

Maritime ex-voto graffito from the church of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople*

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This paper deals with a rare example of a maritime ex-voto drawing with protective saint or St. Nicholas from the south gallery of the church of Hagia Sophia. The most interesting features of our graffito are discovered at the level of the ship's drawing. This ex-voto scene illustrates three types of vessels, one light galley, one round ship or merchantman, and one (merchant?) galley or cargo-ship. Taking into account the types of ships depicted, the time-span for the Hagia Sophia graffito lies between 1350 and 1450.

It is an undeniable fact that graffiti-drawings bearing nautical subject are to be found in countries of various religions and languages all around the Mediterranean. The Middle Ages are presented particularly well by examples of that kind. The church of Hagia Sophia at Constantinople (modern Istanbul) has also provided important results in the same respect.

I had an ample opportunity to find ship graffiti incised on the walls and columns of the upper galleries in the former main temple of Byzantium. I recorded 35 ship graffiti during my stay in Istanbul in 2010 and 2011; it is nevertheless almost certain that more exist.¹ The ship graffiti of Hagia Sophia can be divided into two broad categories: oared vessels or galleys and sailing ships or merchantmen. This is a largely conventional distinction, based purely on the presence or absence of oars. It must be stressed that many of the graffiti are highly detailed and accurate, indicating that their author must have been someone well acquainted with the ships of the period. For this reason it is not surprising to find an emphasis on those parts of the ships with which the sailors were most immediately

* I would like to express my warmest thanks to Professor Richard Unger and Dr Andrea Babouin for their help and valuable suggestions. Needless to say, any errors are my own. *Thanks also to the anonymous readers of the journal, who helped make this text more readable and more defensible*

1 I am planning to publish them in another study 'Unknown Temple. The Ship graffiti from Hagia Sophia, Constantinople.' Unfortunately, I am not yet in a position to say definitely that there are only 35 ship graffiti. As one can easily verify, it is extremely difficult to see what is hiding behind the enormous photos arranged in the entire north gallery. In spite of this, I was able to look behind the photos in central part of gallery and discover one galley with human figures on board and two cogs. However, such action is now prohibited. I must also remember that only two ship graffiti have been published so far, because interest has been focused mainly on the magnificent structure, the interior decoration and arrangement of the church of the Holy Wisdom. For them, see O. MEINARDUS, *Medieval Navigation According to Akidographemata in Byzantine Churches and Monasteries*, *DChAE* 6, 1970–72, 39; L. BASH, *Graffiti navals grecs, Le petit perroquet* 22, 1978, 54–55. Recently I have published four ship graffiti which are connected to Viking sailing vessels: Four Scandinavian ship graffiti from Hagia Sophia, *BMGS* 38/2, 2014, 168–184.

involved (i.e. the sails, the oars and the rudder). Luckily, many of these graffiti have survived time and progress or modern vandalism.

The great diversity of types of vessels represented in these scratchings is clearly noticeable. They give a first-hand impression of what some of these vessels looked like in the eyes of the person who drew them, including some that were in great detail. Some of the ship graffiti represent galleys, Viking ships, cogs, carracks, caravels and galleons. However, others are somewhat ambiguous, which is primarily due to poor carving. For this reason, it is not easy to determine the particular classification of a vessel based on a single graffito. Moreover, correlating the ships with the exact types mentioned in the historical texts and shipwrecks is not always possible. Another difficulty with the pictorial studies of ships is to know the 'nationality' to which the ships belonged. The ship types and details of rigging may give hints as to the ship's nationality, but these are not always reliable due to parallelism between ship traditions around the Mediterranean. On the other hand, several ship graffiti are firmly identified as Genoese due to the banner on the stern with the St. George's cross.²

In the present paper, I concentrate my attention on a graffito drawing that is incised slightly on the last or most eastern marble column of the balustrade in the western bay of the south gallery and just to the left end of the so-called 'Gates of Heaven and Hell', which is now barely visible (see Figure I). When one's eyes adjust to the light, the inscribed lines begin to take shape, providing in graphic detail a composition of a human figure and three vessels that are placed diagonally downward (see Figure II). One can find a number of graffiti inscriptions (two in Greek and two in Cyrillic) on the same column, which seems to be a preferred place for the pilgrims' mementos in the south gallery.

Turning to the ship graffiti, we find that they are in the form of complete ships and depicted as moored in port.

Ship # 1

Central type: hybrid ship (merchant galley or a short range cargo ship?)

View: starboard side.

The first ship graffito is called a hybrid since a number of interpretations are possible as to its type and date. It is a long vessel with length 33 cm and height 8 cm, which is set at about 98 cm from the floor (see Figure III). The sailing direction is to the right. The shape of the hull and the superstructure as drawn require us to believe that the ship is a galley of some sort. With length-to-beam ratio 1:4.1 she is suited for great (merchant) galley or *galee grossa*, which was operating in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea already in the 14th century.³

2 Four ship graffiti in Hagia Sophia, one galley and three merchantmen, are clearly marked with the pennant of Genoa.

3 These 'great galleys' were pure merchant ships, and were not agile enough to fight in the fleets alongside the slender war galleys (*galee sottile*). The great galleys or merchant galleys were a type of a long ship built especially for the transport of spices and others high-value cargoes. They were primarily sailing ships, relying on speed rather than armament to avoid danger. After about 1320 the galleys used to transport valuable cargoes were replaced in this role by the 'great galleys'. With a length-to-beam ratio of 1:6 (as opposed to the usual 1:8 associated with galleys), these vessels were larger, beamier

Our suspicion seems to be logical, if we take the perpendicular and oblique lines bound by the lowest line of the hull as oars. There are only two oars with blade and they are out of proportion. But their number is a common occurrence in graffiti: the first two represent all the rest on quite a few occasions. They appear to be hung in the “wrong” direction, but as far as I know this is also common. The oars of a great galley were used mainly for getting in and out of harbour and in emergencies.⁴ In our case, they enabled the ship to navigate close to the shore.

