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# Byzantium

330—1453

Edited by Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki

ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS

First published on the occasion of the exhibition  
'Byzantium 330–1453'

Royal Academy of Arts, London  
25 OCTOBER 2008 – 22 MARCH 2009

This exhibition has been organised by the  
Royal Academy of Arts, London, with the  
collaboration of the Benaki Museum, Athens

Supported by  
the J.F. Costopoulos Foundation,  
the A.G. Leventis Foundation and  
the Stavros Niarchos Foundation

Travel partner: Cox & Kings

The Royal Academy of Arts is grateful to  
Her Majesty's Government for agreeing  
to indemnify this exhibition under the  
National Heritage Act 1980, and to Resource,  
The Council for Museums, Archives  
and Libraries, for its help in arranging  
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Colour origination: DawkinsColour

Book design and cartography:  
Isambard Thomas, London

Printed in Italy by Graphicom

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Reprinted with corrections, 2008

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library

ISBN 978-1-905711-27-7 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-1-905711-26-0 (hardback)

Distributed outside the United States and Canada  
by Thames & Hudson Ltd, London

Distributed in the United States and Canada  
by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York

EDITORIAL NOTE

All measurements are given in centimetres,  
height before width before depth.

All dates given for rulers are dates of reign.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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# Byzantium and the West

MICHELE BACCI

**C**ONTACTS BETWEEN BYZANTIUM AND the medieval West occurred in all sorts of ways and at several levels. They are just one part of a wider web of cross-cultural convergences in the medieval Mediterranean. These included the dynamics of interaction within the culturally mixed societies of the Levant, the expansion of artistic knowledge through the movement of drawings and itinerant artists, the circulation of works of art along sea routes, the role played by ports and universally shared cult-places in the dissemination of forms and images, as well as the direct or indirect appropriation, imitation and refashioning of other people's artistic models for political, religious and economic purposes.

A major trend in this process was represented by the competition of Rome and Constantinople in their role as the important centres of Christian worship. As the apostolic and patriarchal see of Latin Christianity, Rome soon started working out its autonomous web of holy places associated with the worship of sites, relics and holy icons which aimed to evoke and refashion the aura of the most famous *loca sancta* of Palestine. The painted staurotheke of the Vatican Museums, made in Byzantium in the tenth century and preserved at least from the twelfth century onwards in the Lateran Sancta Sanctorum, is a good witness to this phenomenon (cat. 244). In many respects, papal strategies for the promotion of Rome as the New Jerusalem were analogous and even alternative to those enacted in Constantinople, where the most famous collections of Christological and Marian relics were established, especially between the tenth and twelfth centuries; such a competition was strengthened after the emergence of the juridical and theological dissensions which lead to the schism of 1054 and the Fourth Crusade of 1202–04. In those centuries, the astounding amount of holy treasures preserved in the

Byzantine capital strongly contributed to the shaping of its aura and aroused public admiration even in the westernmost lands: Constantinople then became the goal for pilgrims from throughout Europe, and some authors even stated that it had been founded to prevent Saracens from desecrating the most precious relics of Asia and Africa.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the Crusades many Eastern reliquaries were either bought or looted and entered into the treasures of Western cathedrals and monasteries: some of them were contemporary or slightly earlier works of art, such as the late fourteenth-century staurotheke presented in 1463 to the Venetian Scuola della Carità by the famous humanist Bessarion (1399/1400–72; see cat. 253), whereas others were already very old objects, such as the early ninth-century nielloed reliquary of the True Cross (cat. 52) which is deemed to have been owned by Pope Innocent IV (1253–54). In their new settings, such precious containers were usually left unaltered, though often conveniently enframed within Gothic monstrances.<sup>2</sup>

The desire for Byzantine reliquaries was enhanced by their material preciousness. Luxury goods of both profane and religious use, including manuscripts with sumptuous bindings, Islamic and Byzantine silks, Syrian and Egyptian glass and metalwork, as well as Italian, Greek, Arab and Chinese ceramics, were shared by international aristocratic milieux, regardless of their provenance; they were also included within church treasures, as shown by the extraordinary collection of precious objects in San Marco, Venice (cats 58, 62, 64, 80, 81, 176).<sup>3</sup> Westerners were also eager to appropriate more monumental church furnishings, such as brass doors (cat. 265).

