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The Depiction of Holiness: A Hagiographical Examination of Two Icon Panels in Bursa Archaeological Museum

Abstract

The guiding principles of behavior driven by devotion to Jesus Christ and His followers have triggered a form of life to which the faithful commit themselves. The life stories of saints have taken deep root in Christian society. For believers, these individuals have become symbols, and the lifestyle they maintained gave rise to the presence of figures who could be regarded as idols or, in other terms, icons. The idealization of saints has endowed sacred iconography with a place in Christian theology. Icons, which reinforce the spatial organization of churches, have also become objects of worship displayed in the central places of homes. This article concentrates on two icons housed within the Bursa Archaeological Museum. The purpose of examining these icons, depicting Saint George and Saint Nicholas, is to investigate the place of the icon concept within Christian theology and its reflection in art. To adopt a method suitable to the aim, a retrospective approach was developed to compare similar and different examples. The study indicates that the legends surrounding the figures depicted on the icons remain fresh through repetition in every period. Despite changes in technique and materials, the core theme has been constructed around similar plotlines and has continued to exert widespread influence. Based on the form and technical characteristics of the Bursa Museum's works, as well as comparisons with similar examples, there is a growing view that these could be Greek Orthodox Icons dating to the period spanning the 18th to the 20th century.

Keywords: Hagiography, Christian Art, Icon, Saint Nicholas, Saint George

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Müqəddəslük təsviri: Bursa Arxeoloji Muzeyində yerləşən iki ikon panelinin hagioqrafik tədqiqi

Xülasə

İsa Məsihə və Onun davamçılarına sədaqət əsasında formalaşan davranış prinsipləri möminlərin özlərini həsr etdikləri bir həyat forması yaratmışdır. Müqəddəslərin həyat hekayələri xristian cəmiyyətində dərin kök salmışdır. Möminlər üçün bu şəxslər simvola çevrilmiş, onların həyat tərzi isə büt və ya başqa ifadə ilə desək, ikon kimi qəbul edilə biləcək fiqurların yaranmasına səbəb olmuşdur. Müqəddəslərin ideallaşdırılması müqəddəs ikonqrafiyaya xristian teologiyasında xüsusi bir yer qazandırmışdır. Kilsələrin məkan təşkilini gücləndirən ikonalar evlərin mərkəzi yerlərində də ibadət obyektini kimi yerləşdirilmişdir.

Bu məqalə Bursa Arxeoloji Muzeyində saxlanılan iki ikon üzərində fokuslanır. Müqəddəs Georgi və Müqəddəs Nikolayı təsvir edən bu ikonaların araşdırılmasında məqsəd ikon anlayışının xristian teologiyasındakı yerini və onun incəsənətdəki təzahürünü tədqiq etməkdir. Məqsədə uyğun metod kimi retrospektiv yanaşma seçilərək oxşar və fərqli nümunələrin müqayisəsi aparılmışdır.

Tədqiqat göstərir ki, ikonlarda təsvir olunan fiqurlarla bağlı əfsanələr hər dövrdə təkrarlanaraq canlılığını qoruyur. Texnika və materiallardakı dəyişikliklərə baxmayaraq, əsas mövzu oxşar süjet xətti üzərində qurulmuş və geniş təsirini davam etdirmişdir. Bursa Muzeyinə aid əsərlərin forma və texniki xüsusiyyətləri, eləcə də oxşar nümunələrlə müqayisə əsasında onların XVIII–XX əsrlərə aid Yunan Ortodoks ikonaları ola biləcəyi ehtimalı güclənir.

Açar sözlər: Hagiografiya, xristian incəsənəti, ikon, Müqəddəs Nikolay, Müqəddəs Georgi

Introduction

It is worth noting that there are several significant processes in the emergence and shaping of the Christian faith. It is evident that a large body of research exists on the formation and development stages of these processes. However, given the considerable breadth of the topic and the need for in-depth analysis and conclusions within specialized disciplines, this breadth should not be overlooked. The tendencies and literatures of different disciplines exhibit a complex situation in terms of defining the process. The values shaped by a concept as abstract as belief ultimately translate into worship and acquire concrete meaning. It is precisely at this juncture that the attitudes and behaviors prompting a turning point give rise to worship practices of their own, with relatively clear rules and easier comprehensibility.

The chronological development and the stages through which Christian theology has evolved require a notably wide-ranging investigation. To adequately address the aims and scope of our study, it may be beneficial to specify a clearly defined area. Before addressing the technical aspects of icons, a thorough analysis of the underlying factors of the icon concept and the historical milieu on which it is constructed is essential. These criteria, in terms of determining the research aim, suggest that not only the methodology and scope but also the surrounding issues can serve the ultimate objective. The study rests on evaluating, from technical and iconographic perspectives, two icon samples cataloged in the Bursa Archaeology Museum's inventory. Prior to discussing the examples in the museum, adopting a retrospective approach to examine the place and importance of icons within Christian belief, developing technical discourses through the examples, interrogating the concept of the icon, and questioning its theological context would be more aligned with the purpose of the topic. This study, which aims to analyze the two icon samples in the Bursa Archaeology Museum within a hagiographic framework, will attempt to treat the identities of the figures depicted on the icons, their iconographic characteristics, and the compositional arrangements, and to address the life narratives of the portrayed saints in their theological dimension. In this way, the icons will be discussed not only as artistic objects but also as visual carriers of the cult of saints and as elements of faith practice, carrying meanings that merit examination.

The method established for the article is based on the combined application of iconographic analysis and hagiographic interpretation. In the initial phase, a general definition of the icon is provided, and its place within Christian theology as well as its pivotal turning points are discussed. The hagiographic narratives reflected in the iconographic art are delineated through the two specified examples. Through iconographic analyses, the life histories, miracles, and devotional practices of the saints are examined.

