

The Power of Statues in Byzantium

The Wooden Effigy of Saint George in Omorfokklisia as a Talismanic Device

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Abstract Sculpture in Byzantium was viewed with suspicion. However, in Omorfokklisia, near Kastoria, is preserved a thirteenth-century wooden effigy of Saint George that defies this assumption. The colossal dimensions – the height reaches almost three meters – and the all-relief technique, typical of ancient statuary, detach it from all the rest of the Byzantine production. It is thus argued that this object was specifically manufactured following the model of classical monumental sculpture to enhance the power already indwelling in the depiction of a saint.

Keywords Byzantine sculpture. Wood. Saint George. Palaiologan Renaissance. Macedonia.

Summary 1 Introduction: Byzantine Attitude Towards Statues. – 2 Saint George in Omorfokklisia. – 3 Wooden Sculpted Icons in the East. – 4 Conclusions.

1 Introduction: Byzantine Attitude Towards Statues

It is common knowledge that the practice of sculpture went into disuse after the collapse of the cultural landscape of the Roman Mediterranean. After the rise of Christianity, statuary was seen with suspicion due to its perceived strong links with ancient paganism, and its production was strongly discouraged (Chatterjee 2021, 13). Interest

in sculptural expression resurfaced in the tenth century during the Macedonian Renaissance, with small-scale bas-reliefs alongside more monumental marble artifacts (Lange 1964, 12-14; Grabar 1976, 16). This trend continued to grow until the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204, when every aspect of Byzantine society faced a setback. After the catastrophic parenthesis of the Latin Empire, a slight cultural resurgence was registered in the wake of the city's recapture by the Palaiologans, especially under the emperors Manuel VIII and Andronikos II, when the ancient heritage of Byzantium played an essential role in the reconstruction of the Empire's identity (Nicol 1993, 162; Melvani 2013, 95). There were even attempts to recreate full-relief sculptures, such as the bronze statue of the Archangel Michael commissioned by Michael VIII Palaiologos after recapturing the city (Castiñeiras 2020; Chatterjee 2021, 13).¹

Besides Christian foundations, Constantinople, as well as other cities throughout the empire, hosted a plethora of ancient statues, most of which were of pagan background (James 1996, 15; Walker 2015, 227; Chatterjee 2017, 210). When Constantine decided to turn the small settlement of Byzantium into an imperial capital, he had many of these artifacts brought from all corners of the Empire (Cameron, Herrin 1984, 31). They remained an essential feature of the urban landscape for centuries, as testified by Niketas Choniates in his narration of the fall of Constantinople in 1204, where he lamented their destruction at the hands of both his fellow citizens and the Latins (Chatterjee 2017, 215; 2021, 13).² With the advent of Christianity, the original meaning behind statues scattered around Constantinople – and other urban settlements – got lost; the sculptures did not, however. Legends began circulating, and different meanings and abilities were attributed to them. A disturbing allure surrounded them, as they were believed to be the nesting place of demons. For this reason, they should not have been destroyed (Tóth 2019, 407).

The belief in the supernatural power of statues is an ancient one, rooted in the Greco-Roman tradition. They were considered able to predict catastrophic events but also treated as apotropaic and

¹ See Pachymeres, *Historia*, IX, 15: “καὶ ὁ ἐκέϊσε χαλκοῦς ἀνδριὰς τοῦ Ἀρχιστρατήγου, ὁ ἐπὶ κιονώδους μὲν ἐρηρεισμένος τοῦ ἀναστήματος, ἐς πόδας δ' ἔχων τὸν ἀνακτα Μιχαήλ, τὴν πόλιν φέρουσα κάκεινῳ προσανατιθέντα καὶ τὴν ταύτης φυλακὴν ἐπιτρέποντα, ὁ τοιοῦτος οὖν ἀνδριὰς καὶ ἡ ἀνὰ χεῖρας τῷ βασιλεῖ πόλις, ὁ μὲν τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀφαιρεῖται, ἡ δὲ τῶν χειρῶν τοῦ κρατοῦντος ἐξολισθαίνει, καὶ πρὸς γῆν ἀμφω πίπτουσι” (and the bronze statue of the Archistrategist [the Archangel Michael] which was there, the one which rested on a column of the building and which had at his feet Prince Michael carrying the City to consecrate it to him and to hand over him its custody, therefore this statue [of the Archangel], and the City in the hands of the Emperor, the first lacks the head and the second slips from the hands of the sovereign, and both fall towards the ground). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

