On the Origin of the Early Christian Artistic Tradition in Byzantine Chersonesos

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Despite the considerable number of well known Byzantine centres, Chersonesos-Kherson is one of the few where systematic archaeological research has been conducted. More than 150 years of excavations at the site have resulted in the discovery of a significant number of artifacts. Among them a prominent place is taken by Christian churches. The elements of ornament, sculpture, monumental painting and mosaics which have remained intact allow us to make some assumptions about the origin and development of the artistic tradition. The early Byzantine mosaics are a subject of special interest. The main goal of this article will be to represent and analyse early Christian symbols of mosaic in Chersonesos-Kherson and in Syrian monuments. We would like to follow the direction of the origin of the artistic tradition in Chersonesos. The Byzantine mosaics of Chersonesos churches are those of peculiar interest, thus they always draw the researchers’ attention. It would seem difficult to add something further to this but we have come across some materials dedicated to the early Christian mosaics of Syria. Study and comparison of the floor mosaics of the early Christian centres of Syria and Tauris in combination with other kinds of sources, has uncovered new material regarding the process of the establishment of the artistic tradition of early Byzantine Chersonesos. To sum up, one can state with certainty that close contacts between the eastern provinces of the Empire and Chersonesos-Kherson made a substantial impact on many aspects of the city’s life, together with the spread of Christianity from the East. These artistic traditions were reflected in fresco paintings of the early Christian crypts of Chersonesos and in the mosaic floors of later churches. The existence of the artistic tradition was definitely reflected in the compositions of the floor mosaics of Chersonesos and Syrian churches. All this allows us to maintain that the system of floor mosaics paintings in Syria and Chersonesos has a common source. And, what is more, it would be logical to suggest that most of the artists belong to the Syrian artistic tradition.

Despite the fact that there are several well-known Byzantine centres, systematic archeological research has been conducted in only a few, particularly in Chersonesos-Kherson¹. Excavations over a period of more than

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150 years resulted in the discovery of many artifacts, among which prominence of place is taken by Christian churches. The elements of ornament, sculptures, monumental paintings and mosaics that have been preserved intact make it possible to surmise about the origin and development of the artistic tradition. The Byzantine mosaics of Chersonesos churches in particular always draw the researchers’ attention. Their fullest description is given in the monograph by O.I. Dombrovski. It would seem difficult to add something further to this but we have came across some materials dedicated to the early Christian mosaics of Syria. Studies in the field of the early Christian floor mosaics in Syria and Tauris, in combination with the other kinds of sources, has uncovered new material regarding the process of the establishment the artistic tradition of early Byzantine Chersonesos.

The text about the «Lives of Kherson’s bishops» gives the grounds to assume that the first six bishops arrived in Chersonesos from Jerusalem. Thus, the this text the manner whereby Christianity came to the city and the influence of the Eastern tradition on the formation of the community.

The city had close economic ties with Asia Minor, which is proved by multiple archeological finds. Continuous contacts, exchange of goods, and active visits to Chersonesos by the Eastern tradesmen naturally led to the development of cultural exchange.

A considerable number of both written and archeological sources allow us to acknowledge positively the spread of Christianity to the region of the Middle


East during the first centuries A.D.\(^1\). The foundations of Christian artistic thinking were born in Syria. The late Hellenistic monuments of Palmira and Dura-Europos were called "Oriental forerunners of Byzantine art"\(^2\) by a number of scholars. J. Strzygowski made a well-known statement about the values of Parthian sacred art for East and stated: “What Hellas has contributed to the art of antiquity, Iran has contributed to the art of the new Christian world”\(^3\).

A range of themes and decorative elements in Hellenistic mosaics was formed and passed from one master to another. In the well-known work of Kurt Weitzmann\(^4\) consist a particular study of late Antiquity and early Christian miniatures. The technology of the mosaic work itself suggested availability of "portfolios" which contained replicas of themes and ornamental combinations. As it is noted in the murals of Dura-Europos, not only the compilations of outline drawings but also book illustrations served as a basis for monumental designs\(^5\). Syncretism of Hellenistic motifs, originating on the banks of the Euphrates, and the Eastern methods of space depiction are well distinguished in the sacred art of Palmira, Dura-Europos, and Edessa\(^6\) and later were transferred into other parts of the empire. This continuity was natural and logical and largely because the mosaics of Syria and the Black Sea region are closely related to each other.