The ship has a curved keel, a slightly inclined sternpost and a curved stem post. Details of the superstructure are clearly represented. Over the sternpost a little three-dimensional cabin or stern castle is depicted, crowned by the roof. Stern castles were a common element of every galley at least from the 13th century onwards and were vital for the protection of the palmetta quarterdeck, which housed the ship’s captain and helmsmen, as well as the ship’s flag.

The main mast (one vertical line of 22 cm) is set slightly to the rear of midships and topped with a crow’s nest. Its nearly vertical orientation, however, is inconsistent with a lateener. Five lines depicted fore and aft of the mast, running up to the top of the mast and again along the sides of the mast, are apparently meant to indicate the shrouds, which are located both to port and starboard. Without the use of perspective and in order to give the illusion that lines run to port and starboard, these rigging lines were usually drawn fore and aft of the mast. The main mast carries a curved yard with completely furled sails.

The rudder is especially of interest. On the visible starboard side, the traditional pair of big broad quarter-rudders is depicted.⁵ The second rudder is probably only partially depicted by one diagonal line drawn in front of the complete one. Both rudder blades, attached to a round loom, are asymmetrical, indicating that they are unbalanced rudders. The rudders that are mounted through the stern

and had a greater displacement than conventional war galleys. On the great galley, see J. E. DOTSON, Merchant and naval influences on galley design at Venice and Genoa in the fourteenth century, in: C. L. Symonds (ed.), *New aspect of naval history: selected papers presented at the fourth naval history symposium*, Annapolis 1979, 20–32; B. LANDSTROM, *The Ship*, New York 1961, 128–135; Fr. C. LANE, *Venetian Ships and Shipbuilders of the Renaissance*, Baltimore 1934, 15–26; N. A. FIOKOVA, Венецианское кораблестроение в XIII–XV вв., in: *Из истории социально-экономического и политического развития стран Западной Европы в XI–XVII вв.*, Отв. ред. Н. П. Соколов, Горький 1970, 38; E. SCANDURRA, The Maritime republics: Medieval and Renaissance Ships in Italy, in: G. F. Bass (ed.), *A History of Seafaring Based on Underwater Archaeology*, New York & London 1972, 211; Fr. C. LANE, *Venice: A Maritime Republic*, Baltimore 1973, 122, 126; R. W. UNGER, The Ship in Medieval Economy, 600–1600, London 1980, 176; R. W. UNGER, Warships and Cargo Ships in Medieval Europe, *Technology and Culture* 22, 1981, 238; A. WIEL, *The Navy of Venice*, London 1910, 312; *Crisis and Change in the Venetian Economy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century*, B. Pullan (ed.), Routledge 2006, 22; *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Medieval Military Technology*, C. J. Rogers (ed.), Oxford 2010, I, 147.

4 J. H. PRYOR, *Geography, technology and war: Studies in the maritime history of the Mediterranean 649–1571*, Cambridge 1992, 43.

5 The traditional two side rudders were complemented with a stern rudder sometime after c. 1400 and eventually the side rudders disappeared altogether. For this see R. CH. ANDERSON, *Oared fighting ships: From classical times to the coming of steam*, London 1962, 59–60; PRYOR, *Geography*, op. cit., 61.

castle may have been aft-mounted.⁶ As far as I know, the aft-mounted system was widely used on galleys. Not surprisingly, the ship is not equipped with a stern rudder, which had just been introduced during the 14th century in the Western Mediterranean and apparently had not yet influenced galley construction. The rudders are twisted in a reversed position, which would have made the ship totally unnavigable if under way. However, the ship is not under way and not under sail. Perhaps the rudders were stored in this position while the vessel moored in port.

The triangular projection at the stem may portray a sort of bowsprit, which is called 'sperone' or 'spiron.' It was a very common attribute of all medieval and later galleys. The short spur/spil is an attribute seen mainly on Venetian galleys of the 14th and 15th century.

It might be added that an alternative interpretation of the drawing could be that the whole "body" of the boat is seen from three quarters above and turned in the direction of the viewer. The angle of view depicted reveals details of the inner hull construction. Beams or frames are arranged perpendicularly to the keel. The frames are evenly spaced, although 14 frames are insufficient for a ship of this size. Two of the lower strakes, running parallel to the keel, have been attached to the framing. In summary, the drawing remains a possible but not probable representation of a galley.

There is, however, one other possible interpretation. It might be postulated that ship #1 was a smaller vessel, such as a short-range cargo ship.⁷ What are the arguments for this? It is obvious that the mast is positioned a bit astern of midships. Masts stepped that way were certainly known on northern European ships and on the imitations of Scandinavian ships that turn up in Byzantine manuscripts in the 11th and 12th centuries. Further, the lack of oars brings into question the argument that the ship is a galley, and especially that she might be a great galley. On the other hand, great galleys usually carried two or three masts, each of which had a lateen sail. They were canted forward and progressively shorter towards the stern.⁸ The placement of a single mast, its near-vertical orientation, and the equidistant arms of the yard would show suggest a square-rigged ship. The presence of two oars near the bow of the ship suggests that they are used for guiding the ship in narrow spaces or in light winds, just as was done on Viking cargo ships. The reversed quarter-rudders, disproportionate oars and the fact that so few frames are shown could just be that the artist did not have the desire to go into great detail. That seems logical. Since no single ship type can be completely satisfied with the details represented in the drawing, the conclusion must be that ship #1 is either a galley of some sort or perhaps a cargo ship. I do not think there is enough evidence to type the ship with certainty.

6 L. V. MOTT, *The Development of the Rudder: A Technological Tale*, London 1997, 86.

7 The smaller long ships were occasionally used for a long time from the beginning of the 14th century in emergencies to carry wares out of danger, or to move quickly especially valuable merchandise. For this, see FR. C. LANE, *Venetian Ship and Shipbuilders of the Renaissance*, London 1992, 13.

8 LANE, *Venetian Ship*, op. cit., 22; UNGER, *The Ship*, op. cit., 176; PRYOR, *Geography*, op. cit., 43.

Ship # 2

Central type: large sailing ship, carrack.

