BACINI OR IMMURED PLATES IN GREEK CHURCHES

ANNA BALLIAN

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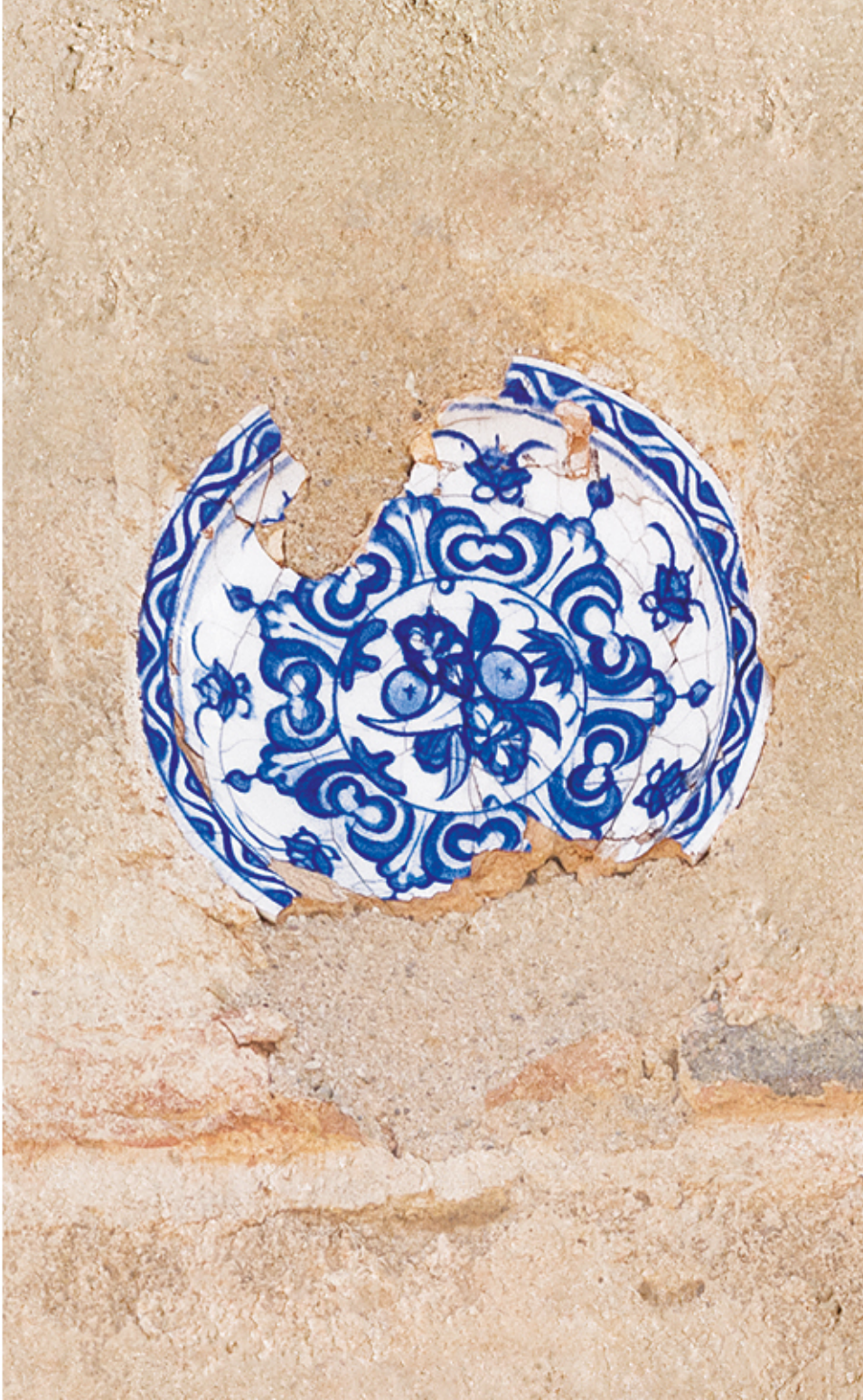

