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A WOMAN'S GRAFFITO DRAWING FROM HAGIA SOPHIA, CONSTANTINOPLE*

This paper sheds light on the graffito-drawing from Hagia Sophia. It mainly discussed the possibility that the graffito presented a Western medieval woman donating a chalice. It is also very probable that the graffito was a work of the 15th century, produced by a anonymous skilled author, who must have been familiar with the woman's fashion of his time.

Keywords: graffiti, drawing, medieval clothes, medieval fashion, Hagia Sophia, deaconess, medieval headdress, gown

One of the places with abundance of graffiti is the Great Church or the Church of the Holy Wisdom – the famous sixth-century domed church, which was built by emperor Justinian the Great. It was considered to be one of the wonders of the world and the most important religious edifice in the city of Constantinople. Hagia Sophia was a focus of God's blessing with tales of wonders and miracles, well-known beyond the borders of Byzantium.¹ In the Great Church, graffiti comprised inscriptions in

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¹ *Malet'o*, Antologija khozenij russkikh putešestvennikov XII – XV vv. Issledovanie. Tekst'. Kommentarii, Moskva 2005, 137.

various languages,² as well as some drawings.³ The marble wall plate on the right side of the last window (from left to right) on the eastern wall of the north gallery of Hagia Sophia contains a unique graffito drawing. The drawing, which is 7.5 cm in width and 23 cm in height, is lightly engraved at about 130 cm above the floor. Above the graffito two Greek monograms are inscribed. The left one can be decoded as “Meletios”, and the second one – as “Patriarchos”. An inscription between them, written in Old Slavonic and dated between the second half of the 12th to the beginning of the 13th century announced the prayer for the dead woman: “O Lord, commemorate the sinful Thedora Smena”.⁴ A Greek inscription was written immediately above the Old Slavonic one. The anonymous Greek author uses some of the Cyrillic letters to create his own inscription which runs as follows: “ΔΗΑΚ[Ο]ΝΗ[ΣΑΝ]” or “deaconess”. It makes its appearance chiefly after the creation of the drawing – a full-length figure of a woman with a chalice in her right hand.⁵ The main purpose of this paper is to present the graffito of the woman’s figure and to show the lack of connection between the drawing and the Old Slavonic inscription, as well with Greek word “Deaconess” due to the absence of the most marked characteristic of the deaconess: an orarion.⁶

The anonymous author seems to have been a trained artist and a careful observer, and he captured the most essential features of the composition with great fidelity (see Image ## 1 and 2). This is supported by such details as bands (stripes), ornamental decoration, cuffs, and headdress with cross. The woman’s sleeveless over-garment with standing high collar and closed in front with buttons goes down to her calves. It has slits for the arms to show that the fitted under-garment’s sleeves ended with cuffs at the wrist. Its decorative stripes ended at the ruffle or lower part of the hem. This over-garment accentuated the body and made buttons and buttonholes necessary. A long row of eleven buttons started at the woman’s chest and stretched up to her chin.

² Eighty-five Cyrillic and one Glagolitic inscriptions which have been scratched in almost all parts of the galleries of Hagia Sophia were recently published: *Thomov, Nepoznatijat hram ‘Sv. Sofia’I*.

³ A total of 90 graffiti drawings were recorded as a result of fieldwork in Istanbul between 2007 and 2014. They include many different forms – from sailing ships, animals, birds, weapons, coats of arms and abstract geometrical patterns, to portraits of saints, angels, clerics and laymen. The most numerous are the ship graffiti (35). Many of the drawings are highly detailed and accurate, indicating that they have been sketched by skilled artists.

⁴ *Thomov, Nepoznatijat hram ‘Sv. Sofia’, 133–134.*

⁵ Apparently the inscription was created by someone after the drawing of the woman. Perhaps the author/artist of the inscription had heard about the deaconesses in the Great Church and their *gynaecium*, and seeing the etching on the wall assumed that the woman depicted must be one of these deaconesses. According to R. Taft (Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When – and Why?, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998) 31) the *gynaecium* was in the eastern end of the north aisle.

⁶ According to the ordination rites for the female deacon, she appears to have been vested with the orarion in the same manner as the male subdeacon, which means that the middle part of the orarion would go horizontally across her waist and then both ends would cross diagonally across her back, come up over her shoulders, and hang down in the front (normally ticked under the horizontal, central section to stay in place). However, the drawing shows neither a horizontal section, nor the ends coming over the shoulders and hanging in the front. We owe the last suggestion to Fr. Michael Zheltov, prof. Valerie Karras and prof. Maria Parani.



Image 1.



Image 2.