View: starboard profile

I think that the next ship depicted here (#2) is a two-masted large sailing ship known as a carrack (see Figure IV). This assumption is supported by the shape of Ship 2, particularly because of the stern. The vessel depicted in profile is relatively small (2,9 x 10,7 cm) and the sailing direction is to the right. The hull is round with a mounted stern deck, while the stem rises rather steeply at the bow. The sternpost is almost straight and at a slight angle to the keel. The sternpost-mounted rudder is clearly depicted. It is shown attached with iron pintles and gudgeons. Above the stern is a large and high aftercastle, perhaps with two or three decks. It continues forward for approximately one half of the vessel's length. The forward end of the aftercastle has an indentation in it before it descends to the deck. The ship is equipped with a smaller, but high forecastle with a hint of parapet. It also had an additional deck level at the bow. The castles at bow and stern are molded into the vessel's contour. Between them, the low part of the hull or the so-called 'waist' is confined.

Two clearly visible slanting lines probably represent two masts: the fore and the main. They are at a slight angle to the hull. Both are topped with a crow's nest. Very little of the rigging is detailed. No yard is shown on the main mast but the main sail is depicted by a curved line fore of the mast. No yard is shown on the main mast. Directly in front of the main mast is a curved line that runs up from the top of the mast to the deck, which appears to be the main square sail. One shroud line is delineated aft of the mainmast. The yard of the foremast appears to be horizontal and two shrouds are clearly visible. The sail itself is not shown.

Details of the superstructure such as the ranking aftercastle and especially the stem extension forward and upward recall the 15th century carrack.⁹ It is highly likely in this connection to assume that the ship # 2 is from Genoa, since it was a port that used large sailing ships and which did know carracks by the end of the 14th century.¹⁰ The carracks seem to have been a modification of the cog,

9 Sailing ships similar to our vessel #2 can be found in an illustration of a two-masted carrack in *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctum* by Bernhard von Breydenbach, published in 1486. See the illustration on page 51 (21) in the digital edition of *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctum*, Munich Digitization Center (MDZ), Bavarian State Library, [http://dfg-viewer.de/en/v3/?tx_dlf\[id\]=http%3A%2F%2Fdaten.digital-sammlungen.de%2F~db%2Fmets%2Fbsb00051697_mets.xml&tx_dlf\[page\]=51&tx_dlf\[double\]=0&cHash=9fc1078e184c458a2a1d6c87f65059d8](http://dfg-viewer.de/en/v3/?tx_dlf[id]=http%3A%2F%2Fdaten.digital-sammlungen.de%2F~db%2Fmets%2Fbsb00051697_mets.xml&tx_dlf[page]=51&tx_dlf[double]=0&cHash=9fc1078e184c458a2a1d6c87f65059d8). (Retrieved March 10, 2015). Another parallel can be found in ship graffito # 39 from Şahabettin İmaret Camii in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, which is dated to 1444–1445. For this, see N. OVČAROV, Risunkite-grafiti ot "İmaret djamija" v Plovdiv kato izvor za istorijata na Sredizemnomorijeto prez XV v., *Razkopki i proučvanija* 18, 1987, 83.

10 For them, see I. FRIEL, The Carrack: The Advent of the Full Rigged Ship, in: R. Gardiner – R. W. Unger (eds.), *Cogs, Caravels and Galleons. The Sailing Ship 1000–1650*, London 1994, 77–80; I. FRIEL, *The Good Ship. Ship, Shipbuilding and Technology in England 1200–1500*, London 1995, 173–174; L. MARTIN, *The Art and Archeology of Medieval Ships and Boots*, London 2001, 70–71; J. PRYOR, The Mediterranean Round Ship, in: Gardiner – Unger, *Cogs, Caravels and Galleons*, op. cit., 56–76.

using carvel methods of construction, and carrying a number of masts and square sails. In the first half of the 15th century one of the goals of Mediterranean ship-builders was to modify the cog design. Their experiments were done initially in one of two ways: either by stepping a short foremast, usually with a square sail, or by stepping a mizzenmast, usually with a lateen sail.¹¹ However, two-masted ships were quickly replaced by three-masted vessels around 1450. The carracks were used in bulk trades for goods like corn and alum, a fixative used in the cloth industry. They also carried cargoes of mixed goods, everything from dried fruit, wine, and olive oil to items such as gold dust and grains.

Consequently, we must notice that Ship #2 is bearer of both northern and southern traditions. While the hull, the square-rigged mainmast and the stern mounted rudder all reflect northern techniques, the presence of a foremast indicates southern influence. The combination of southern and northern attributes strongly suggests that the depicted ship was probably built in the western Mediterranean by shipwrights, who tried to mould the desired qualities of the ‘cog’ using a southern technology. The ship graffito in Hagia Sophia provides us with technical details concerning the adaptation of northern construction techniques by southern shipwrights.

Ship # 3

Central type: light galley or *galee sottili*.

View: portside profile

The ship-technical details that can be made out for the ship under # 3 are few but significant (see Figure V). The sailing direction is to the left and the vessel is 12 cm long and 1.5 cm high. Because of its full shape, the ship is most likely a light war galley (*galee sottili*). The hull is narrow and sleek, and there is no over-structure depicted.¹² The galley has no sperone but does have a protective rail over the oars. Only one oar is depicted on the portside. The main mast stands slightly forward of amidships. Again, its vertical orientation is inconsistent with a lateener. One diagonal line on the mainmast constitutes the yard. No sail is indicated. At least one shroud is shown running fore of the mast. A horizontal bar served to support a tent is shown at the stern. The vessel would no doubt be navigated with the traditional pair of big broad quarter-rudders.¹³ The criss-cross lines on the stern may represent a pair of big broad quarter-rudders. However, the quarter-rudder on the portside is out of proportion and too long. Only one rudder blade is depicted in a reversed position, which would seem to indicate that the vessel is moored in a port. Light galleys or ‘galea sottili’ formed the main strike

11 According to FR. C. LANE (Venetian Merchant Galleys, 1300–1334: Private and Communal Operation, *Speculum* 38, 1963, 203) the earliest two-masted ship is pictured in 1367 and clearly represents a transitional design between single-masted square-rigged cogs and carracks. See also E. H. BYRNE, *Genoese Shipping in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, Cambridge 1930, 12–14, 65–66; J. HEERS, *Gênes au XVe siècle. Activité économique et problèmes sociaux*, Paris 1961, 272–282, 288.