² See Choniates, *Chronologia*, X.

talismanic objects, such as those enchanted by Apollonius of Tiana in the first century CE (Saradi 2011, 101). An 8th-century pamphlet, the *Parastaseis Syntomoi chronikai* (Brief Historical Expositions),³ records much of the Byzantine attitude towards them (Cameron, Herrin 1984). The main concern for the author was to document beliefs, legends, and anecdotes surrounding the sculpted images of the capital. These appear as fearful objects capable of killing men, but they could also predict the future and bend it in one's favor if the person knew how to do it.⁴

One of the ways the aid of a statue could be gained is a ritual known as *stoicheiosis*, described by Michael Psellos in one of his letters (Papaioannou 2019, 312-20). The practice involved the insertion of herbs, stones, or metals inside the statue, which were believed to be able to influence it through the theurgic process of *sympatheia* (Mango 1963, 61). It was deemed possible to harness the power intrinsic to sculptures and direct it toward the master's benefit. It is still to be determined if the practice occurred for real, but it is essential to remember that this was believed to be a concrete possibility for the Byzantines. Alongside *stoicheia*, statues enchanted through the above-described ritual, there is evidence of another category too: *thelesmai*, sculptures considered protective talismans, such as the ones created by Apollonius of Tiana. *Thelesma* is a term that appears to have been used since late antiquity, then replaced with the more common *stoicheion* (Walker 2015, 227; Tóth 2019, 424).

In recent times, scholars have noticed how statues were sometimes perceived as more powerful and effective than icons in military and defensive matters, as some historians did not hesitate to register the latter's failure on multiple occasions (Chatterjee 2021, 3, 93; 2021b, 113-15). Bissera V. Pentcheva (2006-07), thanks to an in-depth theological and lexicographical analysis, has even argued that the most potent and venerated icons in Byzantium were, in fact, bas-reliefs, not easel paintings.

Unfortunately, artifacts in complete relief are documented only by written sources, and they are very few anyway. Besides the already mentioned statue of the Archangel Michael, it is possible to find another one in Stephan of Novgorod's narration of his pilgrimage to Constantinople, which took place in the middle of the fourteenth century. In the *Nea Ekklesia*, he states that:

и в единой церкви ту Христос велми гораздо, аки жив человек,
образно стоит, не на иконѣ, но собою стоять.

³ Paris, BNF, Grec. 1336, ff. 111r-134v. For a digitized copy of the manuscript, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10722877z/f117.item>.

⁴ See Mango 1963; Freedberg 1989; James 1996; Walker 2015; Tóth 2019.

In one of the chapels is a very large image of Christ, the size of a living man, and it is freestanding, not an icon. (Majeska 1984, 36-9)

George P. Majeska (1984, 249) argued that this was an effigy of Solomon, which emperor Basil I had reworked into a representation of himself and placed in the foundations of his church. To the author, such an image could be mistaken for one of Christ since the imperial iconography is similar. This may be true, but it should be remembered that for the Russian pilgrim, it was, in fact, Christ that was depicted and, as such, was perceived. Sculpture, although not widely practiced, probably played some role in the Orthodox Church and might have even been invested with the power of ancient pagan statues, as the only extant example seems to indicate. This is the wooden effigy of Saint George in Omorfokklisia, which will be examined in the next paragraph. It is, in fact, a relief, but it is carved to a depth where it generates the impression of a freestanding statue.