She is wearing a longer under-garment reaching to the calves with modest Y-shaped ornamentation at the lower hem. She is holding a chalice with her right hand, while her left hand can be seen through the slit or side opening. Finally, a pair of shoes can be seen beneath the hem of the under tunic. Small embellishments on the collar, and sometimes the shoes emphasize the dignity of the citizen.

On her head she is wearing a close-fitting cloth caul or cap without ties, resembling a baby bonnet, covering the ears and identifies her as a married woman.⁷ It seems to us much more like Western medieval than anything Byzantine because the

⁷ Dahl, *Sturtewagen*, Cap of St. Birgitta, 126.

common *maphorion* is much longer.⁸ Definitely, the cross on the top of the headdress is more Byzantine than Latin, but this could be an example of some “cross-pollination” of dress and other practices. Perhaps the cross on the headdress is an indication that the woman was a pilgrim making an offering.⁹

We come now to the question of the woman’s clothes. It seems much more likely that the upper-garment is a long gown known as “the houppelande” (worn by both sexes). The houppelande first appeared about 1359 and persisted well into the 15th century.¹⁰ Its earlier form was similar for both men and woman. It was a voluminous upper garment fitting the shoulders and generally falling in tubular folds.¹¹ It has a high, bottle-neck collar, buttoned right up to the ears, and expanding round the head.¹² Sleeves were very wide, expanding to a funnel shape below. A belt was usual but optional.¹³ The belt worn by men was at natural waist level, and by women high up under the bust.¹⁴ The length varied: from trailing on the ground (in ceremonial costume) to the ankle, calf, or just below the knee.¹⁵ In the second half of the 14th century the buttons were set to position between neck and hem, instead of from neck to waist.¹⁶ The front opening of the houppelande was buttoned or laced closed to the chest, or reached down to the hem.¹⁷ They were also fashionable accessories. At the end of the 14th century men and women styles started to diverge into distinct garments.¹⁸

⁸ The maphorion (μαφόριον) is a cloak or veil, which covered the Virgin’s head and fell to the level of her head (cf. *Ball*, *Byzantine Dress*, 50, 99–100; *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Clothing*, 259). We owe this to prof. Valerie Karras and prof. Maria Parani.

⁹ The cross attached to the headdress looks extremely like a pilgrim insignia. It is appropriate to recall here that pilgrims insignia, mostly small, metal reliefs depicting saints, holy persons, crosses, symbols or natural shells which were attached to clothing, have been connected to a place and church where relics or other devotional objects are kept. For this, see *Simonsen*, *Medieval Pilgrim Badges*, 170–196.

¹⁰ *Tortora*, *Marcketti*, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 156; *Thursfield*, *Medieval Tailor’s Assistant*, 136; *Picken*, *Dictionary of Costume and Fashion*, 180; *Illustrated Encyclopedia of World Costume*, 201–202; *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Clothing*, 233–234; *Köhler*, *History of Costume*, 168; *Norris*, *Medieval Costume and Fashion*, 247.

¹¹ The earlier simpler form persisted well into the 15th century among the merchant class and gentry. Cf. *Thursfield*, *Medieval Tailor’s Assistant*, 136.

¹² *Kelly*, *Schwabe*, *Short History of Costume and Armour*, 26 (often the high collar surrounds the head, making it look like an incipient hood). *Johnston*, *All Things Medieval*, 331 (the collar often rose so high that it covered the back of the head).

¹³ *Thursfield*, *Medieval Tailor’s Assistant*, 136, 141 the garment can be worn belted or unbelted.

¹⁴ *Newman*, *Daily Life in the Middle Ages*, 116–117.

¹⁵ It is often described and depicted with fur strips; it was made of satin, velvet, damask, brocade and wool fabrics (cf. *Tortora*, *Marcketti*, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 157; *Thursfield*, *Medieval Tailor’s Assistant*, 137; *Kelly*, *Schwabe*, *Short History*, 26; *Jonston*, loc. cit. (it reached to the knee or ankle).

¹⁶ The 14th century was the era of the button (see *Tortora*, *Marcketti*, *Survey of Historic Costume*, 156; *Thursfield*, *Medieval Tailor’s Assistant*, 55. *Daily Life in Medieval Europe*, 38: Not until the fourteenth century, when buttons came to be used as closures for open-fronted garments, did a tailored fit become possible).

¹⁷ The appearance of the garments opened in front as well the collar can be dated to the 14th century. See *Norris*, *Medieval Costume and Fashion*, 247; *Thursfield*, *Medieval Tailor’s Assistant*, 136.

¹⁸ Cf. *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Clothing*, 236 (after 1387); *Kelly*, *Schwabe*, *Short History*, 33 (after 1400).

