be either plain or surrounded by a slightly raised border. It often happens that it is made of reused material, even in monuments of lavish and high quality marble decoration, such as the katholikon of the Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos.[15] In another monastery, that of Gorgoepikoos of Nestani in the Peloponnese, the masons –probably the monk Iakovos, who carved two templon colonettes of similar style, according to an inscription[16]– converted an ancient Doric capital into an altar (Fig. 2), by preserving the square abacus and by carving the echinus to obtain an octagonal form.[17] An intriguing example of liturgical continuity is found in the Early Christian offertory table exhibited in the Byzantine Sculpture Collection of Chalkida, which seems to be reused for the same purpose, with the addition of a foliated cross on its surface. The same probably happened at Kalenderhane camii (Panagia Kyriotissa?) in Constantinople, where parts of at least two Early Christian altar slabs were found – one of them inscribed.[18] On these slabs the enkainion is embedded into a rectangular cutting in the surface.

In several monumental and lavishly decorated buildings, the altars were placed under a ciborium, following an Early Christian tradition.[19] The few existing examples –Agios Dimitrios

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[13] Thrace, Paleochora of Maroneia, north and south single-nave churches, 12th century (Doukata-Demertzis 2008, 68, figs. on p. 67, 73, 74), Mani, Agios Petros at Gardenitsa, mid-12th century (Drandakes 1995, 262), Mesa Mani, Agios Niketas at Kepoula, 11th century (Drandakes 1995, 340, 342, fig. XV2), Mani, Agioi Theodoroi near Kafiona, 1144/5 (Drandakes 1995, 73).

[14] A Roman pedestal has been used at the Serres Metropolis, between two column shafts (Orlandos 1939–40c, 162, fig. 5).

[15] Pazaras 2001, 141.

[16] Pallis 2013, 789–90, n. 37, with earlier bibliography.

[17] Moutsopoulos 1959, 398, fig. 6.

[18] Peschlow 1997, 107–8, n. 172–3, pl. 123.

[19] Orlandos 1954, 471–80, figs. 434–41.

Fig. 3. Skyros, Episkopi, altar slab, 895 (?).
Fig. 4. Peloponnese, Mani, altar slab from Exechoro, 11th century.

of Thessaloniki,[20] Koimisis at Kalambaka,[21] and the katholikon of Hosios Loukas[22]– indicate that this practice was rather rare by Middle Byzantine times.

Apart from free standing altar tables supported by colonettes, built altars also occur in this period, especially in small churches. These can be divided into two groups: a) the free standing tables and b) those embedded in the sanctuary conch. A square or rectangular slab for the upper surface is the only marble element that can be found on this type of altars. This is probably the case of the church of Faneromeni at Kardia, Nisyros, although we are not sure about the exact time of its construction.[23]

DECORATION

Sculpted decoration appears on the supporting colonettes and the table top of the Middle Byzantine altars. As far their capitals are concerned, the colonettes share the same patterns with those of templon screens and the window mullions; once more, these affinities do not allow of the ready identification of their original placing. The colonette attributed to the altar of the Agioi Apostoloi church in Athens bears an integral capital with a typical lyre-like pattern.

Regarding the table top slabs, relief decoration is to be found either on the border that runs around their top, or on the flat surface that is enclosed in this frame. The first case includes some very simple examples, such as the altar slabs with a mere moulding as a frame, from Panagia Trimetou in Aitoloakarnania, dated to the 10th century,[24] and the Episkopi of Skyros (**Fig. 3**), which was founded according to an inscription in 895.[25] Rarely, the border bears a more complicated ornament and this is the case of a slab from Exechoro, Mani, whose one side is covered by arches with inscribed leaves (**Fig. 4**).[26] In the crypt of the katholikon of the Hosios Loukas monastery, a reused slab covers a built tomb. This extraordinary piece of sculpture is

[20] Mentzos 2008.
[21] Vanderheyde 2005; Voyadjis and Sythiakakis-Kritsimallis 2011, 209–11, figs. 28–30.
[22] Manolessou 2008, 318–21, dr. 1–4, figs. 1–4.
[23] Kappas 2005, 425–6, figs. 21–2.
[24] Vocotopoulos 1992, 35, n. 13, pl. 23β.
[25] Karambinis 2015, 398–401, fig. C.1–7, with earlier bibliography.
[26] Kalamara 2005, 80–1, n. 38 (N. Bouza).