12 Similar depiction can be found in OVČAROV, *Risunkite-grafiti*, op. cit., 86, no. 52.

13 MOTT, *The Development of the Rudder*, op. cit., 62.

forces of all Christian maritime powers of the West during the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries.¹⁴ In our case, this light galley was apparently designated for patrol.

Taking into account the types of ships depicted, the time-span for the Hagia Sophia graffito lies between 1350 and 1450. What are the arguments in support of this statement? The former year is chosen because the arrival of the stern rudder in the Mediterranean was possibly contemporary with the re-adoption of the square sail in place of the lateen. This dates it to about 1350, which is to some extent confirmed by a Spanish miniature of that date that shows several ships with square sails and rudders fixed to the sternpost.¹⁵ However, the galleys had two quarter-rudders (near the stern) until around the mid-fourteenth century. From the middle of the 14th century carracks came into widespread use in the merchant marines of the Christian West. It would be logical that this type of ship would turn up around 1400 in Constantinople. Another thing unavoidably comes to mind: the adoption of the mizzenmast around 1350¹⁶ was quickly followed by the introduction of the foremast as early as at the end of the 14th century.¹⁷ The reason for this lies in the fact that the steady increase in ship tonnage during this period would have required the addition of the foremast to control these large vessels adequately. Finally, the reason for the year 1450 is that by the mid-fifteenth century carracks were ingeniously rigged with three masts.

Each drawing has details of merit and includes features that are historically accurate, therefore demonstrating the familiarity of the artist with the sea and the ships. Bearing this in mind, it is very likely that he was a sailor. It is difficult, however, to establish the national origin of a medieval ship on the strength of external features alone.

Graffiti portraying coastal scenes are an extremely rare find. What is most important in our graffito-scene is that the drawing is focused on the human figure

14 The literature on the medieval galleys of the Italian republics is enormous. Amongst the most useful is ANDERSON, *Oared fighting ships*, op. cit., 52–56; M. BRAGADIN, *Histoire des républiques maritimes italiennes: Venise-Amalfi-Pise-Gênes*, Paris 1955, 37–45; FIONOVA, Венецианское кораблестроение, op. cit., 38; M. BRAGADIN, *Le navi, loro struttura e attrezzature nell'alto medioevo*, in: *La navigazione mediterranea nell'alto medioevo* [settimana di studio] 14–20 aprile 1977. Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, Spoleto 1978, 398–401; LANE, *Venetian Ships*, op. cit., 3–13; C. MANFRONI, *Storia della marine italiana dalle invasioni barbariche al trattato di Ninfio (anni di c. 400–1261)*, Livorno, 1899, appendice, 451–476; W. L. RODGERS, *Naval Warfare Under Oars, 4th to 16th Centuries: A Study of Strategy, Tactics and Ship Design*, Annapolis 1940, 65–68, 109–113; UNGER, *The Ship*, op. cit., 121–122; UNGER, *Warships and cargo ships*, op. cit., 238.

15 PRYOR, *Geography*, op. cit., 40; MOTT, *The Development of the Rudder*, op. cit., 137.

16 As an illustration for this one may refer to a drawing on the Venetian portolan chart by Pizigani, dated to 1367, and a graffito at the Palau Reial at Barcelona, dated to around 1360. See Y. KAMAL, *Monumenta cartographica Africae et Aegypti. Tome IV, fasc. 4. Époque des portulans, suivie par l'époque des découvertes*, Cairo, 1938, 1483; M. LONGHENA, La carta dei Pizigano del 1367 (posseduta dalla Biblioteca Palatina di Parma), *Archivio Storico per le province parmensi*, 5, 1953, 25–130; J. MARTINEZ-HIDALGO, *Columbus' Ships*, Barre 1966, 32; PRYOR, *Geography*, op. cit., 40–41; L. V. MOTT, Medieval Ship Graffito in the Palau Reial Major at Barcelona, *The Mariner's Mirror* 76/1, 1990, 13–21.

17 L. V. MOTT, A three-masted ship depiction from 1409, *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 23/1, 1994, 40. See also PRYOR, *Geography*, op. cit., 40–41.

on the right side, rather than on the ships. It is not difficult to provide a reason for this. The halo behind the human head in the graffito indicates that we are dealing with a Christian saint. The human figure, which is 3 cm wide and 11.5 cm high, is set at about 115 cm from the floor (see Figure VI and VII). The coastline is also depicted through a curved line drawn in front of the figure. The expressive features of the figure are clearly visible – an elderly man with figurative eyes, a trim, round beard and balding head. He is depicted in episcopal vestments, wearing the *omophorion* and holding a Gospel Book. In brief, there are many characteristics that without doubt suggest someone among the Church Fathers. On this basis, I come to the conclusion that the most suitable person is St. Nicholas of Myra.¹⁸ Moreover, this identification does not conflict with what we know about the saint. The reason for our choice is the saint's distinctive features; a balding head and a trim, round beard.¹⁹ He is depicted in the pose of an evangelist and is represented as an Orthodox bishop, wearing the *omophorion* and holding a Gospel Book.²⁰ Sometimes he is depicted wearing the Eastern Orthodox *mitre*, and sometimes he is bareheaded. Because of his patronage of mariners, occasionally Nicholas is shown standing in a boat or rescuing a drowning sailor. In the Roman Catholic iconography, his images stand against backgrounds showing ships.