The feminine houppelande was longer, with a high-necked collar, sometimes with slashed sleeves, and lined or edged with fur.¹⁹ By the early 15th century most women, be they a lady or rich merchant's wife, might have worn it regularly.²⁰ During that time the bodice became more fitted round the shoulders and upper chest, and the fullness moved downwards to the hips, as can be seen on the drawing.²¹

As for the garment's ornament, the festoons were preferable decoration for the hem itself or folds, and by 1400 they decorate the openings for the sleeves. It was not unusual for the edges of the garment to be made of fur.²² There are also images of houppelande decorated with broad and narrow thin strips and embroidery. In Italy, the houppelande changed slightly and was named zimarra,²³ and in Germany it became a very comfortable garment called tapert.²⁴

The discipline of the church today requires a woman to cover her head before entering a cathedral for worship. Thus, most of the women covered their hair with linen head cloths: caps or kerchiefs, wimples, sometime voiles or hoods but from the middle of the 14th century, the headdress became more complex. The style of headdress was ephemeral and changed regularly – like fashion, and its quality and complexity was a sign of the owner's status. The high collar of the early houppelande affected the style of headwear: the frilled veil was replaced with a caul or small cloth cap without ties. Apparently, the cauls seem to have been worn by all levels of society or they were just an alternative to other types of headwear such as veils and hairnets.²⁵ However, they would fall into the category of headwear worn by married women, the same way as veils would.²⁶ In other words, a person with such an extreme high expanding collar needed only a small cap to top off his collar.²⁷ It seems that in this case we are dealing with such a small cloth caul or cap covering the ears and confining the back hair.²⁸

¹⁹ By the beginning of the 15th century, the high collar grows but by 1410 it tends to be lower, narrower, and open at the neck (see *Thursfield*, *Medieval Tailor's Assistant*, 136-137; *Köhler*, *History of Costume*, 168; *Illustrated Encyclopedia of World Costume*, 107; *Norris*, *Medieval Costume and Fashion*, 247; *Jonston*, loc. cit.; *Kelly, Schwabe*, *Short History*, 27, 33 the high expanding collar is found down to c. 1420 (men's gowns) and c. 1415 (women's gowns).

²⁰ *Thursfield*, *Medieval Tailor's Assistant*, 137.

²¹ However, the most significant changes touched the neck opening, the sleeves, and the shaping of the waist. The collar became lower and the neck opening deeper and wider to form an inner V-neckline. The bodice and sleeves became more fitted, and the fullness moved downwards to the hips. But the earlier style with high neckline and wide sleeves persisted well into the 15th century among the merchant class and gentry, as well elderly dames from all social classes. For this, see *Thursfield*, *Medieval Tailor's Assistant*, 137, 141. *Kelly, Schwabe*, *Short History*, 34 (graver dames wear loose full-skirted gowns, reaching up to the neck, and often unbelted).

²² *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Clothing*, 236.

²³ *Čat'lkyan*, *Istorija kostuma*, 95.

²⁴ *Köhler*, *History of Costume*, 185-186.

²⁵ *Dahl, Sturtewagen*, *Cap*, 116; *Nunn*, *Fashion in Costume, 1200-2000*, 23.

²⁶ *Dahl, Sturtewagen*, *Cap*, 116, 126.

²⁷ *Jonston*, loc. cit.

²⁸ *Jonston*, loc. cit.; *Kelly, Schwabe*, *Short History*, 35.

Another possibility led us to the nun's headdress with a small cloth cap covering the ears and a short veil on the back of the head. As an illustration of this, one may consult the manuscripts from the 14th and 15th centuries.²⁹

We also have no difficulty in believing that she must be holding a chalice in her right hand.³⁰ We are skeptical about a more specific association of the vessel from the drawing with the Eucharist. A woman (even the Empress) would not touch the chalice while taking communion. This leads to assumption that the drawing depicted an act of donating. That is a Western medieval woman donating a chalice, much as the 6th century Empress Theodora is depicted in a mosaic at St. Vitale in Ravenna, donating a Eucharistic paten. A simple and more probable explanation would be that this is a Western medieval woman donating a chalice. Thus, we can conclude that for the person who created this drawing it was necessary to emphasize the act of donating.

In order to provide an approximate date for the drawing, it is necessary to consider some characteristic details of the clothes. Firstly, we must turn to the high-necked collar of the *houppelande*, which in the feminine types was into fashion up to ca. 1415. To this, we should add the fact that in the beginning of the 15th century the woman's *houppelande* was diverged into a distinct garment. Because of this, it seems feasible to date the graffito with a reasonable certainty to the beginning of the 15th century. For this reason, one cannot sustain any kind of connection between the drawing and the Cyrillic inscription. Consequently it may be concluded that the Greek word 'deaconess' was incised after the appearance of the drawing. However, as has been stated above, the lack of an orarium is what shows that the figure is not a deaconess.

