

WOODEN INTERIOR DECORATION IN POST BYZANTINE ORTHODOX CHURCHES OF THESSALONIKI

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Abstract:

During the Ottoman period, the wood replaced the marble in the interior decoration of the Orthodox churches. In outward appearance, the churches were imposed to be poor and humble and for that reason the faithful followers emphasized in the enrichment of the interior decoration of their churches, therefore, the carved wooden furnishing constituted a key operating supplement of the churches. The population growth and the economic development of Greeks in the early 19th century provided the basis for a period of prosperity in the construction and repair of churches in Thessaloniki. Only seven of the twelve post-Byzantine churches built or repaired in the old part of Thessaloniki in the last period of the Ottoman occupation, survive today. In this study, an attempt of evaluation and record of the wooden interior decoration that has survived and continues to remain in these churches has been made. In five of these churches and in one monastery survives wooden decoration which includes iconostasis, despotic thrones, pulpits, icon stands and ceilings. Although, this decoration that exists today is quite limited, it corresponds to various decorative techniques of wood utilization. The condition of these wooden artworks is relatively good, they are still in use in a safe and dry environment of a church interior and they are under protection.

Key words: Thessaloniki; orthodox church; interior decoration; wood carved; iconostasis.

INTRODUCTION

Wood is one of the most precious materials, which is characterized by many advantages. Perhaps, one of the most significant advantages of wood is that it can be used in a very wide range of applications, contrary to the other materials. It can be used in simple applications without any special mechanical processing, as well as in production of more complicated products after several kinds of treatment (mechanical, chemical etc.). Therefore, due to its nature, wood can be used from the field of construction, till the energy production. On the other hand, wood is also considered to have several drawbacks and one of the major drawback seem to be this wide range of potential applications that wood could be used. To justify this view, one could refer to the constant use of icons and other ecclesiastical and functional wooden objects from all the region of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, as a combustible material in the production of the Holy Chrism (Xyggopoulos 1956). The beginning of the decorative use of wood in Greece originates the ancient Greek mythology. All the primitive works of architecture and sculpture, as well as the invention of the saw, drill, the adhesive of "fish glue" etc. and also other tools and materials that are used even in our times are attributed to mythical Daedalus. Noticeable is the fact that the name of Daedalus means fine (elaborate) artwork in ancient Greek language. Additionally, during the classical period, gold and ivory statues that adorned the temples were made of wood, covered with gold leaves and ivory (Makris 1982).

During the Byzantine era as well, wood was widely used in the construction of ecclesiastical objects, but the interior decoration of churches interior was mainly based on marble and mosaics that match and complement the exterior brilliant architecture of the churches. Wood replaced the marble in the interior decoration of the Orthodox churches during the Ottoman period, mainly due to the difficult conditions prevailing at that time for Christians. In outward appearance, the churches should look poorer and be lower than the mosques and that is why the faithful followers focused on the enriching of the interior decoration of their churches, while carved wooden furniture appear and contribute to the churches interior decoration (Mantopoulou and Chemikoglou 1997, HMC 2004). The craftsmen had the opportunity to express and demonstrate all their artistic capabilities in the construction and decoration of the churches interior and attach a unique, imposing and devout atmosphere inside them.

The wooden iconostasis, by itself now, is a true jewel of churches and a valuable framework that carries the despotic images, unlike the corresponding Byzantine iconostasis, which was made of marble and had no icons (Koutelakis 1986). Iconostases are usually carved, gilded or uncoated, but they may also be made simply of wood with painted surfaces. Furthermore, over the centuries, the height of the iconostasis was continuously increasing, until it reached the ceiling height. The decoration of the church was enriched and complemented by other wooden objects, such as the pulpit, the despotic throne, the icon stands etc.

The wood used in the construction of these objects usually comes from the surrounding area vegetation. In woodcarving, the wood of walnut tree is preferred, but actually the range of wood species that could be used is quite wide and includes pine, oak, elm, beech, chestnut wood etc. (Voulgaridis and Dassiou 2007).

