During the late Byzantine period the evidence for female piety expressed through foundations, donations or commissions can be considered widespread and visible. One figure who stands out in this phase of history is the basilissa Maria Angelina Doukaina Palaiologina, who is not only considered to have generously donated icons, liturgical vessels and reliquaries especially to the monastery of the Metamorphosis in Meteora, but who is also attested as having founded, together with her husband Thomas Komnenos Preljubović, a monastery dedicated to the Virgin Gabaliotissa in Vodena, present-day Edessa.¹

This couple became despots of Ioannina in 1366/67, when Symeon Uroš, the emperor of Epiros and Thessaly from 1359 to 1371, delegated his son-in-law Thomas Preljubović to aid the residents of Ioannina against an Albanian conquest. Thomas ruled until his death at the hands of his guards on 23 December 1384. The most important written source for the knowledge of the history of Epiros in the second half of the fourteenth century, the so-called Chronicle of Ioannina, draws a clear picture of Thomas as being an incapable and tyrannical ruler, who was largely influenced by his personal advisors, while his wife and the true heir of the throne of Epiros is seen as the exact opposite of him.² Very shortly after Thomas’s assassination the basilissa married Esau de Buondelmonti for political reasons as the Albanians under the rule of Gjin Spata were threatening Ioannina; although not more successful than Thomas in this respect, Esau de Buondelmonti was considered to have been a much better lord than his predecessor.³ Maria Palaiologina herself died in 1394. Esau outlived her and reigned until 1411.

Although the richness of surviving donations by Maria Palaiologina and Thomas Preljubović is already exceptional, one object in this corpus stands out: the small icon⁴ depicting the Incresulcity of Thomas that is preserved in the mon-

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⁴ The icon is made of tempera on wood and measures 38 by 31.8 centimetres.
astery of the Metamorphosis in Meteora may be regarded as one of the rare Byzantine examples of a donor intruding in the depiction of a canonical scene (Fig. 1).

This icon has been of great interest to Byzantine scholars since its discovery by Andreas Xyngopoulos in the early 1960s, as its uniqueness is immediately noticeable: the common iconography of the Doubting Thomas is disrupted by a female figure wearing a red imperial garment and a splendid crown. She is standing just behind the apostle Thomas, who is as usual shown on the point of touching Jesus’s wound. Christ on the other hand does not react to Thomas, but rather to the presence of the woman dressed in the imperial garment by touching and blessing her crown. In this gesture Jesus incorporates another, a twelfth, male figure, whose body is hidden behind the woman and the apostle Thomas, but who looks straight out of the picture and at the viewer.

Xyngopoulos interprets this unusual composition persuasively in his article of 1964, by showing that the icon should be attributed to a donation of the couple Maria Palaiologina and Thomas Preljubović. Comparing the portraits on two other well-known icons, one also preserved in the monastery of the Metamorphosis and the other, which forms part of a precious diptych belonging to the treasury of the cathedral of Cuenca in Spain since the seventeenth century and which shows Maria Angelina in proskynesis at the feet of the Theotokos, he argues that the imperial woman in the icon of the Incredulity of Thomas depicts Maria Angelina herself intruding in the gospel scene. On these icons she is unmistakably identified through the inscription above her head: ΜΑΡΙΑ Η ΕΥΣΕΒΕΣΤΑΤΗ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΑ ΑΓΓΕΛΙΝΑ ΚΟΜΝΗΝΗ ΔΟΥΚΕΝΑ Η ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΝΑ on the icon in Meteora; ΜΑΡΙΑ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΑ ΑΓΓΕΛΙΝΑ ΔΟΥΚΕΝΑ ΠΑΛΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΝΑ on the diptych in Cuenca.