2 Saint George in Omorfokklisia

On the outskirts of Kastoria, in modern-day Greece, lies the village of Omorfokklisia, previously known as Gallista or Kallista (Tsamisēs 1949, 121-2; Nicol 1956, 96). The settlement derives its name, meaning 'beautiful church', from the temple consecrated to Saint George [fig. 1]. The original core of the architecture can be dated to the eleventh century; significant additions were then made at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as testified by an inscription above the entrance of the building (Stikas 1958, 100-6).⁵ Inside the naos, a wooden effigy of Saint George finds its place in a niche on the South wall near the iconostasis. This was obtained by blocking a door, as evident when looking at it from the outside [fig. 2] (Stikas 1958, 109; Moutsopoulos 1993, 36; Tsigaridas 2016, 88).

The saint housed here is carved in high relief from a single piece of wood, and it occupies the whole space of the niche, with a height reaching 2.86 m and a width of 0.68 m, whereas the depth of the relief is 22 cm. The saint is depicted as standing up, with a now lost spear in his right hand and the left resting on a kite shield incised on the back panel [fig. 3]. The head is rendered in almost round relief and encircled by a halo, slightly detached from the background. Moreover, it is surrounded by an inscription, which is certainly not

⁵ This inscription has sparked much controversy, for its date, 1286-87, does not correspond to the documentation of the people mentioned. The problem has been solved by Velenēs (2004), who demonstrated how the inscription was repainted after two hundred years, generating a misunderstanding of the date.



Figure 1 Church of Saint George (North view). 11th-13th cc. Brickwork. Omorfokklisia, Kastoria, Greece.
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contemporary with the artwork. It reads Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ // [Γ]ΕΩΡΓΙ/ΟΣ / ὁ τροπε/οφόρος, an epithet that also recurs in the previously mentioned dedicatory inscription [fig. 4]. The saint is clothed in a typical Byzantine armor, with a cloak covering his left shoulder. The effigy was initially painted, as evidenced by the pigment traces on the mantle and shield. Previous scholars also registered the presence of hints of gold on the armor (Sotiriou 1930, 180; Moutsopoulos 1993, 38; Tsigaridas 2016, 88), but today, it is impossible to distinguish them. Besides losing the painted layer, part of the feet, and the spear, the overall conservative condition is excellent.

The first scholar to mention the relief was N. Papadakis (1913, 443), who associated it with two others, one in the same church and one in the nearby village of Nestorio. Interestingly, to describe them, he employed the term *xoana*, which indicates pagan cult statues made of wood. Ten years later, N.I. Giannopoulos (1923, 94-6) noted its resemblance to ancient fourth and third-century BC statues and stated that it was enclosed in a case that covered its lower part since the feet were damaged [fig. 5]. G.A. Sotiriou (1930, 180) claimed that the object once held in the saint's right hand was a cross, but the source of this information is unclear. P. Tsamisēs (1949, 123-4) once again linked it to the depiction of Saint Demetrius from the same church and that of Saint George in Nestorio. The author also registered damage to the lower parts due to rot. Tsamisēs, too, employed the term *xoanon* to identify this type of production. D.M. Nicol (1956,



Figure 2

Church of Saint George (South wall), walled-up Door.
13th c. Brickwork. Omorfokklisia, Kastoria, Greece.
© Elena De Zordi



Figure 3

Saint George church.
Last quarter of 13th c. Woodcarving, 286 × 68 cm.
Omorfokklisia, Kastoria, Greece.
Source: Καστοριά. Πολιτισμός, λαογραφία. © Region
of Western Macedonia, reproduced with permission

98) described the effigy as missing a significant part of his limbs. It is unclear where this information derives from, considering that all the previous scholars only mention damage to the feet, as it appears today. Two years later, E.G. Stikas (1958, 109) stated how the relief must have been a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century production heavily influenced by Western art. R. Lange (1964, 123) noticed a similarity to the slab of Saint George on the façade of Caorle Cathedral, near Venice. However, this seems to be only a superficial resemblance due to the elongated proportions of both figures.⁶ The following year, Saint George appeared in three publications; all authors noted some common traits between the statue from Omorfokklisia, another relief of Saint George from Kastoria, and the depiction of Saint Kliment Ohridski in the Peribleptos church of Ohrid in North Macedonia. Due to the supposed Western features, M. Ćorović-Ljubinković

⁶ Although the similarities are very thin, it is worth mentioning that they are close in the panorama of Byzantine monumental reliefs of saints, as they are two of the four known depictions of Saint George standing. The other two are a relief icon in the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens and another in the Art Museum of Kyiv (Mason 2011, 377).