When examining the stages of the emergence of the icon, it becomes clear that a multitude of factors contributed to the process. This inference necessitates the development of a multifaceted perspective. Given the meaning that icons represented for Christian laity, it can be said that they left an imprint on a particular era. As the process progressed, reflections in religious, social, and cultural life brought about certain tensions. Naturally, Christian art was adversely affected by these developments. The period in which all forms of religious depiction were prohibited is referred to as Iconoclasm (716–843). This stance against sacred representations has been the subject of numerous studies capable of developing a panoramic view that questions the concept of the icon and its place in Christian theology. Beyond the debates about origin, studies focusing on production techniques and iconographic analyses have facilitated a reevaluation of the relationship between religion and art. The icons in Bursa Museum, examined in terms of production techniques, regional characteristics,

and comparisons with similar examples, have been dated accordingly. The applied method oriented toward technical and iconographic analysis leads to the conclusion that the icons may belong to the 18th–20th centuries.

Multidimensional Methodological Issues in Iconography

There is no doubt that the factors triggering the transformation of the concept from image to symbol are multiple and varied in their incentives. The fact that icons have acquired not only theological significance but also social and even political representational power has turned them into a potent symbol apparatus beyond mere image art. When the emergence of icons and the motivations sustaining their development are foregrounded, developing an analytical mode of thinking becomes imperative. Treating this issue exclusively within the discipline of art history would narrow the contextual framework and risk inadequately capturing the developments that occurred across historical processes. Among the main difficulties encountered in defining icons is the multiplicity of meanings attributed by believers and the potential for icons to evolve into several different symbols depending on expectations. Another challenge lies in the formal variations produced by newly emerging interpretations that shift with different historical periods. The attitudes that kept icons current in the minds of believers throughout history thus present a problem of interpretation.

The theological, chronological, and artistic dimensions of the topic are discussed through methods and approaches whose variability itself brings the challenge of developing different perspectives for each process. Differences in the methodologies applied to identify the materials and techniques used in icon production, and the efforts at categorization, give rise to the possibility of formulating a formal analytical approach. To move beyond a superficial stance and achieve a deeper analysis, a scientific methodological model that requires a broad conceptual framework is necessary. The fact that icons relate to multiple domains leads to similar implications in terms of terminology. The general problem concerning terminology can be described as the insufficiency of terms used to explain theory when positioning icons—concretized on the ground through practical applications—on a specific footing. Some of the methodological issues that may arise in studies centered on icons can be enumerated in this way. Rather than perceiving icons merely as artistic objects, it is necessary to assess them simultaneously with a clear sense of their historical continuity and points of rupture, while remembering that they are not only visual but also sacred symbolic instruments. The suggested considerations can contribute to determining appropriate methods and methodologies for the study.

1. Icon: From Image to Symbol

The attitude of humanity toward nature has also shaped its life journey. In order to overcome encountered difficulties or to adapt to its environment, it has utilized images in the stages of transforming the processes it has designed in the mind into concrete data. By reflecting the vast world of thought gained through images onto its perceptions and fabrications, it has managed to enter the production phase. The stance adopted toward nature continues to shape consciousness and guide the daily life cycle. These changes in the realm of emotions and thoughts have given rise to various myths and archetypes in belief. The forms in which religious beliefs with different ritual systems are performed have driven the emergence of the concept of liturgy. All of these activities can be associated with images as their point of origin. Alongside pagan beliefs, the envisaged notion of the creative principle in the monotheistic religions has taken shape throughout history through various objects. The personification of divinity, formed through images and gradually loaded with symbolic meaning, has become a culture.

When image culture began to spread widely, it could, in addition to its real or known origin, be related to an object that carried associations it awakened, thereby possessing a residual or relic-like quality. Most of the initial notices concern worship or other ceremonial practices directed at images. The image's own innate and intrinsic power of suggestion was given great importance (whether one claims it to be merely a man-made ordinary object or not, or whether it is associated with any sacred person or object); this power was particularly influential among Greeks and Hellenized Semitic communities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Among broad audiences, belief in divine powers within religious images had deeply rooted itself in pagan beliefs. This deeply rooted animistic attitude,

regardless of whether there is a special connection to a sacred relic, naturally re-emerged in Christian imagery and soon became a subject of profound philosophical speculation (Kitzinger, 1954).

Sacred icons are a significant part of liturgy in Eastern Churches, and because liturgy has remained unchanged for centuries, it is natural to assume that the images used during liturgy preserve the same meaning and consistently convey the same message. The main factor that positions icons between Tradition and Modernity is not merely the invariance of their meaning, but also what makes them spiritually valid both in Byzantium and in the present day (Vasilescu, 2010). From the perspective of an art historian or theorist, the most up to date and current definition of the traditional image can be described as an image containing an ikonical presence that yields the impression of existence. On the other hand, in Christian iconography, the participation of both the depicted image and the prototype of the icon itself in its actions conveys not an impression but the holiness or sacredness of a being in the depicted form. This situates it as a manifestation of “spiritual reality.” After this point, because the icon is honored during a religious rite and represents a broader expression of believers’ reverence, it also entails an optical and tactile experience in the same way (Zarra, 2022).

In the early Christian intellectual horizon, images remained a problem and continued to occupy the minds of Christian thinkers and teachers. Even the belief in the invisibility of God, and consequently the impossibility of depicting God, did not eradicate the persistent sense of peril dwelling within the icon. When considered in the historical context of the early fourth century, symbols and figures reflected the division between two classes of images, and in a sense the two great cultural traditions and religious attitudes encountered and fused within Christianity. In newly transformed versions, perhaps we witness, on the one hand, a Hellenistic stance toward ritual images, and on the other hand, a theology of an invisible God rooted in the concepts of Sacred Scripture (Barasch, 1992).

The icon, in its non-representational aspect, is not neutralized; however, its power is distinct from the Eucharist (Communion) and worship. Even though the emperor and the Christ are not physically present within the icon, they are perceived there. They share a space without reference to another place or time. Indeed, no event as such is depicted in this image. Instead, we witness a symbol of the fulfillment of the longing in worship. The situation implies a physical and spiritual encounter with the holy that is absent, yet this encounter exists only within the constraints of the visual language employed. The icon does not merely display the desire within worship; it also sustains that desire (Barber, 1993).

In the eyes of the Byzantines, the ikon was a true portrait that revealed all aspects of the depicted holy person. In this context, it is appropriate to invoke the 82nd Canon of the Quinisext Council (692). It condemns the older tradition of depicting Jesus in the guise of a lamb and, by contrast, advocates portraying Jesus in human form, thereby placing the image against the symbolic (typos). It argues that the icon can be in agreement with the Old Testament’s mode of revelation, where truth can be shown only through pale signs and shadows, whereas the New Testament requires no symbol at all: Truth and Grace are present for everyone to behold in the human form of Jesus (Mango, 2016).

