

Particularities of wooden carved iconostases in selected post-Byzantine churches of Albania

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Particularities of wooden carved iconostasis in selected Post-Byzantine Churches of Albania

This paper presents the data and study results of the post-Byzantine wood carved iconostases of different churches in Albania, which notwithstanding the circumstances of the communistic period have preserved to a considerable extent their typical characteristics. The paper aims to examine the stylistic and morphological aspects of the iconostasis in selected churches in relation to the architecture and tries to identify the relationships, sequences and reasons for such phenomena.

The presence of iconostases in the Eastern Orthodox Church is based on the carried rituals and services that are expressed through ecclesiastical sculptures and other works. In these contexts, the iconostasis is the most dominating screen, related to the rood screen of English mediaeval churches, but contrary to them it is a closed and solid structure. In the iconostasis, architecture and wood carving workers collaborate on a large scale in order to create a solid and well-integrated frame. The analysis includes St Mary's Monastery, also known as the Monastery of Dormition of Theotokos Mary, a medieval Byzantine church on Zvërnec island in the Narta Lagoon, southwest of the city of Vlora, southwestern Albania (SMZ); the Church of Apostles in Hoshtevë, Gjirokastra, with its spectacular interior completely covered with frescoes that became a cultural monument of Albania in 1948 (SA); and the Church of the Dormition of the Theotokos, simply known as Koimissi or St Mary, in the village of Labovë e Kryqit, Gjirokastrë County, southern Albania (SM).

Keywords: cultural heritage, post-Byzantine, churches, Albanian, iconostasis

The Byzantine and Post-Byzantine era in the Balkans, including in Albanian territory, was marked by extensive church building.¹ Church architecture during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was marked by crystallization of its typological architecture particularities and variety of planimetric and volumetric solutions.² Analyzing the functional solution,³ composition of the component parts, architectural, decorative and constructional solutions, and exterior and interior decoration reveals a distinction between the monastery churches and those built in inhabited areas. For this study, we tried to select the most significant prototypes.

¹ THOMO, Piro. *Post-Byzantine Churches of South Albania*. Tirana: KASH, 1998, p. 319; THOMO, Piro and STRATO-BERDHA, Gentian. *Restaurimi i monumenteve të Kishës Ortodokse në Shqipëri* [The restoration of monuments of the Orthodox Church in Albania]. KOASH, 2005, p. 208. [In Albanian]

² MEKSI, Aleksander and THOMO, Piro. Post-Byzantine architecture in Albania. Basilicas. In: *Monumentet*, 1981, 1(2), pp. 11-32; MEKSI, Aleksander. *Medieval architecture of Albania*. Tirana. 1983, p. 375.

³ THOMO, *Post-Byzantine Churches...* p. 319.



Figure 1: Location of the considered churches St Mary's Monastery in Zvernec (ZMZ), St Mary's Church in the village of Labovë e Kryqit (SM) and the Church of Apostles in Hoshtevë, Gjirokastra (SA)

The iconostasis was developed from the Byzantine templon, which appeared during the fifth and sixth centuries AD,⁴ and which may have been influenced by the proscenium in classical theatre, or by the barrier before the *adyton* (sanctuary) of a Greek temple.⁵ Iconostases are commonly found in both Orthodox and Eastern Catholic churches,⁶ while in later Byzantine churches the sanctuary curtain comprises part of the icon screen (templon/iconostasis) which shields the altar from the congregation's view.⁷ Undoubtedly, in Orthodox churches a component or feature of the central piece is the presence of an iconostasis that separates the interior space into the space reserved for the priesthood from the nave, usually reserved to the ordinary people. According to Epstein⁸ and Misijuk,⁹ the initial form of the iconostasis may be seen in a low barrier placed between the nave of a temple and its sanctuary. Based on the accounts of authors it is not clear when the typical arrangement of an iconostasis with its separate zones starts, as shown in Figure 2, based on the initial drawing designed by Markis.¹⁰

Following Antonie Bon,¹¹ the iconographic programs of the Late Byzantine period in large churches and monastic settlements acted as an echo of the grand Middle Byzantine examples. Jesus Christ occupied the highest parts of the vaulting, as master of the universe and supreme judge, while the Virgin was placed in the conch of the apse.¹² The sanctuary scenes were of extreme importance, because of their placement inside the holy of holies.