Before going any further a word must be said about St. Nicholas of Myra. We shall not recount in detail the story of St. Nicholas. It is sufficient to note that he is considered second only to the Virgin Mary as a guardian, patron and intercessor, and he is one of the most popular of all saints in both the East and West.²¹ The story of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker is a conflation of the obscure 4th century Nicholas of Myra and the historical 6th century Nicholas of Sion.²² Nothing definite is known concerning the first saint who is supposed to have lived in the fourth century near Myra and to have taken part in the Council of Nicaea in 325 (the latter, however, being highly doubtful). Nicholas of Sion lived in the first half of the sixth century and died in 564. His cult was well established by the end of the 6th century, aided by his Life written soon after his death by a disciple. This abbot of the Monastery of Holy Sion and later bishop of Pinara performed the popular birth miracles, felling of the cypress tree, miracles at sea, and many healings. In the course of the centuries, the tradition of the two Nicholases merged, and a number of miracles from the Life of St. Nicholas of Sion (including the stilling of storms) were transferred to the Life of St. Nicholas of Myra.

By the ninth century, the 'conflated' St. Nicholas emerges as a major doctor of the Orthodox Church, alongside Sts Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian,

18 Concerning St. Nicholas the reader may be referred to N. P. ŠEVČENKO, *The Life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art*, Torino 1983. I wish to thank Prof. N. P. Ševčenko for her help concerning the identification of St. Nicholas.

19 They were not fully developed before the 11th century, from which time the saint regularly appears in the procession of bishops in church apses. See A. P. KAZHDAN – N. P. ŠEVČENKO, *Nicholas of Myra (Representation in Art)*, in: *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, A. P. Kazhdan (ed.), Oxford 1991, II, 1470.

20 *Подлинник иконописный*, Под. ред. А. И. Успенского, Москва 1998, 54–55.

21 A. VASILIEV, Dve čerkvi „sv. Nikola“ v stolitzata ni, v. *Zora*, № 5851 from 18.12.1938.

22 ŠEVČENKO, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, op. cit., 19.

Cyril and John Chrysostom.²³ His miraculous tomb at Myra which exuded holy oil was a successful pilgrimage destination, and Myra's proximity to the sea facilitated the dissemination of the saint's renown. Tales of his interventions in storms, apparitions to sailors, and saving them from shipwreck were carried by Byzantine seamen²⁴ to the capital, the edges of the Byzantine Empire, and beyond.²⁵ The protection he was believed to offer to seafarers extended over time to all travelers, including even raving robbers.

The remains of St. Nicholas were in Myra up to the 11th century until they were carried over to another port city – Bari (Italy).²⁶ The arrival of the saint's bones in Bari gave an additional boost to his already widespread veneration in the West. The second part of the sanctifier's remains was preserved at San Nicolo church on Lido in Venice. In his Western guise, St. Nicholas came to be represented as a Catholic bishop, giving rise to such implausible relics as the crook and crozier (neither of which formed part of an Orthodox bishop's apparel) preserved at the church on Lido island (which also house the 'true' bones).

The traditional Byzantine iconography of the holy hierarch was formed and reached its full completeness in the 11th century.²⁷ The oldest surviving painted

23 In the first half of the 9th century a *kontakion* in his honor attributed to Theodore of Studios, as well as two texts of the life of the saint *Vita per Michaëlem and Methodius ad Theodorum* were created; in the second half of the century numerous *encomia* and *hymns* about St. Nicholas were written; many churches were built and dedicated to him. See ŠEVČENKO, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, op. cit., 21–22 and R. JANIN, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin. vol. 1: Le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat oecuménique. pt. 3 Les églises et les monastères*, 2nd ed. Paris 1969, 368–377.

24 We shall not be too far from the truth in supposing that the fame of the saint first spread among Byzantine seamen. Another example for this is the so-called 'Nea' Church (the New church) in the Byzantine capital, founded by Emperor Basil I in 880, which was dedicated in part to St. Nicholas. The church was constructed with the aid of the crews of the Imperial fleet in Constantinople because they assumed the saint as their own patron. On the Nea Church, see *Theophanes continuatus, Joannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus ... ex recognitione Immanuelis Bekkeri*, Bonn 1838, 319, 10–14; 325, 15–17; *Ioannis Skylitzae Synopsis Historiarum*, I. Thurn (ed.), CFHB 5, Berlin – New York 1973, 163, 67–70. Cf. also R. JENKINS – C. MANGO, The Date and Significance of the Tenth Homily of Photius, *DOP* 9–10, 1956, 125–140; C. MANGO, *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople*, Washington 1958, 177–183. According to N. Ševčenko (*The Life of Saint Nicholas*, op. cit., 22) it is still unclear how his cult was spread, and along what routes.

25 From Constantinople the cult spread to Italy as early as in the seventh century, and then radiated throughout medieval Europe as far as England and Russia (along the river trading routes). For the spread of the cult of St. Nicholas, see CH. W. JONES, *Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari and Manhattan. Biography of a Legend*, Chicago – London 1978, 7–43, 73–94, 176–193; ŠEVČENKO, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, op. cit., 23. For Russia, see G. GIOFFARI, La leggenda di Kiev. La traslazione delle reliquie di S. Nicola nel racconto di un annalista russo contemporaneo, *Nicolaus*, 1979, 205–231; A. M. LIDOV, "Il dio russo". Culto e iconografia di san Nicola nell'antica Russia, in: M. Bacci (ed.), *San Nicola. Splendori d'arte d'Oriente e d'Occidente*, Milan 2006, 77–88; G. POLLIO, Il culto e l'iconografia di san Nicola a Roma, in: Bacci (ed.), *San Nicola*, 137–144.

26 ŠEVČENKO, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, op. cit., 23–24.

27 E. G. CLARE, *St. Nicholas. His Legends and Iconography*, Florence 1985, 28; J. RADOVANOVIĆ, *Sv. Nicola. Žitija i čuda*, Beograd 1987, 13.; N. P. ŠEVČENKO, San Nicola nell'arte bizantina, in: Bacci (ed.), *San Nicola*, 61–70; See also M. BACCI, *San Nicola*.

image of the saint comes from an icon, painted in Constantinople sometime during the 11th century. It is currently stored in the monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai. Later icons of St. Nicholas (from the 13th century onward) show him slightly older than the icon from Sinai with white hair and a receding hair-line. He is dressed as a bishop, characterized by the white stole embroidered with crosses over his shoulders.²⁸ Called an *omophorion* in Greek, the bishop's stole represents the lost sheep carried over the shoulders of the Good Shepherd (John 10: 1–21) and thus signified the bishop's pastoral role. As a bishop, St. Nicholas also holds a copy of the Gospel in his left hand. Another ministry of the Church's bishops is to preserve and proclaim the Gospel. His right hand is not shown in a blessing in the 10th century icon, but is depicted this way in near-contemporary icons of the Saint (and other bishop-saints).