(1965, 39) proposed their provenance from the court of Boniface of Montferrat in Thessaloniki at the beginning of the thirteenth century. This statal entity, however, had a very brief existence, spanning a couple of decades, so the theory was immediately discarded. The other two scholars, A. Xyngopoulos (1965, 79) and J. Maksimović (1965, 32), considered the provenance from Epirus more plausible. The saint appeared in the corpus of Byzantine sculpture composed by A. Grabar (1976, 156), who, following Lange, leaned towards an attribution to a local atelier. N. Moutsopoulos (1993, 38) reported some local lore surrounding it, such as its arrival from Epirus aboard a wagon towed by two oxen and led by two nuns (Xyngopoulos 1965, 81; Moutsopoulos 1993, 38). E. Drakopoulou (1997, 70) noted the presence of another similar artifact in the village of Lakkomata near Kastoria. E.N. Tsigaridas (2000, 149-53) emphasized the supposed Western elements in the art of Macedonia's wooden relief production, arguing that they may have depended on contacts with Italian cities via the Adriatic Sea and the Balkan peninsula. The author returned to the subject in 2016 and 2018 (Tsigaridas 2016, 88-90; 2018) when he pointed out that the statue belonged to the first period of decoration of the church, that is to say, the end of the thirteenth century, when Western influence is noticeable in the style and iconography of the frescoes inside the temple. There is a brief mention of it in Catherine Vanderheyde's book on Late Byzantine sculpture, where she only noted its resemblance with that of Saint Kliment Ohridski (Vanderheyde 2020, 128). Lastly, M. Castiñeiras (2020) proposed a link between the statue and the political and cultural climate that arose after the battle of Pelagonia in 1259,⁷ pointing out how a depiction of Saint George would have been particularly suitable for a recently reconquered territory, even more since the Palaiologoi paid particular attention to this saint.

All scholars agree on dating the relief to the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century. This seems particularly plausible due to the cultural climate in Byzantium then, because under the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1317) it is possible to notice new impulses in all areas of knowledge, especially concerning the retrieval of ancient culture - both pagan and Christian - inherited by the Empire (Nicol 1993, 162-3). Many scholars pointed out that contacts with Western Europe could explain the main features of the relief of Saint George.⁸ However, the saint perfectly follows

⁷ This battle sealed the dominance of Nikaia over the other political entities that considered themselves descendants of the Empire in Greece and paved the way for the reconquest of Constantinople. See Geneakoplos 1953.

⁸ See Xyngopoulos 1965, 80; Maksimović 1965, 32; Ćorović-Ljubinković 1965, 39; Grabar 1976, 168; Ličenoska 1988, 44; Drakopoulou 1997, 70-1; Tsigaridas 2000, 149-50.

the Byzantine iconographical scheme (Grotowski 2010, 86), which is evident if we compare it, for example, with a twelfth-century icon from Mount Sinai.⁹ Moreover, it shares specific iconographic details with other Byzantine reliefs, such as the knot that ties the military sash, which can be seen almost identical in the marble slab depicting Saint Demetrius, now on the Western façade of Saint Mark's basilica in Venice (279).¹⁰ The saint's facial features resemble Theodosian productions and the statues realized in the capital at the end of the thirteenth century, which were heavily inspired by the former. Both groups show round faces with big, almond-shaped eyes rendered with deep carving and arched eyebrows. The cheek and lips are highlighted, demonstrating a familiarity with ancient specimens (Grabar 1976, 23; Melvani 2013, 89; Castiñeiras 2020). The resurgence of sculpture in Palaiologan times was short-lived, disappearing after the generation of intellectuals surrounding Andronikos II (Melvani 2013, 155). This might also explain why this effigy seems so isolated.