Therefore, the graffito was a work of the 15th century, produced by an anonymous skilled author, who must have been familiar with the woman's fashion of his time. Such an assumption, as well as the Western origin of the dress would require us to conclude that he was a Westerner. Some support for this comes from the concentration of the large number of Latin graffiti in the northern gallery of the Church of Hagia Sophia. It is apparent from their careful examination that the middle and eastern part of the gallery was a preferable area for the Westerners. Moreover, this might be the exact reason for the author's choice of a scratching place. While this explanation is quite plausible, we do not wish to rule out the possibility that the author might be native inhabitant of the City knowing well westernizing female dress³¹. Unfortunately, his identification opens the door of various hypotheses. In such circumstances and with meagre evidence at our disposal it would be unwise to attempt an identification of the author of the graffito drawing.

²⁹ For example, see a miniature from the Bodleian Library, Oxford: the Nuns of the Abbey of Bonne-Ésperance in *Bayet*, *Byzantine Art*, 179 (the headdress of the first nun, from left to right, first row of nuns).

³⁰ *Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 849-850.

³¹ For the westernizing female dress in Byzantine lands, cf. *Parani*, *Encounters in the Realm of Dress*, 275-301.

Finally, another consideration may be worth mentioning. The investigation of the Cyrillic inscriptions shows that most of them (36) are concentrated in the north gallery of the Church. Therefore, they do not support the common view for galleries, that during worship, women occupied the north side and men the south side of the church. If the site was only for women, there is no plausible explanation of the large number of Latin inscriptions with male names on the marble plates on the northeastern pylon in the north gallery. Consequently, it may be concluded that secular and spiritual persons from diplomatic embassies, as well the common worshipers were not restricted solely to the south gallery. What can be seen abundantly clearly, however, is that spiritual persons (monks and priests) left their autographs only in the south gallery, while women signed only in the western and northern galleries (three Cyrillic and three Greek inscriptions have been scratched in each of them). We may thus deduce why the anonymous author incised his eye-witness drawing in the north gallery. The medieval graffiti brings back the lost voices of the medieval world and they show what was going on in people's minds.

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ЖЕНСКИ ГРАФИТО У СВЕТОЈ СОФИЈИ У ЦАРИГРАДУ

Чланак осветљава један графито из Свете Софије. Углавном се расправља могућност да графито представља потпуни лик жене са путиром у десној руци. Могуће је да крст на украсима главе представља показатељ да је приказана жена била ходочасница која приноси дарове. Једноставно и вероватније објашњење би било да је у питању жена са средњовековног Запада која поклања путир. Стога се може закључити да је за особу која је нацртала графито било важно да нагласи чин даривања. Чини се да је анонимни аутор био школовани уметник и пажљив посматрач и он је с највећом верношћу приказао најосновније карактеристике композиције.

Изнад графита су утиснута два грчка монограма. Леви се може декодирати као „Мелетије“, а други – као „Патријарх“. Натпис између њих, написан старословенским језиком и датиран између друге половине XII и почетка XIII века, доноси молитву за умрлу жену: „Господе, помени грешну Теодору Смену“. Грчки натпис је исписан непосредно изнад старословенског. Анонимни грчки аутор користи нека од ћириличних слова у сопственом натпису који гласи: „ΔΝΑΚ[Ο] ΝΗ[ΣΑΝ]“ или „ђаконица“.

Да би се одредио приближан датум цртежа, потребно је размотрити неке карактеристичне детаље одеће. Чини се вероватнијим да је горњи део одеће дугачка хаљина позната као „пеланда“ (коју су носила оба пола). Пеланде су се први пут појавиле око 1359. године и опстале су до дубоко у XV век. Што се тиче датирања, морамо обратити пажњу на високи овратник пеланде, који је у женским моделима био у моди до око 1415. Овоме треба додати чињеницу да

су почетком XV века женске пеланде прерасле у посебну врсту одеће. Због тога се чини допуштеним да се графито с разумном сигурношћу датира у почетак XV века. Из тог разлога, не може се претпоставити било каква веза између цртежа и ћириличног натписа. Следствено томе, може се закључити да је грчка реч „ђаконица“ била урезана након појаве цртежа. Штавише, женска фигура се не може идентификовати као „ђаконица“ због непостојања најизраженијег обележја ђаконице: орариона. Дакле, графито потиче из XV века, дело је анонимног вештог аутора, који је свакако познавао женску моду свог времена.