The monasteries and villages that had gained privileges from the Ottoman Empire will be important centres of wood carving artistic activity since the 16th century (Makris 1982, Kambouri-Vamvoukou 1997). Habitants of some villages of Epirus and Western Macedonia specialized in wood carving and undertake the decoration of churches not only in Greece, but also in many parts of the Balkans up to Romania (Moutsopoulos 1989).

The city of Thessaloniki, having a constant historical continuity of over twenty-three centuries from its inception, has passed various stages and changed over time many owners, taking each time a different character. Despite the multiple disasters that has suffered by conquerors, fires and earthquakes, its rich history is evident through buildings of all the historical periods that have been preserved. One of the most interesting periods of the city historical life, is the last phase of Ottoman occupation. The population growth and the financial development of the Greek people in the early 19th century, in parallel with the milder measures of the Ottoman politics offered the opportunity for a period of prosperity in the construction and repair of churches. All the major Byzantine churches of the city were gradually converted into mosques (Mantopoulou-Panagiotopoulou 1989). The churches that were built during the post-Byzantine period were quite small, of wooden-roof basilica rhythm without a cupola, humble buildings, usually hidden behind homes, due to the several prohibitions and restrictions and were mainly located in the eastern part of the city along the street of Egnatia. The grandness of these churches does not lie in their humble exterior construction, which according to Islamic law should be less important than mosques, but in the rich interior decoration, which is made mainly of solid wood, handmade by artists craftsmen who transformed it into marvelous artworks. This authentic folk art is perhaps the most important cultural heritage of that period.

Seven of the 12 post-Byzantine churches were built or repaired in the old section of Thessaloniki from the last period of Ottoman occupation, survived without major external changes (Nea Panagia, Agios Antonios, Agios Minas, Agios Athanassios, Panagia Gorgoepikoos or Panagouda, Hypapante, Panagia Laodigitria) which constitute valuable historical monuments. In addition, there is a monastery of the Byzantine period, located in the old town of Thessaloniki, which was renovated in the early 19th century. Previous research works that have been published referring to these churches focused mainly on the architecture, with general references to the wooden decoration (Kambouri-Vamvoukou 1979, Mantopoulou-Panagiotopoulou 1989), or focused only on one of the wooden objects of a church (Xyggopoulos 1956).

In this study, an attempt has been made to record and evaluate the wooden interior decoration that has survived at the post-Byzantine churches that remain and continue to be operated within the walls of Thessaloniki, referring to the old part of the city.

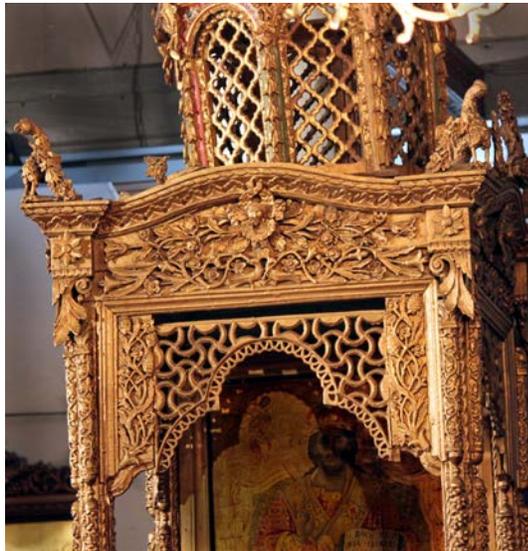
MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current research was conducted visiting all the churches of post-Byzantine period in the old part of Thessaloniki. In these churches, it was examined the condition of their remained wooden elements from that period, the degree of deterioration caused by fungi and insect attacks etc. and also, the differences and changes from the previous work reports were investigated. The wooden items that were examined in this study refer and belong all to the interior decoration of these churches. More specifically, these items are Iconostasis, Despotic Thrones, Pulpits, Icon stands, Ceiling, colons, while in this study icons and some other small auxiliary wooden elements and functional components were not included.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are seven post-Byzantine churches in Thessaloniki, that have remained and in two of them, the one of "Panagia Gorgoepikoos" and the one of "Panagia Laodigitria" extensive restorations have been made in the last century (20th century) and the entire wooden interior decoration of them have been replaced.

