Dedication inscriptions on Middle Byzantine reliquaries convey important information, including the identity of the patrons, the provenance of the relics, and the purpose of the gift. I argue that the placement of the dedicatory inscription in relationship to the image and the contents of the reliquary provides a more nuanced message than that which is explicitly stated in the inscription itself. I present one object as a case study—a reliquary from the Protaton Monastery on Mount Athos that dates between the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Pls 1-2). I suggest that the inscribed text functions as iconography that is integrated into the reliquary’s visual programme.

DESCRIPTION

In its current form, the Protaton reliquary is a complex object. It was first constructed in the eleventh to twelfth centuries and altered in the eighteenth. The Middle Byzantine reliquary consists of a lid and a base sheathed in silver. The lid has a dedicatory inscription that wraps three of its sides, and features a scene of the Crucifixion executed in gilded repoussé (Pl. 1). Christ, the central figure, is depicted with a cruciform nimbus and wears a knee-length loincloth knotted below the waist. The upper end of the cross, which abuts the dedicatory inscription, has a titulus. The lower has a platform for Christ’s feet and is supported on the rock of Golgotha by three stakes. The hillock identifies the lower edge of the lid as the ground line.

The Theotokos and John the Apostle are depicted to the left and right sides of the cross, respectively. They are approximately four-fifths the size of Christ and elevated above the ground line. The Theotokos is nimbed and wears a tunic, maphorion, and boots. Her body is in right profile and her head is in three-quarter view. Her left hand clasps her right shoulder and she raises her right arm toward Christ, whose head is tilted toward her. John is nimbed and wears a tunic and mantle. He is also depicted in three-quarter view, turning and gesturing toward Christ with his left hand. His right hand touches his face, a gesture of sorrow. Two inscriptions from John 19:26-27 are placed above the heads of the Theotokos and John and below the left and right arms of the cross. The inscription above the Theotokos reads: ‘behold your son’; that above John reads: ‘behold your mother’.

Two angels, appearing as mirror images of each other, are depicted above the left and right arms of the cross. They are shown from the waist up; each is nimbed and wears a tunic and mantle. They turn their bodies away from the cross and torque their heads close to their chests exposing their palms.

* This article originates from my dissertation and was first presented at the Byzantine Studies Conference; see Hostetler 2009, 13. I am grateful to those in attendance for their suggestions and comments. I am particularly indebted to Lynn Jones for her guidance through the many revisions of this manuscript.

1 Cutler (2010, 24) argues that that these and other elements “work together, each reinforcing the statement of the other factors”.

2 The lid measures 17.7 x 14.5 x 0.7 cm and the base measures 19.3 x 16.1 x 3 cm. The date is based on style, iconography, and epigraphy. Millet/Pargoire/Petit (1904, 10, no. 26) suggest that it is a copy of an eleventh or twelfth-century ivory. Frolow (1961, 653, no. 1120) argues that it is an original Middle Byzantine work. Recent scholarship agrees on an eleventh to twelfth-century date; see Rhoby 2010, 202; Catalogue Paris 2009, 236, no. 124; Brigitte Pitarakis in Varales 2006, 119; Pitarakis 2001, 52; Katia Loberdou-Tsigarida in Catalogue Thessaloniki 1997, 341, no. 9.18. For additional literature on the reliquary, see Krause 2008, 44; Loverdou-Tsigarida 2007, 86, no. 55; Frolow 1965, 98.

3 The dimensions of the original reliquary have not been documented in the literature.

4 Maguire 1977, 144-145.

5 ΙΔΕΟΤΙΟΛΟΤΟΣ ΣΟΥ: ΙΔΟΤΙ Μ[ΙΤ]ΗΡ ΣΟΥ.
Pl. 1. Protaton reliquary, lid, Mount Athos. Silver-gilt and wood, 17.7 × 14.5 × 0.7 cm
(after Catalogue Thessaloniki 1997, 340)
A figure, shown in *proskynēsis* on the ground line between the Theotokos and Christ, is identified by the invocational inscription above his head: ‘Lord help Zosimas the monk’. He has short curly hair, is bearded, and wears a tunic covered by a mantle. Zosimas faces the Theotokos in left profile cupping his hands together in supplication. He extends them from his body to the Mother of God, but does not touch her. His feet touch the rock of Golgotha.

The base of the Protaton reliquary displays its relics – four stones set at the corners presented through gilded oval-shaped openings (Pl. 2). Inscriptions, placed next to the openings, designate the provenance of the relics. The stones at the top left and right corners are identified as originating from the Tomb of Christ and Golgotha, respectively; those in the lower left and right, Bethlehem and Gethsemane. A gilded repoussé cross was originally depicted in the center of the base. The final rosettes of the left, right, and lower ends of the cross survive. An identifying inscription is divided into two parts and is placed above the Bethlehem and Gethsemane inscriptions. It reads: ‘ΣΥ / ΛΟΝ’ or ‘wood’, indicating that the Protaton reliquary originally contained a relic of the True Cross.

