

A ninth-century silver icon with the image of St. Basil from the complex at Perperikon (Abstract)

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The large-scale archaeological investigations of the rock-cut town of Perperikon in the Eastern Rhodopes have been going on for more than a decade. Of particular significance for the study of the Medieval Period was the discovery of a magnificent architectural complex from the 9th-12th centuries AD on the lower slopes of Perperikon. The complex consists of two churches, a large cemetery and a series of chain-like buildings. The discovery of almost 100 Byzantine lead seals in the area helped to clarify the situation. The seals form the second largest collection of such finds from one site, second only to the collection from Veliki Preslav. The molybdoms support the conclusion that we are investigating the centre of a Byzantine Imperial estate that was directly subordinated to Constantinople.

Along with the seals, many other precious items were found in the course of the excavations. A round silver plate is discussed here that is 21 mm in diameter and 1 mm thick. On the plate, the torso of St. Basil is depicted, with his name marked in Greek – α(γίος) Βα(σίλειος). Despite the schematic depiction, the image makes a strong impression with the expressive large eyes that stare at the viewer, the high forehead and the deliberately enlarged head in relation to the body. These specifics indicate strong Early Christian influences.

The execution is fairly rough and points to folk traditions in the Byzantine art that have emerged after the final victory of iconolatry over iconoclasm in AD 843. The iconographic specifics indicate that the image could not be later than the first decades of the 10th c. AD. Most probably, the silver plate was a part of a larger collective icon, and along with other images of church fathers and saints was mounted on a wooden frame.

The date of the icon is entirely supported by the archaeological context. The main church in the complex is of the so-called transitional type that is typical for the period from the late 7th until the 10th c. AD. The earliest coins found in the course of the excavations date from the reign of Constantine V with Leo IV (AD 757-775) and Theophilos (AD 829-842). Despite the fact that these coins are isolated examples, there are six coins from the second half of the 10th c. AD, of the emperors Basil I the Macedonian (AD 867-886) and Leo VI the Wise (AD 886-912). The same is true for the lead seals. The earliest molybdom belongs to Theophilos, protospatarios of Macedonia, and dates from the first half of the 9th c. AD. The seal of the Emperor's spatarios and magistrate Joseph also dates from the late 9th c. AD. Constantine, spatarios-candidate and kommerkiarios of Thessaloniki, sent letters in late 9th or early 10th c. AD.

This find has an interesting relation to another discovery in the Eastern Rhodopes from 30 years ago. A graffiti-drawing depicting saints Stephen and George was found as a spolia in the katholikon of the medieval monastery St. John the Precursor in present-day Kurdzhali. It has been argued that the spolia provides a general idea about the wallpainting style of the early monastery church from the 9th c. AD that was entirely dismantled in early 11th c. AD to give way to a new temple.

The iconographic specifics of these images also correspond to early Christian traits in the Byzantine art. The figures are short and angular, the heads are disproportionately large and the eyes are big and staring at the viewer. Of particular interest is the orant pose of St. George that also suggests early trends in representation. By means of computer processing, we

managed to restore the images of the two saints that show a striking resemblance to the examples of post-iconoclastic painting from the second half of 9th – early 10th c. AD.

While the wall-paintings of the first church of the monastery St. John the Precursor were painted in the best traditions of the 9th and 10th c. AD, the

small silver icon is an example of the folk art of that time. There can be no doubt that the early Christian traditions were readily received in the region of Achridos (the Eastern Rhodopes) after the end of the iconoclasm. This is clearly visible in both architectural monuments and works of art that have come to us.