Icons were deemed to be the artistic genre more peculiar to Byzantine tradition: from the eleventh century onwards, Westerners started telling the stories of the most sacred images of



Christ and the Virgin worshipped in Constantinople, and became accustomed to using icons as visual counterparts to individual devotion. Their high reputation was stimulated not only by their ideal status as more or less direct copies of famous archetypes 'not painted by human hands' or made from life by such saints as the Evangelist Luke, but also by the compositional and iconographic features which made them efficacious portraits enabling communication between the devotees and their holy benefactors. One of the most recognisable characteristics of this kind of image was a half-figure presentation, as stated in the early twelfth century by the French theologian Hugh of St Victor.<sup>4</sup> One accurate imitation of this model is the early thirteenth-century Madonna signed by a certain '...nellus', now in the Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa (cat. 252).

The wave of Byzantinising painting in thirteenth-century Italy (the so-called *maniera greca*) was largely promoted by the involvement of icons in the religious practices of both individuals and groups, including the new mendicant orders. Eastern panels are thought to have been widely introduced into Italy in this period, although very few original icons (such as the Pisan *Madonna di sotto gli organi*; fig. 41) are still extant. Italian towns which had direct connections with the Eastern Mediterranean, such as Pisa, Venice and Genoa, probably played a major role in the dissemination of this new type of religious image, which was rapidly adapted for new settings and functions: the small dossal made for a location on the altar table of the Pisan church of San Silvestro (cat. 248) and including a Deisis at its centre was an abridged version of the iconographic programme associated with the horizontal icons decorating the epistyles of Byzantine sanctuary screens.<sup>5</sup>

New devotional trends, nourished by the mendicant orders in the Late Middle Ages, laid

emphasis on the Passion as the precondition of human salvation and favoured the making of images encouraging their beholders to feel remorse for their sins. Giunta Pisano, a painter known to have worked for both the Franciscan and Dominican orders, revitalised the Byzantine scheme of Christ dead on the Cross by visually stressing its painful aspects. A special image, that of the *Akra tapeinosis*, which showed the Saviour's dead body unnaturally lifted upwards and often associated with a sorrowful representation of the Virgin, was frequently repeated in the West and transformed into one of the most popular themes telling of individual and Eucharistic devotion, that later known as the *Imago pietatis*, *Vir dolorum* or Man of Sorrows (cats 246, 247.1–2).<sup>6</sup>

Besides iconographic schemes and functional models, Western artists also happened to imitate some technical and stylistic devices of their Byzantine colleagues. This proves to be especially true for painting, which was prized as the most distinctive 'Greek' art: for example, according to the twelfth-century *Treatise on Several Arts* by the German monk Theophilus, the Byzantines excelled in the use and combination of colours.<sup>7</sup> The impact of painting in its different media (book illuminations, murals, icons and mosaics)



Fig. 41  
*Madonna di sotto gli organi* (icon of the Virgin Dexiokratousa) c. 1200. Tempera and gold leaf on wood, 93 × 55 cm

Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, Pisa



on the arts of the medieval West was much greater than that of architecture, sculpture or metalwork. Stylistic analysis shows that, especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Latin painters made use of earlier and contemporary Byzantine formal devices in their quest for a more naturalistic rendering of the human body: implicitly, this practice shows that they looked at Byzantium as the heir to a long artistic tradition rooted in Roman and Early Christian Antiquity.<sup>8</sup>

But how did they become acquainted with Byzantine art? Besides the study of works of art preserved in the West, they could make use of collections of drawings, such as the rather puzzling Magdalen College Musterbuch of the late twelfth to early thirteenth century (cat. 264), or establish direct contacts with Greek painters, some of whom are known to have worked for Latin patrons either in the West (as Helias Spileotes, a book illuminator working in Cologne in 1021, did)<sup>9</sup> or in their homeland (see the bilingual Gospel-book of c. 1300, cat. 261, made in Constantinople for a Western reader). The involvement of Byzantine masters was especially prized by those powers which, like Venice and Norman Sicily, had traditional connections with Constantinople and aimed to appropriate the apparatus and symbolic role of the Eastern empire, best conveyed by the splendour of mosaic decoration.<sup>10</sup>