St. Nicholas is thought to have been the first saint to feature as the subject of a 'hagiographical icon' depicting, as well as his likeness, bordering vignettes of his life, works and miracles.²⁹ This type of icon appeared at the beginning of the 13th century in locations as far apart as in the monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai, in the East and Puglia, Italy, the region of Bari, in the West, suggesting remarkably sea-borne promulgation of innovative forms.³⁰ This icon also shows the motif of a closed Gospel lying on the *omophorion*, thus signifying the participation of the saint in the liturgy.³¹ In this connection it should be mentioned that we have in our graffito an example of the same motif. The right hand of the saint is raised in the two-finger sign of blessing, while in his left hand, which is hidden by the edge of *phelonion* and *omophorion*, he is holding a closed Gospel book. It is also necessary to bear in mind that from the beginning of the 13th century onward the icon-painters especially underlined the advanced age of St. Nicholas through the round beard, high balding and wrinkly forehead. The result was a guise with emphasis on the ascetic rigidity and the implacability of the fighter against paganism and heresy, who was endowed with divine power.³² The graffito apparently shows these characteristic features. His standing figure is shown to have a sturdy build and his face displays courage and firmness.

Here it is useful to remember how St. Nicholas' name could have been connected with the church of Hagia Sophia. We find, first, that possibly during the

Il grande taumaturgo, Bari 2009, 85–88 (the saint's orthodox clothing), and 88–93 (the saint's hair and beard).

28 A. M. LIDOV, *Византийские иконы Синая*, Москва-Афины 1999, 108, no. 33.

29 ŠEVČENKO, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, op. cit., 20; LIDOV, *Византийские иконы*, op. cit., 108.

30 LIDOV, *Византийские иконы*, op. cit., 108.

31 LIDOV, *Византийские иконы*, op. cit., 108, no. 33 (beginning of the 13th century); *Holy Image. Hallowed Ground. Icons from Sinai*, R. Nelson – K. Collins (eds.), Los Angeles 2006, 161 (early 15th century). When wearing the *omophorion*, the bishop acts as a stand-in for Christ. On the *omophorion*, see W. WOODFIN, *The Embodied icon: Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium*, Oxford 2012, 20. On the ecclesiastical vestments in general, cf. K. LÜBECK, *Die liturgische Gewänder der Griechen*, *Theologie und Glaube* 4, 1912, 393–805; N. THIERY, *Le costume épiscopal byzantine du IX^e au XIII^e siècles d'après les peintures datées (miniatures, fresques)*, *RÉB* 24, 1966, 308–315.

32 LIDOV, *Византийские иконы*, op. cit., 108.

reign of Basil I (867-86), the south tympanum of the church was decorated with mosaics depicting bishops and prophets. St. Nicholas was in a pair with those of St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil and other great Fathers.³³ Next we must note another piece of evidence. According to the tenth-century Book of Ceremonies and the later Russian travelers a passageway (*diabatika*)³⁴ and a chapel, dedicated to St. Nicholas, were housed in the area behind the apse of Hagia Sophia.³⁵

There are many stories told about Nicholas as the patron saint of seamen.³⁶ He is said to have miraculously lulled storms at sea and saved the life of a sailor who fell from the ship's rigging. Because of his patronage of seafarers, St. Nicholas is often portrayed as flying down to rescue storm-tossed mariners, standing in a boat, or his image appears against a background showing ships or anchor.³⁷ When we turn to a local legend from Constantinople, we find that the image of St. Nicholas in the Church of St. Nicholas 'de Embolo Venetorum', east of the Basilike market, gave a certain Christian, who had been in a shipwreck at sea, a hundred rubles.³⁸

It is interesting to note that in medieval Europe it was a common practice to name the ships after saints in order to secure divine protection from harm on a voyage. To give reason for this is not difficult. The sea was a dangerous place in the Middle Ages – storms or accidents could wreck the ships, and there was

33 The mosaic of St. Nicholas is now destroyed, but was seen and recorded by the Fosati brothers during their 1847-49 restoration of the church of H. Sophia. Cyril Mango dates this mosaic program to the final years of the Basil I rule or the first half of the reign of his successor, Leo VI (886-912). See C. MANGO, *Materials for the Study of the Mosaics of St Sophia at Istanbul*, Washington 1962, 49–51, 55–57. For St. Nicholas's appearance on the mosaics of H. Sophia and other Byzantine churches, see ŠEVČENKO, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, op. cit., 21–22, note 25.

34 According to the Book of Ceremonies, the passageway, dedicated to St. Nicholas, ran southwards from the south porch of the church to the imperial palace. The date of the construction of the passageway is not known. On the passageway, see *Constantin VII Porphyrogénète, Le Livre des Cérémonies*, A. Vogt (ed.), Paris 1935–40, I, 17; see also 28, 172, and the commentary on page 78. See also C. MANGO, *The Brazen House. A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople*, Copenhagen 1959, 66–72; R. MAINSTONE, *Hagia Sophia. Architecture, Structure and, Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church*, London 1988, 113.

35 The square chapel dedicated to St. Nicholas was located east of the apse of the Great Church and off the passage, probably toward the south end. The chief relic of the Nicholas chapel was the tapestry of the saint. See the „Anonymous description of Constantinople” from the late 1389 and early 1391 in G. P. MAJESKA, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, Washington 1984, 118, 223–224. On the Nicholas chapel, see MANGO, *The Brazen House*, op. cit., 60–72, 80–81; JANIN, *La géographie*, op. cit., 368–369.