One of the five post-Byzantine churches, called "Agios Athanassios" had replaced its original iconostasis with a new one. This church was built, in its present form, in 1818. It is a three-aisled, wooden-roof church, of basilica rhythm with 2 rows of 6 wooden columns that have an external cover of special mix of lime plaster offering the appearance of marble columns of circular cross-section. From the original wooden decoration of that time, only the Despotic Throne (Fig. 1a) and the Pulpit are nowadays still in place, which are generally in good condition, though the woodcarving details are partly covered by the consecutive repainting of these artworks. According to the code of the church, the construction and the gilding of them was finished in 1845 (Kambouri-Vamvoukou 1979). There is also an Icon stand (Fig. 1b), which, as secondary ecclesiastical furniture, perhaps has still the original gilding, even though it's quite worn. Its base exhibits signs of rot, due to the direct contact with the floor. Of great interest is also the flat, wooden ceiling, which is formed in various geometric shapes and whose construction must have been implemented during the church repair, after the fire of 1890.



a



b

Fig. 1

***Details of wooden ecclesiastical furniture of "Agios Athanassios" church
a - Despot's Throne; b - Icon stand.***

The oldest post-Byzantine church of Thessaloniki is "Nea Panagia", which was built in 1727, while in the mid of 19th century great renovations took place. It is a wooden-roof church, of basilica rhythm, with 2 rows with 7 columns of square cross-section, which divide the interior into three aisles. The columns bear capitals and covering of newer construction (after the earthquake of 1978), made of varnished pine wood. Very impressive is undoubtedly the carved and gilded iconostasis of great height, for which there is no evidence of a clear chronology, but it might have been constructed the latest by mid-19th century (Mantopoulou-Panagiotopoulou 1989). Perhaps, part of this iconostasis may come from an older iconostasis of the church. The entire surface of the iconostasis, from the base to the top, is covered by rich carving, which in several places is pierced. It has also three bema doors, large part of whom, are covered also with pierced carving (Fig. 2a). Generally speaking, the condition of the iconostasis is very good. There are not any obvious rot or insect attacks, nor display of other defects in wood or detachments of different joined pieces of wood, except for only few cases. Special attention has been paid in order to protect the iconostasis from the moisture, derived from the often cleaning process of the church floor. This has been achieved using profiled wood, that is placed around iconostasis base and the surfaces of timber are oil painted, in order to create a hydrophobic layer around wood. The back side of the iconostasis was covered with solid wood or wood based panels and painted using oil paint.



a



b

Fig. 2
Wooden interior decoration of "Nea Panagia" church
a - Bema door; b - Pulpit.

From the post-Byzantine decoration also remains in a very good condition the Pulpit and three Icon stands. The quite impressive Pulpit is carved and gilded (Fig. 2b), has polygonal shape, a conical base and is based on one of the columns of the church and additionally on two thinner carved pillars, forming an arch beneath the Pulpit. The ceiling and the loft, dyed with monochrome oil paint, are constructed using flat planks, joined with laths of semicircular cross-section, forming elongated rectangles, a very common structure of that time. The ceiling was decorated all around with an impressive carved wooden frame.

