

POST-BYZANTINE WOOD CARVED ICONOSTASES IN ORTHODOX CHURCHES OF SIKINOS ISLAND

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Abstract:

This paper presents the recording and study results of the post-Byzantine wood carved iconostases of Sikinos, a small island of the Cyclades, which has preserved to a considerable extent its traditional characteristics. The island has 13 churches containing old hand-crafted wood carved iconostases. The most remarkable ones are dated from the late 17th to the late 18th century, have limited dimensions due to the small size of the churches and present a three-zone horizontal structure with two arched openings, three base panels and three Despotic icons constructed with wood planks, while they do not include the row with the Apostles in the upper zone. They are carved in high relief and their coronation is impressive, with a big cross and dragons. In addition, they are made mainly of softwood species without resin canals. These structures are being gradually decomposed by decay and wood-destroying insects, as the protection attempts were limited only to the declaration of the buildings as historical monuments and did not concern at all the interior wood carvings, mainly due to the reduced acknowledgement that wood is one of the most significant parts of the cultural heritage in contrast with the much more rich and impressive ancient Greek findings.

Key words: wood carved iconostasis; post-Byzantine; Sikinos island; Cyclades; cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

One of the landscape features of the Cycladic islands is the enormous number of churches, many of which are post-Byzantine, as the historical circumstances of this period allowed their construction (Bouras 2001). The post-Byzantine period in the Cyclades did not begin in 1453 with the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans (Dimitropoulos 1993), but in 1204 with the invasion of the French and Venetian crusaders (Lock 1995). After that, the Venetian Republic received the Cyclades as a share (Georgantopoulos 1889) and established a Duchy, which was preserved for approximately one century after the fall of the Byzantine Empire, in almost all the islands, until their conquest by the Ottomans (Vallindas 1882).

During the Venetian occupation, there were no restrictions on the Orthodox worship, although the Latins granted privileges to the Orthodox inhabitants in order to proselytize them (Vallindas 1882), but without much success (Tournefort 1717), with the exception of Syros and Tinos islands (Vallindas 1882). Also, during the Ottoman occupation, the Cyclades enjoyed privileges which did not exist in the rest of Greece (Charilaos 1888), as the Ottomans were rarely appearing there and their aim was mainly to collect taxes (Tournefort 1717). The inhabitants of the islands, benefiting of such a freedom, had the opportunity to build new monasteries (Zerlentis 1913) or convert the abandoned Catholic churches to Orthodox ones, some of which had already been Orthodox before the Latin period (Kotsakis 2013). Also, they have built many private churches (Olympitou 1997). The performance of the Christian worship started to be carried out under greater freedom after the four-year rule of the Russians in the Aegean Sea and the signing of the Russian-Ottoman Treaty of 1715, which included, among others, the return of the islands to the Ottomans (Charilaos 1888), providing however clear rights to build and decorate new churches or to repair the existing ones (Vallindas 1882).

These churches are usually simple buildings constructed with local materials (stones), which follow the non-uniformity principle of the Cycladic architecture (Mamaloukos 2006). Their interiors are simple, either without the presence of an iconostasis or with the presence of a built-in or a wood carved or sometimes a marbled iconostasis (Dimitrokalas 1993), as well as mixed, namely marble and wood carved (Goulaki-Voutira and Karadedos 2001). As in the rest of Greece, many wood carved iconostases of particular artistic value have been left to be destroyed (Bent 1885), while some others have already been removed due to the renovation trends at the beginning of the 20th century (Barboutis 2013).

Although the iconostases constitute one of the most significant parts of the cultural heritage, in terms both of religion and wood carving art (Timar et al. 2013), and despite the extremely high number of post-

Byzantine churches, many of which have been declared as historical monuments, there are no researches focusing on the wood carved iconostases of the Cyclades. The studies that display, among others, some single mixed iconostases of the islands of Andros (Goulaki-Voutira and Karadedos 2001), Paros (Mitsani 2006) and Milos (Belivanakis 2007), make an exception.

