
THE TOMB OF ISAAK KOMNENOS AT PHERRAI

Nancy P. Ševčenko

THE SEBASTOKRATOR Isaak Komnenos was born in 1093; he was the son of the Emperor Alexios I, the younger brother of Anna Komnene and of the Emperor John II, and father of Andronikos I. We hear of him in various contexts: as the man who may have commissioned the Octateuch of the Seraglio and as the probable author of both Homeric and theological treatises, a man praised for his literary and charitable activities by Theodore Prodromos but condemned for sedition by contemporary historians. He fell out with his brother John in 1122, and for the next fourteen years wandered, stirring up insurrection, in the Holy Land and among the Seljuk Turks. Though reconciled with his brother in 1136, he was apparently again in exile at the time of John's death in 1143, when he was recalled by his nephew, Manuel I.¹ In 1152, embittered, and in poor health, he began to compose a rather disorderly Typikon for a monastery dedicated to the Virgin Kosmosoteira, located at a place called Βήρα; this monastery he himself had founded, and in it he wished to be buried.² Βήρα has been iden-

¹ For the biography of Isaak, and his literary and artistic endeavors, cf. Th. Uspenskij, "Konstantinopol'skij seral'skij kodeks vosmikhnižija." *Izvestija ruskago arxeologičeskago Instituta v Konstantinopole*, 12 (1907), 1-33; Ed. Kurtz, "Unedierte Texte aus der Zeit des Kaisers Johannes Komnenos," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 16 (1907), esp. 101-19; O. Jurewicz, *Andronikos I Komnenos* (Amsterdam, 1970), pp. 28-38; P. Schreiner, *Die byzantinische Kleinchroniken*, 1 (Vienna, 1975), p. 55 (for the date of Isaak's birth); J.F. Kindstrand, *Isaac Porphyrogenitus, Praefatio in Homerum* (= Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Graeca Upsaliensia, 14) (Uppsala, 1979), pp. 13-20 (attributes the treatises to this Isaak, rather than to the Isaak who was brother of Alexios I); J.C. Anderson, "The Seraglio Octateuch and the Kokkinobaphos Master," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 36 (1982), esp. 84-86.

² L. Petit, "Typikon du monastere de la Kosmosotira pres d'Aenos," *Izvestija ruskago arxeologičeskago Instituta v Konstantinopole*, 13 (1908) 17-75. I am preparing an English translation of this Typikon for a volume of translations of Typika to be published by Dumbarton Oaks. The Typikon, though started in 1152, was by no means dictated all at one time. Issak, for example, does not refer to his tomb at all until Section 89 of the Typikon; he must have decided to have it moved from Chora only when he saw the monastery close to completion. There is other evidence in the later sections

tified with Pherrai, a town in Greek Thrace not far from Alexandroupolis and the Turkish border. In the town of Pherrai there stands today a large church of the Komnenian period, in plan a modified cross-in-square, adorned with frescoes of the twelfth century (Fig. 1). This church is presumed to have been the katholikon of Isaak's monastery of the Kosmosoteira.³

During his happier years at the court of Constantinople, Isaak apparently erected a tomb for himself in the Monastery of Chora, for in the Typikon he requests that various elements of the structure at Chora be removed and shipped to his new foundation.⁴ His anxiety over this move led him to set forth his instructions in some detail; he thus furnishes us with precious information about what constituted a princely tomb of the first half of the twelfth century.

Isaak speaks first of transferring the marble slabs which were to house his remains: his tomb then was probably not a hollowed-out sarcophagos but was composed of several pieces of marble fitted together. He speaks, too, of a cast bronze railing, of an icon stand, and of images (the word used is *στήλαι*) of his parents, i.e. Alexios and Irene, all of which had apparently already been set up in Chora. There was also an image of himself there, which he insists be *not* removed.⁵ Incidentally, Isaak later gives special orders that there be no image made of him anywhere at all in the new monastery.⁶

Isaak goes on to say that in the middle of the lid of the tomb "I

of the Typikon of changes in plan occurring as construction progressed (e.g. in the location of icons and in the burial places of his close associates). Despite his poor health, then, Isaak must have lived on for quite some time after 1152, and have continued to add new instructions to the Typikon.