As seen in the first paragraph, ancient statuary was supposedly able to perform some supernatural activity. It is interesting to notice that even the simulacrum of Saint George, taken here into consideration, is still widely believed to be miraculous (Moutsopoulos 1993, 37; Tsigaridas 2016, 88). Its main feature is the ability to hold coins on its surface; if this happens, the request made by the worshipper will be fulfilled. The population often asks for its aid, especially concerning health matters, and it seems particularly compelling, judging by the series of ex-voto hanging around it.

3 Wooden Sculpted Icons in the East

To put this statue into context, it was necessary to identify a series of woodcarvings produced in Byzantine territories between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. However, despite some resemblance with a couple of them, the juxtaposition made all the more evident how the relief of Saint George is detached even from this kind of production.

This small group of woodcarvings has yet to be studied extensively due to the humble nature of their material and peripheral location. It was possible to identify at least thirteen specimens, all appearing to have originated from various centers near the Via Egnatia. All these, minus a few exceptions, depict warrior saints, such

The first scholar to propose a Western influence behind the artistic production of Macedonia in this period is Mavrodinov (1936).

⁹ <https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/2793#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=615%2C37%2C1924%2C948>.

¹⁰ A list of other examples of this kind can be found in Grotowski 2010, 279.

as George and Demetrius, alone or in combination with each other. Another common characteristic is their miraculous nature, linked to water, healing, or both.¹¹

Among these, it is possible to isolate various subgroups based on their provenance and technique. The first comprises five icons that originated in centers of Eastern Thrace. They are characterized by similar dimensions and shallow relief, complete with a thick layer of plaster and paint. The first one comes from Ainos, present-day Enez (Turkey), and today is housed in the Cathedral of Saint Nicholas in nearby Alexandroupolis after the population exchange between Greece and Turkey. It is dated to the twelfth century and depicts the Theotokos Hodegetria. It is believed to be able to perform miraculous healings (Pennas 1983, 397-405). Another comes from Perinthus, on the outskirts of Marmara Ereğlisi in Turkey. It shares a common fate with the previous one because it was brought to Nea Iraklia on the Chalkidiki peninsula after the population exchange. This icon is known as Saint George 'the Arabian',¹² allegedly for the dark color of the saint's complexion due to the natural color of the wood (Buzykina 2022, 159). This is one of the first depictions of the saint riding a horse, but it lacks the slain dragon under the mount, even though this feature became common in the eleventh century (Sotiriou 1928, 36; Walter 2003, 121). G.A. Sotiriou (1928, 33-7) righteously pointed out how the overall appearance of the saint is strongly reminiscent of the depictions of the 'Thracian horseman', a pre-Christian local divinity. This may be the reason for the lack of the dragon under the mount. The object is surrounded by a series of legends, such as its miraculous retrieval by a group of fishermen from the sea or on the site of the original shrine. This place was also the location of a *hagiasma*, a healing spring, and the woodcarving played an essential role in its rituals (Stamoulē-Sarantē 1943, 237-8). This depiction seems to have originated a devotional following, for it is possible to identify two fifteenth-century copies preserved in Athens, one in the Byzantine and Christian Museum (Kazamia-Tsernou 2015, 64) and one in the Benaki Museum. The last of this group was retrieved at the beginning of the twentieth century by Ivan Goshev in Sozopol, on the Black Sea, from the abandoned church of the Virgin (Goshev 1928-29). Today, it is preserved at the National Church Museum of History and Archaeology in Sofia, Bulgaria. This is a composite work, with the central panel consisting of a painted relief of both Saint George and Saint

11 Healing powers are attributed to the depictions of Saint George of Omorfokklisia, Saint George 'the Arabian', and the Theotokos Hodegetria from Ainos. Powers tied to the realm of water are also attributed to Saint George 'the Arabian' and to the lost representation of Saint George from the village of Nestorio, near Kastoria.

12 Ο άγιος Γεώργιος ο 'Αράβης'.