The fact that the person positioned between Maria and Thomas in addition forms a twelfth apostle, who also should not be part of this gospel scene, and that, as Xyngopoulos states, this face is rather portrait-like with individual traits, makes him assume that the only possible person here depicted could be Thomas Preljubović himself. Xyngopoulos also proposes a rather narrow dating from 1372 to 1383, arguing that the donation could not have been made before Maria’s brother, with the monastic name Ioasaph, entered the monastery and not after Thomas’s official recognition as despot by the Byzantine emperor in 1383, as he is not shown in an imperial garment.

This hypothesis has remained largely unquestioned until today. Major new opinions have

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6 The icon of the Theotokos in the Megalo Meteora has been seen in a direct connection with the so-called Cuenca diptych ever since its thorough study by Cirac Estopañan in 1939 resp. 1943. The Cuenca diptych depicts on its other leaf a standing Jesus at whose feet there has once been depicted Thomas Komnenos Preljubović, as the inscription ΘΩΜΑΣ ΔΕΣΠΟΤΗΣ ΚΟΜΝΗΝΟΣ Ο ΠΕΡΕΟΥΜΠΟΣ above this area states (cited after M. Lascaris, Deux chartes de Jean Uroš, dernier Némantine, in: Byzantion, 25–27, 1955–1957, p. 322). See Cirac Estopañan, Bizancio y España (cit. n. 1); A. Martínez Sáez, El díptico bizantino de la Catedral de Cuenca, Cuenca 2004.


9 See e.g. K. Weitzmann / M. Chadzidakis / K. Miatel / S. Radoicic, Frühe Ikonen, Sinai, Griechenland, Bulgari-
1: Meteora, Metamorphosis monastery, icon of the Incredulity of Thomas, after 1384
only agreed on the possibility that the icon was commissioned and donated by Maria Palaiologina alone and possibly after Thomas's death for his commemoration. Interestingly all interpretations fail to acknowledge adequately and interpret the part of this icon that makes it stand out from the majority of icons of this size: the presence of the woman in this gospel scene. The intrusion of a female person into a clearly fixed and hardly changing iconography is unparalleled in Byzantine painting and is thus a feature that requires a more thorough investigation than has been carried out so far.

Byzantine depictions in which donors are actually integrated within the field of a gospel scene can hardly be found before the same period, the second half of the fourteenth century, and it never becomes a common practice. It is worthy to note that the context of origin of these few instances must be sought within a Latin society. Examples include a depiction of the Incredulity of Thomas with portraits of two persons from the Lusignan family in the church of the Holy Cross in Pelendri, Cyprus, dated before 1375, and the portraits of king Janus and queen Charlotte at the lower end of the Crucifixion and a Latin bishop that bends over the Virgin in the Koimesis in the Royal Chapel in Pyrga, Cyprus, dated to 1421. This phenomenon is exceptional considering the fact that in the fourteenth century there is a sudden emergence of donor depictions within gospel scenes in Italian art. Among those are scattered instances of depictions, in which the protagonists of the gospel scene actually react to, or even interact with, the donor.

But most notable on the icon of the Incredulity of Thomas is that this female figure not only witnesses the event, but she forms an active part of it. Firstly she becomes the main content of this depiction, equal to the apostles and conscious of it, and secondly this fact is emphasized not only through her glorious appearance, but through the unmistakably expressive reaction of Christ.

To begin, the manner in which Jesus touches the forehead and crown of the woman evokes strong similarities to the common iconography.
of crowning scenes, although it is noteworthy that Jesus does not merely bless her symbol of regency while maintaining a frontal and sublime posture. In the majority of crowning scenes, i.e., scenes in which Jesus blesses a regent by touching his crown and thus legitimizing his or her power, Christ is depicted either as a celestial phenomenon seated in a mandorla, as a bust figure within a celestial segment or as a seated or standing frontal figure gazing at the viewer. In this icon of the Incredulity of Thomas Christ’s attention is instead focused on the presence of the imperial woman. He reaches in a most unnatural gesture over the head of the apostle Thomas to perform his blessing and he underlines this conscious act by also turning his eyes to her.