³ The identification was first made by Uspenskij (cf. note 1 above). Petit proposed another church nearer the sea, the Παναγία Σκαλωτή (cf. note 2 above, p. 19), but Uspenskij's identification has been generally accepted. A. Orlandos, "Τὰ Βυζαντινὰ μνημεῖα τῆς Βῆρας," *Θρακικά* 4 (1933) 3-44; Nancy Patterson (Ševčenko), "Byzantine Frescoes at Pherrai" (M.A. Thesis, Columbia University, 1964); D. Mouriki, "Stylistic Trends in Monumental Painting of Greece during the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34/35 (1982) 103-05, figs. 45-49.

⁴ Section 89, Petit, p. 63. The date of the tomb at Chora is unknown. It seems hard to believe that Isaak was planning his tomb before 1122, i.e. while still in his 20s. The portrait of himself which he says was done in "the vanity of youth," must date before 1122, since when Isaak returned to Constantinople from exile, he was already forty-three years old. But the tomb project itself may date from this later period, and have merely incorporated an early portrait into its design.

⁵ A portrait of Isaak as a donor forms part of the early fourteenth century mosaic decoration at Chora commissioned by Theodore Metochites, a later benefactor of the church, P. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami* (Bollingen Series, N.Y., 1966), 1 pp. 11-13, 45-48; 2, Plates pp. 36 and 37.

⁶ Section 77, Petit, p. 59. The passage indicates that such commemorative portraiture must have been considered routine.

want my enkolpion [of] the Theotokos to be fastened (literally “en-graved”) in a prone position in [a setting of] silver work; it has been readied and handed over, and I have just now deposited it in the treasury.”⁷ The passage is somewhat puzzling, but I take it to mean that his own enkolpion is to be set in silver into the marble lid of the tomb. We know of silver sheathing for tombs, but I am not aware of parallels for this sort of silver insert. The “prone position” of the Virgin suggests that she was depicted on the enkolpion standing up, so that when placed on the flat lid, she would of course appear to be lying down. It is, however, conceivable that Isaak means that a *replica* of his enkolpion is to be made in silver and placed on the lid, as a sort of revetment.

The *most* precious adornment of his tomb, according to Isaak, will be the mosaic icon he owns of the Virgin Kosmosoteira, which came to him, he says, by an act of God from Rhaidestos (modern Tekirdağ in Turkish Thrace). The icon must have been originally in Chora, as he speaks of transferring its *stand* from there, but he has apparently had it with him from the time the monastery dedicated to the Kosmosoteira was founded. He has provided the icon with a decoration of gold and silver (κόσμον περιεθήμεν χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου, probably a silver-gilt frame),⁸ and he requests that the icon be affixed to one end of the tomb, along with the one of Christ which is of the same size.⁹ The icon type, the Virgin Kosmosoteira, incidentally, is otherwise unattested. In the Typikon, he makes provision for proper lighting of these icons, and even for their conservation; when they fall into disrepair, he says, they should be removed from their wooden backing and reset by a first-rate technician onto good elm boards.¹⁰

⁷ Περὶ δὲ γε τὸ πτώμα μέσον τοῦ τάφου ἐγκολληθῆναι τὴν Θεοτόκον τὸ ἐμὸν ἐγκόλιον ἐν ὑπτίῳ τῷ σχήματι βούλομαι διὰ τοῦ ἀργυροῦ ἔργου, ὅπερ εὐθείασθεν τῷ σκευοφυλακίῳ ἐτέθη τὴν σήμερον καὶ παραδέδοται. Section 89, Petit, p. 63.

⁸ The term κόσμος could equally well mean a revetment, rather than a frame, but surviving mosaic icons often have silver or gold frames and rarely any revetment. Cf. the eleventh-century mosaic icon of Saint Nicholas on Patmos, M. Chatzedakes, *Εἰκόνες τῆς Πάτμου* (Athens, 1977), 1, pp. 44-45 and Pl. 1. Cf. also A. Grabar, *Les revêtements en or et en argent des icônes byzantines du moyen âge* (= Bibliothèque de l'Institut hellénique d'études byzantines et post-byzantines de Venise, 7) (Venice, 1975).

⁹ Sections 1, 9, 89, 90, Petit, pp. 19, 23-24, 63-64. While in exile Isaak composed a poem to the Virgin with an appeal for salvation, Ed. Kurtz, “Ein Gedicht des Sebastokrator Isaakios Komnenos,” *Byzantinisch-Neugriechische Jahrbücher*, 5 (1926-27) 44-46. The poem would seem to be addressed to an *image* of the Virgin and Child. It should be noted that Isaak donated a book containing some of his own “ekphraseis” to the monastery library, Section 106, Petit, p. 69. Section 9 of the Typikon (Petit, p. 24), which concerns the icon of the Kosmosoteira, itself reads a little like an ekphrasis.