Figure 4 Saint George (detail), last quarter of 13th c. Woodcarving, 286 × 68 cm. St. George church, Omorfokklisia, Kastoria, Greece. Source: Europeana.eu / Aristotle University of Thessaloniki – CC BY-NC



Figure 5 Saint George enclosed in a case (open), last quarter of 13th c. Woodcarving, 286 × 68 cm. St. George church, Omorfokklisia, Kastoria, Greece. Source: Europeana.eu / Aristotle University of Thessaloniki – CC BY-NC

Demetrius on horseback, surrounded by a wide frame with painted scenes from the legend of Saint George. Much debate surrounds the central portion, but dating to the fifteenth century seems plausible (Kuneva 2014, 30).

Another simulacrum of Saint George surrounded by carved scenes of his life was located in the Svyato-Georgievskiy Monastery in Sevastopol', on the shore of the Crimean Peninsula. It is now held in Kyiv's National Art Museum. Thanks to the C14 analysis, it was possible to date it to the middle of the eleventh century (Členova 2003). The object's origin is unclear since the technique and the iconography are different from those found on the West shore of the Black Sea, and the deplorable state of conservation complicates the analysis.¹³

Another group can be found in historical Macedonia. Here, it was possible to identify at least seven artifacts, six located around Kastoria, Greece, and one in Ohrid, North Macedonia. The latter is a tall (1.60 m) relief depicting Saint Kliment Ohridski, dated to the end of the thirteenth century, which was first housed in the monastery of Saint Panteleimon and was then moved to the Peribleptos church (now Saint Kliment) in the fifteenth century (Čorović-Ljubinković

¹³ Other specimens are found in the territories north of the Black Sea, but it is impossible to include them here due to limited space.

1965, 39). Today, the artifact looks like a freestanding statue due to the high relief and the loss of almost the entire bottom panel. Photographs taken at the beginning of the last century, however, show the figure still surrounded by pieces of it, confirming its derivation from the Byzantine tradition (Ličenoska 1988, 43).

Kastoria was the primary hub for this type of production, as at least six examples can be found near this center. One subgroup comprises three tall and narrow depictions of military saints, which strongly resemble each other. The saints are depicted in full-length and frontally. Two of them have been recognized as Demetrius, but the identity of the third remains unknown due to its deteriorated condition. The figures' outline is carved, with a maximum depth of three centimeters, and the remaining details of the face and clothing are painted. It is plausible that a local workshop realized them during the fifteenth century (Tsigaridas 2016, 105). They belong to the church of Saint George in Omorfokklisia¹⁴ (Tsamisēs 1949, 124; Moutsopoulos 1993, 34; Petkos, Paracharidou 2000; Tsigaridas 2016, 99), the Genethlio tēs Theotokou church in Lakkomata (Petkos 1992; Drakopoulou 1997, 71; Tsigaridas 2016, 102) and the Koimesis church in Zeugostasio (Tsigaridas 2016, 103-4).

As for the remaining items, one is documented only in writings from the beginning of the twentieth century, and the other is a well-known piece housed in the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens. The latter was previously inside Saint Paraskevi church in Kastoria (Grabar 1976, 168; Tsigaridas 2016, 92). Similarly to the Kyivan example, it is possible to see a central panel with a high-relief Saint George praying towards the upper right corner, surrounded by a frame depicting various events from the saint's life (Xyngopoulos 1965, 79). The last example was located in the Taxiarches church in the village of Nestorio but was lost or destroyed in the second half of the previous century (Moutsopoulos 1993, 47; Tsigaridas 2016, 92). This might have been the only artifact similar to the colossal statue of Saint George in Omorfokklisia, above all in the dimensions – 2.15 × 0.50 m – as P. Tsamisēs registered in 1949. He also noted that it was carved from a single piece of walnut but lacked facial features and hands (Tsamisēs 1949, 154). E. Drakopoulou (1997, 71) reported a communication from Manolēs Chatzēdakēs, who signaled the presence of a sculpted wooden hand from Kastoria among the possessions of the Benaki Museum, which might be linked to the lost statue of Nestorio. As of today, all attempts to follow this thread have been ineffective. N.K. Moutsopoulos (1993, 48) quoted the information given to him by M. Kōstopoulos, a local high school teacher, who said that the statue had arms attached to the body “like a *kouros*”, and

¹⁴ Now, it is held in the Byzantine Museum of Kastoria (inv. n. KAS-20, not on display).

was called *sfeti-ger* by the local population, meaning 'holy priest'.¹⁵ It was also employed in several rituals involving water, in which he was taken in a procession to a water source and dipped in it to favor the arrival of rain. At the same time, Kōstopoulos said that the object was washed in a nearby water stream on the day of Saint George.

