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"The Gates of Eternal Life": Metamorphosis and Performativity in Middle to Late Byzantine Sculpted Church Doors (with a Case Study of a Wallachian Wooden Door)

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Abstract: In recent years, there has been a growing interest in analyzing the manufacturing techniques of Byzantine church doors in laboratory settings. However, the connection between the iconography and significance of the décor of church doors and their liturgical performativity, as well as their parallels with iconostases in Byzantium, remained a relatively underexplored area of study. This article seeks to delve deeper into these intersections. By focusing on the relationship between the iconography of church doors in Middle to Late Byzantium and their connection to the sacred space and liturgical practices, I aim to shed light on how these artworks played a crucial role in the sacred experience of the Byzantines. This exploration will not highlight only the aesthetic evolution of church door artwork but also emphasize the communal and embodied nature of the religious experience during the Byzantine era. Their intricate designs were not merely decorative elements but served as portals to the divine, enriching the salvation journey of worshippers as they crossed the threshold into the liturgical spaces. By conducting an examination of the development of door iconography and their symbolism throughout the empire's history, the transformation of narrative depictions from the Middle Byzantine era to the Palaiologan period, culminating in a convergence of symbolic meanings within the sacred space of the church, is delineated. This transformation is further exemplified by a sculpted church door from the Principality of Wallachia. By bridging the gap between art history and religious studies, this article aims to rekindle interest in the profound symbolism and significance of Byzantine church doors and their relation to sacred liturgical space, offering a broader perspective on an important aspect of Byzantine heritage.

Keywords: church doors; Middle Byzantine period; Late Byzantine period; Wallachia; iconography; performativity

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1. Introduction. Emerging Symbolic Development in Early Byzantine Church Doors

Although most of the Byzantine sculpted church furniture that survived consists of bronze—or copper—plated doors and carved marble slabs related to sanctuaries and galleries, like epistyles, cancelli, or balustrade parapets, all churches would have featured doors, most of them probably made of wood, that have been lost or replaced with time (Sotiriou 1963, pp. 171–80; Maksimović 1967, pp. 23–34; Sheppard 1969, pp. 65–71; Grabar 1976; Vanderheyde 2020). While the current evidence indicates that the royal doors of the templon (sanctuary barrier composed of a parapet open with doors in front of the sanctuary apse, and columns holding an architrave depicted with icons)[1] came into use in the Middle Byzantine period and were not always a required feature, particularly when the templa were constructed of stone or masonry, church doors were indeed an essential and indispensable element. The doors of the most significant monastic foundations and cathedrals were not likely overlooked by artists and founders, but rather adorned with iconography and decorative elements that served to highlight their sacred symbolic significance. This assumption concerns the doors at the entrance of the church as well as those between the

narthex and the nave in the Byzantine rite. There is a remarkable continuity in architectural styles and forms that persisted throughout the Byzantine and early post-Byzantine periods, with various old and new types of door openings used simultaneously.[2] The persistent and conscious utilization and refinement of doors iconography reveals the importance that was given to them in articulating Byzantine church iconography as an integral spatial and symbolic unit.

Surviving examples of doors from the Early and Middle Byzantine periods are exceedingly rare. The extant pieces primarily consist of metal (bronze or copper alloy) two-valved church doors, predominantly originating from workshops in Constantinople influenced by both Roman and Syrian–Hellenistic workshops following antique models of structure, décor, and technology. There are also some surviving wooden doors. A quick overview of the preserved examples from the early periods includes the carved wooden doors with narrative representations at the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan (4th century with 16th- and 18th-century repairs), featuring a cycle of David (Mroczko 1982; Poldi et al. 2009, pp. 569–80); and of the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome (early 5th century, originating perhaps in Constantinople) with a complex Old and New Testament narrative iconography (Delbrueck 1952; Foletti et al. 2019) (Figure 1); the 5th-century bronze doors with non–figurative decoration of the Oratory of St. John the Baptist in the Lateran Baptistery, Rome, donated by Pope Hilary I (d. 468) (Kleinbauer 1976, p. 21); and four bronze pairs of doors and marble door fittings from the 4th- and 6th-century Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, with a decorative program (Swift 1937; Underwood and Majewski 1960, pp. 210–13). The 4th-century rotunda of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem built by Emperor Constantine also had bronze doors composed of two valves decorated with three cassettes, each encasing bas-reliefs featuring acts of Christ (Lazarus, Zacchaeus, and Noli me tangere), and lionheads holding ringed doorknobs (Conant 1956, p. 4, p. 29 pl. IX, p. 41 pl. XV, p. 43 pl. XVI).[3] Late Roman examples of double bronze doors carved with cassettes, still in place, are the doors of the cathedral of St. John in Lateran, originally belonging to the ancient Curia Julia in the Forum, dating back to the reign of emperor Domitian (r. 81–96 AD); those of the Pantheon in Rome (192 AD); and the doors of the basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian in Rome, which originated from the mausoleum rotunda built on the Via Sacra in Rome by Emperor Maxentius for his son Romulus at the beginning of the 4th century. The four still existing pairs of doors of the church of Hagia Sophia, the 6th-century Classical doors with fish scale design in the narthex of St. Mark in Venice, and the long-disappeared Chalke Gate in Constantinople, restored under Justinian, are the last known bronze doors of Late Antiquity (Haldon and Ward-Perkins 1999, p. 286).[4]

The symbolism surrounding church doors finds its roots in the early Christian centuries, drawing inspiration from the correspondences between the narratives of the Old and New Testaments regarding the coming of Christ to dwell in the temple among His people and His death, Resurrection, and Second Coming. The elaborate example at Santa Sabina illustrates a classical imagery of triumphant arrival, drawing parallels between the *adventus regis* (the arrival of the king in a city) and the *adventus animae* (the reception of the soul at the gates of the Heavenly Kingdom), with a focus on the symbolism of the scene of Jesus' entrance through the Golden Gates of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the ἀπάντησις (formal reception of a dignitary; cf. Parousia, ἀπάντησις of the Lord in 1 Thess 4:17) at the Second Coming.[5] The juxtaposition of the scenes of the Raising of Lazarus and Noli me tangere on the doors of the 5th-century Holy Sepulcher rotunda symbolizes the transition from death to life through the Resurrection of Christ, related to the symbolism of the tomb doors.[6]

The narratives related to the significance of entering the sacred space of a church were still evolving. The iconographic concepts were fluid in these formative Christian centuries, with significant influence borrowed from Roman ceremonial, secular architecture, and decorative principles. Many doors, originally serving laic purposes, were repurposed as church entrances, featuring classical designs with abstract and botanical motifs. This fusion of non-figurative ornamental elements and figurative Christian narratives persisted

through the Middle Ages on church doors, illustrating the journey of humanity towards redemption and the return of the creation to the harmony and beauty of Heaven.

Figure 1. Santa Sabina basilica, Rome, wooden doors, ca. 430 AD (Photo credit: Stefano Spaziani).

2. The Bronze Age of Doors (11th–13th Centuries)

2.1. Bronze and Wooden Doors in Romanesque Europe

The Early Christian both historiated and non-historiated types of church doors significantly influenced the design of Middle Byzantine doors, as well as the Carolingian and Ottonian doors in the Western Europe (see a complete corpus and discussion in Campbell 2006, pp. 317–23). Most of the surviving pieces are either cast entirely in bronze or made

of copper or bronze plates secured to a wooden foundation. The few exceptions are the wooden Romanesque doors at St. Maria im Kapitol, Cologne, c. 1049 (Beuckers 1999) and those at St. Gilles Chapel of Notre Dame le Puy in Auvergne (1143–56), both displaying Gospel cycles with an emphasis on the Nativity and Passion cycles (Cahn 1974; Kravčíková 2019; Foletti and Kravčíková 2019), the 12th-century doors in the Abruzzo region like those in San Pietro Alba Fucense, portraying apotropaic figures (Andaloro 1990), and the open-work reliefs with the Tree of Jesse, Gospel scenes, the Last Judgment, and animal figures on the doors at Gurk Cathedral, Austria (1230–40) (Johnson 1974).

Church doors were mainly categorized into three types: simpler ones decorated with cassettes and lion heads holding the doorknobs (an antique fashion), such as (seemingly) the mid-8th-century lost doors of the tower of Pope Zachary at the Lateran Palace (Haldon and Ward-Perkins 1999, p. 286), the late-8th-century doors of Charlemagne's Palatine Chapel in Aachen, and Willigis' doors of the cathedral in Mainz, completed by 1009 (Mende et al. [1983] 1994, pp. 25–17, 133–34); doors with separate figural panels, like those of Augsburg Cathedral, 1050–65 (Laging 1967; Mende et al. [1983] 1994, pp. 34–40, 137–39); and historiated doors displaying narrative cycles, like Bernward's doors of the Hildesheim Cathedral (1007–15), the first historiated bronze doors cast since antiquity, featuring Adam and Eve and Gospel cycles with a symbolism related to the Doors of Paradise closed by Eve's sin (Cohen and Derbes 2001; Weinryb 2018, pp. 728–43). Today, of the bronze doors that have survived from the 11th and 12th centuries, nineteen are in Italy and are mainly of Byzantine manufacture or model, three are in western Germany, and one each in Poland and Russia (Leisinger 1957; Daniec 1999; Weinryb 2018, pp. 777–80). The bronze doors made around 1175 for Gniezno Cathedral in Poland, of probable German manufacture, are decorated with eighteen bas-relief scenes from the life of St. Adalbert of Prague, while the Magdeburg doors of the cathedral of Płock, dated 1152–54, feature episodes from Genesis (Creation of Eve, Temptation) and New Testament scenes, and were brought from Germany in the 15th century to Saint Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod. Traditionally, the prevailing belief held that the historiated doors preserved at Novgorod were crafted in Byzantium and transported from Crimea, hence earning the moniker "the Korsun [i.e., Chersonese] doors". Nevertheless, research has shown that these doors were crafted in Magdeburg, albeit inspired by Byzantine design (Daniec 1991; Trifonova 2015; Makhortykh et al. 2023).

