The wall paintings in rock-cut churches in Cappadocia contain a great number of male and female portraits of donors, most of which are already known to the scholarly world. In this paper, we shall focus on a group of such monuments in which women constitute an important element in the act of donation. Based on the fact that the paintings remain the only source of research on this subject, we shall comment on the role and identity of the female donors in thirteenth-century Christian society in Cappadocia. The examples in question will be discussed in chronological order.

The first example, dating from the beginning of the thirteenth century, is preserved in Karşı Kilise located in ancient Zoropassos, known today as Gülşehir. The pictorial program of this church, already well known, consists of paintings that have been dated to 1212–1213 by an inscription in the apse which mentions also the name of the emperor Theodore I Laskaris.

Three donor panels run across the lower registers of the church. The first one, unknown until 1996, is situated on the east side of the north wall. It appears to depict three male figures: in the centre, there is a large-scale figure wearing a turban and holding a model of the church. Here we certainly have the main donor, probably represented with his two sons, near the bema, and beneath the scene of Paradise in the upper register. The depiction of the Hand of God and two fragmentary inscriptions, one of which mentions Christ photodotes, contributes to this identification.

4 Jolivet-Lévy, Images et espace (cit. n. 2), p. 168, fig. 4.
The other two dedicatory panels belong to the female donors. They are located on the west wall, without particular iconographic and epigraphic attributes. A certain Irene is depicted in the south niche. A second secular female figure occupies the central niche. Two female figures, represented on a smaller scale and standing on either side of Irene, are identified as her daughters, Kale and Maria (Fig. 1). As was first suggested by Catherine Jolivet-Lévy, it is probably the wife and the daughters of the main donor on the east panel. Irene, standing in the middle, places her palms on the heads of her daughters. She wears a white dress and a long red undergarment beneath, of which only the lower part is visible. The white tunic, with wide sleeves inside the sleeves of the outer garment, is probably fastened with a belt just below the waist; it is adorned with circular and small star patterns. On the upper part, there is a vertical white band, similar to those on the daughters’ dresses, which looks forward to the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century garments of some secular female figures in Crete and the Dodecanese. Above her tunic Irene wears a red

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heavy mantle fastened at the front with a round clasp and patterned with medallions and a gold border band.

It is worth focusing on what appears to be an original headdress, a purple kerchief covering Irene’s hair, the front of which is made up of a metal band imitating a diadem, and which, until now, has gone unnoticed (Fig. 2). Long pendants are suspended on either side of the rim, bringing to mind the *pendulia* of the imperial crowns. The combination of a veil with a kind of diadem, which according to Maria Parani could help to keep the kerchief in place, is already known from depictions of female saints of the tenth century and seems to appear more frequently from the thirteenth century onward. In Cappadocia, in an unusual thirteenth-century representation in the church of St George in Ortaköy (Başköy), St Helena is depicted in a similar way; the veil is wound

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9 Unknown female saint in the church of St Panteleimon, Ano Boularioi, Mesa Mani, N. Drandakis, Βυζαντινές τοιχογραφίες της Μέσα Μάνης, Athens 1995, p. 372, fig. 9.

around the head while the diadem, covering a part of the latter (Fig. 3).11 Going back to Irene’s headdress, diadems with pendants are quite uncommon and, as far as we know, there is no evidence of a similar female secular donor representation with one. It is only in some late examples of diadems in which Byzantine ladies wear pendants attached to the lower rim in order to support large earrings,12 a combination which does not correspond with Irene’s image in Karşı Kilise. Whatever the interpretation of this particular headdress – for example it could be an iconographic solution to replace the absence of earrings or jewellery in her portrait – it clearly emphasizes Irene’s social rank and seems to have been conceived as an attribute equivalent to that of the husband’s turban, depicted on the north-eastern dedicatory panel. It is quite possible that Irene, together with the anonymous female donor represented in the next panel, probably a relative of hers, had specified the decorations on the west wall of the church. In fact, three portraits of female saints, Theodote, Kyriake and Paraskeve, are depicted on the same scale as the female donors, completing the pictorial program of the west wall. As Sharon Gerstel suggests,13 in Byzantium “the use of monumental decoration as a primary source for the space women occupied in the church was common”. In the light of this idea, we could possibly identify a women’s space in the western part of our church, that may be connected with a

11 Lafontaine-Dosogne, Nouvelles notes cappadociennes (cit. n. 2), fig. 17.
12 Parani, Reconstructing the Reality of Images (cit. n. 8), p. 80.
kind of “nonofficial female devotional or commemorative practice” (Fig. 4). Karşı Kilise may have been the private chapel of a family of local aristocrats where the wife played an important role in its decoration. Irene is depicted with her daughters in a manner which expresses her female piety and emphasizes her personal devotion to her intercessors above. Moreover, she is represented at the same scale as St Theodote, martyr saint of Nicaea, who stands on her left. The choice of St Theodote probably provides a clue concerning the geographic origins of the donor Irene, or at least, her possible connection with the Empire of Nicaea at the beginning of the thirteenth century. In 2001, soon after the restoration of the paintings in the church of Tatlarin, not far away from Karşı Kilise, Jolivet-Lévy was the first to observe a dedicatory inscription in the south apse. The year 1215 is mentioned with regard to this inscription as well as the name of a certain Rodathy bearing the title of protopapadia, the priest’s wife (Fig. 5).

