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Lomonosov Moscow State University**

Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art

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For art historians, historians, students and art lovers.

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THE PROBLEM OF THE EASTERN INFLUENCES ON BYZANTINE ART DURING THE MACEDONIAN RENAISSANCE: SOME ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS FROM THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF GREECE AND THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF VENICE

This contribution¹ is a preliminary report on a four-years long research in the National Library of Venice. The study has been conducted under the supervision of Professor Italo Furlan, the author of the well known six-volume publication on the illuminated Greek manuscripts of the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana (1978–1997). The purpose of this research is to study the ornamentation of a group of Byzantine manuscripts from Constantinople datable to a period between the end of the 9th and the first quarter of the 11th century, known as codices in *Laubsäge-Ornamentik*². These manuscripts are decorated with Π and band-shaped headpieces enriched by a repertory of elements of classical origin: foliate rinceaux with trefoils or half-leaves, acanthus scrolls, foliate stems forming upright or inverted heart-shaped figures containing blue or gilded palmettes on the white ground of the parchment. The similar ornamentation can be found on fragments of Middle Byzantine painted stuccoes in the churches of Hagia Sophia in Thessaloniki and Glyki³, as well as on the architectural ceramics that covered surfaces of the churches⁴. The decorations of the Canons Tables in the manuscript cod. 56 of Athens can give a clear idea of the richness of the painted patterns displayed on columns and pilasters⁵. During the 9th and 10th century the same repertory is documented in the glass objects made in Syria⁶, under strong influence of the luxury arts produced for the Byzantine court. The influence of the Constantinopolitan art on the Eastern culture is well attested by the translation of Greek manuscripts into Arabic, under the patronage of the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad, impressed by the number of books preserved and by the profusion of gold that permeated all the aspects of the life in the Great Palace⁷.



Fig. 1. Venice, National Library,
Marcianus graecus II, 4 (832), f. 153v



Fig. 2. Venice, National Library,
Marcianus graecus II, 4 (832), f. 207v

The Marcianus Graecus II, 4⁸ is one of such manuscripts, an example of a prestigious codex adorned with gilded ornaments imitated by the Islamic craftsmen. The codex contains the collection of the *Homilies on the Book of Genesis* of John Chrysostom on 284 sheets of large dimensions. The decorative repertory of the manuscript amounts to 32 []-shaped headpieces and a rectangular one (241v), all drawn in red and colored with gold. As I have proposed elsewhere⁹, the decorative repertory of the manuscript is datable to the second half of the 10th century, certainly before the end of reign of the emperor Basil II (976–1025). Such dating has been confirmed by the paleographic analysis and corroborated by the opinion of Santo Lucà¹⁰ and Paul Canart¹¹ who have proposed an aristocratic patronage of Constantinopolitan origin. The headpieces employ the well attested motifs of classical origin, but on folios 153v and 207v (fig. 1, 2), they differ from the others, showing a foliate repertory of half-leaves that imitate the so-called floriated cufic, diffused in 9th and 10th century Islamic lands¹². Thus, these ornaments attest to the Byzantine approach to Islamic models. Their geometrical forms seem to translate the memory on the Arabic writings into modular units characterized by strong perpendicular lines with foliate ends.

From their first employment in Byzantine Art, pseudo-cufic ornaments¹³ take a variety of forms, resulting not only from the diverse media in which they appear, but also from the absence of interest in reproducing precise models. In fact, the two headpieces illustrate the *modus operandi* of Byzantine copyists, who introduced exotic imagery into manuscript's ornamentation. In the absence of any literary sources or documents which indicate that Byzantine craftsmen have indeed studied and reproduced the objects of Islamic art it is not possible to make any general statements on how the influence of Islamic art was transmitted. Instead, I will focus on analysis and assessment of contributions of some scribes who experimented with new decorative solutions. Naturally, it is not always possible to reconstruct the artistic career of each miniaturist, but when considering the influence of Islamic art, we have to account for the artistic creativity of the artists who transmitted it.

A good example of the complexity of this issue is the manuscript cod. 59 from the National Library of Greece¹⁴. This lectionary comprises 272 folios written in *ogivale diritta*¹⁵. The majuscule liturgical script with fine initials and headpieces in blue and gold suggest a Constantinopolitan origin around the second half of the 10th century or the early 11th¹⁶. The decorative style of the initials makes this codex akin to a group of classicizing manuscripts from the capital of the Byzantine empire, of which good examples are the codex Marcianus Graecus I, 18¹⁷, the Vaticanus Graecus 1157¹⁸ and the codex 512 of the Vatican Library, work of the copyist who wrote the manuscript II, 4 of Venice. Nevertheless, in the manuscript in Athens, the headpieces are of transitional type. Their forms are a hybrid solution between the []-shaped headpieces and the tapestry model covered by rows of circles within flowers in blue, green and red colors, appeared first in the 10th century¹⁹. The combination of different elements is confirmed by two frames at the bottom of the pages with the months of November and May, which display two kinds of pseudo-cufic ornaments. The first, on folio 229r (fig. 3), shows a pattern composed of five almost identical units. Only the first and the fifth unit of the system differ from the others. The first, because it is smaller, the fifth, because it is built in a different way, with the left element closed on itself. The presence of two little rosettes and a cross in the middle of the units and the two little apexes on the top between the first and the second element seem to translate graphic characteristic of the cufic script, as



Fig. 3. Athens, National Library of Greece, cod. 59, f. 229r

in the mosaics patterns of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, realized by Byzantine craftsmen between 970 and 971. The other frame, in folio 256r (fig. 4), is really unusual. As in the case of the previous frame, the forms of the ornament are gradually diminishing towards the left border of the column and it is possible to recognize a modular design of the band. It seems, however, that here the copyist attempted to reproduce decorations quite near to the original Arabic calligraphy, translating the script into sinuous lines. The gauche result is a gilded scribble filled in blue.