The ancient tradition in the West continued throughout the 13th to the 15th centuries, as proved by the wooden doors sculpted by Andrija Buvina for Split Cathedral in 1214, with a Gospel cycle (Belamarić and Tigler 2020), up to the Early Renaissance examples of Andrea Pisano's south doors of 1329–36 and Ghiberti's early 15th-century north doors with New Testament scenes and east doors (*Porta Paradisi*) with Old Testament episodes at the Baptistery of Florence (Angiola 1978; Chernetsky 2018), Donatello's doors at the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo Basilica (1434–43) decorated with Apostles and Doctors of the Church (Paoletti 1990), and Antonio Filarete's 1455 door at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, with scenes from the life of Sts. Peter and Paul.[7]

The doors featuring narrative cycles from both the Old and New Testaments, with an emphasis on the story of the Fall in Genesis and specifically on the symbolism centered on the remembrance of the Gates of Eden closing due to Eve's sin but reopened through Christ's sacrifice, were promoted by Bishop Bernward in Hildesheim and became prominent in the Western world. This type of historiated door, distantly inspired by the Santa Sabina type of design, functioned as an anamnesis of the redemption through Christ's sacrifice that made it possible for the human soul to enter Paradise again. In contrast, Byzantine doors took a different approach, with no known visual reference to an anamnesis of the story of Eve's sin that caused the closing of the Gates of Eden. Byzantine theologians chose to stress the continuous state of closing Paradise and Heaven to ourselves through our sins (Symeon of Thessalonike 1984, p. 79) rather than focusing solely on the historical event of Eve's transgression. As thresholds of the sacred places of the mysteries of salvation, the doors of Byzantine churches embodied the anticipation of what is to come, being designed as majestic gates symbolizing the open pathways drawn by Christ to the Heavenly Kingdom.

2.2. The Corpus of Middle Byzantine Doors

The Middle Byzantine period witnessed the presence of the three distinct types of doors—nonfigurative, figurative, and historiated—which were found also in the West. However, only a few fragments of Byzantine bronze doors have survived from Constantinople, among which are the panels added with the 838–40 restoration by Emperor Theophilos (r. 829–42), his son Michael, and Empress Theodora to the bronze doors of the southwestern vestibule at Hagia Sophia, known as the Gate of the Horologium (Swift 1937; Kleinbauer 1976, p. 19). Arguably, the oldest and sole sculpted extant Middle Byzantine wooden door is that of the narthex of the Olympiotissa Monastery church in Elasson, Thessaly, dated between the 11th and 13th centuries and made either at Thessaloniki or Constantinople (C. Bouras 1989–1990). Documentary sources also speak of the silver and tinned-copper doors in the Great Palace, variously installed in the Trikonchos and the Chrysotriklinos under Emperors Theophilos and Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (r. 913–59) (Ristovska 2017, p. 379; Featherstone 2005, pp. 849–55). Niketas Choniates and Anna Komnene referred to the silver and gold revetments covering the church doors in the Virgin Chalkoprateia complex in Constantinople, decorated with depictions of the Great Feasts, which were melted down in c. 1082 by Alexios I Komnenos (Ristovska 2017, p. 379; Miller 1866, pp. 36–37; Comnena 2000, V, 2, p. 84). Another pair of lost Byzantine doors covered in plates of silver gilt ornamented with patterns in blue enamel work, having the figures of Sts. Peter and Paul holding books in each of the two panels of the door, were taken by Timur from Bursa from the plunders of Sultan Bayezid, in 1326.[8] But according to their iconography, the lost doors are thought to have been much earlier, dating from the Middle Byzantine period.[9]

Unlike the most famous Romanesque bronze doors, Middle Byzantine doors were not made as an integral single cast in bronze using the "lost-wax" technique, practiced habitually in antiquity in the Roman Empire. Instead, they were constructed from small modular units of copper–lead–zinc–tin alloy and silver inlays, which were cast individually through the "sand" or "bracket" technique. The metal pieces were then secured to a wooden support with nails on both sides and eventually adorned with polychrome embellishments and niello, or enamel fillings (Angelucci 1997). Over time, this brass developed the rich patina and appearance of bronze, hence they became referred to as bronze doors.

Eight such doors in Italy are closely related to Constantinopolitan ateliers or prototypes, while the others were crafted in local Italian workshops but also reflected this trend (Matthiae 1971; Frazer 1973; Kleinbauer 1976; Iacobini 2009) (See Appendix A). The Byzantine doors were placed in the Italian cathedrals of Amalfi (1056–7, Constantinopolitan), Monte Cassino (1066, Constantinopolitan) (Bloch 1987), Saint-Paul-Outside-the-Walls at Rome (1070, Constantinopolitan) (Frothingham 1914; Ristovska 2017), Monte Sant'Angelo (Monte Gargano, 1076, Constantinopolitan) (Buccolieri et al. 2021, p. 95), San Sebastian in Atrani (1087, modeled after those in Amalfi), and Salerno (1085, Byzantine), as well as in the Basilica of San Marco in Venice called "the San Clemente door" of the southern portal (circa 1080, Constantinopolitan) (Forlati and Forlati 2019), and the central portal door, or "the Madonna door" commissioned by Leo da Molino, procurator of the basilica in 1112, from a Venetian artist following a Byzantine model (Einstein 1926; Bevilacqua 2019; Mödlinger et al. 2023). This collection represents the largest corpus of surviving Byzantine doors with figurative decoration. Furthermore, Byzantine models served as inspiration for other doors made in Italy, for the cathedrals in Verona, Pisa (Heginbotham 2016; Banti 1993), and particularly in Southern Italy: Canosa in Puglia (c. 1111–18), Troia (two doors, 1119, 1127), Benevento (1150–51), Capella Palatina in Palermo (c. 1140) and those executed by Master Barisanus of Trani for the cathedrals of Ravello (1179), Trani ca. (1190), and Monreale (1186–90) (Cadei 2009; Buccolieri et al. 2022, 2023; Walsh 1982; Daniec 1991, p. 30; Davì 1987; Brenk 2009; D'Elia 1990; Weinryb 2016).

The first set of doors, "the Byzantine group", actually revolve around a small group of donors from the same family. The doors of Sant' Andrea in Amalfi, the earliest in this group, were donated by an Amalfitan consul of Byzantium named Pantaleon Maurus (Mauron). The donor, who owned a large house in Constantinople and had the Byzantine honorific

title of *disypatos* and probably also that of *patrikios*, commissioned in 1056–7 the door from a caster, Symeon the coppersmith, from a workshop in Constantinople, to be given as a gift to the cathedral in his Italian hometown (Ristovska 2017, pp. 374–75). The door was exquisitely crafted. Several other similar Byzantine doors are related or assigned to the patronage of Pantaleon and his family who maintained relations with Byzantium.[10] On the doors donated to the abbey church of Saint Benedict at Monte Cassino, also crafted in 1066 by a Constantinopolitan artist by the name of Symeon, an inscription mentions as donors Abbot Desiderius and Maurus of Amalfi, the father of Pantaleon (Bloch 1987, pp. 89–90). The consul Pantaleon of Amalfi also bore the expense of the bronze doors in the Cathedral of Saint-Paul-Outside-the-Walls at Rome, manufactured in 1070 at Constantinople by a Syriac-speaking master founder Staurakios and a Greek-speaking inlayer Theodore, and perhaps also of the sanctuary of the Archangel Michael at Monte Sant'Angelo (Monte Gargano), donated by a Pantaleon *dominus*. The doors of the cathedral of St. Sebastian at Atrani likely belong to the same family, being donated in 1087 (Frothingham 1914; Ristovska 2017, pp. 367, 428–29).

Documentary sources indicate for certain that at least the first four doors were produced in Constantinople (Ristovska 2017). These commissions, in turn, seemed to have motivated the Lombard noble Landulfo Butromile to order bronze doors from Constantinople for the Saint Matthew Cathedral of Salerno (1099–1108). Around the year 1100 and shortly afterwards, two sets of such doors were installed in Saint Mark in Venice, and after 1111 another set was placed in the entrance of the mausoleum of Bohemond I of Antioch, one of the leaders of the First Crusade, at Canosa in Apulia.

As a result, it is possible to reconstruct the evolution of door typologies and iconography during the Middle Byzantine period, particularly those of Constantinopolitan manufacture or model. Such attempts at studying them were already begun in the 1970s and evolved in two directions: an analysis of their iconography (Frazer 1973, 1990; Walsh 1982; Bevilacqua 2009), and an examination of symbolic functions not of the doors themselves, but of the entrances and passages in the church in general (Spieser 2009). However, less attention has been paid to the iconic and performative aspects of the doors as such.

3. Theological Symbolism, Iconography, and Liturgical Performance of Middle Byzantine Church Doors

The Middle Byzantine period of the 10th to 12th centuries marked a significant shift in Byzantine liturgical history, characterized by the production of normative texts known as monastic and liturgical *typika*. One of the pivotal events that shaped this period was the aftermath of the iconoclast controversy, which served as a major turning point, leading to a comprehensive liturgical reform that also fundamentally altered the traditional church arrangement and iconographical discourse. The Middle Byzantine period witnessed the development of new liturgical practices, including the introduction of a new Euchology, new Typicon, new developments into the Divine office, and new liturgical music, which also sparked architectural changes (Taft 1992, p. 61). Prior to Iconoclasm, the architectural design of churches was generally characterized by large, single-apse basilicas with expansive atriums, narthexes, and multiple monumental entrances. The design featured extraordinary openness with no internal divisions, side-apses, or auxiliary chambers, allowing for perfect visibility of the sanctuary. The iconographic decoration was minimal, emphasizing a sense of spaciousness and simplicity. However, in the aftermath of Iconoclasm, there was a significant shift towards a more inward-focused church space. The new architectural arrangement featured churches without atriums preceding monumental entrances, instead emphasizing a triple-apsed altar and an enclosed sanctuary. The narthex becomes an enclosed space as well. The interior of the churches became more dimly lit and intimate, with frescoes covering the walls entirely. This transformation reflected a new theological sensibility that prioritized a richer visualization of mystical experience within the sacred space.