According to the Greek ethnography, the image, or the representation of an object, the icon that denotes a portrait, also signifies a symbol or sign. In this context, Saint John constructs a refined, filtrated arrangement of different sign groups. This arrangement possesses a modern and up-to-date order appropriate for our era of semiotics studies. The first group of signs or images by Saint John encompassed God as images, namely Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The second group consists of mnemonic images, and “these images are of two kinds: either the words written in books—in which case the written word is an image—or the material images ‘the reverence shown for the image is transmitted to its prototype.’ This implies that the elevation of the ikon is achieved by passing through the ikon to its prototype. The ikon is a instrument, not a goal; yet it also represents the true version of the four Gospels in the New Testament (Abel, 2005).

Understanding the direct background of changes in images and ikonology theories requires a careful grasp of historical conditions. Among these, the most important is the situation that can be described as the “politi-zation” of the ikon; this has placed the icon at the center of intense political

debates. As is well known, this condition underwent a deep-rooted transformation in the eighth century. The Iconoclastic Controversy became, in the eighth and ninth centuries, a central event in Eastern Christianity, turning the icon into an object of political struggle and a central political symbol. Numerous groups, including scholars, commentators, and preachers across generations, contributed to expressing and firmly establishing the victorious ideology that ultimately led to the veneration of famous Byzantine icons (Barasch, 1992).

Undoubtedly, reflections of pre-Christian and post-Christian traditions in Byzantine society brought with them certain tendencies. The inclination to render mental images into perceptible visibilities constitutes a systematic behavioral model nourished by all these habits. The resulting phases, for the Christian world and especially for the Orthodox rite, have standardized liturgical activities and prompted a fundamental shift. The meaning attributed to icons has significantly contributed to their symbolic character.

2. The Meaning Attributed to Icons and Its Place in Christian Theology

The process of turning image-power into design and its gradual transformation into a symbolic expressive mode is naturally underpinned by a variety of factors. The shift of belief into a concrete behavioral pattern brings with it long and arduous stages. When the idea of the icon and the underlying reasons are examined, the necessity to ground the subject in theological and philosophical foundations constitutes a prerequisite that shapes the main framework. For Orthodox believers, this form of worship, which has become a very important liturgical activity, can be seen as incorporating certain allegorical and analogical elements.

The question of when icons were first created has given rise to various opinions. According to some of these views, the oldest icon example is argued to have been produced using techniques employed in Egyptian mummies. A recent piece of evidence suggests that one of the six-century icons found at the Monastery of Bayyuit in Middle Egypt belonged to the monastery's abbot Abraham. This wax-painting icon shows similarities to the Egyptian tradition of depicting the deceased (Yücel, 2020). After Egyptians mummified their dead, they placed a portrait of the deceased, made while the person was alive, on top of the coffin that protected the mummy, thereby conveying the person and their memory to future generations. A few of these portraits were found in Egypt's Fayum region, on wooden panels painted with wax-based colors. These funeral portraits, dated to the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE under Roman rule in Egypt, reflecting a blend of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman styles, are believed to represent models for the earliest icons (Başğmez, 1989).

The term "icon" has been in use since antiquity. In ancient Greek, it derives from the verb *eiko* meaning "to resemble" or "to signify." The first icons of Byzantine art were created to commemorate revered figures from holy scriptures: Christ, Mary, prophets, saints, and significant scenes from their lives. According to the doctrinal framework established by Church Fathers, an icon is an intelligible representation of the visible world; thus it is a reflection of the real world and holds a unique place due to its resemblance to the archetype or the original model. For this reason, the icon stands as a sacred prototype for Byzantine painters (Chatzidakis, 2021). Icons are religious images. They not only depict individuals and events of religious significance, but also articulate their compositions and convey a statement about the relationship between the created world and its Creator. The icon is a microcosm of the relationship between the material world, humanity, and the divine power believed to have created them. It expresses even more; it can be seen as a form of sacramental communication with that divine power (Kenna, 2024).

The artistic, stylistic, and, for some, spiritual origins of icons should be sought in a historical period that extends several centuries before the emergence of Christianity and continues into the early centuries of the Common Era, up to the beginning of the 4th century CE. From the late periods of Jesus' life, Christians were not widely prominent on the historical stage; socially and culturally, their influence was not broadly evident until Christianity became the official religion of the Romans in 313 CE (Temple, 1990). In the early centuries of Christianity, references to symbols are scattered (and perhaps sometimes imagined), but there is no concrete evidence that any number of icons were produced. Figurative art in Christian tradition began to take on serious significance only in the 3rd

century, but from the 4th century onward icons became a much larger part of believers' daily lives (Cormack, 2014).

The Monastery of Sinai possesses the largest collection of tempera and encaustic icons in the world; however, no medieval source emphasizes how this collection was assembled or whether any of the works were produced on site. The earliest panels are considered to have been imported from Constantinople. Other early icons are regarded as having been produced in Jerusalem or Egypt. Yet, even in the seventh century, an icon depicting the Prophet Elijah demonstrates an interest in the local topography of Sinai (Pentcheva, 2015).

Although it is believed that the first icon was painted by Luke the Evangelist, neither that specific work nor any of the icons believed to have been produced during the early periods of Christianity (4th–5th centuries) have survived to the present day. The earliest known example of an icon today is located in Saint Catherine's Monastery and is dated to the 6th century. Furthermore, there are Byzantine icons belonging to the same monastery that are thought to date back to the 7th and 8th centuries. However, due to the fact that strict rules for icon production had not yet been established in the aforementioned examples, the depictions particularly those of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ had not yet acquired a definitive clarity (Yener, 2015).

Icons have also been used, widely, in frescoes and mosaics on church walls, as well as in monasteries, palaces, the shrines (tombs) of saints, schools, shops, military barracks, and houses. They can further be found on the covers of the Bible and some religious books, on crosses, on garments, and in other areas as well. This is because, although icons depict Christ, the Word, the Son of God, and the Virgin Mary, they simultaneously represent belief and the Incarnation and martyrdom (i.e., the embodiment of the divine Word) in a powerful manner. In this sense, the icon is a symbol that reveals something greater than what lies beyond physical boundaries (Geyik, 2020).