The kind of emphasis of Christ facing the crowned person – although completely unknown in this special mode – nevertheless exists in some few instances. Examples are the ivory plaque with Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos, today in the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, or the portrait of Roger II in the church of Santa Maria dell’Amiraglio in Palermo. But a crowning scene of this kind has not been preserved that includes an empress as its main protagonist.

Also exceptional is the existence of a female figure within a gospel scene and amongst the apostles. A single comparison for this kind of representation of a female person integrated within the group of the twelve disciples of Christ can be sought among the scenes of the Pentecost and the Ascension of Christ. A mode of depiction of both scenes includes the Theotokos herself, a female person shown at the centre of the apostles. Well-known early examples are folio 13v (Ascension) and folio 14v (Pentecost) of the Rabbula codex. Both show the Theotokos in the centre of the apostles and in this instance standing out within her function. While the composition of the Ascension of Christ remains basically unchanged up to the late Byzantine period and maintains a strong similarity to the common iconography of this subject in Western art, the scene of the Pentecost evolved in different directions in the East and in the West. The familiar image type in Byzantium would show exclusively the twelve apostles sitting in a semi-full-circle receiving the flames that ray out from a celestial segment or from the Hetoimasia, as in the mosaics in the dome of San Marco in Venice or in the inner narthex of Nea Mone.

In Western depictions of the Pentecost from the twelfth century onwards, however, the Theotokos becomes an integral and central part of the composition. As such she is most notably shown on the triptych by Orcagna from the high altar of SS Apostoli in Florence dated to around 1362, visually forming the highlighted centre of the scene (Fig. 2).

These comparisons point out that viewing the female figure within the icon of the Incredulity of Thomas as a representation of the donor of

16 This fact has recently been stressed by B. Cvetković, Christianity and Royalty, the Touch of the Holy, in: Byzantium, 72, 2002, pp. 363–364.
17 Cf. A. Grabar, L’empereur dans l’art Byzantin, Paris 1936, pp. 112–122, e.g. pls. XXIV 2, XXV 2.
22 Cf. G. Kreytenberg, Orcagna, Andrea di Cione, Ein universeller Künstler der Gotik in Florenz, Mainz 2000, pp. 158–162, pls. 44, 45, with further examples of the Pentecost scene from the fourteenth century including the Virgin by Taddeo Gaddi (fig. 190) and Jacopo di Cione (fig. 191).
this object is not the only possible interpretation. As a matter of fact the woman could be seen as the Virgin herself being crowned by Jesus. The postures of those two figures recall the Coronation of the Virgin in the manner that emerges in the late thirteenth century throughout Western art. Although the prominent mosaic by Jacopo Torriti dating from around 1290 in the apse of Santa Maria Maggiore still shows its protagonists sitting rather statically next to each other, this depiction of a crowning already reveals the strong connection of Jesus towards the Virgin, which is uniformly missing towards worldly emperors, but which is found in the icon of the Incredulity of Thomas. Throughout the fourteenth century the composition becomes more dynamic and the devotion of both Jesus and Maria towards each other increases, before this connection gets dissolved and ideologized by the development of a trinity-composition and thus a frontal posture of the Virgin by the fifteenth century.

The two versions of this iconography by Jacopo di Cione from the early 1370s are chronologically close to the icon of the Incredulity of Thomas. They show the Virgin sitting in veneration with her head lowered, arms crossed before her chest and turned towards Jesus, whose whole attention is focused on the act of blessing...
his mother’s crown with both hands, which is an honor that seems reserved only for her (Fig. 3).\(^\text{27}\)

It becomes clear that it is possible to consider the compositional singularity as an integration of an altered Coronation scene within the Incredulity of Thomas. The direct connection between this scene and the Mother of God is additionally given through the tradition of her Ascension in the *Legenda Aurea*: The apostle Thomas had missed the Dormition of the Virgin and demanded as in the case of Jesus a proof for this miraculous event. Thus the Virgin hands him over her girdle, while she ascends.\(^\text{28}\) The narrative moment right after this would be the Coronation of the Virgin. In this manner, through the associative integration of both instances of doubt, the circle of a narration that includes a theological demonstration of the divinity of Jesus is complete.