Fig. 42  
*Deceased Woman  
in the Presence of the  
Enthroned Virgin and  
Child* (fragment),  
c. 1453. Wall painting,  
131 × 170 cm

Chora Monastery  
(Kariye Camii), Istanbul



It is not so easy to find examples of Western influence on Byzantine art. Nonetheless, interesting cases of fertile interaction are the adoption of painted initials in some Greek manuscripts of the ninth century, and the use of cloisonné enamels, probably borrowed from Carolingian practice.<sup>11</sup> In the Palaiologan period, the art of the metropolitan centres occasionally made use of Gothic ornamental features in monumental painting and sculpture, and appropriated translucent enamels for the decoration of liturgical vessels;<sup>12</sup> an Italianate mural made shortly before 1453 in the narthex of the Chora Monastery Church in Constantinople is an isolated testimony to the fascination with Early Renaissance style (fig. 42).<sup>13</sup>

In earlier times, there had been much more interaction in the Western borderlands of the Orthodox world, such as in South Italy (whose territories were largely included in the Byzantine Empire before the Norman conquest in the eleventh century)<sup>14</sup> and the Balkans (especially the Serbian kingdom),<sup>15</sup> where different styles were mixed together, such as Byzantine-type paintings with Romanesque and Gothic architectural patterns. In the wake of the Crusades, and especially after 1204, with the establishment of several Latin-ruled territories along the sea routes of the Eastern Mediterranean, cross-cultural connections were intensified. In the mixed societies of Acre,<sup>16</sup> Lebanon,<sup>17</sup> Cyprus,<sup>18</sup> Rhodes,<sup>19</sup> Athens,<sup>20</sup> Euboea,<sup>21</sup> Crete<sup>22</sup> and Constantinople itself (which was ruled by Latin emperors from 1204 to 1261),<sup>23</sup> Westerners imported their own habits and traditions, which were either simply juxtaposed or integrated or even mingled and synthesised with the art and style of the indigenous populations. Glazed pottery from late medieval Cyprus (cats 257, 258) suggests the blending of forms of different origins that is so typical of multicultural societies.





Whereas artistic synthesis, resulting from a long process of formal selection, was more natural for luxury goods and everyday objects, other considerations often prevailed in the field of religious art. With some exceptions (among them the fourteenth-century Italian murals in Rhodes and Famagusta),<sup>24</sup> the Greeks under Frankish rule tended to remain loyal to Byzantine tradition in the representation of saints and sacred events, as shown here by the detached fresco (cat. 255) with St Catherine in imperial garb from a chapel on Mount Penteli, dating back to 1233–34, when Attica was under Latin rule; this loyalty did not prevent them from adopting Western ornaments or architectural devices if these proved useful to enhance a church's sumptuousness, as is made clear by the fourteenth-century Gothic church of St George of the Greeks in Famagusta (fig. 43).<sup>25</sup>

Latin settlers, though making frequent use of Western models, especially in architecture, sculpture and book illumination,<sup>26</sup> also shared an interest in Byzantine pictorial tradition and often patronised Greek painters to decorate their churches, such as at Abu Ghosh and Bethlehem in twelfth-century Palestine<sup>27</sup> or in the fourteenth-century murals of the Arap Camii in Pera<sup>28</sup> and Our Lady of Carmel in Famagusta.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, they soon appropriated the Eastern Christian devotional use of icons and started sponsoring and

producing icon-like panels, most of them dating from the mid- to the second half of the thirteenth century: though preserved for the most part in the Monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai, there is no general agreement as to their original place of production, whether in Acre or on Sinai itself, even if it is plausible that many of them were brought by pilgrims as ex-votos to the holy site. Be this as it may, the icons often display formal characteristics which point to the interaction with the artistic traditions of the different religious groups settled in the wider area of the Eastern Mediterranean. Eventually icon painting, represented by the mid-thirteenth century icon with St George on horseback (fig. 44), consisted of an original mixture of Byzantine, French, Italian, Armenian, Arab Christian and Islamic elements.<sup>30</sup>

Fig. 43  
The metropolitan church of St George of the Greeks, Famagusta, second half of the fourteenth century