These portable paintings defined by the West as 'icons' and typically executed on wooden panels, though in some instances on precious metals, fabric, or ivory allow us to trace their historical development. For their owners, they serve not only as instruments for personal devotion and meditation but also facilitate a direct dialogue between the believer and the depicted saint. Certain surviving icons at Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai exhibit their general characteristic features: usually one, and in some cases multiple figures, are depicted frontally. Although stylistic methods vary and possess certain nuances that would be difficult to explain in detail here, these are paintings where depth is absent and the gaze is fixed upon the spectator (Spieser, 2019). The cult of the icon is deeply rooted in Eastern Orthodoxy. Icons, which can be defined as portable religious images on wooden panels, are regarded not merely as works of art but as essential instruments of worship. The icon is spiritual and symbolic; through it, believers establish an active communication. Worshipping an image of Christ rather than an invisible power enables the individual to communicate more easily with Him. It allows the believer to comprehend that Christ, in addition to His divine nature, was also human reminding them that he lived and died for humanity, leaving behind an exemplary life (Bulgurlu, 2005).

The icon can be regarded as a human response to the Incarnation. However, iconography is not merely an expression of the human effort to sustain and internalize a relationship with the Incarnate God, but also an expression of the continuity of that relationship. Beyond being reminders of the Divine's physical appearance or earthly presence, icons contribute to the ongoing progression of Christian history. The icons thus shaped ensure the succession and transmission of divine revelation within life, theology, and human creativity. They bridge the past, the present, and the future, unifying earthly and divine realities (Narinskaya, 2012).

Icons acquired profound significance as manifestations of personal devotion during turbulent periods when the empire and many of its institutions were shaken. Consequently, individuals or families could acquire their own icons and dedicate themselves to them. Although the veneration shown to icons arose from other prevalent practices, such as the cult of saints, it was also extensively supported by the Byzantine intellectual tradition. Stylistically, icons drew from diverse traditions. Shaped by religious objectives rather than artistic concerns, icons generally featured figures depicted

frontally particularly in large scales directing their gaze directly toward the supplicants. The primary goal of these figures was to establish a link between the divine and earthly life; for this reason, the sense of realism was disregarded, and detailed backgrounds were not produced (Gregory, 2019).

The role and significance of icons in the Orthodox faith differ greatly from the concept of religious depiction in the Catholic world, which aims to teach Christian doctrine through imagery. It is possible to evaluate Orthodox icons under two primary groups. The first group consists of 'Devotional Icons' (Venerational Icons), which may be incomprehensible to non-Orthodox individuals or those unfamiliar with Orthodox faith and liturgy. The second group is comprised of 'Descriptive and Didactic Icons.' It is easier to compare the icons in this second group with the concept of the icon in the Catholic world, as well as with the function and development of monumental painting iconography. The icons in the first group, however, possess characteristics that must be evaluated within the framework of their own unique rules, and they virtually reflect the very spirit of the Orthodox faith (Akkaya, 2000).

Various categories of icons exist within Byzantine iconography, which profoundly influenced both Eastern and Western art. For instance, it is possible to divide icons into two groups: those made by human hands and those not made by human hands. *Acheiropoieta* is the term used to define icons of divine origin, created without human intervention. Emerging in the early 8th century during the Early Byzantine period, this category of icon refers to 'miraculously created images' and occupies a very distinct place in Byzantine history. The most famous *acheiropoieta* icon is the *Hagion Mandylion*, or the Holy Mandylion a white cloth bearing the impression of the face of Jesus Christ. These depictions, believed to be not made by human hands, subsequently constituted the most significant evidence in the defense developed against the iconoclasts (Şen, 2017).

In Byzantine churches, icons are positioned according to the liturgy upon the *templon*, the partition that separates the *bema* the sanctuary where the liturgy is performed and which is accessible only to the officiating clergy from the congregation. While Christ, the Virgin Mary, and John the Baptist are the permanent elements of this arrangement, other icons may vary according to the nature of the specific liturgy being celebrated. Archangels, saints, and Church Fathers, who are core elements of the Orthodox faith, also maintain their positions within this order. The *templon* wall, which in early periods was a divider at a height that allowed participants to view the *bema*, eventually reached a height that completely separated the *bema* from the *naos* as a result of liturgical evolutions, thus becoming known as the 'iconostasis.' The changes in the liturgy and the revision and reorganization of hagiographic literature by imperial decree during the 10th and 11th centuries also influenced the iconography of these depictions (Barut, 2012).

A general characteristic of Byzantine iconography is that space and volume remain confined to the surface of the panel. The pictorial representation achieved through volumeless figures, faces, garments, and architecture creates a unique spatial depth within icons. Semantic integrity on the plane is generally maintained through 'reverse perspective.' Rather than drawing the viewer's attention into the depth of the painting, the aim is to foster a direct engagement, enabling the spectator to perceive the narrative viscerally. The primary objective of the iconographer was not to depict how they personally perceived God, but rather to render the divine light metaphorically visible. Although the landscape in an icon may appear descriptive at first glance, it is presented through a non-descriptive lens. From this perspective, the Byzantine conception of the icon remains far removed from realism (Yaşar, 2019).

The principal production center of icons is the imperial capital, Constantinople. Thessaloniki (Selanik), which is regarded as the empire's second capital emerges as another important locus for icon production. Outside Constantinople, in Anatolia and around the Mediterranean, there are also certain icon-producing centers in places such as Cyprus and Crete (Zenbilci, 2020).

Following the fall of the Byzantine Empire, the art of the icon persisted through various regional schools. After the conquest of Constantinople, artists who were compelled to leave the city migrated to different regions and practiced within the established schools there. The most prominent among these were the Cretan, Macedonian, and Russian schools. The Macedonian School emerged in the

13th century and was influenced by the Hellenistic artistic tradition. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the influx of several significant artists to the island resulted in the fusion of the local artistic style with the Capital School (Constantinopolitan School). The Cretan School, on the other hand, adopted slender and elongated forms. In general, these paintings featured dark tones and sharp contrasts. From the 17th century onwards, the Aegean Islands became significant centers of icon production (Siddiki & Sülek, 2023).