3.1. Liturgical Function and Theological Significance of Church Doors in Byzantium

The relations between door iconography and liturgical performance and symbolism are synthesized in the explanations of the holy services by St. Symeon of Thessalonica in the Late Palaiologan period (in office 1416/1417–29). In his discourse on the symbolism of the components of the Byzantine Divine Services, Symeon of Thessalonica elucidates the profound connection between Paradise, the Heavenly Kingdom, and the symbolism of the space articulations and liturgical performance in the church (Symeon of Thessalonike 1984, Ch. 17, 41, 42, 43, 44, 57, 61):

> "The royal doors of the church are closed [at the beginning of Matins service], as typifying paradise and heaven of old—rather, it is indeed Paradise and Heaven; Paradise because in the midst of the church on the holy altar the Tree of life (His most–holy Cross) holds Christ performing His priestly office; Heaven because the holy table is itself a throne, with Christ the King of glory seated there through the sacraments and the Gospels, and the angelic hosts round about, with the priestly orders, the holy chrism and sacred relics of the saints, the company of the souls of apostles and prophets departed and gone, yet still present through their holy writings, and the angels truly dwelling there as their celebrants with us, performing the same liturgy above and below. The doors of this holy temple of the new Paradise and Heaven are then closed. Because we close Paradise and Heaven to ourselves—and keep closing them—through our transgressions, the priest stands before the doors as a mediator, having the character of an angel, and blesses the one God in Trinity, saying: Blessed be the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Symeon of Thessalonike 1984, Ch. 57, p. 79)

He then offers a description and explanation of the Matins service rite, particularly when a bishop is in attendance:

> "The standing and chanting outside the nave indicates our expulsion from paradise, as we stated above, and that heaven is closed to us, and that all the departed and the righteous are in the power of Hades. Therefore we stand at the west of the church, being in darkness of hell and corruption, and as being subject to horror of ignorance. We do not light big lamps because there is only partial light in us, that natural light of the knowledge of the just, or the prophets and the Law, which is not able to enlighten totally. [. . .] The censing is done initially around the walls and foundations because the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, beginning with the Law of Moses and finishing with the truth and grace given through Christ. [. . .] Then, the priest enters the nave and censes it, thus honoring God in imitation of the ancient censing offered in the Holy of Holies—although more honorable than that priest, as enriched by the grace of one great high priest after the order of Melchizedek, our Savior Christ [. . .]. When the priest enters with the incense, he, as into the Holy of Holies, or rather into something loftier and holier than that, as commemorating and imitating the incense of Zachariah, [. . .] he takes the cross and comes forth in silence without candle–bearers, since Jesus our God came to us in humility and simplicity having fulfilled the Law. [. . .] Then everybody enters together, since Christ renewed and prepared for us a short way through the veil of the flesh, and by this means we have the entrance to the sanctuary, where the great high priest entered before, effecting our eternal redemption and salvation in the life to come." (Symeon of Thessalonike 1984, Ch. 58, pp. 83–85)

> "Then when we have all entered—the leader through the Royal Door, which is closed to us, symbolizing the Theotokos, and which he opens to us like the Gates of Heaven, since he typifies Christ [. . .], the priest as the minister of Christ gives the blessing from the sanctuary." (Symeon of Thessalonike 1984, Ch. 17, p. 26)

Then, the commencement of the liturgy is marked by the bishop's symbolic passage through the gates of the church and into the sanctuary:

> "Descending as far as the gates of the temple, [the hierarch] represents [God the Word's] appearance and manifestation on earth, and also His descent to earth and to the underworld; for going to the west and descending to the gates represent this. [. . .] The priests say the prayers inside, typifying the heavenly orders. The psalmists sing the antiphons, typifying the choir of the prophets. [. . .] The hierarch, having completed the sacred prayers outside, remains standing and the deacons stand beside him, typifying not only the apostles, but also the angels who have rendered service to His mysteries. [. . .] When 'Come, let us worship Christ' is sung loudly and clearly and the bishop is acclaimed, the Resurrection and Ascension of the Savior are signified. [. . .] The bishop typifies the risen Lord Himself, who appeared to the disciples and was assumed from earth to heaven. Therefore, we said that the whole outer nave is a figure of the earth while the most sacred sanctuary is a figure of heaven. [. . .] And this is indeed what the Church does: acclaiming the hierarch with a processional escort as he enters the sanctuary. The sacred doors of the sanctuary, closed before the entrance and open during entrance, represent this." (Symeon of Thessalonike 2011, F. III, 43–49, pp. 113–37)

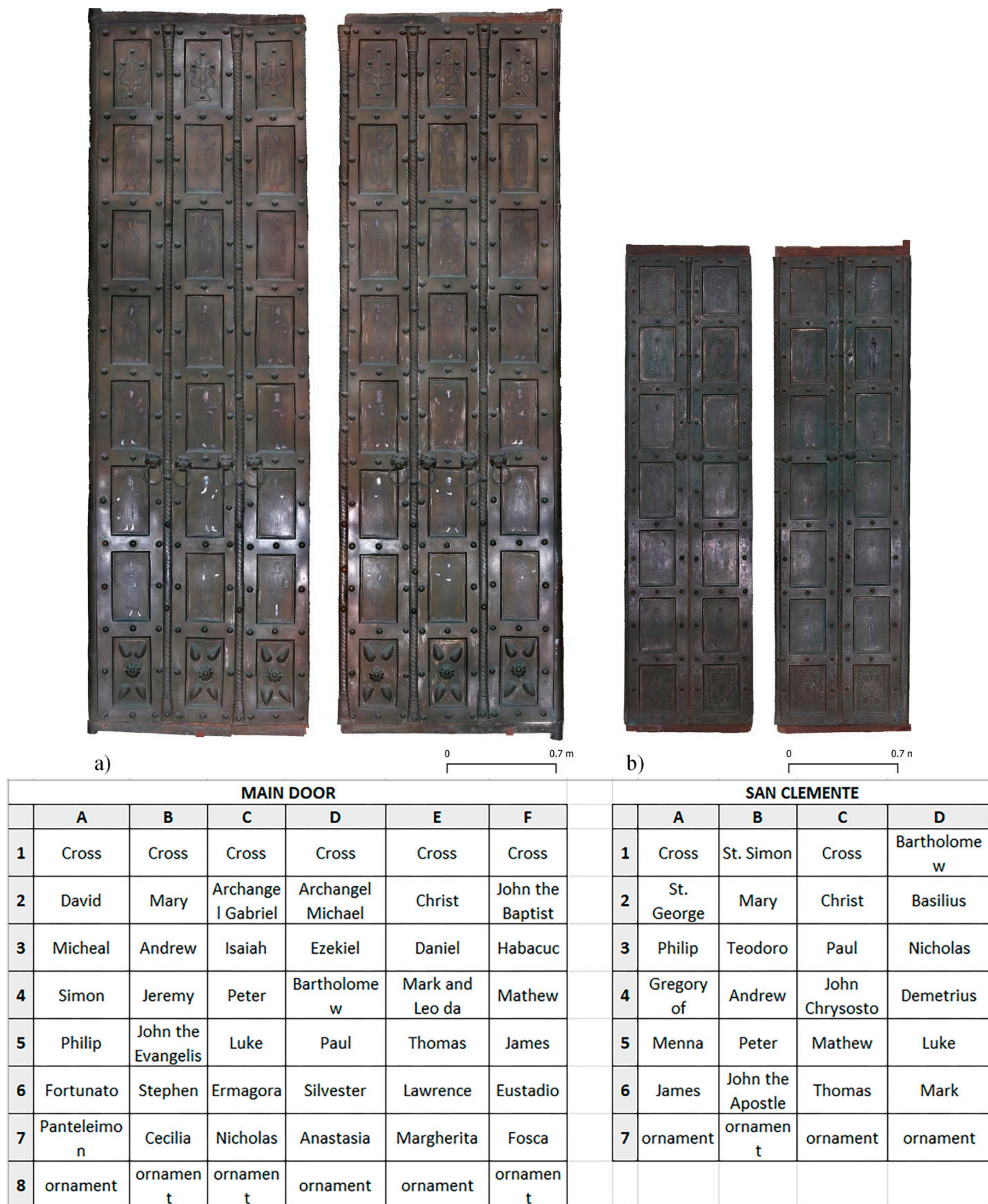
The vespers, matins, and liturgy services in the church, as explained by St. Symeon, hold a symbolic significance that reflects our spiritual journey to redemption and Heaven. The ritual of beginning these services outside the nave serves as a reminder of our separation from the perfection of paradise and, as we stand before the closed royal doors, it is as if we are standing outside the gates of Heaven itself, acknowledging our distance from the divine. When the penitential prayers and songs reach their conclusion and the gates of the sanctuary open, we step inside the nave, akin to entering paradise or heaven. This act signifies that the gates to heavenly dwellings are open to us, granting us access to the Holy of Holies and inviting us to ascend and approach the throne of the Lord. This performative journey from outside the temple to entering its sacred space as our progression from a state of separation and distance from paradise to a state of closeness and communion with the divine presence is also mirrored by the iconography of the church doors.[11]