The epithet protopapadia, referring to the wife of a protopapas (i.e. the foremost in the hierarchy of priests and of the lower level clergy) is of special interest. As far as the title of protopapas is concerned, the existing epigraphic evidence is far from abundant and is located in the Mani peninsula dating from the eleventh century and on, in Crete, dating from the four-

14 Irene places her palms on her daughters’ heads as they stand with their hands crossed over their chest. Even though there is no clear indication of a funerary inscription, or even of a tomb or an arcosolium present, we may have here a funerary painting in which the mother intercedes on behalf of her deceased children and she is also the donor of the composition. On other similar representations see T. Papamastorakis, Επιτύμβιες παραστάσεις κατά τη μέση και ύστερη βυζαντινή περίοδο, in: Deltion tes Christianikes Archaiologikes Hetaireias, 19, 1996–1997, p. 298; S.T. Brooks, The Double Portrait of Kale Kavala from Mistra, in: Byzantine Studies Conference: Abstracts of Papers, 21, 1995, p. 79; S.T. Brooks, Commemoration of the Dead: Late Byzantine Tomb Decoration (Mid–13th to Mid–15th Centuries), PhD Thesis, New York University 2002, pp. 47–51, 145–159.
teenth century, while two dedicatory inscriptions from Naxos contain the name *papas*. However, to the best of our knowledge, the title of *protopapadia* has not been preserved elsewhere in church inscriptions. It was common, however, for priests’ wives to use their husbands’ title. Monastic acts from later centuries refer to priests’ widows being called *papadia* and at the beginning of the fifteenth century a certain Irene from Cyprus, wife of a *protopapas*, is mentioned in the same manner as Tatlarin’s female donor.

The altar niche of the apse presents an imposing image of the Virgin and Child flanked by two angels, with the Virgin’s parents on both sides of the composition (Fig. 6). Above the Theotokos with Child appears the Hand of God, symbol of God the Father, coming from a section of heaven and giving the blessing in the direction of the Child’s head. In between the Hand

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22 On the title of *protopapadia or papadia* see ibid, pp. 189, 192.
of God and Christ’s nimbus there is an inscription containing verse three of Psalm 109. As the inscription is partly preserved, we may hypothesize that the protopapadia Rodathy, the widow or wife of a priest, could have been responsible for the choice of this distinct iconographic formula. It should also be noted that the other contemporary example of this composition, depicted in the church of the Archangelos in Cemil, was sponsored by clerics of low rank, simple priests and monks.

The evidence from the surviving monuments, as well as from historical sources and studies, attests to social and religious interaction: an inevitable consequence of political exchange, which grew in importance along the Konya-Nicaea connection since the beginning of the thirteenth century. Comparable social circumstances, but set against a slightly different political background, may also be found in the second half of the thirteenth century in the same region. Important evidence about female patronage emerges from the church at Yüksekli, published in 1987. Although the paintings of this chapel are of high quality, they are very badly preserved, yet they can be dated to the second half or the end of the thirteenth century, on the basis of their iconography and style. Today, the portrait of the female donor has completely disappeared; she was depicted in the west niche of the north wall, on the right side of St Christopher, in the place of honour on the spectator’s left (Fig. 7). Another donor, possibly her husband, was probably depicted to the left. The female donor is accom-


24 Ibid., pp. 128–129.


28 Ibid., p. 129, fig. 23.
panied by the inscription *Skribonissa* which seems to be used as a patronymic.29 On the south-west side of the barrel vault, in front of this dedicatory panel, the Baptism of Christ is depicted with some distinct iconographic features. A Western-style sailing vessel with a praying sailor figure on board is represented below the figure of Christ making a protective gesture. Scholars30 have seen in this an original iconographic formula consisting of an image imploring protection for an expedition at sea, or an *ex voto* offering for a successfully accomplished trip or pilgrimage. In fact, the depiction of St Sabas holding the scroll near the donor portraits may suggest an affiliation with them, and maybe even with the Holy Land.31 Furthermore, the depiction of these commissioners on either side of a monumental icon of St Christopher, the holy protector of travellers and pilgrims, may also point to this direction.