A considerable number of the early Christian monumental pieces of art are preserved in the museums of mosaics in Marra and Apamea. Their collections are composed of mosaics that were collected in “dead cities” which are situated in the north of Syria between Aleppo and Hama (Apamea in 4th –5th centuries)\(^7\). Furthermore, analysis of themes, methods and prototypes of Chersonesos depictions testifies to a certain semantic and esthetic link of the

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\(^7\) A. Hadjar, The Church of St. Simeon the Stylite and other archaeological sites in the mountains of Simeon and Halaqa, (S.L, 1995), 1-6.
artistic tradition. This subject matter has recently become of interest to scientists. Specifically A.E. Filippov examines in his works¹ the influence of Dura-Europos monumental art on the wall-paintings of the early Christian crypts of Chersonesos.

Examination of the Chersonesos-Kherson monuments gives us grounds to state that ornamental motifs, such as depictions of grape vines, bunches of grapes, birds, animals and bowls predominate in the stylistic design of the mosaic floors of basilicas. The range of colors was represented by red, black, blue, yellow, dark cherry.

The symbol of a bird, which is very often a personification of a human soul², is wide-spread. Doves can be singled out as the symbol of the Holy Spirit. The peacock reflects the belief in immortality, which is based on the idea of the imperishability of its flesh. A peacock with an extended tail symbolizes the sky of stars³.

Amongst those depictions that occur most often, special attention should be paid to the “bowl” (in mosaics from the of the Countryside Cruciform Church situated on the necropol, Basilica No.15 also referred to as the “Basilica in Basilica”, the 1935 Basilica) (see Figures 1-5). The cup symbolizes the Eucharist in Christian teaching “The Lord's flesh and blood”. It is extremely significant that the depictions of the vessels, including those with the birds drinking from them, were the motifs for both Chersonesos and Syrian mosaics (see. Figures 1-8). They could symbolize the teaching of Christ and the immortality given by him (peacocks drinking from bowls).

³A. Uvarov, Hristianskaja simvolika. [Christian symbolism]. (Moscow, 1908), 52.
Figure 1. Chersonesos. From Early Mosaics of the 1935 Basilica. Kontharos

(Photo by A.M. Litovchenko)

Figure 2. Chersonesos. From Early Mosaics of the 1935 Basilica. A Bowl with a Growing Grape Vine

(Photo by A.M. Litovchenko)
Figure 3. Chersonesos. From Mosaics of the Countryside Cruciform Church situated on Necropol. A Kilix in a Triangle

(Photo by M.V. Fomin)

Figure 4. Chersonesos. From Mosaics of the Countryside Cruciform Church situated on Necropol. A Bowl with Birds and Grapes

(O.I. Dombrovskij, Vizantijskie mozaiki Hersonesa Tavricheskogo [Byzantine mosaics Chersonesos.] [Poznan, 2004]:72.)
Figure 5. Chersonesos. From Mosaics of the Countryside Cruciform Church situated on Necropol. Central Image. Peacocks with a Vessel-kantharos

(Photo by M.V. Fomin)

Figure 6. Museum of Mosaic in Marra (Maraat an-numan). Peacocks with a Vessel-kantharos

(Photo by O.G. Checal)
Figure 7. Museum of Mosaic in Marra (Maraat an-numan). Peacocks with a Vessel

(Photo by O.G. Checal)

Figure 8. Chersonesos. Crypt “At the Site of N. I. Tur”. Peacocks with a Garland

(M. I. Rostovtzeff, Antichnaya dekorativnaya zhivopis’ na yuge Rossii [Ancient Decorative Painting in South Russia] (Saint Petersburg, 1914), 475.)

A significant place in early Christian symbolism is also presented by the vegetative images. Garlands of laurel leaves, flowers and trees symbolize the settings of the heavenly kingdom, paradise\(^1\). A wreath was the symbol of victory (laurel wreath), also victory over death,\(^2\) and it often symbolized martyrdom. Framing with grape leaves and bunches was also widespread (Basilica №15, Countryside Cruciform Church situated on the necropol, the 1935 Basilica, the 1932 Basilica, the Western Basilica (No.13)) – and its were the symbols of Christ’s teaching\(^3\) (Christ the wine maker). There are also depictions of a diamond with rings on it (a symbol of eternity\(^4\)) and the anchor (a symbol of hope\(^5\)).