⁴ ANDRONIKOS, Thanos. An introduction to Greek Orthodox iconostases. The Frame Blog, 2014, accessed August 24, 2022, <https://theframeblog.com/2014/11/12/an-introduction-to-greek-orthodox-iconostases/>

⁵ MAKRIS, Konstantinos. *Ecclesiastical wood carvings*. Apostolic ministry of the Church of Greece, Athens, 1982, p. 48; FANNY, Vitto. The Origin of the Iconostasis in Early Christian Churches in the Holy Land. In: *Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art: Collection of articles*, 2017, 7, pp. 222–231; DJURIC, Isidora et al. Church Heritage Multimedia Presentation: Case study of the iconostasis as the characteristic art and architectural element of the Christian Orthodox churches. In: *Challenges – CULTURAL HERITAGE*, 2020, 1, pp. 551–560; MELVANI, Nicholas. The Middle Byzantine Sanctuary Barrier: Templon screen or Iconostasis? In: *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 1981, 134(1), pp. 1–27.

⁶ GRONEK, Agnieszka. Eschatological elements in the schemes of paintings of high iconostases. In: *Seris Byzantina*, 2014, 7, pp. 11–21; VRYZIDIS, Nicolaos and PAPANASTAVROU, Elena. Notes on the Sanctuary Curtain: Symbolisms and Iconographies in the Greek Church. *Cahiers Balkaniques*, 2021, p. 48.

⁷ LIDOV, Alexei. The Catapetasma of Hagia Sophia and the Phenomenon of Byzantine Installations, Convivium: Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval Europe. In: *Byzantium, and the Mediterranean*, 2014, 1(2), p. 40–57.

⁸ EPSTEIN, A. W. The Middle Byzantine Sanctuary Barrier Templon or Iconostasis? *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 1981, 134, pp. 1–28.

⁹ MISIJUK, Tatiana. The multilayer composition of an iconostasis. In: *Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej*, 2017, 16(3), pp. 221–236.

¹⁰ MAKRIS, *Ecclesiastical wood carvings...* p. 48.

¹¹ BON, Antonie. *The Ancient Civilization of Byzantium*. Barrie and Jenkins. London, 1972, pp. 105-107.

¹² KARACHALIOU, Ermioni. *The architectural and iconographic identity of Paliokhora on Aegina. An Introduction to Its Late and Post Byzantine Churches*. PhD thesis. University of Manchester, 2012, p. 530.

Historically, during the Byzantine era, wood was widely used in the construction of ecclesiastical objects, but the interior decoration of churches was mainly based on marble and mosaics that matched and complemented the brilliant exterior architecture of the churches.¹³ Later on, during the Ottoman period, wood replaced the marble in the interior decoration of the Orthodox churches, mainly due to the difficult conditions prevailing at that time for Christians. The wood of this period is clearly enriched with various interior decorations, and carved wooden furniture also appeared around the same time, contributing to the churches' interior aesthetics.¹⁴ As described by various authors,¹⁵ craftsmen had the opportunity to express and demonstrate all their artistic capabilities in the construction and decoration of the churches' interior and attach a unique, representative and highly impressive interior.