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COVER IMAGE: Blue-and-white plate immured on the dome of the Monastery of Loukous, see fig. 48 (photo: V. Tsonis)

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Iznik, Italian and local ceramics

(16TH-17TH CENTURY)

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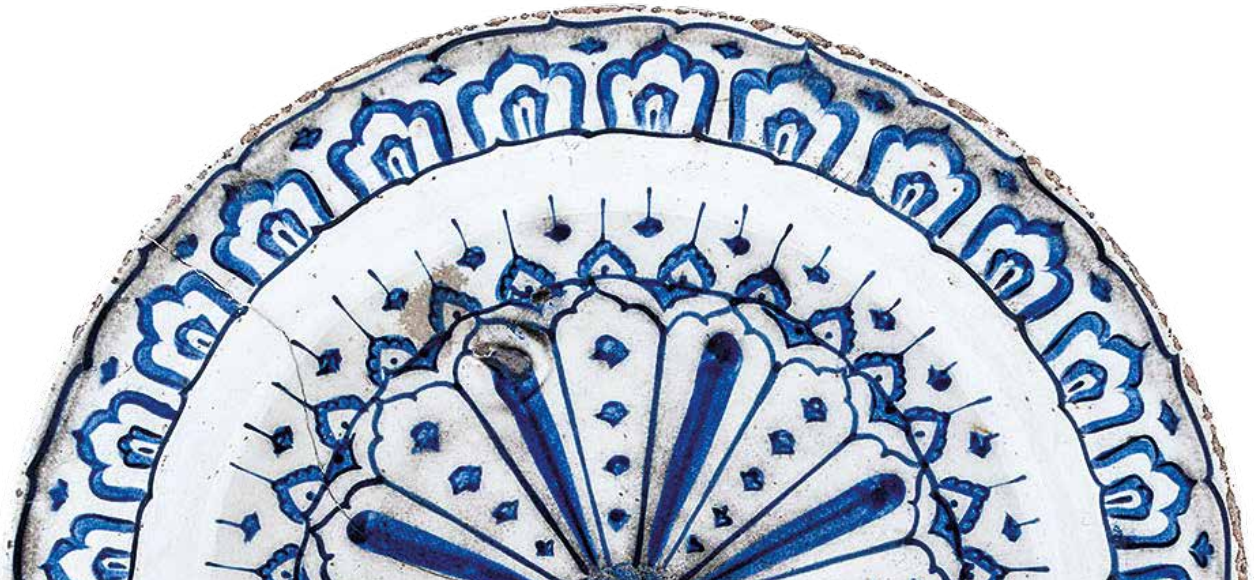
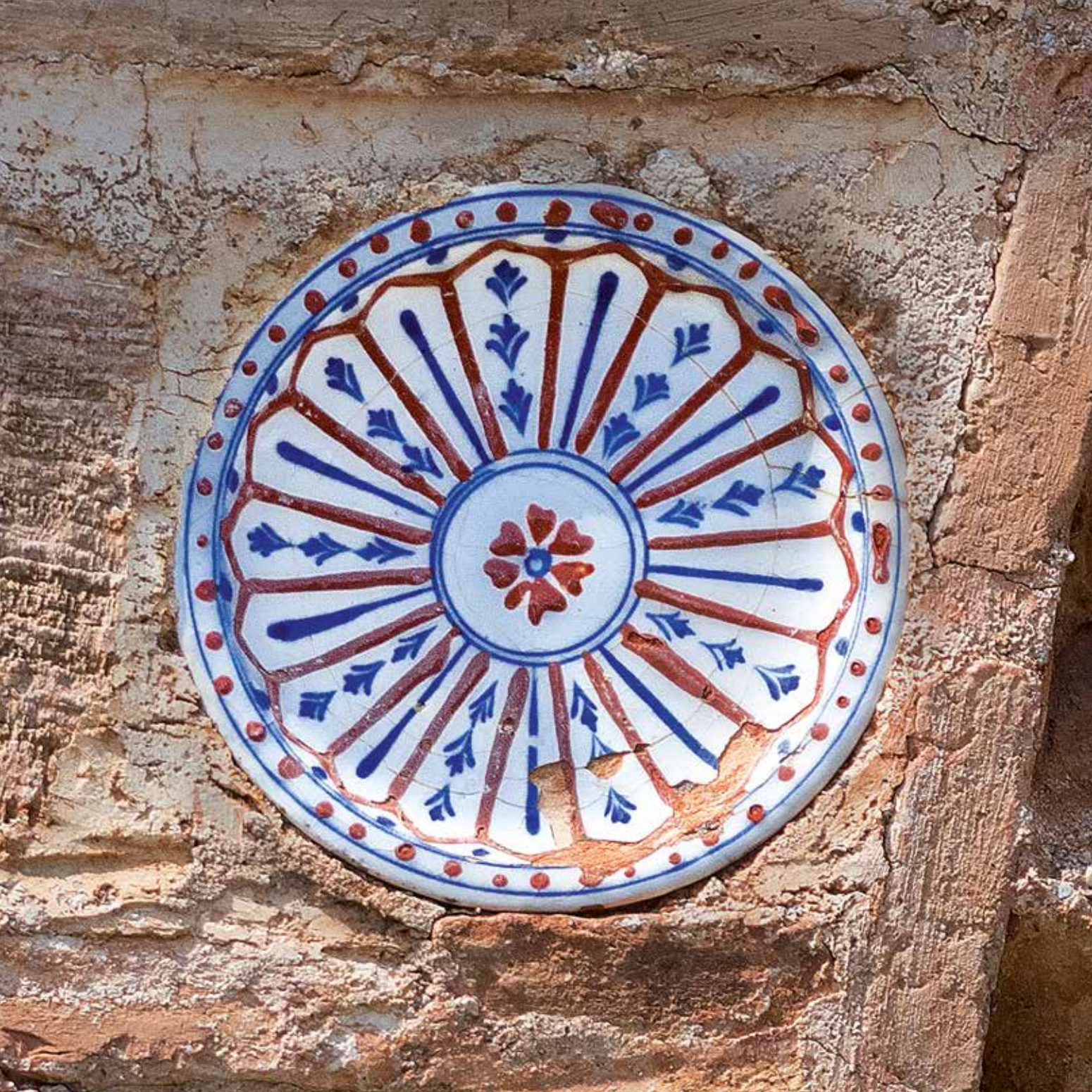