The lid and base were altered in 1758. This date is confirmed by a dedicatory inscription placed on the left, right, and upper edges of the base. It reads: ‘this enkolpion with the cross and the precious wood is now owned by the great church of the Protaton with the help and expense of the kellion, and if anyone should desire to remove this or anything from it, he has the sovereign Theotokos as his adversary on the Day of Judgment, 1758’. At this time, silver strips decorated with rinceau were added to the left, right, and lower edges of the lid. A triangular shaped overlay of silver, described by Brigitte Pitarakis as a handle, is at the centre of the lower strip. A cavity was cut in the centre of the base to make room for an enkolpion, which holds a relic of the True Cross.

**The Dedicatory Inscription: Placement, Context, and Meaning**

The dedicatory inscription on the lid is a dodeca-syllable epigram composed of three verses; each verse is placed along one edge of the lid (Pl. 3). The inscription begins in the top left corner where only half of the ‘T’ of ‘tous’ remains. It is likely that a cross preceded the ‘T’, originally marking the beginning of the inscription and directing the order in which it is read. The first verse, read from left
Pl. 2. Protaton reliquary, base, Mount Athos. Silver-gilt, wood, and stones, 19.3 × 16.1 × 3 cm
(after Pitarakis 2001, Fig. 8)
The placement of the names of Zosimas and Nicolaos within the inscription is significant when viewed in relationship to the iconography (Pl. 4). The placement of Zosimas’s name associates him with the Apostle (Pl. 4a). His name begins on the same level as the top of John’s head and ends in alignment with John’s left elbow. The placement of

*Pl. 3. Protaton reliquary, lid, detail of the Crucifixion, Mount Athos. Silver-gilt and wood, 17.7 × 14.5 × 0.7 cm (after Catalogue Thessaloniki 1997, 340)*

*Pl. 4. Protaton reliquary, lid, detail of the Crucifixion with the words Zosimas, Nikolaos and lithous highlighted, Mount Athos. Silver-gilt and wood, 17.7 × 14.5 × 0.7 cm (after Catalogue Thessaloniki 1997, 340, with additions by B. Hostetler)*

...
Nikolaos’s name associates him with Christ and the Theotokos (Pl. 4b). The first letter of his name, ‘N’, aligns with the right hand of Christ. The last letter of his name, ‘C’, is on the same level as the Mother of God’s right arm.

This suggested relationship between word and image is supported by the placement of the word ‘lithous’, the accusative of ‘stones’ (Pl. 4c). The definite article ‘tous’ is placed at the beginning of the first verse of the inscription and its corresponding noun, ‘lithous’, at the end of the second. This unusual placement aligns ‘lithous’ with the depiction of the rock of Golgotha, referencing that which is unseen – the stone of Calvary inside the reliquary. The placement of word, image, and relic each amplify the other components. This reflexive relationship is also present in the central placement of the Crucifixion on the lid and the repoussé cross, the ‘xylon’ inscription, and the relic of the True Cross in the base.

This careful treatment of word and image is also seen in the representations of the donors (Pl. 5). Zosimas is depicted in proskynesis seeking the aid of the Mother of God. While Nikolaos is not depicted, it can be argued that he too is represented. The last letter of his name aligns with the right arm of the Theotokos (Pl. 5a). She in turn elevates her right hand to Christ to intercede on behalf of both Zosimas and Nikolaos. Christ dispenses salvation to Nikolaos via his right hand, which is stretched out on the cross and aligned with the first letter of Nikolaos’s name. For Zosimas, the promise of salvation is given visual expression by his contact with Golgotha – the place where Christ destroys the power of death and offers eternal life (Pl. 5b). For Nikolaos, the same message is expressed through the iconography of text.

How do the contents contribute to the messages conveyed by the relationships of words and images on the reliquary? The primary function of the Protaton is to contain a relic of the True Cross and secondary relics from sites associated with the life of Christ. This function has its closest parallel to Early Byzantine eulogiai, such as the Monza and Bobbio ampullae. These pilgrimage flasks, which held oil and water from shrines in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, have images and inscriptions that reference their places of origin. The sixth-century Sancta Sanctorum reliquary, also a rectangular box with a sliding lid, contains stones, earth, and wood. Identifying inscriptions written on the relics associate them with different sites connected to the life of Christ: Bethlehem, Zion, the Mount of Olives, and the place of the Resurrection.
interior of the lid features five biblical scenes, some of which correspond to the suggested provenance of the relics.

The Protaton reliquary, like its Early Byzantine predecessors, is a microcosm of the Holy Land, a locus sanctus. The inscriptions and image authenticate the relics. The relics in turn allow the faithful to receive the benefits of the sites, no matter how distant.28

Annemarie Weyl Carr demonstrates that for the Byzantine pilgrim, “the space claimed was one less of distance than of presence”29. For Nikolaos and Zosimas, their presence at Golgotha is expressed by the complex interrelated programme of words, images, and relics. The placement of Nikolaos’s name and Zosimas’s image in alignment with the Theotokos and Christ conveys a unified message of supplicant, intercessor, and savior. Their proximity to the cross, the monk’s contact with the rock, and the placement of ‘lithous’ in the inscription emphasize their presence with that of the relics. Their actions, articulated in the present tense, make their prayers continuous and without end. The placement of text in relationship to the iconography and relics enable Zosimas and Nikolaos to offer their requests of salvation in perpetuity at the site of veneration.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


---

29 Carr 2002, 76.