The church of "Agios Antonios" differs from the other post-Byzantine churches of Thessaloniki, not only due to its smaller size, but mainly due to the fact that it has only one row of 5 columns that divide the interior space into two aisles. These columns, of circular cross section, are made of wood, have an overlay of a special lime plaster mixture and they are mounted on older marble columns parts, in order to protect the timber from the humidity coming from the floor. The church was built around 1820 (Siaxampani-Stephanou 1985), whereas its current form may have been acquired during its renovation in the early 20th century (Mantopoulou-Panagiotopoulou 1989). The interior decoration of the church is constructed, referring to the most of its part, of flat wooden boards, where other profiled or carved pieces are glued on. The carved parts of the iconostasis are gilded (Fig. 3a), while the rest of its surface is painted with some painted decoration elements. The construction of iconostasis may seem to be simple, due to the limited participation of woodcut parts. Nevertheless, the craftsman achieved to utilize the connection ability of wood, offering to his object a beautiful appearance that is apparent, even without painting. The damage observed in the iconostasis is quite limited and is caused mainly by older insect attack. Also in this case, in order to protect the base of the iconostasis from humidity, certainly profiled wood, which has been oil painted has been placed circumferentially of the base.



a



b

Fig. 3

**Details of wooden interior decoration of "Agios Antonios" church
a - Iconostasis; b - Icon frame.**

The pulpit is based on one of the columns of the church and is constructed and painted, following the same technique as that of the iconostasis. It is a structure of polygonal shape, with 6 sides on the protruding part and the corresponding pyramidal base. In the horizontal wooden roof of the church, the certainly profiled laths, forming various geometric shapes, while in the middle of the surface there is a slightly carved, small rosette. Additionally, in the church there is a magnificent gilded icon frame with pierced carving (Fig. 3b).



Fig. 4

Wooden iconostasis of "Ypapanti" church.

The impressive wooden decoration of the church "Ypapanti" presents many similarities with that of "Agios Antonios". The sightseer Camus declared in 1896 that the church has beautiful contemporary woodcarvings (Tampaki 1998). The church is also of basilica rhythm without a dome, while it has two rows of 6 wooden square columns that divide the church into three aisles. The columns, also, has chapters and an overlay of painted pine lumber, of newer construction, like in the church of Nea Panagia. The church in its present pattern was formed in 1841 (Mantopoulou-Panagiotopoulou 1989). The tall, painted iconostasis (Fig. 4) was constructed the same year and it also constitutes other previous iconostasis parts. The oldest of its parts, is the central "bema door" with Cretan art paintings of the 16th century (Xyggopoulos 1956) and today it is attached to a newest bema door

behind a protective glass. At the top of the iconostasis there is a gilded, pierced carved pediment. Despite the absence of rich wood carving decoration, the overall construction of the iconostasis lends majestic atmosphere and courtliness to the church. The plenty rectangular and semicircular frames, separated by colonnettes of various shapes (square, semicircular, vase-type) and enriched with capitals and other decorative wooden elements provide a beautiful appearance, which would be quite obvious, as in the church of "Agios Antonios", even without the painting.

The wooden pulpit is based on one of the columns of the church and has dodecagonal shape with 6 sides in the protruding part and the corresponding pyramidal shape of its base, while it is constructed following the same technique that was used in iconostasis construction. The ceiling and the women loft, monochromely painted with oil paint, are constructed with flat planks, connected with laths of semicircular cross section, forming elongated rectangles or rhombus.

The church of "Agios Minas", which was rebuilt in 1852 after several extended destruction is one of the most magnificent religious buildings of the 19th century in Thessaloniki (Kambouri-Vamvoukou 1989; Mantopoulou-Panagiotopoulou 1989). This church, like all the other post-Byzantine churches of Thessaloniki, is wooden-roof of basilica rhythm. Additionally, it has seven couples of wooden columns, covered with a special mix of lime plaster, that gives them the appearance of circular cross-section concrete columns and mounted on tall square section pedestals they divide the church into three aisles. The interior wood decoration of the church presents a prototype, different style compared to other post-Byzantine churches of the city. The impressive iconostasis bearing friezes and gables and also having excellent oil painted (white and beige) and partially gilded wooden structures, attach the appearance and the splendour of a marble temple of classical era. The back side is completely covered by oil painted solid wood boards (Fig. 5a), giving overall the appearance of built wall. The bema door, quite different, but harmoniously connected with the rest of the structure, is gilded and pierced carved, while its dedication date is in 1859, as it is recorded.



a



b

Fig. 5
Details of wooden interior decoration of "Agios Minas" church
a - Back side of iconostasis; b - Icon stand.