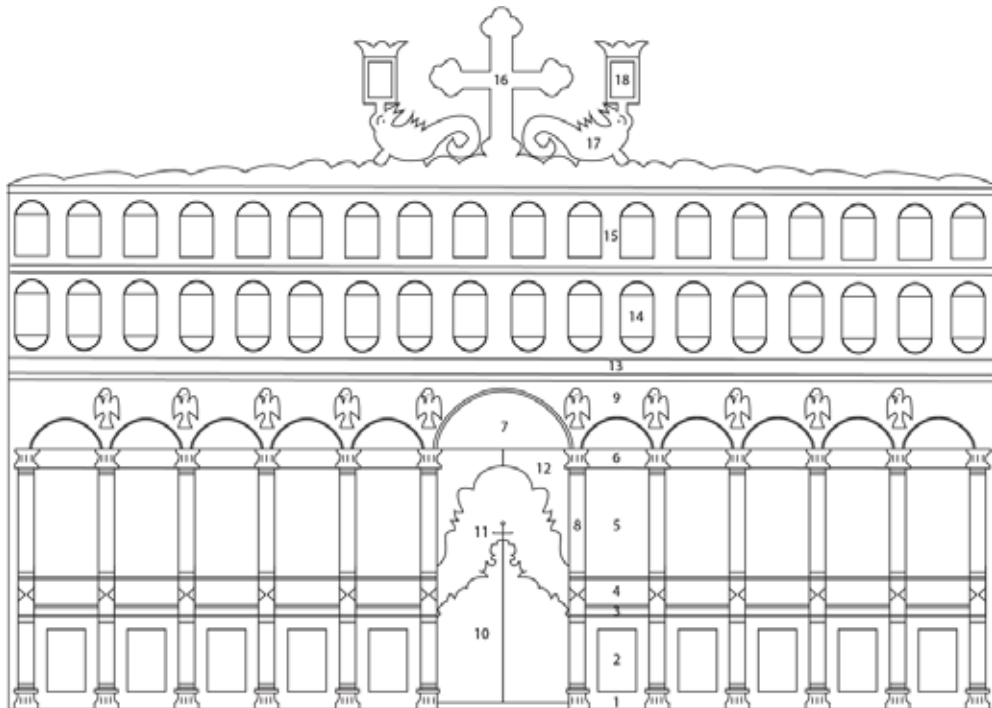


Figure 2: The structure of a Greek iconostasis as it developed from the sixteenth century (after D. Stamelos, 1993)

Andronikos describes typical arrangement of elements in an iconostasis;¹⁶ this might be found with slight modifications (as per Figure 2) in its details, and include: (1) the base; (2) *horakion*: an oblong panel made from wood or marble which may, in either case, be carved or painted; (3) *staphyle* (or grapevine): a narrow strip decorated with carved grapevines; (4)

¹³ BARBOUTIS, Ioannis. Wooden interior decoration in post byzantine orthodox churches of Thessaloniki. In: *Pro Ligno*, 2013, 9(4), pp. 219–227.

¹⁴ MANTOPOULOU-PANAGIOTOPOULOU, Thanos, CHEMIKOGLOU, Evangelia. Thessaloniki during the Ottoman occupation, the organization of the city and its monuments. In: *Archeology and arts, Athens*, 1997, 64, pp. 93–97.

¹⁵ KAMBOURI-VAMVOUKOU, Maria. The church of Agios Minas in Thessaloniki. A new type of ecclesiastical architecture. *Churches in Greece 1453–1850*, National Technical University, Athens, 1989, 3, pp. 13–31; AGNANTOPOULOU, Evangelia and BARBOUTIS, Ioannis. Post-Byzantine wood carved iconostases in orthodox churches of Sikinos Island. In: *Pro Ligno*. 2019, 15(4), pp. 426–433.

¹⁶ ANDRONIKOS, An introduction to Greek Orthodox iconostases...