3.2. Iconography and Symbolic Narratives of Church Doors

Middle Byzantine doors in Italy encompassed various typologies and iconographies, featuring both figurative—full figures and narrative cycles—and non-figurative, symbolic, or vegetal elements. The figurative ones included panels with silhouettes composing a Deësis of intercessory saints toward Christ led by the Theotokos Hagiosoritissa or Theotokos of the Paraklesis and categories of intercessors as holy hierarchs and military martyrs (Amalfi, Atrani, Saint Mark in Venice), Old Testament prophets (Saint-Paul-Outside-the-Walls), apostolic figures of Paul, Peter, Andrew and/or their hagiography (Amalfi, Monte Cassino, Saint-Paul-Outside-the-Walls at Rome, the lost Byzantine doors of Bursa), cycles of archangels as guides to Christians towards the Heavenly Kingdom (Monte Sant'Angelo), and scenes from the Gospels (cycles of Feasts). The non-figurative types of representations evoked rebirth in Christ through baptism: the motif of the paradisiacal fountain (Salerno), serving as an allusion to baptism and the entrance into the paradisiacal world that the Church offers to the faithful,[12] the paradisiacal motif of the Cross as the Tree of Life, and the vine alluding to the Eucharist (Amalfi, Atrani, Monte Sant'Angelo, Ravello). The only Middle Byzantine bronze doors preserved outside Italy, those of the Great Lavra (11th century) (Bouras 1975; Taddei 2009, pp. 529–31), are adorned with cassettes featuring foliated crosses, rosettes, and vines that allude to the paradisiac state regained by the souls through the Eucharist brought by the Cross of Christ.

The Byzantine doors of San Marco of ca. 1080 and 1112 (see Figure 2) showcase a distinct hierarchical arrangement of intercessor figures, with silhouettes of saints adorning the panels. At the top panel, the Mother of God in prayer toward Christ is accompanied by the archangels and St. John the Baptist. Below, the saints are organized in three categories. The first group includes the 12 apostles, the second one features hierarch saints

such as Nicholas, John Chrysostom, Basil, and Gregory of Nazianzus, while the third one showcases military saints like Menas, Demetrius, George, and St. Theodore. Remarkably, these doors align with the iconographic norms of the Middle Byzantine epistyle of the templon, maintaining the same hierarchical arrangement of saint categories (Frazer 1973, pp. 152–54; Walsh 1982, p. 96; Stoufi-Poulimenou 2011). While the positioning may vary—with the epistyle placing them horizontally from the center towards the edges, and the doors arranging them from top to bottom—both representations reflect a shared taxonomic and hierarchical framework for categorizing intercessor saints.



MAIN DOOR

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Cross	Cross	Cross	Cross	Cross	Cross
2	David	Mary	Archangel Gabriel	Archangel Michael	Christ	John the Baptist
3	Micheal	Andrew	Isaiah	Ezekiel	Daniel	Habacuc
4	Simon	Jeremy	Peter	Bartholomew	Mark and Leo da	Mathew
5	Philip	John the Evangelis	Luke	Paul	Thomas	James
6	Fortunato	Stephen	Ermagora	Silvester	Lawrence	Eustadio
7	Panteleimon	Cecilia	Nicholas	Anastasia	Margherita	Fosca
8	ornament	ornament	ornament	ornament	ornament	ornament

SAN CLEMENTE

	A	B	C	D
1	Cross	St. Simon	Cross	Bartholomew
2	St. George	Mary	Christ	Basilius
3	Philip	Teodoro	Paul	Nicholas
4	Gregory of	Andrew	John Chrysosto	Demetrius
5	Menna	Peter	Mathew	Luke
6	James	John the Apostle	Thomas	Mark
7	ornament	ornament	ornament	ornament

Figure 2. Saint Mark basilica, Venice, Leo da Molino's doors (central doors), 1112, and the Byzantine bronze doors ("San Clemente"), ca. 1080. (Photo credits: Marianne Mödlinger). (**a**) iconographic program of central doors; (**b**) iconographic program of San Clemente doors.

Another significant type of Byzantine door decoration is the historiated one, exemplified by the depictions found in the doors of the Cathedral of Saint-Paul-Outside-the-Walls in Rome (Figure 3). Adorned with 54 panels (27 on each side), these doors showcase a rich tapestry of gilded panels featuring scenes from the life of Christ, the apostles and their martyrdoms (key figures such as Peter, Paul, Andrew, Bartholomew, Thomas, and Philip), the teachings of the apostle Paul, prophets of the Old Testament, and symbolic elements like eagles and crosses. Particularly striking are the detailed portrayals of the twelve Great Feasts (*dodekaorton*). The iconography adorning the historiated door at the Cathedral of Saint-Paul-Outside-the-Walls in Rome depicts the stages of Christ's revelation, as elucidated by Saint Paul's teachings. The prophets heralded the redemption of humanity through the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ. The culmination of these prophecies unfolds with the birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ, encompassing the liturgical cycle of feasts. The apostles' teachings and martyrdoms symbolize the beginning phase of the propagation of the divine revelation that the apostles disseminated worldwide, serving as a beacon for believers to attain eternal life through their enduring faith and sacrifice (Frazer 1973, pp. 157–58). This apostolic narrative depicted on the entrance doors of the cathedral at Rome dedicated to St Paul encapsulates the foundational theology of the Church, elucidating the origins and significance of its hierarchical structure begun with the apostles and the sacramental observances rooted in the Great Feasts.

The presence of 10th (or 11th)-century doors adorned with depictions of the twelve Great Feasts at the Chalkoprateia church in Constantinople, as noted by Choniates, aligned with the era when the twelve Great Feasts were gaining prominence as a distinct liturgical cycle. This period saw the emergence of the Feasts being visually represented on the epistyles of the sanctuary barrier (templon), with similar instances documented at significant locations such as the Kecharitomene monastery in Constantinople, which was established c. 1100 by Irene Doukas, the spouse of Emperor Alexios Komnenos, and at St. Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai (Frazer 1973, p. 156). Chalkoprateia was actively involved in the inclusion of new Marian feasts in the canon of the *dodekaorton*, where between the early 8th and the early 10th century authors with links to the Patriarchate promoted three new feasts: the Nativity of Mary, the Presentation to the Temple, and the Conception of the Virgin (the meeting of Joachim and Anna at the Golden Gate). As all three events were particularly celebrated at Chalkoprateia (Krausmuller 2011), it is likely that some of them, if not all, were also found depicted among the Feasts on its church door. This tradition appears fulfilled in the Russian Byzantine-style doors in the cathedral of Suzdal (circa 1230; see Figure 4) (Muratova 2009), adorned with feast cycles depicting scenes of Christ and the Virgin. These scenes include the Embrace of Joachim and Anne at the Golden Gate (Protoevangelium of James, IV, 4) and the Entrance of the Virgin in the Temple, and their iconography emphasizes the symbolism of gates, particularly referencing Mary as the Gate through whom the Son entered the world and became human to unite humankind with Him. "Golden Gate" was the name given to the main portal in the east wall of Jerusalem, which opened into the Temple Mount. The Golden Gate also gained unmistakable associations with the adventus of Christ into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in fulfillment of the words of the Prophet Ezekiel (44:1–3) (Morgenstern 1929; Angiola 1978, p. 242), making the earthly city of Jerusalem the model and image of the Heavenly City and the Golden Gate a pivotal entryway symbolizing access to the Heavenly Kingdom. On the Suzdal doors, "Christ the Gate" embodies the symbolic significance of gates in various contexts. The door depictions include the Annunciation, Candlemas, Raising of Lazarus, Entrance to Jerusalem, Harrowing of Hell, Holy Women at the Tomb, and the Descent of the Holy Spirit, all symbolizing passages to life, the reopening of the gates to eternal life, and the destruction of the gates of hell brought by the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ.[13]

Figure 3. Bronze doors, 1080 (detail). Cathedral of Saint-Paul-Outside-the-Walls at Rome (Photo source: North American Society for the Study of Christian Apocryphal Literature).

Figure 4. Bronze doors, ca. 1230. Cathedral of the Nativity of the Theotokos, Suzdal, Russia (Photo credit: Studia Liturgica. Centre International d'Études Liturgiques).

3.3. The Sensory and Spiritual Boundaries and Passages Represented by Doors

The examination of church door décor, parallels with the sanctuary screens, and liturgical performance would be incomplete without considering the presence of curtains hanging before them. This is proved by surviving curtain hooks, such as those found above the doors of the mid-6th-century inner narthex at Hagia Sophia. In the Byzantine church, the liturgical use of curtains subtly symbolizes a barrier, a spatial boundary, embodying the concept of liminality, both spiritual and physical. Hardware remnants at church entrances suggest that curtains were hung outside the door valves, emphasizing their role in the exterior presentation of the entrance to the church akin to a theatrical performance (Dauterman Maguire 2019; de Blaauw and Doležalová 2019; Vryzidis and Papastavrou 2021; Parani 2018). The curtains at the British Museum (Egypt, 6th–7th century, EA29771) and other fragments evoke paradisiacal imagery reflecting a Byzantine inheritance from Roman and Hellenistic traditions, depicting a vibrant array of birds, blossoms, fruits, and flowers, suggesting birdsongs, fragrance, movement, and light modulation (Dauterman Maguire 2019, p. 217). Their setting evokes an insightful early analogy by Clement of Alexandria, which envisioned the curtained entrance of the Old Testament Tabernacle with five columns as a representation of the five senses, symbolizing the barrier of the sensory gateways beyond which individuals cannot perceive (Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis, 6.134.2, in van den Hoek 1988, pp. 125–26) (Dauterman Maguire 2019, p. 220). Clement proposed that the senses, akin to drawn curtains, obstruct or veil the perception

of spiritual and eternal realms. The biblical directive for these curtains outside the Holy of Holies to bear images of cherubim woven into them by a skilled worker (Exod. 26:1) reinforces Clement's interpretation of the curtains as a formidable barrier, divinely ordained (Dauterman Maguire 2019, p. 220). Eunice Maguire stressed that Clement's cognitive exploration of the curtained gateways inspired by the biblical depiction anticipates modern philosophical and critical phenomenology, reflected by his insights into the interplay between sensory perception and spiritual understanding (Dauterman Maguire 2019, p. 220).