Contents

Iznik ceramics became an integral part of Greece's maritime tradition through the seafaring skill and commercial genius of its islanders. No Greek home was complete without a plate decorated with ships and tulips. It was in recognition of this that Angelos Delivorrias, director of the Benaki Museum for forty-five years (1973-2018), included Iznik plates painted with galleys and lateen-rigged ships, among the material he chose for the 1987 exhibition "Greece and the Sea". He was fully aware of their Ottoman origins, however, a much-loved subject such as ships, as well as the "large quantities of Iznik pottery scattered throughout the Dodecanese and elsewhere" (Delivorrias 1992, 306), comprised a phenomenon that he considered worthy of further study. As a true descendant of the Generation of the Thirties, Angelos adored the Aegean islands, a palimpsest of a uniquely Greek locus, in which traditions and perspectives converge. The image of a whitewashed church with immured Iznik plates is completely interwoven with this landscape. When the Benaki Museum of Greek Culture re-opened in 2000, Iznik plates bearing ships and Greek inscriptions framed the display cases dedicated to Rhodes and the Aegean islands, signalling their enduring special place in the Greek tradition. This book was written with Angelos's enjoyment of the subject in mind and is a small contribution to his memory.



Iznik ceramics in the Greek lands

The Ottoman material heritage is usually presented in the Greek literature through a folkloristic lens, focusing on clothing, embroidery, household wares, ceramics, copper ware and other objects – all works made of relatively simple materials. However, there is a certain class of objects that, as early as the 19th century, were not treated as works of traditional art in the scholarly literature but as luxury products and courtly art works. Typical examples are the renowned ceramics of Iznik and the equally renowned silks of Bursa, which are perhaps the most recognisable and highly regarded expressions of Ottoman art. Research interest in previous decades focused on the production of the 16th century, the "golden" era of the Ottoman Empire, and the court workshops that fulfilled the large orders of the sultan as well as those of high-ranking Ottoman officials. In recent years the interest of researchers has turned to the later period and the Empire's provinces, as well as the meeting of Ottoman art with local traditions, and its use by local elites.

Ceramic ware from Iznik survived in Greece displayed on the so-called plate walls of mansions and captain's houses such as those of Lindos, or used as architectural decoration, embedded on the exterior walls of post-Byzantine churches and monasteries. The prolific Greek scholar of Byzantine and post-Byzantine architecture Anastasios Orlandos termed the latter "immured Rhodian or Asia Minor plates" but in recent years the Italian term *bacini* has prevailed among the international scholar community. In 1974, Manolis Chatzidakis, the other great figure of Byzantine Art studies in 20th-century Greece, considered the immured ceramics from Asia Minor, with their strong and vivid colours, to be a rare instance demonstrating the influence of the arts of the Orient.[1] More rarely, tiles line the interior of monastic churches, such as on Mount Athos and the island of Andros, while there is also a group of 17th-century plates bearing Greek inscriptions, showing that Greeks were not only using Iznik ceramics in that period, but also commissioned them.[2] This form of ceramic art was thus transferred and adopted into the Christian environment, both ecclesiastical and secular, serving the purposes of the local Christian leaders and notables. In its initial stages Iznik ware was closely associated with court patronage and the sultan himself, but its later distribution and consumption in today's Greek lands and beyond, highlight the rise of the new Christian elites and their integration into the administrative mechanisms of the Empire.[3]

1. Orlandos 1951. Chatzidakis 1974, 418.

2. Carswell 1966. Korre 2004. For the Iznik tile revetment in the Monastery of Iveron see Ballian 2022, 275-277, for Iznik plates with Greek inscriptions, Moraitou, Androudis 2022.

3. This study of Iznik in Greece does not include Iznik ware collected by Greeks in Alexandria in the early 20th century, a collecting activity which documents a different ideological environment and was inspired by Western European artistic trends, see Ballian 2006.

1. Iznik plate, last quarter 16th century. The Monastery of Loukous, fig. 37 (photo: Vasilis Tsonis)

In these more or less well-known cases of Iznik ceramics found in Greek lands, we should now add the data from recent archaeological investigations which have recorded material from the early modern period. This material includes Iznik sherds among other local or Western ceramics but does not point clearly to the identity of the user, whether Muslim or Christian, Orthodox or Catholic. More interestingly, the archaeological research has revealed that Iznik ceramics were in circulation from the early 16th century onwards in the Aegean islands and mainland Greece, in areas of the Peloponnese such as Corinth, Akronafplia and Chlemoutsi, as well as Thessaloniki, Boeotia and Crete. Although samples from the first half of the century are not many, in most cases excavators consider them to be products of trade or part of the household goods of Ottoman officials, while there exist also isolated finds, possibly the property of travellers. That Iznik ceramics were being imported into Nafplio while it was still in the hands of the Venetians, that is, until 1540 when the city fell to the Ottomans, is a matter of particular interest because a similar case is observed in Buda where excavations uncovered early Iznik ware, dating to before the Ottomans' conquest of the castle in 1541.[4] In any case, in Venetian-occupied Andros and in the castle of Cadmea in Thebes, fragments of so-called Miletus ware were also found, which in the 15th century was exported to the Aegean and Anatolia. This was produced in Iznik until the first decades of the 16th century but differed significantly from the rest of the Ottoman production as it was made of red paste.[5]