The fact that this interpretation of the icon of the Incredulity of Thomas introduces a strong influence of trends in Italian art in the second half of the fourteenth century could be explained by the affiliation of the donor of this artefact, who can nevertheless be identified as Maria Palaiologina. This different reading makes such a commission even more plausible, as Maria Palaiologina could act as a disguised donor within the picture, identifying herself with the Virgin and merely inserting her face, especially when considering Xyngopoulos’s starting point for the identification of the royal female figure within the icon with Maria Palaiologina. He relied on the strong facial similarity of this female figure to the portraits of Maria Palaiologina on the Cuenca diptych and the icon of the Theotokos in Meteora.\(^\text{29}\)

Such a form of identification is not unknown in Byzantine art. A prominent example of the hidden participation of a donor in an apocryphal event is the case of Constantine Monomachos, whose features can be seen in the figure of king

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27 The monumental polyptych dating to the years 1370/1371 is today preserved in the National Gallery in London and the smaller panel from 1372/1373 is in the Galleria dell’Accademia in Florence. Cf. Kreytenberg, Orcagna (cit. n. 22), p. 181, figs. 203, 204.

28 J. de Voragine, *Die Legenda Aurea*, tr. Richard Benz, Heidelberg 1979, pp. 588–589. A relic of the girdle is still venerated in Prato, where it was brought, according to the local legend, by a Michele Dagomari from Jerusalem in 1141. Its popularity grew especially from the beginning of the fourteenth century on, when a transept chapel to house the relics and a marble pulpit to display them on feast days were annexed to the cathedral and the depiction of the miraculous moment became a common motif in Italian art. Cf. A. McLean, *Prato, Architecture, Piety and Political Identity in a Tuscan City-State*, New Haven/London 2008, pp. 152–158, 173–193.

Solomon in the scene of the Anastasis in Nea Mone on Chios.\(^{30}\)

If Maria Palaiologina commissioned this icon and placed herself in a very central position, although not as herself but as her name patron the Virgin Maria, the reference to Italian art does not surprise. Maria Palaiologina as basilissa and regent of Ioannina derived from the Orsini family, which had ruled over Kephalenia since the end of the twelfth century and over the Despotate of Epiros since 1318. Her legitimacy over the throne of Epiros was assured through the heritage of her mother, Thomaïs Orsini. Although the Orsinis were well established in the region of the Ionian Islands and Epiros, it is clear that they maintained good relations with Italy and other Italian families settled on Greek territory, which is demonstrated by their decision to make Esau de Buondelmonti, who derived from the Florentine family of Acciajuoli, the second husband of Maria Palaiologina.\(^{31}\)

The connection to Italy can also be traced in other artefacts that are assuredly associated with Maria and her first husband Thomas Preljubović, especially with a chalice preserved in the monastery of Vatopedi (Fig. 4). This precious liturgical vessel shows formal and technical features that originated in Western art. Its shape with a six-lobed foot, a knop with projecting bosses and a bell-shaped bowl with a crown, the leaves of which form a fleur-de-lys, are typically Italian. The technique of translucent basse-taille enamel, as known from Siena and Venice, is nevertheless used to depict Byzantine iconography and the Greek donor inscription ΘΩΜΑ/Σ ΔΕΣ/ΠΟΤΗΣ Κ/ΟΜΝΗΝ/ΟΣ ΠΡΕΛ/ΔΟΥ-ΜΠΟΣ\(^{32}\).

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30 Cf. Mouriki, Nea Moni (cit. n. 20), pp. 136–139, pls. 48, 53; R. Ousterhout, Rebuilding the Temple, Constantine Monomachus and the Holy Sepulchre, in: Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 48.1, 1989, p. 78. This is a point that makes Nancy Patterson Sevcenko underline the singularity of the icon, by assuming that it is common practice in Byzantine art to add the donor’s own portrait to the body of a holy person, but unknown to participate as evident donor in a holy scene, cf. Patterson Sevcenko, Representation of Donors (cit. n. 10), pp. 162–163.