OBJECTIVE

The present study aims to identify and record the hand-crafted wood carved iconostases that were constructed until the middle of the 19th century in the island of Sikinos and to analyze the most remarkable ones, with a view to contribute to the preservation and protection of them as valuable elements of Greek cultural heritage, highlighting the use of wood in structural and decorative applications, in an area where the production of local timber was and still is absent.

MATERIAL, METHOD, EQUIPMENT

The study was conducted in Sikinos, a small island in the southern part of the Cyclades, which is geographically located in the central zone of the Aegean Sea, in Greece. The choice of the study area was based on the fact that this island has preserved its traditional characteristics to a considerable extent, mainly due to the only recent and mild development of tourism. Sikinos does not have a natural port, while an artificial one was built recently, which means that product transfer has been a laborious and costly process in the past. The «Chora» (capital of the island) consists of three traditional settlements: the «Castle», built during the Venetian domination and «Vouni», which was its extension, as well as the «Chorio» (village), which was inhabited later. The total population of the island amounted to 890 inhabitants in 1836 (Gavalas 1931), while nowadays (2011) the population is no more than 300 inhabitants. As far as vegetation is concerned, Sikinos does not have timber production forests, as the ecosystem consists of the Mediterranean phrygana (cushion-shaped, spiny dwarf shrubs), combined with garrigue (sparse and low broad-leaved evergreen shrubs) or juniper shrubs, as well as a mixture of them (Gerakis et al. 2003).

The study was conducted between the years of 2016 and 2018, implementing visits to all the old churches of the island, recording the presence or not of wooden iconostases and their type. In the case of the old, hand-crafted wood carved iconostases, a detailed inventory of their characteristics was carried out, examining the dimensions, structure, type of relief, presence of paint or gilding, main decorative patterns, origin dates, subsequent additions, biological degradation (decay, wood-destroying insects), etc. In addition, macroscopic identification of wood species was performed using a hand magnifier, which was proven to be difficult in many cases, as the front side of the iconostases was generally gilded or coloured, while the back side was some times indiscernible, due to natural ageing, biological degradation or placement of additional layers of materials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of the recording process followed in this study, Sikinos includes 58 old churches, six of which are Byzantine, while seven of them have been declared, to date, as post-Byzantine historical monuments. One of them was a mausoleum of the 3rd century AD that was turned into a domed Christian church, getting its particular final form in the 17th century (Frantz et al. 1969). Concerning the iconostases, the most significant information is summarized hereupon:

- 15 churches bear built-in iconostases, while 9 churches have no iconostases, mainly due to the removal of the decayed wooden ones or the partial fall of the churches,
- 34 churches have wooden iconostases and specifically:
 - ✓ 21 churches have simple wooden iconostases or modern carved or partly reconstructed using modern composite wood products, which do not serve any artistic highlighting of the wood, compared to the old hand-crafted wood carved iconostases,
 - ✓ 12 churches were found to have hand-crafted wood carved iconostases, two of which appear to have double nave with two iconostases each, while another church had until recently a wood-carved iconostasis, which has currently been removed due to restoration work of the building.

Taking into account all the above mentioned, the five wood carved iconostases that were considered to be the most remarkable are presented in the following. A typical arrangement of an iconostasis with its separate zones is being shown in Fig. 1, based on the initial drawing designed by Makris (1982).