Finally, there is also a small number of known Muslim monuments with Iznik tile revetments that deserve further research, including into their possible impact on the local communities. The Yeni Mosque in Komotini is the only example with Iznik tiles *in situ*, with several tile panels similar to the ones in the mosque of Selim II in Adrianople (1569-1575), while the tiles of Reçep Pasha Mosque in Rhodes (1587-1588), unfortunately have not been preserved.[6]

The ceramic ware and tiles from Iznik as well as the European ceramics of the early modern era found in today's Greek lands, were treated in the Greek literature as evidence of the growth of the Greek merchant marine in the 18th century and the rise of the Greek merchant class that contributed decisively to the awakening of Greek national ideas and the setting in motion of the 1821 War of Independence. In this spir-

4. Yangaki 2012, 178, 179-182, 203-206, fig. 119-125. Skartsis 2010, 216-218. Vroom 2007, 81-83, fig. 4.12. Vroom 2003, 175-176, 353. Morgan 1942, 171-172, fig. 153 a-b. For Buda, see Kovács 2005, 70.

5. Dori, Velissariou, Michailidis 2003, 164-165, 166-168. Kontogiannis, Arvaniti 2007, 628-629, fig. 5. Arvaniti 2013, vol I: 182-183, vol II: 98.

6. For the Yeni Mosque and its sponsor, Kiel 1971, 421-426. Colour photographs of the tiles in Komotini, Stefanidis 2002, 169. For the mosque of Reçep Pasha and photos from the interwar period showing the tiles, see Androudis 2016, fig. 1303-1317. Also, Brouskari 2008, 321-323, 366-367 (G. Dellas).

The Holy Monastery of the Transfiguration of Christ or the Great Meteoron Monastery

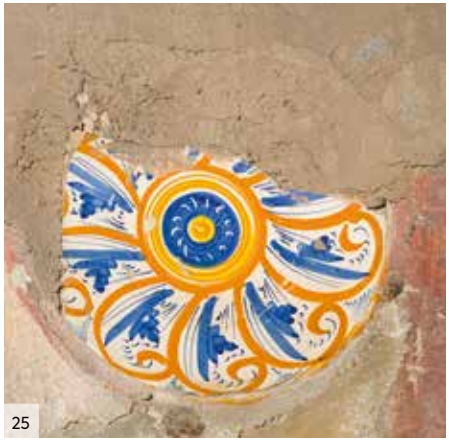
In the Monastery of Great Meteoron there are nine immured plates on the walls of the gallery that surrounds the northern side of the new *katholikon* which, according to the marble inscription set in the wall, was rebuilt in 1544/45. In a drawing by George Sotiriou the gallery seems contemporaneous with the church but in a newer study by P. Theocharidis, two construction phases are documented: that of the western part of the gallery is contemporary with the new *katholikon*, while the eastern part – in which the ceramics are immured – dates from the second phase and has as a *terminus ante quem* a carved date of 1730 (or even 1719).[47] The nine plates are found immured in threes around the arches that support the gallery, at the exterior eastern side of the courtyard FIG. 24 and in the interior, at the eastern and northern arches. Of these, four of the ceramics are Italian and the remaining five come from Iznik workshops.

Italian ceramics

Two of the four Italian ceramics, one located at the courtyard arch and the other at the northern arch, are maiolica ware of the same design, painted on white with cobalt blue and bright orange FIGS. 25-26. These vessels have wide rims painted with orange spiral bands radiating from the centre and a set of blue brushstrokes, the so-called ladder motif, between them. The orange spirals – *spirali arancio* – have given their name to this group of ceramics and are reminiscent of the orange-red lustre colours of the Iberian ceramics, such as the Valencia lustreware which still had tremendous appeal in Renaissance Italy. They are an innovation of the Montelupo workshop which appeared in the 1530s and 1540s, although production declined in the early 17th century, disappearing entirely around 1620. A closely comparable plate at the Montelupo Museum is attributed to between 1530 and 1550.[48] The spread of Tuscan ceramics and particularly those of Montelupo, around the Mediterranean basin is documented from the 14th century but was still at its peak in the 16th. Maiolica ware with orange spirals from levels dated to the end of the 16th and the first half of the 17th century have been found in excavations in Barcelona and been recovered from the waters around L'Île-Rousse, Corsica. In Crete where, as we have seen, several other Italian ceramics have been found, a vessel with a wide rim and similar orange spirals and green ladder motifs has been immured in the church of Agios Georgios in Therissos, near Chania, dated to the last quarter of the 16th century.[49]