31 For the Orsini family on the territory of Epiros see Nicol, Despotate of Epiros (cit. n. 3), pp. 40–43, 57–61, 80–83, but also the revealing genealogical tables 2 and 5.

most unusual feature, however, remains the little statuette of an enthroned Christ making a gesture of blessing with both hands. The visibility of the back of his throne is singular in fourteenth-century Byzantine and Italian art. It has been suggested that such a statuette is best suited for the top of a monstrance reliquary.\(^3\)

It becomes evident that it would not be unusual for the rulers of Ioannina, the basilissa Maria Palaiologina and the despot Thomas Preljubović, to commission artefacts that combine features current in the regions beyond the sea and beyond the mountains and that create unique artistic outcomes. In the case of the icon of the Incredulity of Thomas it is even possible to trace a regionally broad impact of this newly found iconography. This icon that foregrounds the importance of a female figure within a narrative that originally excludes such a presence was copied throughout Epiros and the environs of Meteora in six frescoes dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.\(^4\) All of these post-Byzantine copies are found in the naos of the katholikon of a monastery and have in common the presence of the female imperial figure standing behind the apostle Thomas.

\(^{33}\) Cf. Durand, Innovations gothiques (cit. n. 1), pp. 339–341, and Ballian, Liturgical Implements (cit. n. 1), pp. 119–120, agree on all major points concerning this object.

\(^{34}\) The probability that more representations existed in other post-Byzantine monasteries in Epiros can not be excluded, although the state of preservation on one hand, and the state of documentation on the other hand do not allow for further speculation.
The earliest depiction is on the west wall of the katholikon of the monastery Hagios Nicholaos ton Philanthropinon on the island of Ioannina and can be dated to the year 1542 (Fig. 5) and attributed to Frangos Katelanos and his workshop. The scene has a traditional composition including two groups of apostles on either side of the main event, and Jesus is shown frontally with his right hand raised to the sky and his left hand uncovering his wound. On his right side behind the apostle Thomas a woman in imperial garment is depicted, although in this instance Christ does not react to her presence; she becomes a part of the uniform group of the apostles.

In 1548 the same workshop painted the naos of the katholikon of the Barlaam monastery in Meteora. Here they integrated once again the scene of the Doubting Thomas with the imperial female figure (Fig. 6). This depiction nevertheless stands out amongst the other copies. On the one hand it is painted on a prominent position above the south entrance and also exactly above the donor inscription, thus it is meant to be particularly visible. On the other hand Christ is again blessing the present woman in an exaggerated gesture. It can be assumed that the painters knew the “original icon”, which was on display in the neighboring monastery of the Metamorphosis.

6: Meteora, Barlaam monastery, scene of the Incredulity of Thomas, 1548

37 Mentioned in Weitzmann, Frühe Ikonen (cit. n. 9), p. 85; Acheimastu-Potamianu, Philanthropenon (cit. n. 35), pp. 174–175; Martínez Sáez, El diptico (cit. n. 6), p. 43.
The direct influence of the icon can also be seen in the depiction of the same scene on the west side of the pier that divides the naos and the narthex of the katholikon of the monastery of Hagia Triada in Meteora. In the paintings that date to 1692 Christ reaches out to bless the imperial woman (Fig. 7). It is clear that the spatial proximity to the “original icon” have inspired the painters in those two instances, as this most expressive gesture by Jesus only occurs in Meteora, although in frescoes dating 150 years apart.