The bishop's throne and two Icon stands (Fig. 5b) are also wood carved, bearing a date of gilding in 1886. Both of the above-mentioned are kept in a very good condition, demonstrating only minor damage to the protruding carved wood parts. The wooden pulpit, which blends more with the style of the iconostasis, has an octagonal shape with concave surfaces and inverted pyramidal base.

The church of "Vlatadon", as a Byzantine Monastery built in the 14th century, had initially a marble iconostasis. The first years of Ottoman occupation, the church was converted into a mosque for only a small period, unlike other Byzantine churches of Thessaloniki, that remained mosques throughout the period. The current wooden iconostasis seems to be a result of work in the church that ended in 1845, but perhaps there

might have also been done some maintenance of the iconostasis, during the renovation work of the church in 1907. The appearance of the specific iconostasis may not be as impressive as the previously mentioned, but it is indeed of great importance, because several parts of the iconostasis are much older, such as the Cross (late 16th century - 18th century), possibly obtained from a previous wooden iconostasis and handcrafted with excellent technique (Hatzitryfonos 1985, Mantopoulou-Panagiotopoulou 1989). The carved sections of the iconostasis are made of walnut, shaped in a low relief that gives the sensation of a flat surface, but its embellishments, crafted with excellent art, almost totally carved, they look like as if they are glued to the surface and provide a natural appearance (Fig. 6). In one stage of the renovation process of the iconostasis, some parts were replaced, due to their wear, with new ones, like the eight colonnettes and small chapters of some other colonnettes, a fact that is apparent, mainly due to the existence of different quality of work. Unlike the upper part of iconostasis, the lower part is later and very simply constructed, with painted horizontal wooden boards placed in frames. In previous studies on the monastery, the bema door is referred, which now does not exist anymore. In the north chapel of the church there is also a wooden carved iconostasis that may have been built in one of the recent renovations (Stojoglou 1971).



Fig. 6
Details of wooden iconostasis of "Vlatadon" Monastery.

The back side of that iconostasis was not covered and it remained as it was constructed, and it is worthy to be mentioned that almost in all the parts of iconostasis, even the newer ones, damage from insect attack was observed.

CONCLUSIONS

Wood could be considered as a worthless material compared to gold or marble, but it is undoubtedly a unique material suitable for any use, that gives the opportunity to talented and experienced folk craftsmen to create brilliant artworks.

The conversion of Byzantine churches during the Ottoman occupation to mosques and the trend of 'respectability' of post-Byzantine churches in the early 20th century, resulted in the minimizing of the old ecclesiastical wooden decoration that has been preserved in Thessaloniki, in relation to the number of its churches.

These decorations come mainly from the 19th century, although there are some older parts dated from the 16th century, therefore, it is archeologically characterized very recent compared to the 2500 years history of the city. However, this wooden decoration is a very significant part of the limited heritage of the town from the 500 years (1430-1912) of her life under the Ottoman rule. Although, it is relatively limited the amount of post-Byzantine church decoration that exists today in the old part of Thessaloniki, it represents various decorative techniques of utilizing wood. These wooden artworks are still in relatively good condition, they are in use in a safe and dry environment of a church interior and as it is expected, they are under protection.

The main risks that could threaten the post-Byzantine churches of Thessaloniki and their wooden decoration is the contempt and the ignorance of the properties of wood and the care this material requires.

The search of the construction date of the individual parts of this wooden decoration, as well as the determination of the wood species used in each structure of it, could be characterized as arduous, time-consuming and difficult due to bureaucracy, but it could provide useful information and knowledge valuable to many scientific fields.

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