

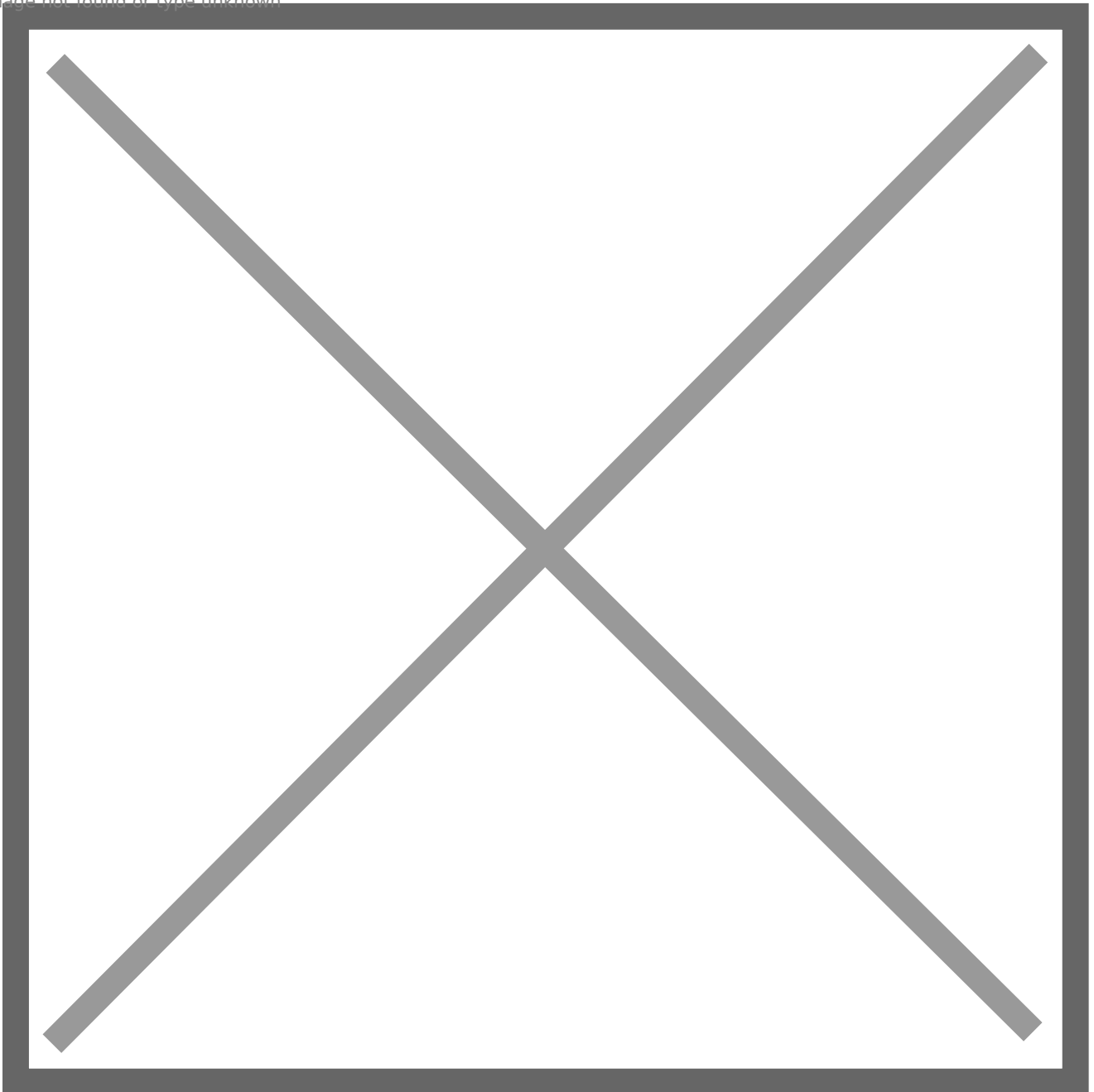
Deisis of Vatopedi Holy Monastery (Efthymios N. Tsigaridas)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