Whatever the interpretation of the above depiction, the visual link between this particular image of baptism and the dedicatory panel suggests that our Skribonissa was a member of a rich local family in which mobility seems to have been an integral part of their lifestyle. Perhaps she was the wife of a rich merchant or of a senior civil servant under the Seljuk administration.32 Indeed, the *pax mongolica* at the end of the thirteenth century was an appropriate period for the expansion of Anatolian trade, in which Greek officials were involved, sometimes on behalf of the Seljuk Turks.33 In addition, the higher stylistic features of the paintings and some iconographic components belonging to the Latin world,34 raise questions about the background of the painters and the way in which they were associated with the donors who seem to have the financial resources and the aesthetic sensibility to choose a workshop of such quality. The presence of a nimbus35 on Skribonissa’s portrait and her high-status position on the right of the saint’s figure may reveal a particular eagerness to emphasize her high social rank. The places given to St Kyriake and St Barbara who frame the donor’s image can be seen as a possible female influence on the decorative program, bearing in mind that three more...
depictions of female saints are preserved on the west part of the church in their usual place and in visual connection with Skribonissa.  

Another case of an act of female patronage, in which the woman’s initiative is examined in the particular political and social context of central Anatolia, is found at the well-known Kirk dam Altı church in the Peristrema valley, dated to the 1280s (1283–1295).  

In the pictorial program of this funerary church dedicated to St George the patron saint is represented in five different portraits. The main icon of St George in the centre of the north-western wall, to the right of the sanctuary, is flanked by Tamar and her husband Basil Giagoupes who bears the title emir (Fig. 8). According to some scholars, Tamar who is depicted in this dedicatory panel, may be identified as the well-known Georgian princess Gurji Khatun, accompanied here by her third husband.  

Another hypothesis suggests that she could be an otherwise unknown Georgian aristocratic woman married to a local Greek ruler,

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37 On female saints’ location and the hagiographical program of the church see ibid., pp. 128–130, no. 99.
39 V. Laurent, Note additionnelle: l’inscription de l’église Saint-Georges de Beliserama, in: Revue des Études Byzantines, 26, 1968, pp. 367–371; S. Vryonis, Another Note on the Inscription of the Church of St George of Belisera-
the commander of some Christian troops and a vassal of the Seljuk sultan. In fact, high-ranking Christian officials bearing the title emir are known to have served in the Seljuk army.\textsuperscript{40}

As for Tamar, it is evident that she is presented in the church in a way that highlights her Christian identity, even if the dedicatory inscription mentions both the Seljuk sultan Mas'ud II (1283–1305) and the Byzantine emperor Andronicus II (1282–1328).\textsuperscript{41} Tamar is depicted wearing a modest costume recognizable in the eastern Christian tradition. She wears a white dress with narrow patterned sleeves and over it a long green mantle with a white decorated collar, fastened at the neck and covering her shoulders. These details are also attested in several other contemporary portraits. A low round bonnet covers her head above a long white veil (Fig. 9). However, a more original feature is the double pair of earrings on each side, which have, until now, gone unnoticed and which may be considered belonging to an iconographic tradition common to the eastern Mediterranean world. Earrings are a regular part of female secular costume,\textsuperscript{42} but

\textsuperscript{40} The name of Giagoupes, ”Yakoub” for the Greeks and for the Turks, and his rich ”oriental” costume suggest his perfect integration into the multi-confessional society of the Seljuk state in the second half of the thirteenth century. Vryonis, Decline (cit. n. 25), p. 232; Balivet, Entre Byzance et Konya (cit. n. 25), p. 194.

\textsuperscript{41} On the other examples of dedicatory inscriptions from the thirteenth-century central Anatolia mentioning simultaneously both the Byzantine and Seljuk ruler see N.A. Bress, Die Inschriftenaufzeichnung des Kodex Sinaiicus 508 (976) und die Maria-Spiäiotissa-Klosterkirche bei Sille (Lykaonien), Berlin/Wilmersdorf 1922, pp. 5–80; A. Mitsani, Το εικονογραφημένο ευαγγέλιο του Βασιλείου Μελιτηνιώτη (Καισάρεια, 1226), in: Deltion tes Christianikes Archaeologikes Hetaireias, 26, 2003, p. 161.