Fig. 44  
*St George on Horseback*, from Crusader Palestine, mid-thirteenth century. Egg tempera and gold leaf on pine panel, 26.8 × 18.8 cm

British Museum, London









244 ←

# Reliquary of the True Cross

Constantinople,  
second half of the tenth century  
Tempera and gold on board,  
26 × 12.5 × 2.5 cm

Vatican Museums, Vatican City, inv. no. 61898

245 →

# Reliquary of the True Cross

Constantinople, eleventh century  
(central plate); Rhine-Meuse, early  
thirteenth century (mount, reverse  
and lid) and seventeenth century  
(corner angles), silver gilt, silver,  
copper, champlevé enamel, gem  
stones, wood core, velvet, brown  
varnish (reverse), total height 30 cm  
(Byzantine plate: 13 × 10 cm)

Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Objets  
d'Art, OA 8099





246

Two-sided icon with the  
Virgin Hodegetria and  
the Man of Sorrows

Kastoria, last quarter of twelfth  
century

Egg tempera on wood,

115 × 77.5 × 3.5 cm

Byzantine Museum, Kastoria









247.1-2

UMBRIAN ARTIST

*Diptych with the Virgin and  
Child and the Man of Sorrows*

c.1250-60

Egg tempera and gold on panel,  
left wing 32.2 x 22.8 cm; right wing  
32.4 x 22.8 cm

National Gallery, London, NG 6572 and NG 6573









248

FRANCESCO DA PISA (?)  
(fl. 1298–1301)

Deisis with St Catherine  
of Alexandria and  
St Sylvester

Second half of thirteenth century  
Tempera and gold on poplar,  
87 × 217 cm

Museo Nazionale di San Matteo,  
Pisa, inv. no. 1582









249

GIUNTA PISANO (fl. 1236–54)

Processional cross  
with Crucifixion on both  
sides

Thirteenth century

Tempera and gold on poplar wood,  
113 × 83 cm

Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa, inv. no.  
2325













## 250 ←

Triptych with Virgin  
and Child enthroned  
with angels and saints

Made in Italy, possibly at Rome,  
Naples or Siena, between c. 1315  
and c. 1340

Egg tempera with gold on gesso,  
canvas and wood, painted in red  
on verso, 39.7 × 27.9 cm (open)

Polesden Lacey. The McEwan Collection (the  
National Trust)

## 251 →

Icon with the Virgin  
and Child, Church  
Feasts and Saints

Venice (?), mid-fourteenth century

Egg tempera on wood, stucco,  
gold glass, 42 × 30 × 1 cm

Benaki Museum, Athens, inv. no. 2972









252 ←

Icon with Virgin and Child

Mid-thirteenth century  
Tempera and gold on poplar,  
80.2 × 59.7 cm

Museo Nazionale di San Matteo,  
Pisa, inv. no. 1576

253 →

GENTILE BELLINI (d. 1507)

*Cardinal Bessarion and Two  
Members of the Scuola della  
Carità in Prayer with the  
Bessarion Reliquary*

Venice, 1472–73  
Egg tempera with gold and silver  
on panel, 102.3 × 37.2 cm

National Gallery, London, NG 6590





254

Wall mosaic with  
head of an angel

Torcello, second half  
of eleventh century  
Mosaic, 31.6 × 24.6 cm

Musée du Louvre, Paris,  
Département des Objets d'Art, OA 6460



255 →

Wall painting with  
St Catherine

1233-34  
Detached fresco, 211 × 97 × 7 cm

The Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Byzantine and  
Christian Museum, Athens, BSM 1067

256 →

Funerary cloth with  
Othon de Grandon and  
the Virgin and Christ

Cyprus, last quarter of the  
thirteenth century  
Embroidered taffeta and silk, 88 ×  
328 cm

Historisches Museum, Berne

















257 ←←

Glazed bowl with a representation of a fish

Cyprus, Paphos region, first half of the thirteenth century

Clay, lead-glaze, height 9.3 cm; diameter 17 cm; diameter of base 6.8 cm

Leventis Municipal Museum, Nicosia, inv. no. B/2003/070

258 ←

Glazed bowl with a representation of a falconer

Cyprus, Lapithos region, early fifteenth century

Clay, lead glaze, height 9.8 cm; diameter 13.8 cm; diameter of base 7.3 cm

Leventis Municipal Museum, Nicosia, inv. no. B/2003/021



259 ←

Capital with angels

Thirteenth century

Marble, 29.4 × 30.5 × 26.5 cm; diameter of base 21 cm

The Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 23rd Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, Chalkis, inv. no. 14314