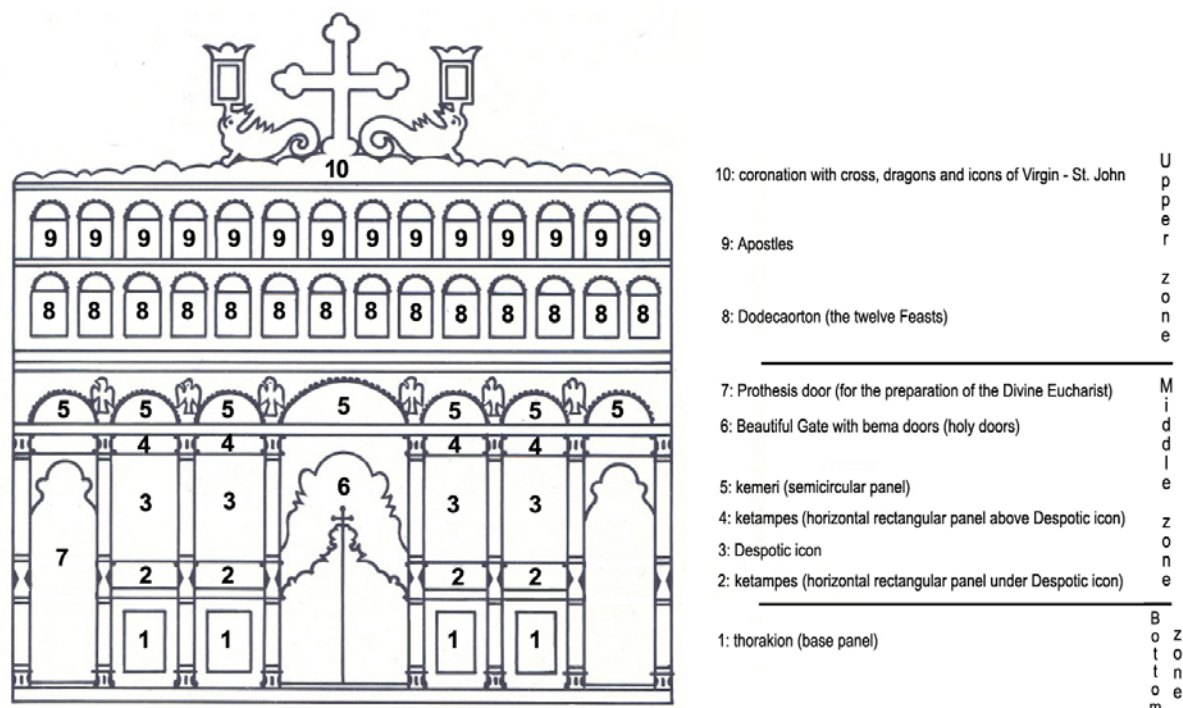


Fig. 1.
A typical arrangement of an iconostasis, based on an initial drawing of Makris (1982).

«Pantanassa»

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross or «Pantanassa» is a small post-Byzantine church with a dome and three-niches, declared as a historical monument (Royal Charter 1936), which is the metropolitan church of the island located in «Kastro». It bears a wood carved iconostasis of 4.65 m. length x 3.35 m height (with maximum height of 5.25 m including the cross), which has a three-zone horizontal structure with two arched openings (the Beautiful Gate in the center and the Prothesis door on the left). In the bottom zone, there are three simple illustrated wooden base panels (*thorakio*) constructed using vertical planks, in the middle zone there are three Despoticon icons and above them a row with horizontal rectangular panels (*ketabes*), while the row of the semicircular panels (*kimeri*) is absent. In these two zones, there are six interrupted complex slender pillars, ribbed or carved, with corinthian capitals at the top and reversed ones at the bottom. The upper zone of the iconostasis includes various carved decorative strips and the Dodecaorton icons, ending to the coronation with the cross and the icons of Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist, supported on the heads of two dragons, while the row with the Apostles, which is commonly found in mainland of Greece, is absent.

The iconostasis is carved in high relief and the surface is painted gold, with some coloured parts and red background colour, covering the original gilding. The main decorative pattern is the twisted vine (Fig. 2) with emphasized leaf veins and bunches of grapes, enriched with flowers and birds that peck grapes and other scattered patterns (cross, double-headed eagle, etc.). The Beautiful Gate includes an arched transom with ornate supports, a perforated wood carved curtain and bema doors which include illustrations and similar to the previous motifs wood-carved decorations.

Taking into consideration that the dimensions of the iconostasis are perfectly adapted to those of the church, without any additions or modifications, while a Despoticon dating back to 1697 was found, it is speculated that the iconostasis was constructed for this particular church probably at the end of the 17th century. Regarding the wood species, most of the iconostasis has been made of softwood species without resin canals, maybe cypress wood.