3. Iconoclasm: The Destruction and Reconstruction of Images

When the formation of icons and the stages through which they solidified their place within Christian theology are examined, the power of interaction within the Byzantine world is once again revealed. The icon, signifying the integration of the sacred with a symbolic expression, acquired a tangible meaning for the representation of spirituality and became an indispensable element, particularly of the Orthodox Church. The acceptance of icons which were shaped from the early periods of Christianity and functioned as symbols over time was by no means easy within the Christian world and involved navigating arduous stages. The period known as Iconoclasm undoubtedly led to a turning point in terms of Christian theology. However, the eventual triumph of the iconodules (pro-icon supporters) following the ongoing events carried the art of the icon into a new dimension.

The active role of icons in determining the principles of faith and worship throughout Christian history should not be overlooked. Their contributions to the church liturgy and the regional preferences regarding their use facilitated the integration of diverse techniques and styles into Christian pictorial art. The developments concerning the prohibition of depictions are significant as they illustrate the factors to which Christian painting, and consequently the art of the icon, was subjected. Due to their usage in both public and private spheres, icons acquired the characteristic of being products endowed with functionality across different planes. All these definitions have provided the opportunity to track the practical changes that icons have undergone.

Iconoclasm in all premodern contexts from antiquity to the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy was about "real presence." The damage done to the image is an attack on its prototype, at least until Byzantine iconoclasm, and it presupposes some kind of assault on real presence as contained in the image (Elsner, 2012).

The debate over the function of images in Byzantium revolves around ongoing research into the origins, theological arguments, and consequences of Iconoclasm. The official condemnation of images likely began in 726 and persisted until 843, with an intervening period from 787 to 814 under the reign of Empress Irene and her two successors. The extent to which the Church destroyed figurative art during the Iconoclastic era remains a subject of debate. Similarly, the geographical scope of the Iconoclasts' influence is uncertain. Kartsonis has pointed out certain exceptions in the strict enforcement of restrictions on figurative religious art, even within the capital. She argued that during the Second Iconoclasm (815–843), official policy was primarily aimed at restricting the public veneration of new religious images (Drewer, 1996).

In 726, Leo III issued his first edict against icons. With this decree, rather than commanding the destruction of icons, he seemed to order them to be hung higher to prevent the adoration of the crowds. This measure incited intense controversy: it led to violent incidents in Constantinople, a swiftly suppressed uprising in Greece (727), and a general revolt in Italy. In 753, a council convened at Hieria strongly condemned icons (Diehl, 2023). The period termed Iconoclastic was not a barbaric process from 730 to 787, and subsequently from 814 to 843, in which the entirety of culture was degraded. Even the fierce debates of the iconodules who should not be situated solely within the perspective of art history demonstrate the existence of an art in which even the emperors themselves were among the patrons. Iconoclasm emerged as a reaction to the development of the cult of images; however, in an opposing direction, by placing the power of images at the forefront of the debates, it resulted in each image being perceived as a powerful idol. The sacred character of images gained a new legitimacy, emerging from this situation with a fresh triumph (Spieser, 20219).

Upon the death of Leo IV, Irene, acting as regent for Constantine VI, convened the Council of Nicaea and brought an end to the iconoclastic movement (787). Churches and monasteries were once again adorned with icons. Anti-image behaviors continued during the reigns of Leo V and Michael II. However, Theodora, acting as regent for Michael III, revived the cult of images. In 843, a grand ceremony was held at Hagia Sophia, resolving this period of crisis which holds a significant place in the history of the Byzantine Empire and the Orthodox Church (Yener, 2015).

During the Iconoclasm dispute in the eighth and ninth centuries, icon veneration became widespread; as a result, in the second half of the ninth century Byzantine church architecture and ornamentation were shaped on the basis of iconodulist principles, and a classical system was formed in Orthodox church architecture. Icons are arranged according to a constructed framework and repertoire that may be termed the Christian realm or the plan/program of salvation. In the classical system, three principles were observed. The first is a hierarchical order: within this universe, what is positioned higher stands above what is below. God or Christ is located at the top of the dome (Baş, 2023).

4. The Reflection of Hagiographic Narratives on Icon Art

The practices performed by saints or martyrs, rooted in their attitudes and habits, found a widespread resonance within the Christian world. Their contributions to theology brought about several changes and permeated daily worship procedures. Considering the sphere of influence and the nature of these concepts, the importance of hagiographic texts containing narratives about them further increases. As these texts assumed an observable identity, they became ingrained in the memory of the Christian society. The reactions formed against the experiences of these figures eventually enabled iconographic analyses. The practices that reconfigured the dynamics of religious, social, and cultural life did not merely shape hagiography-based stories but also brought them together with art. In a concrete sense, the existence of icons represents a production ideal designed and practiced for the sake of faith. The core themes of the subjects contained within icons revolve around the depictions of holy figures and sacred events. Portrayals of saints have attained a very extensive representational value within the art of the icon.

Numerous examples of icons, which serve a specific purpose and are regarded by the faithful as symbols of the veneration felt for saints, are exhibited in various museums and collections. Two icons registered in the inventory of the Bursa Archaeology Museum will be examined for the purpose of reinforcing the ideas emphasized above regarding the icons of saints.

Hagiography (the written corpus concerning Christian saints) is a literary genre that transmits and extols the exemplary lives, wisdom-filled doctrines, and miraculous deeds of men and women who have ascended to the rank of holiness as a result of the veneration they garnered throughout or among the Christian world. Throughout the Byzantine period (4th–15th centuries), hagiography stood out for its prevalence and diversity. It encompasses the Passions (*passio*) of those at the rank of sainthood who were martyred for their faith, as well as life stories or *Vitas* (detailed biographies), *Enkomia* (panegyrics), collections of stories gathering the miracles of saints, morally instructive short stories, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Sayings of the Desert Fathers), and abbreviated versions of longer texts in various forms (primarily epitomes and *synaxaria*). Each of these aforementioned subgenres possesses a distinct format (Efthymiadis, 2021).