¹⁰ Section 109, Petit, p. 71.

The tomb was to be located in the left part of the narthex, there where, he says, "I made an extension (παρεκβολή) to the building for my tomb."¹¹ This brings up another puzzle: What sort of space did the tomb occupy? Was Isaak talking about a separate structure, a real tomb chamber *attached* to the narthex, or about something smaller, an arcosolium niche, for example, at one end of it?

Turning back to the Typikon, we find that Isaak says that the railing to be brought from Chora should separate the tomb from "the whole of the narthex." And in it should be an entrance-way so that the monks can go in after Vespers and recite the Trisagion before the two icons, plus forty Kyrie Eleisons for the repose of his soul before they retire to their cells.¹² Now the monastery was designed to have at least fifty "singing" monks,¹³ and unless we assume they filed in one by one, we should probably reconstruct Isaak's tomb as a separate chamber large enough to accommodate at least a portion of them.

Turning for confirmation to the evidence provided by the structures surviving at Pherrai, we discover to our regret that, though there are paving stones visible to the West of the present West wall of the church, no narthex has been preserved—neither esonarthex nor exonarthex, both of which are mentioned in the Typikon. However, the small domed NW and SW corner bays of the cross-in-square church each have a very tall recess 2.70m. long and .80m. deep in their Western wall. Robert Ousterhout has recently suggested that the tomb could have been located in one of these.¹⁴

There are two difficulties with this intriguing proposal which make me at present somewhat hesitant to accept it. We would have to assume 1) that Isaak would term this Western bay of his cross-in-square church "the narthex," and 2) that he would use the word παρεκβολή, an "extension," with reference to such a recess. This word, it seems to me, would more aptly describe a structure like the little burial chamber attached to the North wall of the Παναγία τῶν Χαλκέων, Thessalonike.¹⁵ But Professor Ousterhout is undertaking a new study of the church architecture, and only when his observations on the actual remains become available, can the issue begin to be settled.

¹¹ Section 89, Petit, p. 63.

¹² Sections 7, 90, Petit, pp. 22-23, 64.

¹³ Sections 3, Petit, p. 21. There were also to be 24 monks serving the needs of these 50.

¹⁴ "The Architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul," PhD thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign, 1982, p. 113.

¹⁵ D.E. Evangelides, *Ἡ Παναγία τῶν Χαλκέων* (Thessalonike, 1954) figs. 1-2, Pl. 5b. Uspenskij's photograph of the church from the West (cf. note 1 above, Pl. 2) shows a structure adjoining its NW corner (no longer extant). Orlandos' plan indicates a door in the North wall of the church (now blocked by a buttress) which probably communicated with this structure (cf. note 3 above, fig. 6). But neither author gives us any indication of date.

In the meantime, the Typikon is the sole evidence we have concerning the appearance of the tomb. Accessible from the narthex through a bronze grill, the tomb chamber would have contained a marble coffin with some silver inlay or revetment, icon stands carrying two mosaic icons in fancy frames, panels with the portraits of Alexios and Irene, lamp stands, and still enough space for a good number of monks to assemble for a final prayer.

Was Isaak's tomb ever actually built? All we know for sure is that Isaak was buried in his monastery: Choniates reports that in 1183 Andronikos I rode by with a royal hunting party and visited his father's grave.¹⁶ And in the church was found a broken marble slab, inscribed with what are evidently the seven final lines of an epitaph; the very last of these lines mentions a δεσπότης—not a Sebastokrator, to be sure, but close enough, given the flowery language of the inscription, to warrant the assumption that the slab once adorned Isaak's tomb.¹⁷ But whether the monks at Chora ever really consented to hand over the crucial parts of his tomb, and whether it was ever reassembled as and where Isaak envisioned it, we simply cannot tell.

¹⁶ Niketas Choniates, *Historia, De Andr. I Comn.*, p. 280: 30-39, ed. Van Dieten (Berlin, 1975).

¹⁷ Uspenskij, "Konstantinopol'skij seral'skij Kodeks vosmikhnižija" (note 1 above), p. 26 and Pl. 6; Orlandos, "Τὰ Βυζαντινὰ μνημεῖα τῆς Βῆρας," pp. 27-28, fig. 19.



1. Pherrai: View of the church of the Virgin Kosmosoteira from the Southwest (Photo: N. Ševčenko)