Each iconographic variation of the Middle Byzantine doors is deeply rooted in the symbolism of Christ's sacrifice and redemption, illustrated by the evangelical cycles of feasts, foliated crosses representing eternal paradisiacal life, and the presence of saints in prayer to Christ as intercessors for the faithful. The doors of the church serve as symbols of the entrance to the Holy Kingdom, conveying the image of Christ as the gateway to Heaven, as expressed in the Gospel according to John 10:9: "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved; and he will go in and go out and find pasture". This passage, along with the verse "I am the door of the sheep" from John 10:7, was inscribed above the central imperial door at Hagia Sophia during the Middle Byzantine period (Underwood and Majewski 1960, pp. 212–13; Frazer 1973, p. 162). It is not merely a coincidence that the representation of Christ as the Gateway to Heaven conjoined with the concept of *adventus regis* was exemplified by the image of Christ (Christ Chalkites) placed above the Chalke Gate ("the Bronze Gate"), the primary ceremonial entrance to the Great Palace of Constantinople. The image of Christ depicted on the gate embodied the spiritual joining of the two kingdoms: that of the Romans and the eternal one. The removal of the mosaic at the order of Emperor Leo III in 726 or 730 caused a major political and theological controversy that transformed it into a central symbol for the iconodule movement during Byzantine iconoclasm. The Chalke Gate epitomized the public face of the Palace for the people to the city from the 6th century until the mid-10th century, representing a physical boundary that mediated between the state and its public (Brubaker 1999, p. 259), while at the same time the image of Christ above it certified to the true faith that united the people with the state and its emperor.

The evolution of the design of church doors is also tightly linked to sanctuary barrier (templon) decoration, as symbolic thresholds, forming a significant relationship between the two elements. The strategic placement of the depictions on the doors of churches, which serve as both a visual and a performative barrier at the threshold of the sacred space of the church, mirrors the symbolic role of the sanctuary screen and its door within the altar area, at the threshold between the terrestrial and the celestial realms, the sacerdotal space connected with the celestial liturgy performed by Christ in Heaven, in which the holy mysteries originate. These parallels draw a powerful analogy which mirrors the liturgical symbolism, emphasizing that the church in which individuals enter is the prefiguration, or the vestibule, of Heaven, guarded by angels, and as believers enter the church, they are met by the intercession of the holy figures representing the Heavenly Kingdom. At the forefront of this divine assembly is the Mother of God, who, in communion with Christ, intercedes on behalf of all categories of saints, seeking forgiveness of sins and guiding the faithful towards the holy mysteries performed by Christ through the priests, which bring eternal life. The visual narrative depicted on the doors not only enriches the spiritual experience of worshippers as they approach the liturgical mysteries in the church but also underscores the interconnectedness between the liturgical performance and the sacred imagery within the church's space which is conceived as a progressive journey and at the same time a unitary narrative and symbolic unit.

Margaret English Frazer, exploring the iconographic symbolism of the Middle Byzantine doors in Italy, stressed that the Italian donors, inspired by the Byzantine models in Constantinople, transformed their doors into symbolic gateways to Paradise (Frazer 1973, pp. 147–48). Frazer based her account of the reasons of the Italian donors on the testimony of Consul Pantaleon, who donated the doors for the basilica of Saint-Paul-Outside-the-Walls in Rome in 1070. In the inscription on this door, he provided a reason for his gesture

through an inscription placed below his portrait, where he is depicted in prostration in front of Christ and Saint Paul. Pantaleon prays to St. Paul, expressing his hope that by offering the decorated and gilded doors, "the gate of life" will be opened for him, allowing him to be saved and blessed like Paul in the Kingdom of Heaven:

> "Blessed Paul, do not cease to pour your prayers to the Lord in favour of the Amalfitan consul Pantaleon who, driven by the love of you, had these doors constructed for you. Hence the gate of life will be opened for him on account of you. He therefore asks beseeching, you who are always in the presence of the Lord, so that through your prayers God may grant him to be what you are."
>
> and:
>
> "Also you who approach the threshold of this sacred temple, look carefully at these doors through which you are coming, and having thus entered, bring to the Lord your tears together with your prayers so that God may grant him to have perennial peace, and at the same time may the intercession of Paul, whom he [Pantaleon] honored with such gift out of love for him, obtain this for him." (Ristovska 2017, cat. 1 and 2, pp. 425–26, Latin original text and English translation)

The inscriptions on the entrance doors also served as a distinctive form of honoring the donor or founder, adding a social layer of significance to the overall artistic and symbolic representation embodied in the door designs (Spieser 2009, pp. 67–68).

Following the example set by Pantaleon and inspired by Byzantine iconographic models, other Italian donors also commissioned doors from workshops in Constantinople or local artisans, drawing on Byzantine prototypes. The symbolism of gates was further expanded upon, with references to concepts like the destruction of the Gates of Hell, as seen in the doors of Płock or Santa Maria Assunta in Ravello. Additionally, the significance of Peter and Paul as the founding apostles of the Church and protectors of the Gate of Heaven highlights the idea of gatekeepers, symbolizing authority over entry to divine realms. Not least, the presence of the archangels on the doors at Monte Sant'Angelo, apart from their significance as patrons of the respective church, also evokes the angelic guardianship of the twelve gates of the Holy City of the New Jerusalem, the Heavenly Kingdom referenced in Revelation 21:12.

Unfortunately, the available evidence of sculpted doors from the late Komnenian and Palaiologan periods is limited, with the majority of preserved pieces featuring a non-figurative, decorative pattern design.[14] Therefore, exploring the Middle Byzantine material provides crucial insights for understanding the further evolution of the iconography and symbolism of church entrance doors. While the Palaiologan period did introduce some compositional and decorative modifications to the doors, their iconographic symbolism, established in the Middle Byzantine period, largely endured unchanged.

4. Aftermath of the Byzantine Tradition: The Wallachian Wooden Church Door (1453)

The evolution of wood carving in Byzantium presents a challenge when attempting to trace its development prior to the 14th century, mainly due to the scarcity of preserved pieces from the empire's territory. However, starting from the 14th century onwards, the emergence of wooden iconostases coincides with the integration of icons in their structure, increasingly replacing earlier marble or masonry barriers. This transition of the sanctuary barrier toward iconostasis sparked a diversification in iconography. Unlike the narrower and more simply decorated Middle Byzantine stone epistyles, which typically featured only a few figures composing a Deësis, animal silhouettes, crosses, and decorative motifs, the entablature of the iconostasis began to include one or more rows of icons with a more elaborate iconographic program. This shift also catalyzed the decorative advancement of the wooden iconostasis structure. The development of wood sculpture played a significant role in enhancing wooden door ornamentation, particularly in the Macedonian region of the Balkans (Ćorović-Ljubinković 1965). Furthermore, during the Late Byzantine period, it

is crucial to acknowledge the iconography present in the tympani, door intrados, and lower registers of the paintings near the doors. Contrary to the highly complex iconography seen on cathedral portals in Western Europe during the High Middle Ages,[15] Middle Byzantine iconographic contexts around church doors had been relatively less elaborate. However, during the Palaiologan period, the pictorial program around doors evolved into more complex iconographic structures, contributing significantly to the symbolic layout of church entrances.[16]

While a fair number of carved pieces, such as the royal doors of iconostases dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries, have been preserved, most wooden church doors from this era have not endured the test of time. This absence of surviving examples makes the 15th-century carved doors from the Principality of Wallachia particularly intriguing to researchers due to their unique stylistic and iconographic characteristics. In 1862, archaeologist Alexandru Odobescu found these doors being used as an entrance at the church of St. Panteleimon in the village of Turbaţi (today, Siliştea Snagovului), a former nuns' hermitage situated ca. 3 km north of Lake Snagov. A local legend told him that the doors had been transported from the Snagov Monastery, situated on a small island on Lake Snagov (ca. 20 Km north of modern-day Bucharest) (Odobescu 1981, pp. 96–97). The doors were transported to Bucharest, where they now reside as part of the collection at the National Museum of Art of Romania, inv. inv. L100/1115 (Figure 5).

Historian Orest Tafrali was the first to attempt deciphering their inscriptions and analyzing their iconography (Tafrali 1935–1936, pp. 8–9). Subsequently, Stoica Nicolaescu published the inscriptions and attributed the doors to a hypothetical chapel dedicated to the Annunciation, purportedly constructed at the Snagov Monastery by Voivode Vladislav II, who ruled the Principality of Wallachia from 1447 to 1456 (Nicolaescu 1936, pp. 118–28). Among the researchers who explored the doors was Nicolae Iorga, who in 1936 highlighted the "Byzantine features without other admixtures" of this piece (Iorga 1936, p. 9), a viewpoint that was echoed in the same year by Stoica Nicolaescu (Nicolaescu 1936, p. 128).

Dumitru Năstase, the last scholar to extensively examine these doors, interpreted them as a symbolic founding gesture by Vladislav II related to the beginning of the siege of Constantinople on April 6, 1453. He attributed them not to Snagov Monastery but to the (today disappeared) Annunciation Monastery in Bolintin (ca. 35 Km west of modern-day Bucharest), to which Vladislav II made a donation on April 29, 1453 (Năstase 1999).