Fig. 4. Athens, National Library of Greece, cod. 59, f. 256r

In 10th century Byzantine Art pseudo-cufic ornaments are used to decorate monuments like the Panagia of Hosios Loukas²⁰ and the church of the Holy Apostles in the archaeological area of the Ancient Agora in Athens. These monuments attest to the success of such variety of motifs in the Byzantine provinces, where the aristocratic officials were interested in imitating the luxury arts of Constantinople, as illustrated by the bracelet in gilded silver and niello in the Benaki Museum at Athens²¹. Pseudo-cufic ornaments were also used on architectural ceramics²², bowls, vessels and mural paintings, as documented by the well known bowl of the Treasure of Saint Marc in Venice²³ and by the helmet of Joshua, in the fresco on the external wall of the exonarthex of the Panagia's church of Hosios Loukas. It also seems likely that, as in the 11th-century paintings of the Karanlık Kilise and of the Elmalı Kilise of Göreme, executed under a strong influence of Constantinopolitan art, in the Byzantine court pseudo-cufic ornaments were used to decorate socks. Patrons and craftsmen alike were impressed by the gifts sent by the Arab courts to the Byzantine emperors²⁴. The admiration for eastern art was also inspired by the merchandise brought to Constantinople and by luxury items taken back to the city as war spoils. The uninterrupted interest of the Byzantine court in Islamic culture and fascination with Islamic ornament is documented from the time when the first mosque of Constantinople was built²⁵. The emperor Theophilus (813–842) imitated the decoration of Islamic palaces²⁶. This attitude continued during the Macedonian²⁷ and Comnenian rule²⁸, with frequent embassies and exchange of gifts²⁹. During this period, some Arab prisoners made a lucky career in the Great Palace or in the imperial administration³⁰. Under the Palaeologan dynasty³¹, the Sultan of Cairo sent gilded candlesticks, embroidered curtains, censers, carpets and spices to the mosque that Michael VIII had built in Constantinople.

Another example of transformation of the Islamic influence through the creativity of Byzantine masters can be found in the manuscript cod. 91 of the National Library of Greece³². The codex, comprising 327 folios, contains the *Acts of the Apostles*, the *Epistles* and the *Apocalypse* of John. It can be dated to the end of the 10th century. The multicolor



Fig. 5. Athens, National Library of Greece, cod. 91, f. 88r

ornaments which adorn the codex are consistent with those found in other 10th-century manuscripts³³, but the way in which the patterns are displayed sets it apart from the *Laubsäge-Ornamentik* group. In fact, the forms are soft and rounded and the two-dimensionality is abandoned in favor of a vivid polychromy in which the white lines contribute to an effect of plasticism. Some bands reproduce 10th-century models in blue and gold, as on f. 262v³⁴, or develop ornament inspired by pseudo-cufic decorations³⁵ in the multicolor language that translates the influence of the Arab script, as in f.88r (fig. 5). This kind of modular composition divides the frame in units, broken by vertical elements creating a rhythm of descending and ascending lines, in which the concavities are filled with different elements: half-palmettes, rosettes, little crosses. Because of its formal conception, broken and full of corners, this pattern is often interpreted as an Eastern influence on the Byzantine ornament³⁶. Yet, in this case the rinceaux seems to be a middle solution between the classic band-shaped headpiece consisting of palmettes and their pseudo-cufic translation. It is difficult to ascertain an evident connection with pseudo-cufic ornaments as, instead, the motif could be interpreted as a variation of the classical models. Indeed, in looking for definitive answers on its origins we risk to enter in the endless battle between *Orient oder Rom*.

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ПРОБЛЕМА ВОСТОЧНЫХ ВЛИЯНИЙ НА ВИЗАНТИЙСКОЕ ИСКУССТВО В ЭПОХУ МАКЕДОНСКОГО РЕНЕССАНСА: НЕКОТОРЫЕ ИЛЛЮСТРИРОВАННЫЕ РУКОПИСИ ИЗ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ БИБЛИОТЕКИ ГРЕЦИИ И НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ БИБЛИОТЕКИ ВЕНЕЦИИ

Орнаментика группы византийских рукописей константинопольского происхождения, датируемых периодом между концом IX и первой четвертью XI вв., может дать нам новые данные для рассмотрения проблемы взаимодействия между византийским и мусульманским искусством в Македонский период. В частности, орнаменты рукописей Gr. II, 4 из библиотеки Марциана в Венеции, №№ 59 и 91 из Национальной библиотеки Греции, с П-образными ленточными заставками, содержат и элементы классического происхождения, и псевдо-куфические мотивы. Популярность этих мотивов в византийском искусстве засвидетельствована в памятниках архитектуры, мозаиках и фресках, ювелирных изделиях, керамике, тканях. Используя псевдо-куфические элементы самых разнообразных форм, византийские ремесленники придавали своим изделиям оттенок экзотики.

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