This iconostasis is an excellent wood-carved structure, preserved in relatively good condition, without showing extensive damage. This is mainly attributed to the fact that the church is metropolitan, resulting in both its maintenance and the frequent ventilation of the space, thereby reducing the humidity levels that negatively affect the constructions (in recent years a dehumidifying device operates in the church). Of course, there are scattered holes caused by wood-destroying insects, some of which have been filled and covered by the paint, while the wooden base that has contact to the floor and higher humidity levels, has been partly decayed.



Fig. 2.

The iconostasis in the church of Pantanassa – Details of the upper zone.

«Christ»

The Transfiguration of Christ or «Christ» is a small private Byzantine church with an arched roof, declared as a historical monument (Royal Charter 1936), which is located at a short distance from the «Chora». It bears a wood carved iconostasis of 4.80m. length x 2.60m height (with maximum height of 3.85 m including the cross), which has a structure similar to the aforementioned iconostasis regarding the horizontal zones, the pillars and the coronation (Fig. 3), with the exception of the existence of two even smaller vertical sections at the ends, as well as the absence of the row of the horizontal rectangular panels above the Despotic icons.

Also, the wood carved parts have a similar relief and main decorative pattern, with the addition of an angel without a body, but with a head and wings, as well as two carved human-like heads used to hang the vigil lamps at the coronation. However, the original gilding has been maintained on the surface with some coloured parts and red background colour. Furthermore, the Beautiful Gate includes an illustrated wooden curtain constructed with planks, but not an arched transom, although the Prothesis door has one with solid endings, similarly to the aforementioned iconostasis.

Although the dimension of the upper zone is perfectly adapted to the opening of the church, the width of the vertical sections at the edges is not the same as the rest of them. Consequently, even though a painting dating back to 1712 was found at the Prothesis door, allowing the hypothesis that the iconostasis was constructed for this particular church probably at the beginning of the 18th century and there was a failure in ordering, placing or reassembling (according to information the iconostasis had previously been removed from the Ephorate of Antiquities), however this can not be claimed clearly, whereas today's coverage of those vertical sections with makeshift materials makes it even more difficult to draw safe conclusions. Regarding the wood species, most of the iconostasis has been made of softwood species without resin canals, probably the one of cypress.

This iconostasis is an excellent wood-carved structure, which however is not maintained in good condition, demonstrating decay, cracks and holes caused by wood-destroying insects. This situation becomes even worse over time, because of the high humidity levels, caused by the fact that the church remains closed with the decision of the Ephorate of Antiquities, possibly for the protection of the Byzantine frescoes. There are also gaps between the separate horizontal zones, which were probably created after their removal and reassembly.

Holy Unmercenaries & St. Charalambos

Holy Unmercenaries (or the Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple) and St. Charalambos is a post-Byzantine church with double naves and separate arched roofs, which is located in «Chorio» and is declared as a historical monument (Ministerial Decisions 1996 & 1967). The naves communicate internally with two arches, but they have independent entrances and different iconostases. The nave which is dedicated to Saint Charalambos bears a wood carved iconostasis of 4.00m. length x 3.30m height (with maximum height of 4.60m including the cross). Although it has a structure similar to the aforementioned iconostases, regarding the horizontal zones, it also presents several differences, as it has rectangular columns in the bottom zone, base panels with wood-carved frames, a row with horizontal rectangular panels under the Despotic icons, as well as a row with semi-circular panels in the middle zone.

The iconostasis is carved in high relief, while is perforated at some points. It presents various detailed decorative patterns (Fig. 4), like vases with vertical or spiral shoots, rich floral decoration enriched with complex motifs, including two men holding a royal crown, two angels on both sides of a blazon, a variety of

animals (lions, birds that peck grapes and leaves, winged quadruped etc). Besides the usual aforementioned twisted vine with birds that peck grapes, the upper zone has also scattered blazons. The Beautiful Gate includes a perforated three-lobed arched transom with plant and animal decoration, a royal crown on the top, perforated endings and ornate supports, as well as bema doors, which combine the illustration positions and the perforated decoration, consisting of birds that peck grapes and flowers, in combination with lions and snakes etc.