There are fewer than two dozen extant examples of Byzantine *vita* icons, yet the impact generated by this genre is quite substantial. These types of Byzantine icons first emerged in the early thirteenth century; they became sparse in the fourteenth century, reappeared in the fifteenth century, and became increasingly popular in the post-Byzantine period. The most prominent characteristics of this icon type are as follows: they are generally quite large panels, ranging in height from approximately 70 cm to 2 m; they are dedicated to the lives of well-known saints, and the scenes mostly surround the central image of the saint on all four sides. The cycles of any given saint show very little variation from one icon to another. The scenes in question may reflect known written texts but do not follow them consistently. The sequence of the episodes is often irregular. It begins with a birth scene and concludes with a death scene (Sevcenko, 2024).

The growing interest in the lives of saints has been influential in terms of Byzantine studies. Authors concerned with hagiographies are particularly interested in the power of images and how they permeate the lives of the men and women who behold them. Saint Nicholas, in particular, is represented in narrative cycles where he intervenes directly to prevent the execution of innocent people. The standing figures of saints in the lowest register of Middle and Late Byzantine church programs are generally analyzed by category—bishops, monks, warriors, martyrs, women—and according to the feast dates in the church calendar. The most popular hagiographic cycles are those of Saint George and Saint Nicholas (Drewer, 1996).

The communicative role typically attributed to illuminated manuscripts can similarly be ascribed to icons. Icons were not only indispensable elements of daily worship but were also portable and could circulate as easily as manuscripts. The dimensions of a portion of dated icons confirm that they might have originally been placed between the intercolumniations of the iconostasis, or displayed in other prominent locations, and were thus widely visible to the public. Since the Early Christian period, the deeds of saints have been depicted through monumental paintings in chapels and churches (Weiner, 1977).

The veneration felt for saints, their adopted lifestyles, and the presence of various accounts presented as miracles by the faithful led to the emergence of a rich literature. The contribution of illustrated manuscripts, miniatures, and icons supported by literary texts made it possible to transmit hagiographic legends through multiple methods. These differences in narrative methods serve as concrete evidence of the perspective of Christian theology, and particularly the Orthodox denomination, toward the concepts of saints and martyrs.

Two icons of saints registered in the inventory of the Bursa Archaeology Museum can be evaluated among the depictions that may serve as examples of the iconographic discourse described above. To examine, in general terms, the contributions of the production techniques and methods of depiction of these icons to the iconographic narrative will be a more consistent approach to defining the main framework of this article.

5. Two Examples of Icons in the Bursa Archaeology Museum

5.1. Icon of Saint George / Georgios

The icon of Saint George was acquired for the museum on April 20, 1979, having been purchased from Erol GENÇ. Registered under inventory number 8095, it is executed in the tempera technique on a wooden panel measuring approximately 40 x 28.03 cm with a thickness of 2 cm.



Figure 1-2: Bursa Archaeology Museum, Icon of Saint George / Georgios, Obverse (Front) and Reverse (Back) Views.

At the center of the composition, Saint George is depicted in military uniform atop a rearing white horse. He wears a long-sleeved short tunic, armor with gold embellishments, tight-fitting white trousers covering his legs, and boots. A red chlamys (cloak), knotted at chest level, billows backward as he advances on the horse. The haloed saint is portrayed holding a spear in his right hand. The

momentum of his offensive strike against the dragon is reflected in his body anatomy. The dynamism in the movements of his arms and legs reveals the saint's stance toward his focal point. He is in the act of plunging the tip of his spear into the mouth of the dragon, which lies on the ground with its face turned toward him. The dragon's sinuous body, mouth, and claws are rendered with great clarity. Its body anatomy and facial expression imbue the gravity of the event with a concrete meaning. The animal's posture, reminiscent of surrender in the face of Saint George's strike, can also be evaluated as a reflexive move toward self-defense. This struggle between two opposing forces can be defined as the primary scene of a central diagram.

In the upper right corner of the icon, architectural forms resembling monumental towers, along with a body of water bordering the central axis where the figures are placed, impart a sense of depth to the composition. Furthermore, immediately behind the saint, a second figure is depicted holding a bowl in his right hand and a jug-like vessel in his left. This figure, portrayed in quite minimal dimensions, is assumed to be the young Christian slave rescued from Mytilene on Crete (. Due to the degradation the icon has undergone over time, the presence of other possible figures in the painting cannot be clearly discerned. However, another figure standing in draped garments in front of the architectural structure, toward the direction the saint's horse is facing, draws attention. It is plausible that this figure, situated on the same axis as the young Christian, is the king's daughter. Despite the deformation the icon has suffered, the colors of the saint's military uniform have not lost their vibrancy (Fig. 1-2).

The icon of Saint George offers a mystical portrayal of something generally invisible—the spiritual warfare that mystics refer to as the 'hidden war.' The warrior is the individual who has established focus and silence within, reined in their earthly nature, and become receptive to divine influences. In this state, the human being indeed becomes a miniature of the universe (microcosm), transforming inner chaos into a cosmos (Temple, 1990)

5.2. Icon of Saint Nicholas

The icon of Saint Nicholas was also acquired for the museum on April 20, 1979, having been purchased from Erol GENÇ. Registered under inventory number 8096, it is executed in the tempera technique on a wooden panel measuring approximately 60 x 48.08 cm with a thickness of 2 cm. At the center of the icon, Saint Nicholas is depicted seated on a throne-like chair, making a gesture of blessing with his right hand and holding the Gospel in his left. The bearded saint is portrayed with a distinct halo and wears a mitre-like headpiece resembling a crown. From beneath his cassock, the epimanikia on the sleeves of his dark blue sticharion can be discerned. Furthermore, the omophorion hanging from his neck is adorned with cross motifs. An epigonation with fringed ends hangs at his skirt level, featuring a haloed figure with a cross. Surrounding the saint in a 'U' shape are nine compartments enclosed within contoured frames. Each compartment contains scenes related to the saint's life and some of the miracles he performed. Notable scenes depicted in the icon include: his healing of the sick, his appearance to Constantine in a dream, and his act of leaving gold in the rooms of three young girls; as well as scenes of his death, the public's farewell before his remains, and the translation of his relics to Bari.