The images found in Eastern Thrace and the group of fifteenth-century military saints from Kastoria are realized in a different technique from the statue of Saint George, for the carving is shallow and, in some cases, barely noticeable. Instead, the depictions in the Byzantine Museum of Athens and the Art Museum of Kyiv are realized in high relief. Still, they are surrounded by painted or carved episodes from the saint's life, thus rendering them entirely different objects. The only two examples possibly related to the colossal Saint George are the lost saint from Nestorio and the relief of Saint Kliment Ohridski. None of them, however, seems to be perfectly associable with the example from Omorfokklisia because, in both cases, the body is treated as a unique volume, as the arms are not detached from the torso. However, it is interesting to see how many of these items are deemed miraculous, for it is one of the main features of the effigy in question. It is especially true when considering the lost statue from Nestorio, which seemed to have had a complex set of rituals tied to it, and one must wonder if their miraculous capacities may have been connected to their nature of larger-than-life statues.

4 Conclusions

The wooden effigy of Saint George housed in Omorfokklisia is undoubtedly a unicum in the Byzantine artistic panorama. The similar artifacts presented above emphasize the freestanding position occupied by the sculpted Saint George. We have already seen how, during the empire of Andronikos II Palaiologos, sculptural production saw a resurgence fueled by the renewed interest in ancient art, particularly that of the Theodosian period. The trend was not exclusive to the capital, although it took its most advanced form there (Nicol 1993, 166). Kastoria was an essential imperial stronghold along the border. There, many noble families took refuge after the Fall of Constantinople in 1204, and it was home to many high-ranking functionaries during the thirteenth century, so it is natural to suppose that tendencies alive in the capital had some echo there (Sotiriou 1930, 179; Lange 1964, 38; Castiñeiras 2020). Located at the crossroads of

¹⁵ It is interesting to note the Slavic root of the word. This speaks of the ethnic composition of the villages on the mountains around Kastoria, which, until the population exchange, were primarily inhabited by ethnic Albanians and Slavic people.

different territorial interests, Kastoria faced a turbulent period between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, being taken by Ivan II Asen in 1204, then recaptured by the Despotate of Epirus and shortly after by John II Dukas Vatatzes, then again by Michael II Angelos of Epirus (Pelekanides 1978, 1194-5). In 1259, he was defeated in Pelagonia by Michael VIII Palaiologos, paving the way for the reconquest of Constantinople by the Empire of Nicaea (Geneakoplos 1953, 135). The Empire did not hold the city for long, as in the middle of the fourteenth century, it was captured by Stefan Dušan, who shortly after lost it to the Albanian family of the Mouzakis. Finally, in 1385, it became part of the Ottoman Empire (Pelekanides 1978, 1194-5). It may not be a coincidence, then, that during this period, the people of the area decided to realize a massive effigy of Saint George, since from the 6th century, he was treated as a talismanic saint linked to the army and the Emperor (Grotowski 2010, 121). In the Late Byzantine period, his representation inside churches gained great favor, mainly because he was regarded as an effective protector against foreign conquerors (Walter 2003, 134). Its most striking feature is the height and almost round relief, which we have demonstrated as deriving from ancient statuary. Keeping all this in mind, it could be argued that the depiction played a role comparable to that of a *thelesma* (Tóth 2019, 424), a talismanic statue whose role might have been protecting the people of the nearby countryside from foreign armies. The figure is still today considered very powerful by the local population, which regularly pays homage to it and leaves offers, even though its powers changed realm to that of miraculous healing, for after the Ottoman conquest, its primary function of protecting the population against foreign domination became useless.

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