24. The Great Meteoron Monastery, eastern arch of the gallery looking at the courtyard (photo: Christos Galazios)

47. Theocharidis 1979, 124. Messis 2010, 208, 211.
48. Berti 2008, 325-326, no. 46b.
49. Yangaki 2012, 363, fig. 5, 367. See also Amouric, Richez, Vallauri 1999, 90, fig. 197 right. Beltrán, Miró 2007, 20, fig. 13.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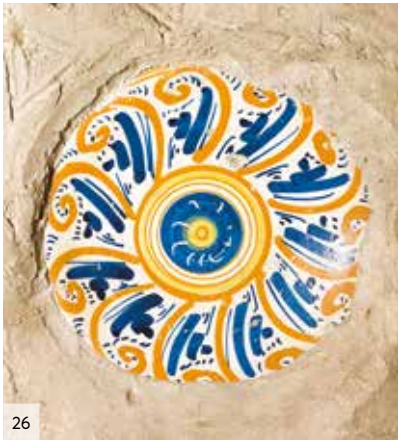
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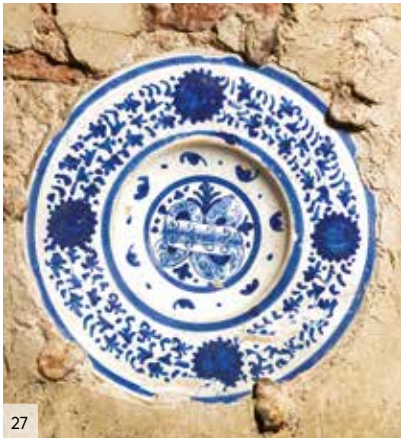
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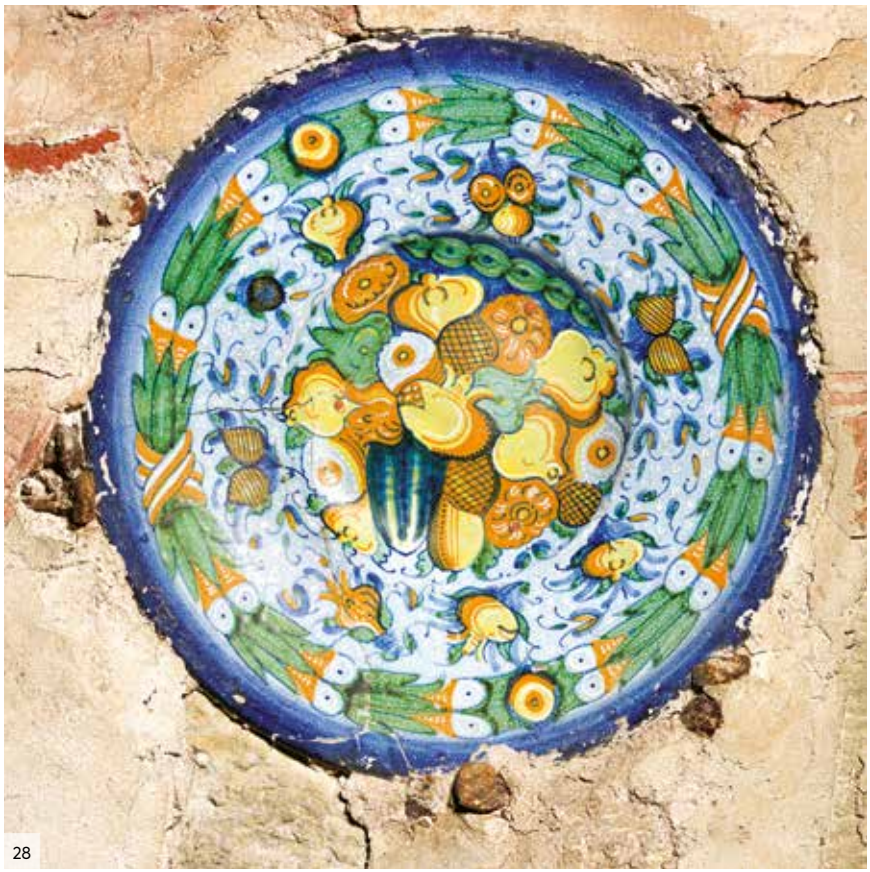
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25–26. The Great Meteoron Monastery, maiolica with orange spirals, Montelupo, 16th c.
25. Eastern arch (centre).
26. Northern arch (right), (photo: Christos Galazios)