260 →

The Melisende Psalter covers

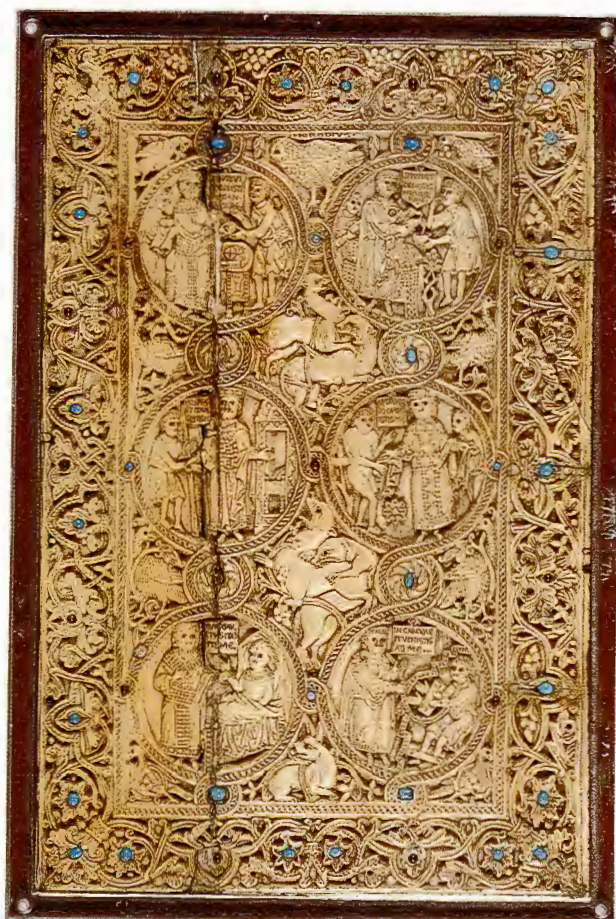
Jerusalem, c. 1131-43

Ivory, 22 × 14.5 × 0.5 cm;

silver and silk, 23 × 5.8 × 0.8 cm

The British Library, London, Egerton 1139









οὐ χρεὶσιν ἑαυτοῖς φερεῖν  
 οἱ δὲ ἑαυτοῖς φερεῖν· οὐ  
 κέχουσιν ὡδὲ· εἰ μὴ π  
 τι ἄρτοσ καὶ δύο ὀϊχθῦς·  
 ὁ δὲ εἶπε· φέρετε μοι αὖ  
 τοῖς ὡδὲ· καὶ κεράσας  
 τοῖς ὄχλοις ἀμακλήθη  
 πάντα τὸν χορὸν· καὶ  
 ὑποῖ τοῖς περὶ τὸν ἄρτον  
 καὶ τοῖς δύο ὀϊχθῦσιν, ἀ  
 μαβράσας εἰς τὸν ὠκεόν·  
 ἀβύσσος· καὶ ἔλασας· ἐ  
 δωκε τοῖς μαθηταῖς τὸ  
 ἄρτον· οἱ δὲ μαθεύοντο  
 τοῖς ὄχλοις· καὶ ὁ φερό

non habet necesse ut  
 date uos illis manducare  
 Responderunt ei. Nō  
 habemus hic nisi quinq  
 panes et duos pisces  
 Qui ait eis. Afferte huc  
 illos michi. Et cū uidisset  
 turbā dissonbere supra  
 fenū accepit quinq panib  
 et duobz piscibz aspicies i  
 celū benedixit et fregit. et  
 dedit discipulis pa  
 nes. Discipuli au  
 tem turbis. Di  
 scipuli autem tur  
 bis. et manducauer