The identity of the saint is emphasized by the inscription 'Saint Nicholas' (Ο ἍΓΙΟΣ ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΣ) at his head level. On the upper axis of the central composition, depictions of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are positioned on either side of the saint. Located on the right axis, the haloed figure of Jesus Christ is situated upon clouds, emanating rays of light while wearing a chiton and a himation covering his left shoulder and arm. He is portrayed making a gesture of blessing with his right hand and holding the Gospel in his left. Additionally, the abbreviation ΙΣ ΧΣ (Jesus Christ) is added to both sides of his head. The figure of the Virgin Mary on the left axis is similarly depicted among clouds with a halo. She is shown with her head slightly bowed, extending the episcopal stole she holds in the sleeve ends of her maphorion toward Saint Nicholas. The inscription ΜΡ ΘΥ (Mother of God) is located at her head level (Fig. 3-4).



Figure 3-4: Bursa Archaeology Museum, Icon of Saint Nicholas, Obverse (Front) and Reverse (Back) Views.

Due to the degradation the icon has undergone over time, some depictions within the composition cannot be clearly discerned. However, the gold-leaf-like colors of the frames bordering the narrative scenes, the outlines of the throne-like chair upon which Saint Nicholas is seated, and the color gradations of the garments worn by the other figures remain visible. Light colors are used in conjunction with pastel and dark tones to create a sense of contrast (Fig. 3-4).

Saint Nicholas is one of the most widely recognized saints not only in Eastern Christianity but also in the West, holding a place of great significance and special devotion among believers. His tribulations and the miracles he performed have become the subject of legends, establishing him as one of the most invoked saints for aid and intercession. He is held in profound veneration within Eastern Christianity. Nevertheless, the biographical information regarding Saint Nicholas who is so deeply beloved and revered by the public is based not on historical facts, but on narratives that emerged in the sixth century (Başgömez, 1989).

Saint Nicholas is widely recognized as the patron saint of sailors, with his cult exhibiting striking parallels to the cult of Poseidon. He is renowned for his protection and aid offered to children and the impoverished, serving as the patron Saint providing spiritual support and intercession for travelers and the youth alike. Through his religious and social endeavors, he devised humane solutions to the problems of the common people, attaining a deeply beloved status within his community as a result of his compassionate activities (Yener, 2015).

Discussion and Conclusion

Hagiographical texts conveying the life stories of saints have bestowed an exceptionally rich representational tradition upon Christian art. The concept of the 'Saint' and its projection within Christian tradition have contributed to the formation of the hero archetype. The lifestyles of Saint George and Saint Nicholas, coupled with the narratives attributed to them, have elevated their significance among believers to an unshakeable dimension. The necessity to tangibly represent the veneration felt for these saints has led to the manifestation of faith through art. Their hagiographies and purported miracles have been depicted by believers across diverse geographical regions. Today, saint icons featuring varying stylistic characteristics, techniques, and materials can be found in numerous museums and private collections. Among the prominent examples of icons belonging to Saint George and Saint Nicholas located globally and within our country, the following can be listed: Icons in the British Museum; the Saint Nicholas icon in the Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow); the Nicholas icon in the Bondarenko Collection (Moscow); Saint George and Saint Nicholas icons in the Coptic Church of the Virgin Mary and Museum (Cairo); icons of both saints in the Icon Museum Recklinghausen (Germany); icons in the National Museum of Stockholm (Aschberg Collection); icons registered in the Leningrad Museum (Russia); icons from the Hann Collection (USA); the Saint George icon in the National Museum of Art of Romania (Bucharest); the Saint Nicholas icon in the National Art Museum of Ukraine; icons in the Benaki Museum (Athens); the Museum of Icons at the Hellenic Institute (Venice); Saint George icons in the Archaeological Museum of Chania (Crete); the

Saint George icon in the Walters Art Museum; the Saint Nicholas icon in the Hagia Sophia Museum (Istanbul); Saint George icons in the Sinop and Tokat Museums; and finally, the icons with inventory numbers 160.2.82 and 153.2.82 in the Antalya Museum.

The aforementioned iconographic examples serve as proof of the highly prestigious and revered status these saints hold within the Christian world, and particularly within the Orthodox tradition. Saint George and Saint Nicholas have not only been subjects of classical icons but have also constituted the central themes of various other artworks executed with diverse materials and techniques.

A mosaic icon currently housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris, depicting Saint George slaying the dragon, exhibits a stylistic execution distinct from conventional icon-painting techniques. This work consists of a wooden panel enclosed within a copper frame, where copper rods plated with gold and silver, along with fragments of marble and glass, are embedded into a filling material composed of beeswax and mastic (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Mosaic Icon Depicting the Scene of Saint George Slaying the Dragon.
(Source: Arne Effenberger, Images of Personal Devotion, 2004, p. 230)

The relief, discovered during excavations at the St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery (Mykhailivs'kyi Zolotoverkhyi) in Kyiv and mounted on the southern wall of the monastery's cathedral in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, is currently exhibited at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The relief depicts two military saints, George and Theodore. While the figure on the right, appearing more mature, is Saint Theodore, the younger saint on the left is Saint George. Both saints are portrayed on horseback in the act of hunting the dragon (Fig. 6).



Figure 6: Relief from St. Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery (Mykhailivs'kyi Zolotoverkhyi) in Kyiv. (Source: Olenka Z. Pevny, Kievan Rus, 1997, p. 293)

In the Tarsus Museum, Saint George is depicted on a limestone slab within an area bordered on both sides by acanthus-like floral motifs. The saint is portrayed on horseback with a halo; however, the facial features have been damaged. He is depicted in the act of thrusting his spear into the dragon with his left hand. Although the upper part of his body is oriented toward the viewer, his left shoulder and arm appear shorter in comparison to his right shoulder and arm. He is shown wearing a tunic (Chiton) and a cloak (Chlamys) (Fig. 7).