Taking into consideration that the dimensions of the iconostasis are perfectly adapted to those of the church, without any additions or modifications, while two Despotic icons dating back to 1778 were found, it is speculated that the iconostasis was constructed for this particular church probably in the second half of the 18th century. Regarding the wood species, this iconostasis seem also to be constructed with softwood species, without resin canals, probably the one of cypress.

This iconostasis is an excellent wood-carved structure with complicated patterns, preserved in relatively good condition, without showing extensive damage, with the exception of the contact points of the horizontal support beam with the masonry, where decay is more extensive, as well as scattered holes caused by wood-destroying insects. The great value of this construction has been also reduced to a small extent, because of the relatively recent painting of the scattered blazons in the upper zone with white colour.

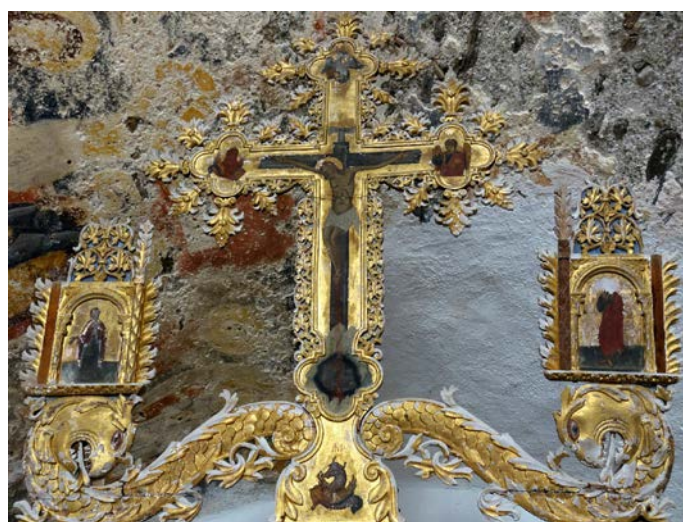


Fig. 3.

The iconostasis in the church of Christ - Details of the coronation.



Fig. 4.

The iconostasis in the church of St. Charalampos - Details of the middle zone.

St. John the Forerunner

St. John the Forerunner or «Notari», is a small post-Byzantine church with an arched roof, which is located in the southwest of «Kastro» and is declared as a historical monument (Royal Charter 1936). It bears a wood carved iconostasis of 4.20m. length x 3.00m height (with maximum height of 4.40m including the cross), which has a structure similar to the aforementioned iconostases regarding the horizontal zones, the

pillars and the coronation, apart from the presence of wooden frames at the base panels and a row with horizontal rectangular panels above the Despotic icons which combine wooden and wood carved parts.

Also, the wood carved parts have a similar relief, although the original gilding has been maintained on the surface, with some coloured parts and red or cyan background colour. The main decorative pattern is a twisted stem with various, big in size, flowers and fruits, enriched with a lion (Fig. 5), two lion heads and a human form, while there are five heads of angels with open wings at the panels above the Despotic icons. Although generally the twisted vine is the main decorative pattern of the iconostases, that motif is limited to the arched transom of the Prothesis door in this particular structure. Also, there are two wood carved birds with open wings, as well as another winged form, which are used to hang the vigil lamps at the coronation. The Beautiful Gate includes an arched wood carved transom with perforated endings and ornate supports, a perforated wood carved curtain and bema doors presenting illustrations and wood-carved decoration with a twisted flowering stem.

The year 1793 is engraved above the Beautiful Gate, apparently referring to the construction or gilding of the iconostasis, which probably happened directly or some years after its construction. Taking into consideration that the dimensions of the iconostasis are perfectly adapted to those of the church, without any additions or modifications, it can be suggested that the iconostasis was constructed for this particular church probably in the second half of the 18th century. Also in this case, the iconostasis is constructed using a softwood species, without resin canals, which could be cypress wood.