Sixty kilometers northeast of Meteora in the katholikon of the monastery Hosios Nikanoras in Zavorda, the scene of the Incredulity of Thomas is painted on the south wall of the diaconikon (Fig. 8). Although the composition integrates the woman, and places her centrally in between Thomas and the rest of the apostles to the right of Jesus, there is no reaction to her presence, just as in the version on the lake of Ioannina. The paintings of the katholikon are generally attributed to Frangos Katelanos, although the only secure dating can be made through an inscription on the lower part of the drum, which indicates the year 1592.

In the katholikon of the Tsoukas monastery 20 kilometres west of Ioannina the composition—

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38 Cf. Sophianos, Meteora (cit. n. 9), p. 91; Steppan, Meteora (cit. n. 36), p. 254.
39 For the attribution to the workshop of Frangos Katelanos see Acheimastu-Potamianu, Philanthropenon (cit. n. 35), pp. 178–179; N. Moutsopoulos, Grevena, Antiquities, Fortifications, Villages, Monasteries and Churches of the Prefecture of Grevena, Thessaloniki 2006, p. 142. For the inscription of the year 1592 see S. Bogiatzes, Symbole sten historia tes ekklesiastikes arketonikes tes kentrikes Hellados kata to 16o aiona, hoi munes tou Hagiou Bessarionos (Dousiko) kai tou Hosiou Nikanoros (Zaborda), Athens 2000, p. 75, pl. 57b. The discrepancy between the attribution and the dating might not have been addressed so far, although in the area of the depiction of the Incredulity of Thomas a small part of the painting has been cleaned and it shows an underlying layer, which could belong to the original décor, while the layer which is now visible is that of 1592.
8. Zavorda, monastery of Hosios Nikanoras, scene of the Incredulity of Thomas, 1592

10. Arta, church of Hagia Theodora, scene of the Incredulity of Thomas, late seventeenth or early eighteenth century
al type of the imperial woman merely part of the apostle group has been used in such a way that it bears a strong resemblance to the fresco in the monastery Hagios Nicholas ton Philanthropinon (Fig. 9). This depiction is situated on the northern wall of the western cross-arm and is dated to the year 1779.40

The last citation of the Meteora icon of the Incredulity of Thomas is found in the church of Hagia Theodora, formerly the katholikon of the monastery dedicated to that saint, and the frescoes have been dated to the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century.41 In the center of the northern wall of the main nave, the figural composition of the scene resembles most closely the solution found in the monastery of Hosios Nikanoras, although the architectural setting is different. The imperial woman is again central, but not participating (Fig. 10).

These depictions show that the reference to the icon of the Doubting Thomas in the monastery of the Metamorphosis is not a scattered phenomenon that might for example be associated with the fact that Maria Palaiologina is depicted as the donor. What can be seen is the development of an image type that must have been regionally well distributed and popular. This reception may have been fostered by the knowledge that Maria Angelina had donated this object. Her memory was indeed kept alive in Meteora and in Ioannina.42 But the development of the image type integrating the imperial woman points to a theological understanding of this figure. In this regard, an identification with the Mother of God as Maria Regina is most logical as, contrary to the Byzantine period, this iconographic variant was in post-Byzantine times already accepted and often depicted.43

The icon of the Incredulity of Thomas is a telling example of the modes adapted in a late Byzantine society to express concepts of oneself. In this case the artefact refers to a close connection to Italy, although using a typically Byzantine means of expression that facilitated a dissemination of this newly invented iconographic version in large scale and over more than four centuries.

Illustration credits: Fig. 1: after Evans, Faith and Power (cit. n. 1), pl. 24A. – Figs. 2, 3: after Kreytenberg, Orcagna (cit. n. 22), pl. 44a, fig. 204. – Fig. 4: after N. Bonovas (ed.), Le mont Athos et l’Empire byzantine, trésors de la sainte montagne, Paris 2009, pl. 72. – Figs. 5–10: F. Gargova.

43 See e.g. the main icon of the monastery of the Metamorphosis in Meteora dating to 1790, whose Theotokos is shown wearing a crown, cf. Sophianos, Meteora (cit. n. 9), p. 134.