27. Maiolica with *porcellana* decoration, Faenza, first half 16th c. Northern arch (centre), (photo: Christos Galazios)

28. Maiolica of a *berrettino* type, Faenza, ca 1530–1540. Eastern arch (centre), (photo: Christos Galazios)

ΠΑΡΑΛΕΙΠΟΝΤΑΙ ΕΝΔΙΑΜΕΣΕΣ ΣΕΛΙΔΕΣ
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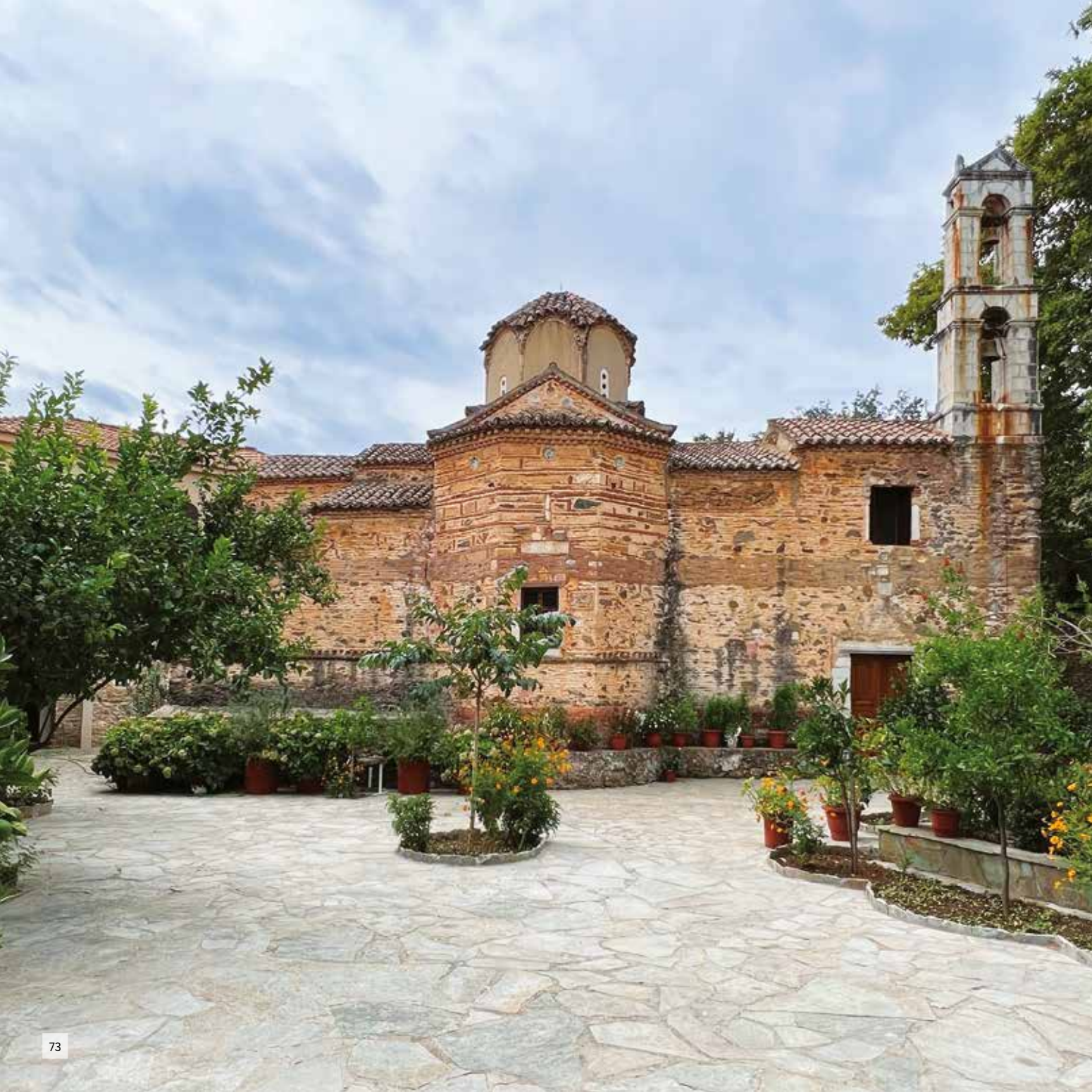