261 ←

The Four Gospels,  
 folio 55r

Constantinople, beginning of the  
 fourteenth century

Manuscript on parchment,  
 33.5 × 25 cm

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris,  
 Greek manuscript 54

262 →

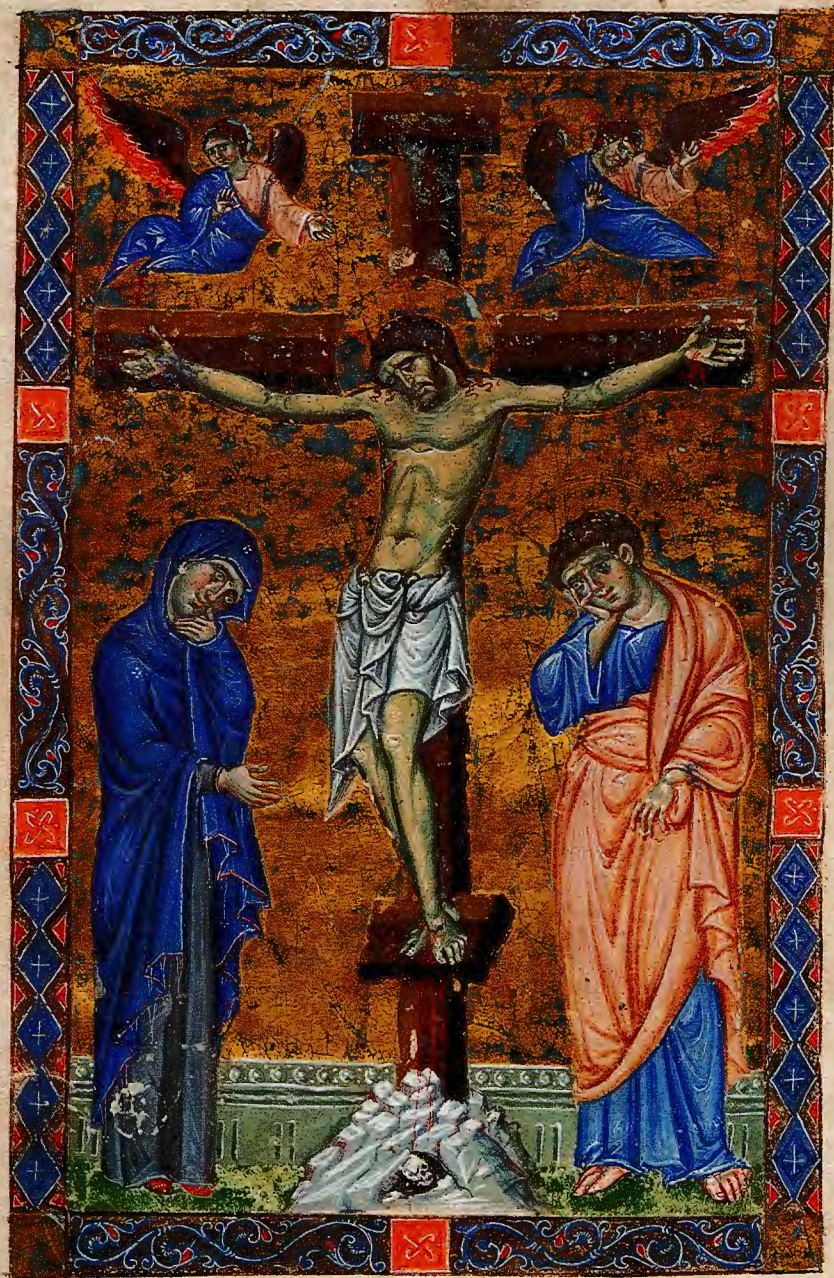
Missal with Crucifixion,  
 folio 191v

Acre, third quarter of the  
 thirteenth century

Parchment, 32 × 23 cm

Capitolo della Cattedrale di San Lorenzo,  
 Perugia, Ms. 6











263 ←

Leaf from a model book,  
showing Christ and  
Zacchaeus, and St  
Theodore and St George

German artist (?), thirteenth  
century

Silverpoint and sepia with red ink  
on vellum, 36 × 22 cm

Augustinermuseum, Städtische Museen Freiburg,  
Freiburg im Breisgau, inv. no. G23/1C