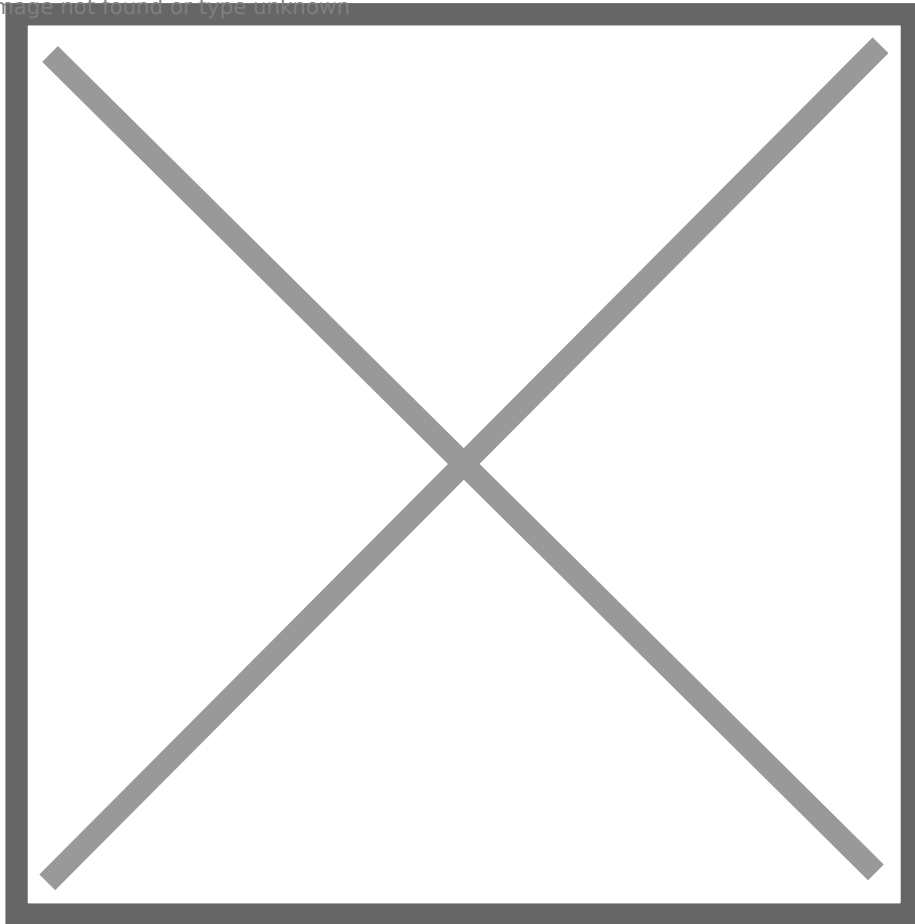
Above the entrance leading from the exonarthex to the narthex, in a semi-circular shallow lunette, is the scene of the Deisis (Fig. 184).

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Christ is shown in the middle, sitting on a backless throne and resting His feet on a richly decorated footstool. With His right hand He gives His blessing and with His left He holds an open Gospel book, which is resting on His knee. The pages of the Gospel have the words: "I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD THE TRUTH THE LIFE THE RESURRECTION THE WAY THE SHEPHERD THE DOOR THROUGH ME IF ONE ENTERS IN HE WILL BE SAVED".

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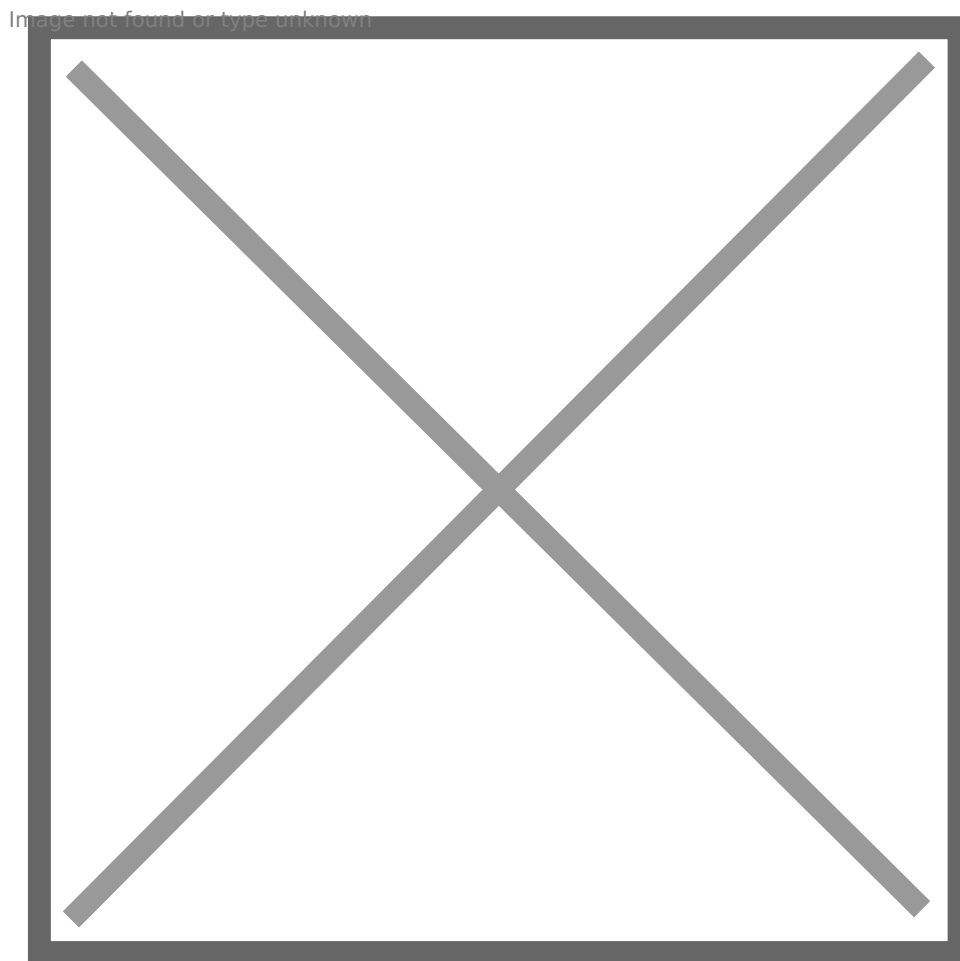
The text of this inscription, which is a compilation of phrases from the Gospel according to John (Jn. 8:12, 10:9, 10:11, 11:25, and 14:6) provides the reason for the depiction of the Deisis with Christ in the centre above the entrance to the main church, giving to the scene a content relating to the concept of salvation, since Christ is described, *inter alia*, as the door of salvation. Apart from this, the Deisis in the narthex of the Vatopaidi Monastery, a polysemous scene which symbolises the Second Coming, includes not only the concept of the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and John the Baptist with Christ for salvation – in accordance also with the donor’s inscription on the mosaic, which we shall see below – but also the testimony of the Blessed Virgin and of John the Baptist to the reality of the Incarnation of the Word of God, in whose person the Church on earth, in the bosom of which salvation is effected, is made manifest¹⁹.