Fig. 5. Peloponnese, Mani, the altar of Agios Niketas at Kepoula, 11th century.
Fig. 6. Peloponnese, Mani, the altar slab of Agios Nikolaos at Milea, 2nd half of the 11th century.

reported in the literature as a sarcophagus cover slab,[27] but I believe that it could have been originally used as an altar table top as well. This idea is supported by the following characteristics: the cuts on the corners to fit to ciborium supports, the richly decorated border, the empty and smooth inner surface that covers most of the slab, the small rectangular incision which could receive the enkainion. The kufesque patterns of the decorated border, where a good part of the colored inlaid material has been preserved, link this slab with the sculpture of the church of Panagia at the same monastery.

The inner surface is usually decorated with a cross taking up a small or a big part of it. On the altar of Chalkida, the cross is inscribed within a special frame, while on that of Nisyros it is freely developed.[28] The simple cross of the altar of Agios Niketas at Kepoula, Mani, dated to the 11th century (Fig. 5), covers almost all the surface within the border.[29] A unique case is that of the altar of Agios Nikolaos at Milea in the Mani, a work of the local sculptor Niketas Marmaras.[30] The slightly irregular rectangular slab bears an inscription on the border indicating its use – *θυσιασθήριον*, while the inner surface is entirely covered with relief decoration (Fig. 6). The inscription gives also the information that the slab was made by Niketas, the only Byzantine marble mason who proudly signed five of his works and must have created much more, during the second half of the 11th century. The late professor Nikolaos Drandakis identified as an altar slab one more relief from Mani, at the church of Panagitsa at Fagrianika, but it seems that it was originally a relieving arch transenna.[31]

The decoration of the Middle Byzantine altars was in low relief or in the cloisonné technique. Apart from its wide use in the sculpture of this era, the aforementioned techniques were obviously preferred for practical reasons: the relief work should not cause any problems in the smooth performance of the holy mysteries that took place on the slab. This is why the altar top surface remains in many examples undecorated and even. The cross predominates as the decorative pattern, in various forms: greek, latin, on a globe, foliated. This preference arises from its symbolic values, and of those of the altar as well.

There are also several supplementary patterns, such as foliate ornaments, arcades and interconnected roundels. Even when they do not frame a cross, as they usually do, they may con-

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[27] Bouras 1980, 112–4, dr. 5β, figs. 185–90; Pazaras 1988, 44, n. 53, pl. 42α–β.
[28] Kappas 2005, 425–6, figs. 21–2.
[29] Drandakes 1995, 340, 342, fig. XV.2.
[30] Drandakes 1980, 179–81, fig. 1.
[31] Drandakes 1980, 181–3, fig. 2.

tain symbolic values referring to Paradise, fitting excellently with that of the holy altar, where the eternal life giving sacrifice is celebrated. If the slab of Osios Loukas crypt was originally a table top, then the adaptation of kufesque Arabic letters forms on an altar would be rather puzzling.

CONCLUSION

Altars with sculpted decoration never became widespread in Middle Byzantine period: the examples we discussed are extremely few, given the degree of church building activity and the architectural sculpture production during this era. The reasons seem to be primarily practical, as the existence of relief elements on the altar slab might endanger the safe placement of the holy vessels on it during the services.

Furthermore, it seems needless to decorate an element that would be permanently hidden under vestments as soon as it had been sanctified. Since the Early Christian era, altars began to be dressed with the covering ενδυτή and this practice continued to be in use in the Middle Ages, when the altar was usually covered with two vestments, the white κατασάρκιον below and the ενδυτόν over it.[32] The strange choice to decorate this hidden element could be connected with the main decorative pattern employed, the cross: probably it was deemed needful to confirm and enhance the sanctity of the altar, regardless whether the faithful could see it or not – and probably this latter point was of no real consequence.

Thus, the choice to treat the altar as a work of sculpture was an exceptional one, depending possibly on the taste of the donor or the sculptor. The exceptional case of the completely decorated altar of Milea, which was created and signed by Niketas Marmaras, famous in Mani, probably has more to do with the personality of this provincial sculptor, rather than reflecting a trend in altar arrangement that did not find other supporters.

PROVENANCE OF FIGURES

Fig. 1. After Orlandos 1955–56, 77, fig. 10.
Fig. 2. Fig. courtesy of Georgios Tsekes.
Fig. 3. Fig. courtesy of Stavros Mamaloukos.
Fig. 4. After Kalamara 2005, 80–1, n. 38.
Fig. 5. After Drandakes 1995, 342, fig. XV.2.
Fig. 6. After Drandakes 1980, 184, fig. 1.

[32] Orlandos 1954, 468–9, fig. 431; Speck 1966; Wessel 1966b; Cutler 1991.

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