lower *ketabas* (probably from the Turkish): a rectangular board which is frequently used as support for icons; (5) tier of “despotic icons” (from *despotes*, Greek for Lord, or Christ): six icons comprising, usually from left to right, the archangel Michael, a patron saint or important event, the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, St John the Baptist and the archangel Gabriel; (6) upper *ketabas*; (7) *kemeri* (from the Turkish for belt): an arcade with carved or painted decorations, with *The Last Supper* in the central arch; (8) columns which separate the ‘despotic icons’ and their auxiliary elements (2–6), and form the supporting structure of the iconostasis; (9) *peristera* (literally “pigeon”, as in a bird’s beak molding), a protruding decorative area where hanging candleholders are usually attached; and (10) *orea pyli* (the beautiful gate) consisting of two hinged doors with carved decorations and miniature icons attached on their surface – they are considered to be sacred and may only be entered by ordained clergy; (11) the Holy Grail, which crowns the doors; (12) the canopy above the doors, composed of carved decorations usually depicting horrifying scenes such as gorgons or dragons being slain; (13) a representation of the Tree of Jesse, showing the ancestry of Jesus Christ; (14) *The Twelve Feasts*: scenes from the life of Christ, representing the main feast days of the liturgical year – these may vary as to order and number; (15) miniature icons, usually of prophets or apostles, surrounded by carved floral decorations; (16) the crucifix; (17) a flying dragon, representing Satan in the form of a serpent; and (18) cherubs enclosing icons of the Virgin (left) and St John (right) – these may also be supported on the dragon’s tail. Generally, the parts of an iconostasis are categorized into three zones: despotic icons (1–12), miniature icons (13–15) and the “coronation” or crest (16–18).

Despite the fact that the iconostases represent a central element of the church and its heritage,¹⁷ and that they are one of the most significant aspects of Albania’s national heritage, having been declared “monuments of culture”, there are no scientific studies focused on their typology, evolution, or the differences among Albanian post-Byzantine churches and the wood carving techniques deployed within.

The current research was conducted by visiting all the churches of the post-Byzantine period presented in this contribution. The condition of their current iconostasis structures, wooden elements, the degree of deterioration caused by various factors, and differences from the standard typology were examined.

The analyzed church iconostases in our case belong to a golden period, when iconostases were presented in the form of solid screens with large icons, a style that developed in Russia in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and probably spread from there to Mount Athos, and further to Greece and the Balkans.¹⁸ In the eighteenth century, iconostases became the most decorative elements in Christian Orthodox churches, with the highly decorated carvings and icons made by the most influential artists of that time.

St Mary’s Monastery (SMZ), also known as the Monastery of Dormition of Theotokos Mary, is a medieval Byzantine church on Zvërnec Island in the Narta Lagoon, southwest of the city of Vlora, southwestern Albania (40°51’38” N 19°39’45” E) (Figures 1 and 3).

¹⁷ TIMAR, Maria Cristina, GURAU, Lidia, POROJAN, Mihaela, BELDEAN, Emanuela Carmen. Microscopic identification of wood species: An important step in furniture conservation. In: *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2013, 9(4), pp. 243–252; AGNANTOPOULOU and BARBOUITIS, *Post-Byzantine wood carved iconostases...*

¹⁸ FANNY, Vitto. The Origin of the Iconostasis in Early Christian Churches in the Holy Land. In: *Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art: Collection of articles*, 2017, 7, pp.222–231; DJURIC et al., Church Heritage Multimedia Presentation...



Figure 3: *The Church of SMN in Narta (source: author's archive)*

The Church of Apostles (SA) in Hoshtevë, Gjirokastra, with its spectacular interior completely covered with frescoes (40°13'03.25"N; 20°14'53.68"E) became a Cultural Monument of Albania in 1948 (Figures 1 and 4).



Figure 4: *The Church of SA in Hoshtevë, Gjirokastra*

The Church of the Dormition of Theotokos, simply known as Koimissi or Saint Mary's church (SM) is an Eastern Orthodox Christian church in the village of Labovë e Kryqit, in Gjirokaštër County, southern Albania (40°04'06.25"N; 20°18'53.02.28" E) (Figures 1 and 5).



Figure 5: *The Church of SM in Labovë e Kryqit*

View of some of the most significant elements in iconostases

The essence of the altar screen lies in its size and scheme of its paintings, and this is well reflected in all three churches considered here, with a particularly spectacular presentation in SMZ (Figures 6 and 8). Divided into several rows filled with icons, the iconostasis in SM creates a structure which, like a wall, fully covers the passage to the sanctuary (Figures 5 and 7). This space, along with the liturgical rituals taking place in it, are completely hidden from the eyes of the faithful, becoming even more mysterious and inaccessible as a result.¹⁹



From the site survey, it is clear that only fragments remain of the iconostasis of SMZ (Figures 6 and 8). The horakion – an oblong panel (see also Figure 2, element 2) that might be carved or painted – was heavily damaged and had been restored at a later stage, while the representation of the Tree of Jesse (see also Figure 2, element 13), showing the ancestry of Christ, is for the most part preserved, although the left section (ca. 0.8 m) is also damaged.