Compositions or complexes in the iconographic programme of churches of the 11th century of similar content which amount to the idea of the Deisis have been noted in Hosios Loukas, Phokida, the Nea Moni on Chios, and in the Church of the Dormition of the Theotokos at Nicaea in Bithynia²⁰. In the narthex of the katholikon of the Hosios Loukas in particular²¹, above the entrance to the church, there is a bust of Christ holding an open Gospel book with the inscription “*I am the light of the world ...*”

(John 8:12), while in the central groin vault of the narthex, the Theotokos and St John the Baptist are shown on the same axis as Christ.

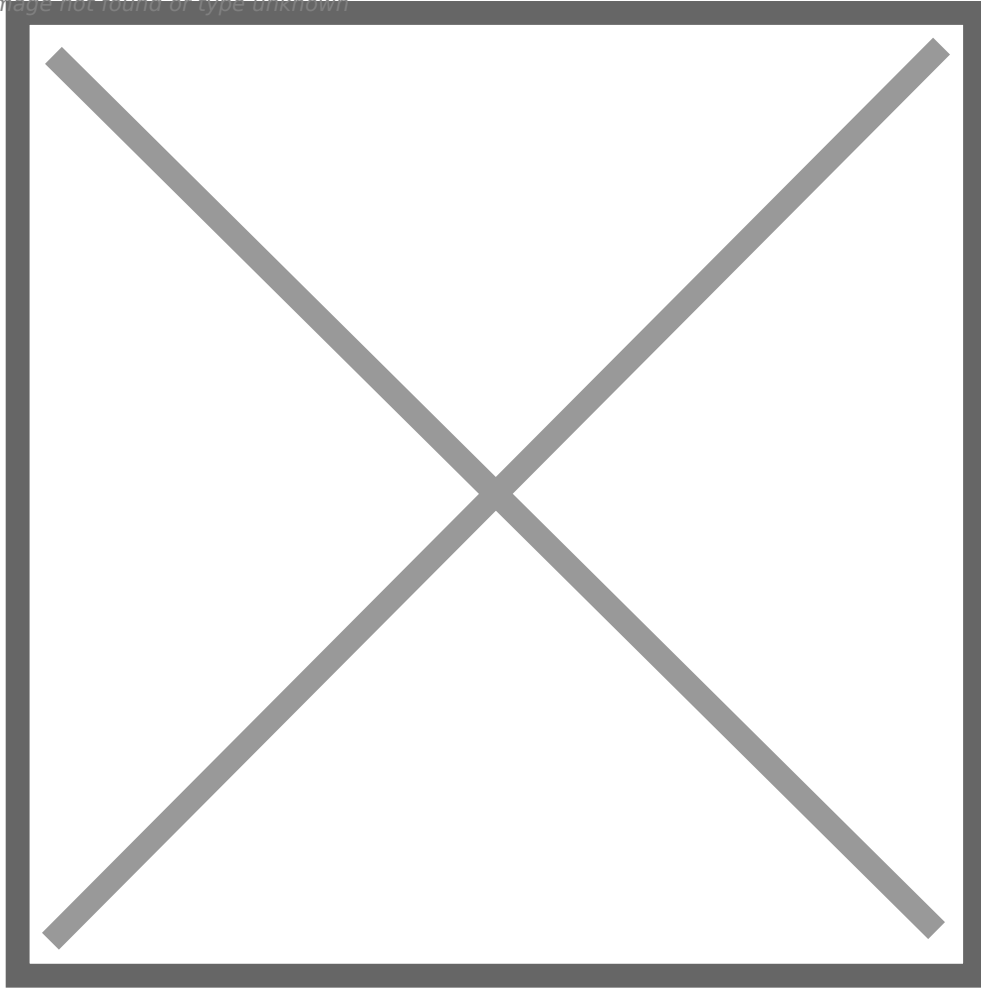
The Christ of the Deisis in the Vatopaidi Monastery wears a brown tunic and a dark blue cloak, which is highlighted by a wealth of lines in gold. The technique is faultless. The generous use of gold tesserae in the rendering of the garments of Christ, comparable with that in the mid 11th century mosaics in the Nea Moni on Chios²², is intended to stress the sumptuousness of these garments, but also to project the supreme role of Christ in the scene.