The door measures 1.92 × 1.2 m, although its lower section was cut to fit into the door frame of the church of St. Panteleimon in Turbaţi, resulting in the loss of the lower part of the inscription frame. It consists of two valves, each divided into three panels, culminating in a semicircular arch, bordered by bands of inscriptions. The scenes and figures shown are not explicitly labeled, but they can be easily recognized based on their iconography. The upper panels depict the scene of the Annunciation, featuring the figures of the prophet David alongside the Virgin, and Solomon next to the archangel Gabriel. The central panels showcase two holy hierarchs each: probably Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, and Gregory the Theologian and Nicholas. The lower register portrays the equestrian figures likely of Saints George and Demetrius.

Stoica Nicolaescu deciphered and published the inscriptions written around the scenes and door frames. These inscriptions are fragments from Ezekiel chapters 43:27 and 44:1–3. Here, we provide them supplemented by the missing portions reconstructed by Nicolaescu:

> "And it will be on the eighth day, and before that, the priests will make your burnt offerings and the ones for your redemption on the altar. And I will receive you, says the Lord God" (Ezek. 43: 27).[17] "And He turned me to the path of the door of the holy of holies of the outermost, looking towards the east. And it was locked". "And the Lord said to me: this door will be locked, and it will not be opened, and no one will pass through it". "That the Lord God of Israel will pass through the gate, and it will be locked. As for the ruler, he will sit there, to eat bread before the Lord. By the way of the door he will enter and by its way he will go out". (Ezek. 44: 1–3)[18]

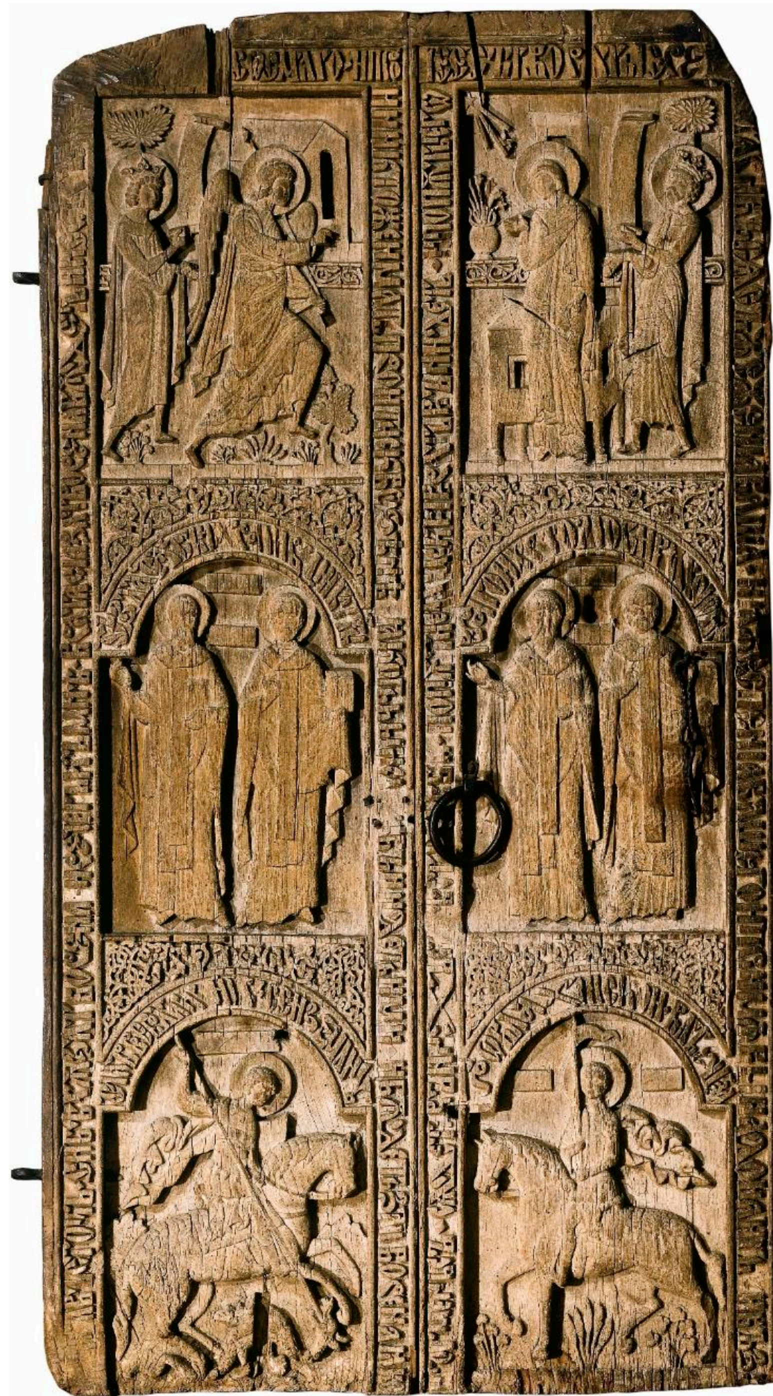


Figure 5. Wooden doors, Snagov Monastery (?), former Principality of Wallachia, 1452–3, inv. L100/1115, 1.92 × 1.2 m (Photo credit: National Museum of Arts of Romania, Bucharest).

An inscription on the arches above the depictions of the two hierarchs and the two military saints on the doors makes reference to the construction of a church by voivode Vladislav II in the year 6961 (1452–3), stating:

> “This church was built in the days of the Orthodox and Christ-loving Jo<hn> Vladislav, voivode and ruler of all of Wallachia, in the year 6961.” (Elian et al. 1965, cat. 1177, pp. 773–74)

The biblical quotes of the inscriptions establish a profound connection between the iconography featuring the Annunciation and the vision of the Temple in the book of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel, the locked door serves as a symbol of the passage through which the Lord

will enter, offering a prefiguration of the Mother of God in the act of Incarnation. This same passage (Ezekiel 44: 2) was inscribed on Ezekiel's scroll in his depiction on St. Mark Cathedral's Byzantine doors of Leo da Molino in Venice (ca. 1112), within a selection of prophets forecasting the Annunciation and the Nativity (Frazer 1973, p. 153, note 30). This connection is further reinforced by the presence of the Annunciation scene on the Wallachian door, also hinting at a possible association with the patron saint of the intended church. Notably, the Snagov Monastery was dedicated to the feast of the Entry of the Most Holy Virgin Mary in the Temple. According to the mid-17th century account of the Syrian traveler Paul from Aleppo, the Snagov Monastery accommodated two chapels, one dedicated to the Annunciation and the other to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (Alep 2014, p. 394). Both chapels were demolished in 1840 to make way for a prison building, as witnessed by Alexandru Odobescu during his visit in 1862 (Odobescu 1981, p. 98). Nicolaescu suggested that at some point when the chapel got ruined or at the demolition that took place in 1840, the carved doors of the Annunciation parekklesion, thought to have been built by voivode Vladislav II, may have been relocated to the church in the adjacent village of Turbaţi (Nicolaescu 1936, pp. 124–26).

Dumitru Năstase analyzed instead the donation inscription on the doors associating them to the chrysobull presented by Vladislav II in 1453 to the Bolintin Monastery, also dedicated to the Annunciation. However, the contrast between the absence of building references in the chrysobull and the explicit mention of church construction in the door inscription is noteworthy. Năstase's analysis draws a connection between Ezekiel's Temple vision during the Babylonian captivity and its potential significance in the contemporary context, notably the Ottoman siege of Constantinople. The reference to the benevolent "Christ-loving voivode" and the prophetic nature of the inscription, hinting at a king passing through the temple door, is interpreted by Năstase as a symbol of hope for divine protection of the Principality of Wallachia amidst challenges of the looming threat of the Ottoman power (Năstase 1999, pp. 90–97).

Năstase's analysis sheds light on the potential political and religious symbolism embedded in the inscription, offering an interpretation of the historical circumstances and the aspirations of the Wallachian ruler during that troubled period. However, despite this rich historical backdrop, the true significance and possible origins of these doors remain shrouded in mystery. The iconographic and textual elements on the doors, referring to the Vision of Ezekiel and the Annunciation, do not unequivocally align with a particular political or historical context, casting doubt on Năstase's interpretation. However, the theological motifs present in the doors' iconographic structure are consistent with themes commonly seen in the literature and visual arts of Late Byzantium.

Representations of the Old Testament theological topoi of the Mother of God, among which is included the "closed door" motif, experienced a developmental surge during the Palaiologan period in iconography. The motif of the Virgin symbolized by the closed door of the Temple is represented at the Church of Theotokos Pammakaristos in Constantinople towards the end of the 13th century. The fragmented fresco depiction can be found on the north wall of the southern ambulatory, in a scene with Aaron and his sons in front of the altar of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (Figure 6) (Belting et al. 1978, pp. 108–10 and Figures 108–9). The veil of the central doors of the iconostases in churches have been correlated with the motif of the "closed door" and the veil of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (Gr. καταπέτασμα), in the context of late Byzantine theology. They have typological correlations with the curtains of the church doors, attested up to the Middle Byzantine period, as thresholds of the sacred space evoking the structure and symbolism of the Tabernacle. The "closed door" and the impenetrable veil of the Holy of Holies are metaphors reflecting the purity of the Virgin Mary, with biblical passages regarding the Tabernacle of the Testimony and its contents representing typological images of the Mother of God evoked during the Vespers of the feast of the Entry of the Mother of God into the church, on November 21st. The Marian symbolism of the Veil and the Temple, with its closed door, is suggestively illustrated in a typological cycle at the Church of the Virgin

Peribleptos in Ohrid (1295), around the same period as the fresco at Pammakaristos, in a similar scene with Aaron in front of the altar of the Tabernacle (Figure 7) (Babić 1968), and in the iconography of the Entry of the Mother of God into the temple. Correspondingly, the reopening of the gates of Heaven through the resurrection of Christ and the reception of the soul of the Mother of God are illustrated in the scene of the Dormition of the Mother of God in the same church. An extended Old Testament typological cycle prefiguring the Mother of God is depicted in the parekklesion of the Chora Church in Constantinople (ca. 1320). Prophets bearing Old Testament symbols of the Mother of God can also be seen at Staro Nagoričane (Figure 8), at Peć, and in 14th-century icons of Mother of God praised by prophets (illustrations of hymn Ἄνωθεν οἱ Προφῆται σὲ προκατήγγειλαν) (G. Babić 1968, pp. 147–51). The fact that Wallachia was aware of, and assimilated, these late Byzantine trends of using Old Testament topoi prefiguring the Mother of God during the 14th century is revealed by the depiction of the large scene of the Offerings of the twelve tribes of Israel to the Tabernacle of Testimony (Num. 7), on the sanctuary apse at St. Nicholas Princely Church in Curtea de Argeș (c. 1369), where the Ark of the Covenant is bearing the image of the Virgin in a clipeus (Dumitrescu 1979, pp. 27–28 and Figure 10).

