

A Dragon Slayer Graffito Drawing in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (modern Istanbul)

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This paper deals with a rare example of a graffito drawing from the church of Hagia Sophia with a complete Christian scene of a warrior on horseback in western attire, who thrusts his long spear into the gaping jaws of a beast under the horse's hooves. The drawing represents St George and, taking into account the types of armor depicted, the creation of the graffito may be dated to the 1430s–1470s.

The Great Church or the church of the Holy Wisdom is a famous sixth-century domed church, which was built by emperor Justinian the Great. It contains an interesting collection of graffiti inscriptions and drawings, some crude and schematic, others remarkably detailed. Thematically, they may be divided into memoranda, inscribed mainly on the occasion of attendance at the church, various inscriptions of an invocative nature, the beginning of the alphabet, human,¹ magical and animal figures, ships, coats-of-arms², weapons, crosses, game board,³ monograms and mason's marks. The autographic, supplicatory inscriptions containing the formula 'Lord, help Your servant X' and those with the formula 'X wrote' occur frequently. The graffiti are written in Greek, Cyrillic, Armenian and Latin script letters. Eighty-five Cyrillic and one Glagolitic inscription which have been scratched in almost all parts of the galleries of Hagia Sophia have been recently published.⁴ A total of 90 graffiti drawings were recorded as a result of my fieldwork in Istanbul between 2005 and 2014. They include many different shapes – from sailing ships, animals, birds, weapons, coats-of-arms and abstract geometrical patterns, to portraits or full scale figures of saints, angels, clerics and laymen⁵. Among them, the most numerous are the ship graffiti (35).⁶ Many of the drawings are highly detailed and accurate, indicating that they have been sketched by skilled visitors.

1 CH. SAVOVA, Modata spored edin grafit na žena ot hrama „Sv. Sofia“ v Konstantinopol, *Spisanie za tekstil, obleklo, kozi i tehnologii* 5, 2018, 134–137. CH. SAVOVA–T. THOMOV, A woman's graffito drawing from Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, *ŽRVI* 56, 2019 (in press).

2 T. THOMOV, Gerbove-grafiti ot hrama 'Sv. Sofia' v Konstantinopol, in: *REGNUM BULGARIAE. Studia in honorem annorum LX Georgii N. Nikolov*, A. Nikolov (ed.), Sofia 2018, 679–693.

3 T. THOMOV, Igra na 'Dama' v hrama 'Sv. Sofia', Konstantinopol, in: *Bálgarsko srednovekovie: obstestvo, vlast, istoria. Sbornik v cest na prof. dr. Miliana Kájmakamova*, G. Nikolov–A. Nikolov (eds.), Sofia 2013, 437–452.

4 T. THOMOV, *Nepoznatijat hram 'Sv. Sofia'. Část I: Nadpisi-grafiti na kirilitsa i glagolitsa*, Sofia 2016.

5 I discovered 16 coat-of-arms and decided to share them with my Italian colleague Maurizio Carlo Alberto Gorra who is more competent in the field of medieval heraldry than I am. He published them on Academia.edu under the title of 'Observations and reflections on some coats of arms graffiti in Santa Sofia in Constantinople.' https://www.academia.edu/35771277/Observations_and_reflections_on_some_coats_of_arms_graffiti_in_Santa_Sofia_in_Constantinople (retrieved April 17, 2018).

6 Recently I have published four ship graffiti which are connected to Viking sailing vessels: Four Scandinavian ship graffiti from Hagia Sophia, *BMGs* 38/2, 2014, 168–184, as well as an ex-voto scene with three vessels and full scale figure of St. Nicholas: Maritime ex-voto graffito from the Church of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, *BSI* 73/1–2, 2015, 57–74.

In conclusion, it seems reasonable to suppose that the horseman in the graffito can be identified with St George representing a rare example of an ex-voto drawing requesting the protection of the saint. Its completion may be placed between the 1430s and 1470s.

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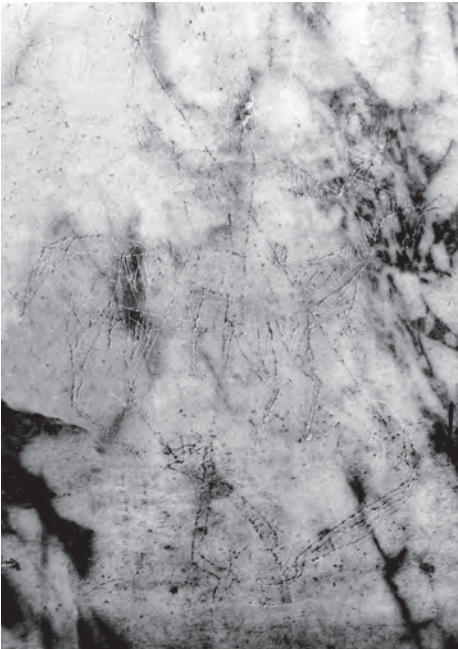


Photo 1

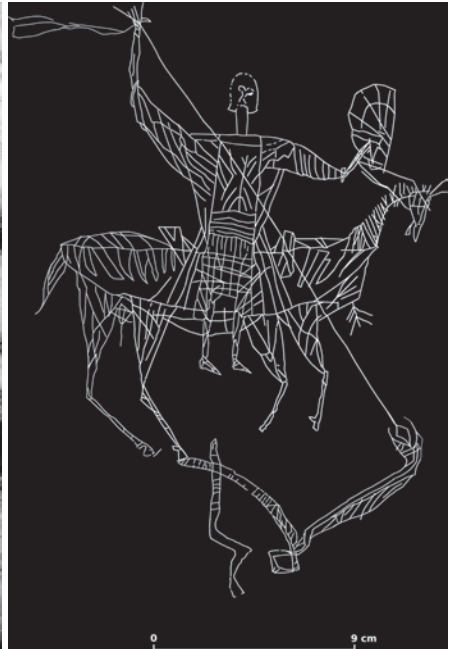


Figure 1