36 See, for example, B. KARAKOSTOV, *Morjashki sueverija i legendi*, Burgas 1939, 51, 97.

37 KARAKOSTOV, *Morjashki sueverija*, op. cit., 83, 93.

38 MAJESKA, *Russian Travelers*, op. cit., 354–355 with cited literature. The story of the miracle performed by the image of St. Nicholas in this church, which is recounted by the Russian Anonymous from the late 1389 and early 1391 (and developed in the 'Dialogue' version of the text), is not recorded in the standard collection of miracles connected with St. Nicholas. See G. ANRICH, *Hagios Nikolaos: Der Heilige Nikolaos in der griechischen Kirche*, Leipzig – Berlin, 1913, I, 365.

always the danger of a pirate attack. This made ship-naming a matter of real significance.

We happen to know that more than 75% of Venetian ships found in a series of documents dating from the end of the late 12th to the beginning of the 15th century sport a name of religious origin.³⁹ When we turn next to Genoa, we find that 121 of 124 ships in the documents issued between 1350 and 1414 bear religious names.⁴⁰

Devotion to Saint Nicholas, who is commemorated by the Church on December 6, is also shown by many churches and small chapels that dot the coastline.⁴¹ These sanctuaries, dedicated to the saint, have been built in gratitude to God for protection on the seas. It is customary for people passing one of them to enter, to light a candle, and to pray for their friends' and relatives' protection from turbulent seas.⁴² Survival at sea during storms was completely out of the seamen's hands. There was little chance of finding refuge, other than prayer and belief in a 'higher power'. It was mostly sailors that were in the most dangerous storms, in sudden assault of the pirates, in shipwrecks, in captivity or any other catastrophic accident, who appealed to St. Nicholas. Apparently this ex-voto drawing from Hagia Sophia was created by seamen in memory and gratitude for being saved in danger of shipwreck, after invoking Nicholas's sacred name.⁴³ This was an event that the devout worshipper would consider miraculous in the

39 B. Z. KEDAR, *Mercanti in crisi. A Genova e Venezia nel '300*, Roma 1981, 149–157, 217–220.

40 KEDAR, *Mercanti in crisi*, op. cit., 212–216; IDEM, Noms de saints et mentalité populaire à Gênes au XIV^e siècle, *Le Moyen Age* 73, 1967, 445; M. BALARD, *La Romanie Génoise (XII^e – début du XV^e siècles)*, Genova 1978, II, 535; IDEM, Les transports maritimes génois vers la Terre Saintes, in: G. Airal di – B. Z. Kedar (eds.), *I comuni Italiani nel regno di Gerusalemme*, Genova 1986, 143–174; P. BALBI, I nomi di nave a Genova nei secoli XII e XIII, in: *Miscelanea di Storia ligure in memoria di G. Falco*, Genova 1966, 65–86. In this context, it should be added that in 1368 8.2% of the citizens of Genoa bore the name of St. Nicholas. For this, see KEDAR, Noms, op. cit., 437. With regard to the ships' names one may consult the records of the Genoese notary Antonio di Ponzò, dating from the years 1360–1361. Of fifty-seven ships listed in the Ponzò registers, thirteen were named after St. Nicholas. For this, see M. BALARD, *Gênes et l'Outre – Mer. Tome II. Actes de Kilia du notaire Antonio di Ponzò. 1360*, Paris 1980; G. PISTARINO, *Notari genovesi in Otramar: Atti rogati a Chilia da Antonio di Ponzò (1360–1361)*, Genova 1971.

41 From the mid-12th century, 6th December was marked in western liturgical calendars, suggesting that it was a major feast. For this, see N. BUX, Il culto e la liturgia, in: G. Otranto (ed.), *San Nicola di Bari e la sua basilica*, Milan 1987, 56.

42 KARAKOSTOV, *Morjashki sueverija*, op. cit., 97. Even today, among Orthodox communities settled on the Bulgarian littoral of the Black Sea, an icon of St. Nicholas is settled in the hull of boats under construction in order to strengthen them and women are supposed to pray in front of an image of the Saint while their husbands are at sea. See N. OVČAROV, Legends et rites maritimes dans les dessins graffiti des églises de Nessebar (XIV^e – XVIII^e siècles), in: H. Tzales (ed.), *Tropis III*, (3rd International Symposium on Ship Construction in Antiquity. Athens 1989), Athens 1995, 329–330.

43 According to O. Meinardus (*Mediaeval navigation*, op. cit., 31, 34), naval graffiti found in churches were usually votive offerings created by sailors. See also P. CASSAR, The Nautical Ex-Votos of the Maltese Islands, *Maltese Folklore Review* I/3, 1966, 226; A. LUTTRELL, *Hal Millieri A Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings*, Malta 1976, 81.

highest degree. We also have no difficulty in believing that the drawing is given as testimony to protection received, and not as intercession for future aid.⁴⁴

In other words, such a graffito is the manifestation of ex-voto practices. Among other things, the drawing does not give any explanation of the danger, which the ships obviously survived, though we do not know with how much damage. We can only conclude that for the person who created this drawing it was necessary to emphasize that the ships survived, and this was probably perceived as a regular part of a sailor's life. The absence of any signature on a drawing denotes the importance of the event represented and not the creator. The presence of a protecting saint or St. Nicholas to whom prayers for salvation were dedicated is a common feature of ex-voto drawings. The meaning of their figurative presentation of a patron saint is undoubtedly to express gratitude for salvation, which is very common in religious belief.

We have not been able to determine the exact reason for his choice of the scratching place, but to a certain extent we can narrow it down. All I wish to say here is that there was some kind of connection between the graffito drawing of St. Nicholas and his image, which the author saw on the south tympanum of the church. After gaining access to the galleries of Hagia Sophia he stopped before the last or most eastern marble column of the balustrade in the western bay of the south gallery and just to the left end of the so-called 'Gates of Heaven and Hell'. It seems to me that the author's choice of a scratching place was due to his belief that the column was not only below, but also quite close to, the mosaic of St. Nicholas on the south tympanum of the church which he saw from the nave. This is a plausible suggestion, but further evidence is needed to prove it. One could possibly look for influence of the symbolic meaning of the church columns. It was popularly believed that they were the warrior-martyrs 'by whose labours faith was fortified'.⁴⁵ Personally I hold the view that the connection between our graffito drawing and the image of St. Nicholas on the south tympanum of the church is the most plausible. In addition, judging by the short space between the graffito and the floor, one may assume that the pose of the creator was apparently kneeling, and that would clearly suggest a purpose and function for his creation.