One of the images was the “cross”. A resolution of the Third Council of Constantinople (680-681 A.D.), banned depictions of the cross on the floor. This aspect is testified to in the mosaics of the Uvarov Basilica (No.23), the

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\(^1\) A. Uvarov, _Hristianskaja simvolika_. [Christian symbolism]. (Moscow, 1908), 46.
\(^2\) J. Xoll _Slovar’, sjuzhetov i simvolov v iskusstve_. [Dictionary of subjects and symbols in art.], trans. A. Maikapara (Moscow, 1996), 123.
\(^3\) A. Uvarov, _Hristianskaja simvolika_. [Christian symbolism]. (Moscow, 1908), 34.
from the Countryside Cruciform Church situated on the necropol and Basilica No. 15, where such depictions were presented. The themes mentioned above can be found both in the floor mosaics of the Chersonesos churches and in the fresco paintings of the painted crypts (see Figures 5, 8).

Mosaic carpets covered with a pattern were discovered in the Basilica No.15 and in the Uvarov Basilica (No.23) (see Figures 9, 10). They demonstrate patterns that are completely identical with the floor mosaics in Syrian museums (see Figures 11, 12). Similar links can be identified in the motifs of the framing of the mosaics Chersonesos (see Figures 3, 13) and Apamea (see Figure12).

As indicated above, a widespread theme was depiction of the Vessel. One of the variants is a Vessel-kilix in a triangle (Apamea (see Figures 14, 15), Chersonesos (see Figure 3)). Vessels with grapevine are known from the mosaics of the 1935 Basilica (see Figure 1), similar themes are presented in Syrian mosaics as well (see Figure 7).

**Figure 9. Chersonesos. «The Carpet» in the Basilika No.15**

(O.I. Dombrovskij *Vizantijskie mozaiki Hersonesa Tavricheskogo* [Byzantine mosaics Chersonesos.] (Poznan, 2004), 53.)
Figure 10. Chersonesos. «The Carpet» from Nartex the Uvarov Basilica (No.23)

(Photo by A.M. Litovchenko)

Figure 11. Museum of Mosaic in Marra (Maraat an-numan). «A Carpet»

(Photo by O.G. Checal)
Figure 12. *Museum of Mosaic in Apamea (Hama). Patterns*

(Photo by O.G. Checal)

Figure 13. *Chersonesos. From Mosaic of Cruciform of the Countryside Cruciform Church situated on Necropol. A Vine’s Sallow*

(Photo by M.V.Fomin)
Figure 14. Museum of Mosaic in Apamea (Hama). A Bowl in a Triangle

(Photo by O.G. Checal)

Figure 15. Museum of Mosaic in Apamea (Hama). A Bowl in a Triangle

(Photo by O.G. Checal)

Compositions with the depictions of birds and a Vessel are of particular interest. The earliest depictions of peacocks are known from the wall-painted crypts of Chersonesos (mid 4th – 5th centuries (see Figure .8)). Such mosaics covered the floors of the Countryside Cruciform Church situated on the necropol (see Figure 5). Mosaics of similar composition were discovered in Syrian churches (see Figures 6, 7). Moreover, we can speak about a relatively early date for the creation of mosaics with the depiction of crosses, which were also included in the composition (see Figures 16, 6).
To sum up, one can state with certainty that close contacts between the eastern provinces of the Empire and Chersonesos-Kherson made a substantial impact on many aspects of the city’s life, together with the spread of Christianity from the East. These artistic traditions were reflected in fresco paintings of the early Christian crypts of Chersonesos and in the mosaic floors of later churches. The existence of the artistic tradition was definitely reflected in the compositions of the floor mosaics of Chersonesos and Syria churches. In
spite of some differences in depiction of individual elements, the design, in general, is similar. All this allows us to maintain that the system of floor mosaics paintings in Syria and Chersonesos has a common source. And, what is more, it would be logical to suggest that most of the artists belong to the Syrian artistic tradition for the origin of the artistic tradition in monumental paintings of Chersonesos.

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