The Monastery of the Dormition of the Virgin or the Monastery of Zerbitsa

The Monastery of the Dormition of the Virgin, also known as the Monastery of Zerbitsa, is located near the village of Xirokambi, in the eastern foothills of Mount Taygetos outside Sparta FIG. 73. The *katholikon* that dominates the centre of the courtyard was built in 1639 and is of a cross-in-square plan with a dome but of the Athonite architectural type, that is, with lateral apses or *choroi*. It is apparent from the masonry that a two-storey narthex was added at a later stage, probably a little before 1669 when the wall paintings of the main church, as well as the narthex, were carried out by an unknown painter, a student of Dimitrios Kakavas.[108] Details about the construction of the church "from the ground up", in 1639, as well as its painting and embellishment thirty years later, in 1669, are given in the foundation inscription which is painted in the interior above the western door of the main church, leading to the narthex. The painting and embellishment were undertaken in the time of the abbot Parthenios, with the expenses borne by "the most honourable and magnificent lord, lord *kyr* Emmanuel, living in Constantinople, towards his spiritual salvation". The magnificent *kyr* Emmanuel was identified as Manolakis Kastorianos, the master of the furriers' guild in Constantinople and one of the most powerful *Romioi* (i.e. Greek Orthodox Christians), of Constantinople, and a great advocate of Greek letters and education.[109]

Externally, the northern side of the *katholikon*, exposed to the courtyard and where the entrance is found today, has a rich ceramic decoration with embedded marble and stone *spolia*, that is, older architectural members that have been reused, and immured ceramic plates. Of the original twelve plates, ten are preserved, and of the two that were immured in the southern and eastern sides of the building, the empty cavities on the wall are left. The remainder that are preserved are located on the northern side, six on the main church – on the three-sided *choros*, and on the cross arm just above it FIG. 74 – and four in the two-storey narthex above the entrance FIG. 75. The latter appear to have been immured at the later stage of the narthex construction and are asymmetrically positioned in a chance manner. Correspondingly, the six on the walls of the main church were probably immured in 1639 during its construction, and although the intention appears to have been to position them symmetrically, this has not entirely been achieved.[110]

Of the ten ceramics that are preserved, five are Iznik ware and the remaining five are Italian. Of the Iznik plates, four are on the main church and one on the narthex; of the Italian, two are on the main church and three on the narthex.

73. The Monastery of Zerbitsa, view from the northern side (photo: author)

108. Simopoulos 1966. Messis 2010, vol. 2, 315-320. Charalambous 2014.

109. Charalambous 2014, 38-44. For Manolakis Kastorianos also see now Bayraktar-Tellan 2017, 125-126.

110. Charalambous 2014, 34-35.

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