44 It seems to me much more likely that the drawing is to be regarded as a votive offering of a sailor not prior to but after a long and perilous voyage. This does not exclude of course the possibility that a number of ship graffiti might have been "donated" prior to embarkation as a sort of "good luck" for a journey or as an insurance against the perils at sea. For this, see MEINARDUS, *Mediaeval navigation*, op. cit., 31; A. BRYER, Shipping in the Empire of Trebizond, *The Mariner's Mirror* 52, 1966, 3–12; A. H. J. PRINS, *In Peril of the Sea – Marine Votive Paintings in the Maltese Islands*, Malta 1989, 6; A. CUSCHIERI – J. MUSCAT, Maritime Votive Paintings in Maltese Churches, *Melita Historica* X/2, 1989, 122, <http://mhs.eu.pn/mh2/19892.html> (retrieved March, 10, 2015). In interpreting the naval graffiti, J. Muscat (Il Graffiti Marittini Maltin = Maltese Ship Graffiti, in: Chr. Villain-Gandossi – S. Busuttill – P. Adam (eds.), *Medieval Ships and the Birth of Technological Societies, II. The Mediterranean Area and European Integration*, Malta 1991, 323–381) inferred that the persons who left them as lasting mementos in stone did so because they did not have the money to buy candles to offer in church.

45 T. VLADYSHEVSKAIA, On the Links between Music and Icon Painting in Medieval Rus, in: W. C. Rumfield – M. M. Velimirovich (eds.), *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, Cambridge 1991, 14–29, 16.

As always with graffiti, the problem seems to be how far one can trust them. However, if we try to sum up the above findings, the following conclusion may be drawn: we have a rare example of maritime ex-voto drawing with protecting saint or St. Nicholas from the church of Hagia Sophia. If we trust the dating of the ship, our graffito should belong to the period between 1350 and 1450. The newly found ship graffito proves once again to be a valuable source for our knowledge on shipping in the Mediterranean.

Unfortunately, many ex-voto drawings which have remained in their original places have been exposed to humidity and neglect as well as vandalism, without respect for the people of whom this may be the only memorial or legacy left behind.

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Figure I

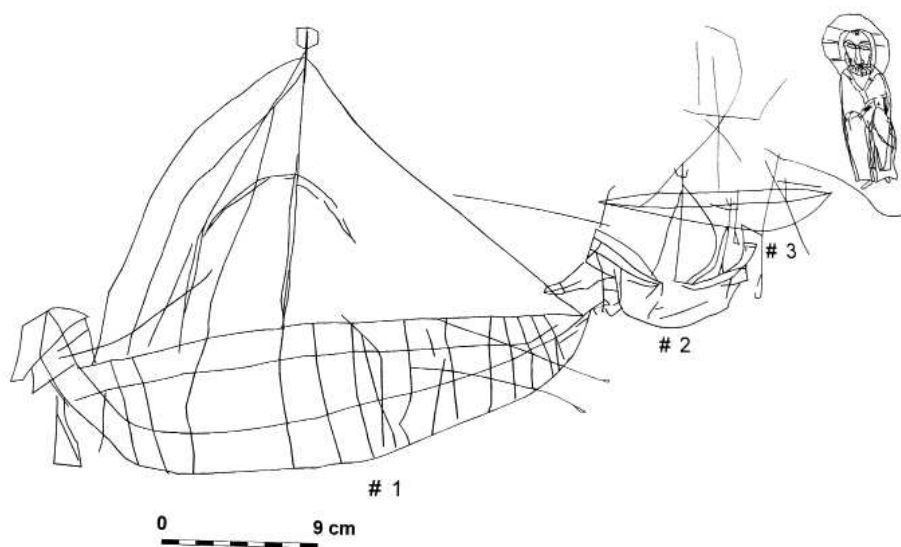


Figure II



Figure III

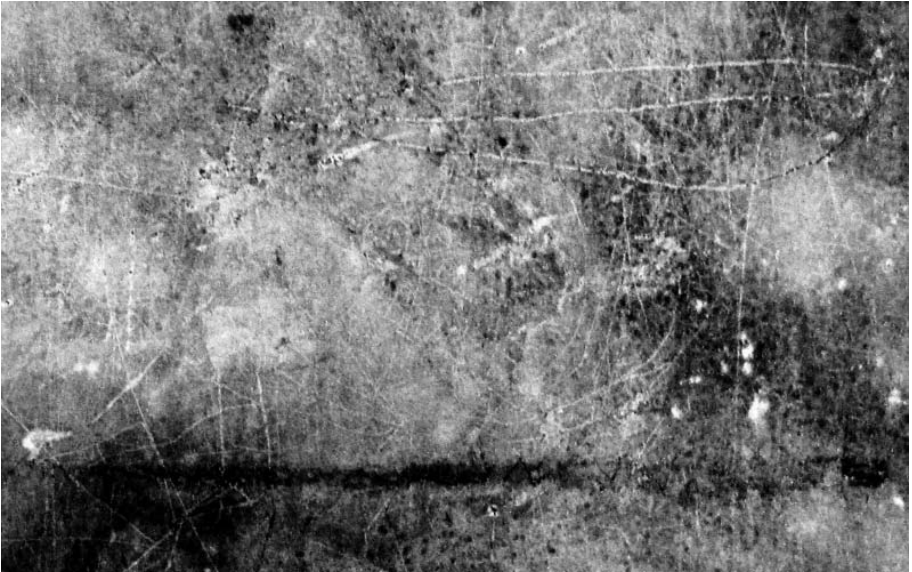


Figure IV



Figure V



Figure VI



Figure VII



Figure VIII