

Steatite Icon from the Museum of History in Sevlievo Portraying the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ

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The steatite icon portraying the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ comes from the area of the village of Dushevo, Sevlievo region. It was entered under № 5246 in the Finding book of the Museum of History in the town of Sevlievo. The preserved part of the icon is 9.6 x 4 cm and 0.8 cm thick (fig. 1); it is almost rectangular in shape. It was made of dove-colored steatite. The surface of the reverse is nicely smoothed and there is a finely engraved cross almost in the center; the arms of the cross end with two small medallions and there is a bigger one in the center (fig. 2). The arch-shaped icon is easy to reconstruct and this enables the restoration of the shape, proportions, number of the figures in the composition and even some details (fig. 3). It is a portable icon, 14.5 x 10.5 cm. The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and St. John Theologian are portrayed on the obverse of the icon. Some of the indicative inscriptions are preserved - the abbreviations of Jesus Christ's (IC) and Virgin Mary's (MHP ΘY) names and the abbreviation A(γΙΟΥC) at the figure of St. John Theologian.

The steatite icon is similar in style to a 12th century ivory icon kept in the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. There is also a similarity in the relief technique with two 12th century steatite icons portraying the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ from the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Hermitage (fig. 5, 6). The 12th century steatite icon, which was found in a grave from the necropolis at the Royal Basilica in Veliki Preslav is the closest parallel to the above icon as far as the style is concerned.

The iconographic analysis and some of the mentioned typical features of the style and the relief technique relate the steatite icon from Dushevo portraying the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ to the work of the steatite ateliers in Constantinople in the 12th century. It is difficult to define whether the icon was inlaid, whether it had some kind of lining in order to be used as a portable icon or it was part of a small altar. However, it is indisputably a highly artistic piece of the applied arts, which was brought to Bulgaria as an import or a trophy from the Byzantine Empire.