Figure 6:

Front central part of the iconostasis in SMZ, Narta

¹⁹ GRONEK, Eschatological elements. . . , pp.11–21; STAMELOS, Demetrio. *Neo-Hellenic Popular Art: sources from the 16th Century to Current Times*. Athens: Gutenberg, 1993, 120-1/128; STANKOVA, Lidia. Tradition and innovation in the decorative practices in Christian art of the Balkans, fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. In: Hartmuth et al. (eds.). *Christian Art Under Muslim Rule. Proceedings of a Workshop held in Istanbul on May 11/12 2012*. Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, Leiden, p. 195–205.



Figure 7:
*Iconostasis in SMZ,
Labovë e Kryqit*

It is worth mentioning that SMZ's iconostasis differs significantly due to its *orea pyli* (beautiful gate) (Figure 2, element 10). The standard *orea pyli* consists of two hinged doors with carved decorations and miniature icons attached to their surface, but in this monument the feature is associated with Holy Grail crowns (Figure 2, element 11), and on its left side there is an additional door (Figure 8).



Figure 8: *The orea pyli in SMZ, Narta*

Following Barboutis,²⁰ the wood-carved elements of the *orea pyli* in SMZ display a similar relief and main decorative patterns, with the addition of an angel without a body, but with a head and wings, as well as two carved human-like heads from which the vigil lamps are hung at the coronation. Furthermore, it seems that due to time constraints and interventions, the original components (including colorings) have been partially maintained. There are also environmental and biological impacts to consider, including damage caused by insects and fungi.²¹

Finally, it is worth mentioning that all components of iconostases are carved in high relief, perforated at some points, as Agnantopoulou and Barboutis also emphasize²² in their analyses of post-Byzantine Greek churches. The present designs display various decorative motifs, including local floral and faunal elements such as vases with vertical or spiral shoots, and numerous plant-based decorations

²⁰ BARBOUTIS, Wooden interior decoration...

²¹ SHUMKA, Laura and ÇIFTÇI, Çigdem. Relative Rate of Durability Towards Influence of Water in Stone Degradation. Case Study of Lead Mosque in Shkodra (northwest Albania). In: *Journal of International Environmental Application & Science*, 2019, 13(2), pp. 105–109; SHUMKA, Laura. Comparison of Indoor Climate Features Following Different Climate Guidelines in Conservation Examples of Selected Churches in Albania. In: *International Journal of Conservation Science (IJCS)*, 2019, 10 (4), pp. 623–630; SHUMKA, Laura., PERI, Leonidha and LATO, Entela. The Needs for Determining Degradation Risks from Temperature and Relative Humidity of Post-Byzantine Church Indoor Environment. In: *Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism (JEMT)*, 2020, 11 (3), pp. 601–606.

²² AGNANTOPOULOU and BARBOUTIS. *Post-byzantine wood carved iconostases...*

enriched with other motifs, including two men holding a royal crown, two angels on either side of a blazon, and a variety of animals (lions, birds pecking grapes and leaves, winged quadrupeds, etc.) (Figures 9 and 10).

Also in the case of the orea pyli, various decorative plant and animal motifs are incorporated.



Figure 9: *Fragments of wood carving from the iconostasis in SM, Labovë e Kryqit*



Figure 10: *Various decorative motifs, including local flora and fauna*

In conclusion, despite the fact that these iconostases represent spectacular examples of Albanian workmanship, due to historical reasons, they have been significantly damaged along with the deterioration of entire post-Byzantine church structures. Thus far, preservation attempts remain lacking, and there is a need for an integrated approach which includes

conservation against decay protection from wood-destroying biological components such as insects and fungi.

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