This iconostasis is an excellent wood-carved structure, which, although is preserved in good condition in the upper zone, exhibits extensive decay on the base panels, as well as some cracks and missing parts in the rest of the structure. Also, in the small thickness carvings, such as in the arched transom of the Beautiful Gate, although the wooden outer shell has been preserved, the interior has been completely decomposed and breaks through a simple touch.



Fig. 5.

The iconostasis in the church of St. John the Forerunner - Details of the upper zone.

Holy Trinity

Holy Trinity is a small church with an arched roof, which is located in «Chora» and is nowadays used as a storage space. It bears a wood carved iconostasis of 4.30m. length x 3.20m height (with maximum height of 4.60m including the cross), which has a structure similar to the aforementioned iconostases regarding the horizontal zones, the pillars and the coronation, apart from the presence of rectangular wood carved columns at the bottom zone, as well as wooden frames at the row with the rectangular panels above the Despotic icons.

Also, the wood carved parts have a similar relief, although the original gilding has been maintained on the surface, with some coloured parts and red or cyan background colour. The main decorative pattern at the lower strip of the upper zone is the twisted vine with emphasized leaf veins and bunches of grapes, enriched with flowers, birds that peck grapes and an angel head with open wings in the middle (Fig. 6), while at the upper strip there is a twisted stem with various, big in size, flowers. In addition, there are two human-like heads used to hang the vigil lamps at the upper zone. The Beautiful Gate includes an arched polylobed wood carved transom with perforated endings and ornate supports, as well as bema doors including illustrations and wood-carved decoration.

Taking into consideration that the dimensions of this iconostasis are perfectly adapted to those of the church, without any additions or modifications, and although it has not been possible to find a date, it is assumed, due to many common elements, that this iconostasis was constructed around the same time as the iconostasis of St. John the Forerunner described above, namely in the second half of the 18th century.

Regarding the wood species, this iconostasis seem also to be constructed with softwood species, without resin canals, probably the one of cypress.

This iconostasis is an excellent wood-carved structure, which however is not maintained in good condition, especially in the contact points with the masonry and the floor, where cracks, decay and holes caused by wood-destroying insects seem to be more extensive, while there are also missing parts. The biological degradation of the structure is expected to be deteriorated over time, influenced by the high humidity levels that prevail, since the church is closed and it is only used as a storage space.



Fig. 6.

The iconostasis in the church of Holy Trinity – Details of the upper zone.

CONCLUSIONS

The island of Sikinos, despite its limited size and population, in combination with the lack of local timber production and the absence of a port until recently, has a comparatively large number of remarkable and precious post-Byzantine hand-crafted wood carved iconostases, dating back to the late 17th till the end of the 18th century. These iconostases have limited dimensions due to the small size of the churches and present a three-zone horizontal structure with two arched openings, three base panels and three Despotic icons constructed with wood planks, while they do not include the row with the Apostles in the upper zone. They are carved in high relief and their coronation is impressive, with a big cross and dragons. In addition, they are constructed mainly with softwood species, without resin canals, probably cypress wood, used also in the islands of the Dodecanese, where it is reported that the cypress wood was commonly used, although in continental Greece it was mostly used wood from hardwood species, especially walnut, oak, lime and chestnut (Koutelakis 1986). Several attempts of research have already been started with a view to clearly identify the exact wood species that were used in the construction of the aforementioned iconostases, as this knowledge is considered to be crucial for the appropriate restoration work of them in future (Timar et al. 2013).

Although the presented iconostases constitute exceptional artworks, unfortunately they are being left to be gradually degraded by decay, wood-destroying insects and ageing. This is attributed to the fact that the protective action of the Authorities is limited only to the declaration of the buildings as historical monuments and does not extend to the preservation of the interior wood carvings, due to the reduced acknowledgement of wood as an important component of the cultural heritage in contrast with the much more rich and impressive ancient Greek findings.

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