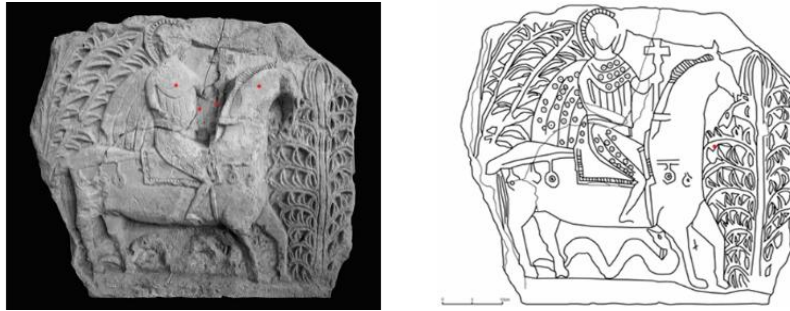


Figure 7: Relief of Saint George in the Tarsus Museum. (Source: Ayşe Aydın, An Example of the Transformation of Ancient Equestrian Heroes into Equestrian Heroes [Antik Atlı Herosların Atlı Kahramanlara Dönüşümüne Bir Örnek], 2011, p. 386)

A stone relief currently housed in the Chios Museum is likewise dedicated to Saint George. Distinct from the example in the Tarsus Museum, the saint's direction of movement is oriented toward the left. In contrast to the Tarsus Museum specimen, the figures in this scene possess a more dynamic sense of motion. In both instances, the saints are depicted slaying the dragon (serpent) with the spears in their hands (Fig. 8).



Figure 8: Stone Relief of Saint George in the Chios Museum. (Source: Ayşe Aydın, An Example of the Transformation of Ancient Equestrian Heroes into Equestrian Heroes [Antik Atlı Herosların Atlı Kahramanlara Dönüşümüne Bir Örnek], 2011, p. 388)

A mosaic depicting Saint Nicholas is located in the Stavronikita Monastery on Mount Athos, Greece. The saint is portrayed with a halo and a beard, making a gesture of blessing with his right hand while holding the Gospel in his left. He wears the episcopal stole (Omophorion) adorned with cross motifs; however, the head section of the saint has been damaged (Fig. 9).

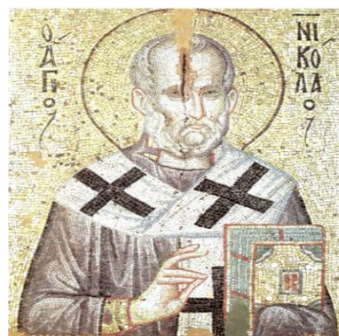


Figure 9: Mosaic of Saint Nicholas in the Stavronikita Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece. (Source: Otto Demus, Die Grossformatigen Ikonen [Large-Scale Icons], 1991, p. 75)

In a fresco located in the Church of St. George in the Staraya Ladoga region of Russia, Saint George is depicted on horseback, portrayed with a halo and wearing a cloak. At the feet of the horse, the dragon is shown with a thick rope around its neck.

The rope is held by a figure standing in draped garments, whose face is turned toward the scene. Vibrant colors have been employed throughout the composition (Fig. 10).



Figure 10: Fresco of Saint George in the Church of St. George, Staraya Ladoga, Russia.
(Source: Aune Jääskinen, Northern Byzantine Icons [Kuzey Bizans İkonaları], 2014, p. 74)

A wall painting of Saint Nicholas, located in the apse of the Church of the Panagia (1315/1316) in Alikampos, Greece, remains identifiable despite having suffered a certain degree of damage over time. The saint's facial features, the halo around his head, and the episcopal stole (Omophorion) can still be clearly discerned (Fig. 11).



Figure 11: Wall Painting of Saint Nicholas in the Apse of the Panagia Church, Alikampos, Greece (1315/1316). (Source: Jessica Schmidt, Byzanz zwischen Orient und Okzident [Byzantium between Orient and Occident], 2020, 274)

The surface of the marble slab located on the courtyard wall of the Church of St. George in Istanbul is divided into two separate panels by lobed arches. While the right-hand composition depicts the scene of the Metamorphosis (Transfiguration), the left-hand scene portrays Saint George on horseback, slaying the dragon with the spear in his hand (Fig. 12).



Figure 12: Relief on the Courtyard Wall of the Church of St. George, Istanbul.
(Source: Reinhold Lange, Die Byzantinische Relieffikone [The Byzantine Relief Icon], 1964, p. 137)

In Christian theology, the veneration of saints has evolved into the primary theme of handicraft products created across various media through the lens of art. It can be emphasized that, alongside architecture, portable handicrafts reinforce their representational quality while significantly serving the expressive power of compositions aimed at a specific mission. From a theoretical perspective, the methodological differences employed for definition and interpretation, as well as the intricate structure of narrative-based modeling, are also encountered in the practical application of the work. The development of multiple methods and techniques regarding the production and ornamentation of saint-themed artifacts has led to their evaluation in various categories.

Conclusion

Considering the significance that Saint George and Saint Nicholas hold among Christians, their identification with the attribute of 'protector' has further expanded their sphere of influence. Although some sources associate the veneration of saints with certain Gnostic-based schools of thought, the vast majority of Christians, particularly within the Orthodox world, have commemorated them with profound devotion. Furthermore, the existence of countless examples across various regions of the world, featuring diverse materials and technical characteristics, leads to the conclusion that the concept of the saint is an indispensable element for the art of the icon.

Based on the artifacts in the Bursa Archaeology Museum and the examples provided through visual evidence, it can be stated that icons have maintained their presence chronologically in every period and their production has remained current through modeled templates. The icons registered in the inventory of the Bursa Archaeology Museum were acquired by the museum through purchase. As there is no detailed information regarding these works, it has not been possible to reach definitive data concerning their exact production dates. However, the material and technical characteristics of both icons, as well as the existence of various examples with similar identifiable forms, have provided the opportunity for comparison in determining their history. This situation, which makes it possible to form an opinion about the date range in which the icons were produced, has served as a basis for overcoming the emerging problematic. From this point of view, it has been inferred that the icons in the museum might be Greek (Rum) icons dating between the 18th and 20th centuries. The interpretative differences, stylistic changes, and material preferences that have emerged since the early periods when icons were first produced have enriched the technical infrastructure. The primary figures and narratives forming the main theme of the depictions confirm that the narrative structure in icons has actually undergone less change and has sustained its existence in every era by being updated. Supporting data, which forms the subtext of the research results, was sought through a retrospective approach.

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