Figure 6. Aaron and his sons before the altar (below) and Mother of God the closed door of the Temple (above), Fethiye Camii (Theotokos Pammakaristos), Istanbul, south ambulatory, north wall, end of 13th–early 14th cent. (Photo credit: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection).

Figure 7. Aaron and his sons before the altar of the Tabernacle, church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid, Republic of North Macedonia, 1295, narthex (Photo credit: Milco Georgievski).

As we have shown already, in his mystagogy on the spatial dynamics of the church and its connection to the liturgical ritual, St. Symeon of Thessalonica emphasized the symbolic link between the Jewish temple and the church as a recurring theme (Symeon of Thessalonike 1984, Ch. 58, pp. 83–85). The sacred space, which in the Jewish world is reserved for the high priest and the king, as mentioned in the fragment from Ezekiel inscribed on the Wallachian door, is open to the faithful in the Christian church. The biblical quote must therefore be understood in a typological sense, also indicated by the iconography of the door, that the church is the fulfillment of what the Jewish temple prefigured: the accomplishment of salvation realized through the Incarnation of Christ (the scene of the Annunciation), the Eucharistic mystery (indicated by the holy hierarchs), and the testimony of the martyrs (the military saints).

The symbolism of the temple in Ezekiel's vision materialized in this piece of sculpture seems not to be unique in Wallachia of those times. Ioana Iancovescu posited that the dimensions and spatial arrangement of the church of the Curtea de Argeș Monastery in Wallachia (1512–17) correspond to the dimensions of the temple in Ezekiel's vision, and thus the exceptional foundation of Voivode Neagoe Basarab of Wallachia (r. 1512–21) would have had this passage of the biblical description of the Temple of God as a source of inspiration (Iancovescu 2008). The motif has deep roots in the Early Byzantine tradition, exemplified by the church of St. Polyeuktos in Constantinople (520s AD), whose measurements in royal cubits precisely mirrored those of Ezekiel's temple (Harrison 1989, pp. 137–42; Ousterhout 2010, pp. 242–46; Matthews 2023, p. 28), and of Hagia Sophia (532–37 AD), which bears proportional relationships with the Temple of Solomon (Scheja 1962; Ousterhout 2010, p. 242).

Figure 8. Prophet Ezekiel with the closed door, detail from the Dormition of the Mother of God, Church of St. George at Staro Nagoričane, Republic of North Macedonia, ca. 1317–8, naos (Photo credits: Vlado Kiprijanovski and Jehona Spahiu Janchevska).

The depiction of the Annunciation on the doors reveals similarities with the wooden doors of Molybdoskepastos Monastery in Epirus rebuilt by the *protovestiarios* Andronikos Komnenos Palaiologos in 1320–30 (Figure 9) (Taddei 2009, pp. 539–42; Papatheophanous-Tsouri 1993; Vanderheyde 2020, pp. 130–31) and the bronze doors of the catholicon at Vatopedi—whose church is dedicated to the Annunciation of the Virgin—a composite work of late 14th century seemingly brought from the church of St. Sophia in Thessaloniki, with the two panels depicting the Annunciation added in the 15th century (L. Bouras 1989–1990, pp. 23, 26; Loverdou-Tsigarida 1998, pp. 497–99; Loverdou-Tsigarida 2003, pp. 251–52 and Figures 19–20). Likewise, the portrayal of equestrian military saints and real or fantastical beasts, like lions, prey birds, gryphons, and centaurs, can be observed on the bronze doors of the church of St. Nicholas Bolnički in Ohrid, originating from the late 13th-century (Fokas 2017) (Figure 10). Molybdoskepastos Monastery showcase a comparable thematic arrangement, featuring teratological creatures, gryphons, and snakes biting each other, instead of military martyrs. The doors from Snagov share similarities with these examples, including the motif of the military saints on horseback, with St. George slaying the dragon, which aligns with the apotropaic figures of beasts and fantastical creatures depicted at St. Nicholas Bolnički and Molybdoskepastos, or on the doors commissioned by voivode Stefan Hreljo Dragovola at Rila Monastery (Bulgaria, 1334–5) (Gergova 2017). Bestial and

martial motifs are a notable element within the repertoire of illustrated doors in the Middle Ages, which hold significance among the populace, reflecting the communal beliefs and practices of the time (Spieser 2009, p. 67; Vanderheyde 2020, pp. 194–209). These motifs, which resonate with the symbolism of the earth and the underworld, representing Christ's descent through his incarnation and death, are placed in the lower section of the doors, where bestial creatures, archers, humans, and beasts engage in combat or in hunting scenes, as seen on the doors at Augsburg, Ravello, San Pietro Alba Fucense, Gurk, Suzdal, St. Nicholas Bolnički, Molybdoskepastos, Rila, etc. These protective symbols, which were part of a category of secular figures that appealed to feudal societies (Schapiro 1963), were designed to ward off evil or harm and had a moral significance, which resonated with a wider audience beyond the confines of strict theological realm.

Figure 9. Molybdoskepastos Monastery, Epirus, wooden doors, 1320–30 (Photo credit: Catherine Vanderheyde).

Figure 10. Saint Nicholas Bolnički in Ohrid, bronze doors, late 13th century (Photo credit: Catherine Vanderheyde).

The hierarchical composition on the doors of Molybdoskepastos and Snagov follow the typical Byzantine structured order from top to bottom: the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, hierarchs, martyr rider saints/dragons. However, when comparing the examples from St. Nicholas Bolnički and Molybdoskepastos to the piece from Snagov, it is evident that the first two are of a more provincial nature, exhibiting a lower level of refinement and

quality. These works are vernacular interpretations of potentially lost prototypes that were likely connected with the Late Byzantine empire.[19]

Contrary to expectations, the Wallachian craftsmanship evident in the sculptures from Snagov highlights an exceptional blend of technical precision, artistic finesse, and profound theological depth. These remarkable skills have been strongly influenced by Late Byzantine sources, indicating that a rich Byzantine artistic heritage inspired Wallachia. While Nicolae Iorga's claim that the Snagov doors are "Byzantine without other admixtures" may not capture the full complexity of their origins, especially considering potential Balkan influences, it undeniably carries significant weight. The carvings on the doors symbolize a longstanding artistic tradition in 15th-century Wallachia, with only a handful of surviving material remains. This tradition maintained active ties with the Byzantine realm on a religious level, ensuring the uninterrupted transmission of legacy from the previous century with minimal deviations. Despite their smaller size, tailored for Wallachian church portals, they synthesize the theology of the Church space and the iconography and symbolism found on the majestic cathedral and catholicon doors of Byzantium. The impeccable quality of the decorations emphasizes the special dedication of Wallachian voivodes and hegumens in highlighting, through an elegant artistic vision that followed in the Byzantine footsteps, the Byzantine theological and aesthetic essence of the church space as the sacred sanctuary of the Holy Trinity following the Jewish Temple, a representation of the performance of the sacred mysteries by the Incarnate Son of God, and the gateway to the Eternal Kingdom.

5. Conclusions

Such an extensive exploration of the iconography and symbolic significance of Byzantine church doors and their influence across Europe over a millennium, spanning from early Christianity to the empire's collapse in 1453, might initially seem like a daunting task for pinpointing precise historical details. Nonetheless, delving into the entirety of church door imagery allows for a deeper understanding of the foundational concepts related to the symbolic conception and performance of church thresholds. These concepts, evolving from early Christianity, have persisted over time, albeit with varying expressions.

Central among them are the themes of the Incarnation of Christ, the redemption of the human soul, and their interplay involving crossing thresholds of the earthly realm and the Celestial Kingdom. Their dynamics appear symbolically portrayed early on, through the Classical symbolism of *adventus regis* and *adventus animae* parallelism (at Santa Sabina doors). This dynamic was refashioned during the Middle Byzantine period as a narrative structure formed by Deësis vs. Great Feasts that emphasized the divine and the human natures of Christ in performative contexts, involving the principles of intercession and emulation. These themes, encompassed within liturgical rituals, form the core around which the symbolic iconography surrounding the church door became structured. The church door threshold, as a liminal space bridging the mundane and the divine, served as a visual and spiritual gateway, embodying *in nuce* all the theological concepts of church space and its liturgical use, developed further in the iconography of the paintings within the interior.

During the Middle Byzantine period, the evolution of the templon barrier, serving as a liminal threshold within the sanctuary area, and the iconography of church doors progressed in tandem. The former enlightened believers about the holy mysteries unfolding within the enclosed altar area, while the latter bridged the sacred realm with the external, mundane world called to salvation. They shared the same taxonomy of the Deësis assembly of Christ, Mother of God, saints, and angels, and the Great Feasts narratives, but the iconography of the church doors developed in addition reference to the Old Testament prophets and also to the earthly domain, and the underworld, featuring teratological creatures, beasts, and fantastical beings such as gryphons, dragons, and centaurs, all symbolic of creation destined for containment and redemption through the Incarnation of Christ.