264 →

Commentary on Genesis  
with drawing of Christ,  
folio 155v

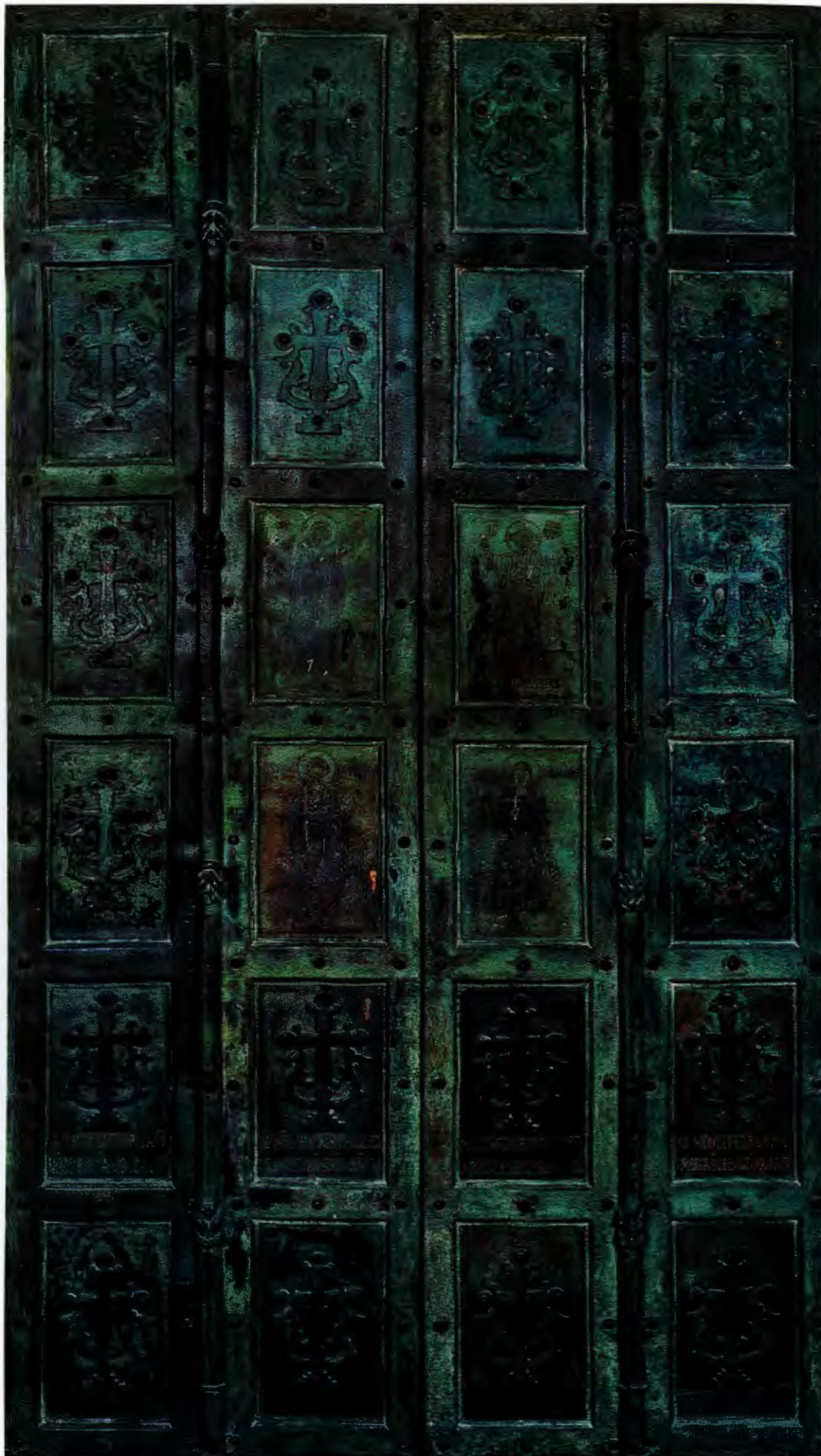
Cyprus (?), c. 1175–1225; fifteenth  
century

Paint on parchment, 33 × 54 cm

The President and Fellows of Magdalen College,  
Oxford, ms Gk 3







265

The doors of the Church  
of San Salvatore de  
Birecto, Atrani

1087

Brass, 333 × 184 cm

Church of San Salvatore de' Birecto, Atrani