\textsuperscript{42} Parani, Reconstructing the Reality of Images (cit. n. 8), p. 79.
double pairs are rare. In the church of St George in Ortaköy, which may also be dated to the late thirteenth century, two holy women, St Helena (Fig. 2) and St Anastasia Pharmakolytria, also wear a double pair of earrings (Fig 10). This feature may also be observed on a fifteenth-century local aristocratic female donor on Rhodes, as well as on some icons from Sinai dated to the late thirteenth century, where the female saints are represented with three earrings on each ear.43

Tamar is depicted on the left side of St George with her husband on the right, in the place of honour. Moreover, her gesture, offering the model of the church to the titular saint, testifies to her role as the primary donor along with the dedicatory inscription that records the giving of a vineyard.44

Under different social circumstances, many religious foundations were erected or renovated by women of the royal nobility and according to written sources, monastic archives, typika and dedicatory inscriptions, a large number of women also acted as donors either individually or with their children.45 It is difficult to identify the precise role of women in religious patronage. We can point out, however, that there are frequent mentions or representations of nuns and widows as founders or relatives of the donors in late Byzantine churches.46 The female donor Kale Meledone in the church of the Transfiguration in Pyrgi of Euboea and the otherwise unknown Maria in the church of St George at the village of Maratho in Naxos are already well-known.47 In addition to the above, the nun Kataphyge in the church of Hagia Triada in the village of Psinthos on Rhodes is mentioned as the primary donor and appears to be offering a model of the church.48

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47 KALOPISSI-VERTI, Dedicatory Inscriptions (cit. n. 10), pp. 83–84; ΜΙΤΣΑΝΙ, Η χορηγία στις Κυκλάδες (cit. n. 20), p. 425.

However, the case of Kirk dam Altı Kilise seems quite different from the examples mentioned above. Tamar, depicted in our church with her husband, was the driving force behind the act of donation highlighting her high social status and origin. An analogous example could be the well-known portrait of the Georgian queen T’amar, the only successor of the Bagratid dynasty.49

To sum up, the iconographic and epigraphic representation of female donors in the thirteenth-century wall paintings in Cappadocia does not seem to diverge from the main Byzantine tradition of the later centuries. Women possessing financial resources and members of the landed aristocracy appear in a secondary position, as wives or relatives of the primary donor in an attempt to display their social, cultural and religious identity. Tamar’s case, however, may be compared to those of Anna Radene in the church of Hagioi Anargyroi in Kastoria, and of Pepagomene in the church of Panagia Krena on the island of Chios, both portrayed in ways which underline their high aristocratic status and the prestige of their origins.50

It seems that the thirteenth-century complex political and social conditions of the area had contributed to the wealth of the female patrons along with the vitality of the Christian communities in the Seljuk territory. The female donor’s faith in the power of images of the past has remained undiminished but it is now expressed in a social context in which the female patron seems to have become more significant.

The information deriving from the dedicatory inscriptions and donor portraits of the thirteenth-century wall paintings in Cappadocia adds to our knowledge of women’s role in the Byzantine countryside and the part which is occupied by the Seljuk Turks, even in very different socio-economic conditions. They furthermore contribute to the research on the artistic quality of the wall paintings as well as to their connection with artistic trends of major art centres of the time.

Illustration credits: Figs. 1–6, 8–10: B. Tolga Uyar. – Fig. 7: C. Jolivet-Lévy.

49 On the portrait of queen T’amar in the church of Vardzia (1184–1186) and her status during her reign see A. Eastmond, Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia, University Park, PA 1998, pp. 108–113; A. Eastmond, Royal Renewal in Georgia: The Case of Queen Tamar, in: P. Magdalino (ed.), New Constantines. The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th–11th Centuries, London 1994, pp. 283–293. From the iconographical point of view, we could also mention the donor portrait in the church of St George in Pološko (1343–1345). The church was erected by the despot Joran Dragušin, depicted to the right of Christ, while his mother and daughter of the emperor of Bulgaria, the queen Maria, was responsible for the church’s decoration. She is represented as a nun on the left of the Christ, offering the model of the church, C. Grozdanov/D. Ćornacov, Les portraits historiques de Pološko, 2, in: Zograf, 15, 1984, pp. 85–93.

50 The two aristocratic ladies, although they are not the main donors but the founders’ wives, are shown in the place of honour, on the right side of the Virgin, and they are designated by their maiden names. See M. Panayotidi, Η προσωπικότητα δύο αρχόντων της Καστοριάς και ο χαρακτήρας της πόλης στο δεύτερο μισό του 12ου αιώνα, in: Δώρον: Τιμητικός τόμος στον καθηγητή Νίκο Νικολάνο, Thessaloniki 2006, pp. 160–162 and further bibliography; C. Pennas, Some Aristocratic Founders: The Foundation of Panagia Krena on Chios, in: J. Perreault (ed.), Les femmes et le monachisme byzantin. Actes du symposium d’Athènes, Athens 1988, pp. 65–66; A. E. Laiou, The Role of Women in Byzantine Society, in: Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik, 31.1, 1981, pp. 251–252. Thus, in the church of Kirk dam Altı, as in the two other cases, the husband’s authority is probably influenced by Tamar’s identity, who appears to be the primary donor.