One of the most interesting facets of church door iconography lies in its incorporation of Old Testament references, as it adds a temporal vector to the narrative, establishing a connection of the church space with the Tabernacle of the Testimony and the Temple of Solomon. The Old Testament scenes on church doors reflect the typological readings of the prophets' books by the Church Fathers. The presence of Old Testament program on church doors—which is exemplified early on, at Sant' Ambrogio in Milan with a depiction of a cycle of David—is intended to link Christ's Incarnation with his Judean lineage and connect the church to its historical roots in the Judean temple. By around 1100, typological references to the Virgin Mary as "the closed door," symbolized by the Veil of the Tabernacle, began to emerge, as seen in Leo da Molino's door displaying prophets (and Ezekiel displaying this particular text) at St. Mark in Venice (Figure 2a). The evolution of Old Testament typological symbolism of the Virgin Mary and the Incarnation reached its pinnacle in church iconography during the Palaiologan period, with notable examples in frescoes at Pammakaristos, Peribleptos in Ohrid, and Chora.

These views appear synthesized on a wooden church door from the Principality of Wallachia, dating back to 1452–3, which features a lengthy inscription from the Book of Ezekiel concerning the closed door of the Holy of Holies and its opening by the king, bordering depictions of the Annunciation, holy hierarchs, and martyrs. Reflecting the Marian theological trends of the Palaiologan era, the door encapsulates the synthesis of all the Byzantine development of the symbolism of the church and the church door, by praising Mary as the fulfillment of the prophecies and the legacy of the Judean Tabernacle and Temple, through whom all the redemptive sacraments of the church were enabled.

To fully grasp the significance of the church doors in Byzantium, one must consider their performative role in the liturgical services, which align with the typological readings of the Old Testament. This alignment is evident in the interplay between restriction and access during matins and the beginning of the liturgy, as explained by the mystagogy of St. Symeon of Thessalonike. The Marian symbolism of the Veil, acting as both a barrier to holy mysteries and a material means through which Christ enters the world in human form, is apparent in the later Palaiologan doors featuring the Annunciation iconography.

The performative nature of doors serves as a link between art history and religious studies, showcasing how iconography, spatial design, and liturgical practices were deeply intertwined symbolically to offer a cohesive narrative and immersive sacred experience.

Not least, the relative frequent mobility and repurposing of church doors in various locations underscore their dual functional and ideological meanings, showcasing the high symbolic significance and status that they were invested with, as well as the valuable artistic craftsmanship that went into creating them.

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Appendix A. Corpus of Existing Byzantine and Byzantine-Influenced Doors

Milan, Italy: Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio (4th century CE, with 16th- and 18th-century repairs).

Rome, Italy: Basilica of Santa Sabina (early 5th century CE, originating perhaps in Constantinople).

Rome, Italy: Oratory of St. John the Baptist in the Lateran Baptistery (ante 468 CE).

Istanbul, Turkey: Hagia Sophia, four bronze pairs of doors from the 4th- and 6th-century CE.

Istanbul, Turkey: Hagia Sophia, panels added to the Gate of the Horologium of the southwestern vestibule, 838–40 CE.

Mount Athos, Greece: Great Lavra Monastery, 11th century.

Amalfi, Italy: Cathedral of Sant' Andrea, 1056–7 (Constantinopolitan).

Monte Cassino, Italy: Church of Saint Benedict Monastery, 1066 (Constantinopolitan).

Rome, Italy: Cathedral of Saint-Paul-Outside-the-Walls, 1070 (Constantinopolitan).

Monte Sant'Angelo (Monte Gargano), Italy: Church of Archangel Michael Monastery, 1076 (Constantinopolitan).

Atrani, Italy: Cathedral of San Sebastian, 1087 (modeled after the Constantinopolitan ones in Amalfi).

Salerno, Italy: Saint Matthew Cathedral, 1085 (Byzantine).

Rome, Italy: Chapel of Lateran Baptistery (1195–6).

Venice, Italy: Basilica of Saint Mark: Narthex door, 6th century; "the San Clemente door" of the southern portal (circa 1080, Constantinopolitan); the central portal door (after a Byzantine model), 1112.

Canosa di Puglia, Italy: Mausoleum of Bohemond of Antioch (1111–1118).

Troia, Italy: Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (two doors, cast by Oderisius of Benevento, 1119 and 1127).

Verona, Italy: Cathedral of St. Zeno Maggiore, c. 1138.

Ravello, Italy: Cathedral of Saint Panteleimon (cast by Barisanus of Trani, 1179).

Monreale, Sicily, Italy: Cathedral of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary (cast by Barisanus of Trani, 1186–90).

Trani, Italy: Cathedral of Saint Nicholas the Pilgrim (cast by Barisanus of Trani, 1190).

Benevento, Italy: Cathedral of Virgin Mary, early 13th century.

Elasson, Thessaly, Greece: Olympiotissa Monastery, 11th and 13th centuries (Constantinople or Thessalonike).

Suzdal, Russia: Cathedral of the Nativity of the Theotokos, c. 1230 (Russian–Byzantine).

Mount Athos, Greece: Vatopedi Monastery, early 14th century and late 15th century (from St. Sophia Church in Thessalonike).

Kastoria, Greece: Church of Panagia Mavriotissa, 11th–12th century.

Koutzoventis, Greece: Monastery of St. John Chrysostom, 12th century.

Peristerona, Greece: Church of St. Barnabas and Hilarion, 13th century.

Voulgarelli, Greece: Kokkini Ekklesia (ca. 1293–4).

Assinou, Cyprus: Church of Panagia Phorbiotissa, 14th century.

Rila, Bulgaria: St. John of Rila Monastery, 1334–5.

Mount Athos, Greece: Dionysiou Monastery, 1374.

Molybdoskepastos, Greece: Panagia Molybdoskepastos Monastery, 1320–30.

Ohrid, Republic of North Macedonia: St. Nicholas Bolnički, late 13th century.

Bucharest, Romania: National Museum of Art of Romania, inv. L100/1115 (from Turbaţi church, Silişţea Snagovului), 1452–3.

Notes

1 On templa in Byzantium, see (Lasareff 1964–1966; Walter 1971, 1993; Wharton Epstein 1981).

2 A comprehensive analysis of the structure and technology of Byzantine doors is offered by Mamaloukos (2012). Earlier research of the topic was made by Bouras (1964).

3 For the Castello Sforzesco, Munich, and British Museum ivories depicting the Holy Sepulcher (5th C), see (Bhalla 2022).

4 For the Chalke Gate, see (Brubaker 1999).

5 More on the topic in (Kantorowicz 1944; Delbrueck 1949).

6 For the *Marys at the Sepulchre* ivory, 5th Century AD (inv. avori 9), Castello Sforzesco, Museo delle Arte Decorative, Milan, see (Bhalla 2022).

7 It also contains contemporary scenes and portraits related to the Council of Florence (1437–8) and mythological figures. See (Glass 2012).

[8] (Clavijó 1928, p. 269): "The inner doorways here were made very high, so high indeed that a man on horseback might easily have entered through them, and these double doors were covered with plates of silver gilt ornamented with patterns in blue enamel work, having insets that were very finely made in gold plate. All this was so beautifully wrought that evidently never in Tartary nor indeed in our western land of Spain could it have been come to. In the one door was figured the image of Saint Peter while in the other was Saint Paul, and each saint had a book in his hands, the entire work being of silver. They afterwards told us that these doors had been brought hither from Brusa, where Timur had found them when the treasure of the Turkish sultan [Báyazíd] had come into his hands". The editor suggested that these doors originally may have come to Brusa from Constantinople, as plunder (p. 360, note 2).

[9] Being possibly contemporary with the "San Clemente" ones of San Marco in Venice (1080) (Ross 1940, p. 577).

[10] Five of Pantaleon's nephews from his brothers John and Sergius bore titles of imperial *protonobelissimos* and *kouropalates* at the end of the 11th and in the first half of the 12th century (Ristovska 2017, p. 376).

[11] See comments on this topic, in (Ćirić 2016; Woodfin 2011).

[12] See such allusions to "the fountains of paradise" in (Chrysostom and Shilling 2016, p. 208).

[13] This door typology was reiterated in the bronze doors commissioned in 1336 by archbishop of Novgorod Vasily Kalika for the St. Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod. Subsequently, these doors were relocated by Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible to the Trinity Cathedral in Alexandrov, Vladimir Oblast. See (Trifonova 2015).

[14] Panagia Mavriotissa in Kastoria, 11th–12th C; Monastery of St. John Chrysostom in Koutzoventis, 12th C; Church of St. Barnabas and Hilarion in Peristerona, 13th C; the Kokkini Ekklesia at Voulgarelli (ca. 1293–4); Panagia Phorbiotissa in Assiou, 14th C; Rila Monastery in Bulgaria, 1334–5; Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos, 1374. See (Taddei 2009; Gergova 2017; Nikonanos 2001, pp. 150–51; Konstantas et al. 2021).

[15] On the topic, see the more recent study of (Castiñeiras 2015).

[16] More on this topic with an overview of the Balkan cases, in (Iancovescu 1996, 2006; Čirić 2015).

[17] Ezekiel 43:27, New International Version of the Bible (NIV): "When these days are over, it shall be on the eighth day and thereafter, that the priests shall offer your burnt offerings and your peace offerings on the altar; and I will accept you, says the Lord God".

[18] Ezekiel 44:1–3, NIV: "Then he brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces east; and it was shut. The Lord said to me: This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore, it shall remain shut. Only the prince, because he is a prince, may sit in it to eat food before the Lord; he shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gate, and shall go out by the same way".

[19] For these motifs that persisted until the mid–16th century, see the wooden doors at Treskavec and Slepče monasteries in Northern Macedonia (Momirović 1970, pp. 63–71).

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