On the left is the Blessed Virgin,



standing and turning towards Christ in an attitude and with a gesture of supplication. She is wearing a tunic and maphorion of dark blue which falls to the knee in generous undulations. On the right is St John the Baptist, also standing in an attitude and with a gesture of supplication addressed to Christ.

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He has on a tunic of light brown and a green cloak, with lines of gold and brown, which falls billowing to the knee. The scene is framed by two semi-circular bands on a gold background. The first is decorated with multi-coloured quatrefoils, while the second, the outer one, has a black-letter verse inscription which reads as follows²³:

«Τὰ, πρὶν ἀκαλλῆ καὶ ῥυέντα τῷ χρόνῳ
ψηφῖσι χρυσαῖς καὶ λαμπρῶς βεβαμμέναις,
φαιδρῶς ἀγλαῶς κατεκοσμήθη λίαν.
Σπουδῆ πόνῳ τε καὶ πόθῳ διαπύρῳ,
τοῦ ποιμενάρχου τῆσδε τῆς μονῆς λόγε,
Ἰωαννικίου τε τοῦ τρισολβίου,
ᾧ καὶ παρέξοις σὴν βασιλείαν χάριν,

ταῖς ἱκεσίαις Πανάγνου καὶ Προδρόμου.

Ταῦτα μοναχὸς Σωφρόνιος νῦν λέγει».

“What was formerly without charm and the

victim of time

has been much decorated with gold and bril

liantly painted tesserae.

By the care, labour and fervent love

of the pastor of this monastery, O Word,

Ioannicius the thrice-blest,

to whom may you grant your kingdom, thanks

to the intercessions of the All-pure and the

Forerunner.

This the monk Sophronius now says.”

According to Millet, an Abbot of the Monastery of Vatopaidi by the name of Ioannicius²⁴ took part in 1094 in an embassy of Athonite monks to the Emperor Alexius I Comnenus (1081-1118). This was probably the same person as the Abbot mentioned in the inscription, a hypothesis accepted by Xyngopoulos²⁵, and consequently the mosaic of the Deisis, on the basis of the internal evidence of the inscription, must have been made in the late 11th or early 12th century.

From the same inscription another significant fact can be indirectly concluded: that in the place now occupied by the mosaic of the Deisis there had previously been a wall-painting, most probably with the same subject. This provides some indication that the Monastery's katholikon, which was built in the late 10th century, was decorated with wall-paintings, which may survive, to an unknown extent, below the existing layer of painting of 1312²⁶.

From the point of view of style, the figures of the Deisis are short and stout, with large heads, short and sturdy necks, rugged linear features, and large eyes with a look of serenity. These features and the types of physiognomy, as these can be seen in the Baptist and Christ, link this scene of the Deisis with wall-paintings and

mosaics of the first half of the 11th century in the Hosios Loukas Monastery in Phokida and in the Church of Haghia Sophia in Kiev²⁷.

In their technical rendering, the Christ and the Baptist of the Vatopaidi Deisis have departed from the methods which characterise the art of mosaics of the first half of the 11th century. Thus, in the face of Christ, and more so in that of the Baptist, in spite of the linear outlining of the facial features, the abrupt alternation of levels of light and shadow has been abandoned and an effort is made to render the mass of the face by gentle gradations of the same colour – chestnut. The same approach dominates the rendering of the garments, where the colours are deep and dull, and the folds have the purpose, in the discreet way in which they are arranged, of suggesting the mass of the body, which can just be discerned under the clothing. This technique, observable in the figure of Christ, but above all in that of John the Baptist, links the mosaic of the Deisis with trends from painting in the art of mosaics²⁸, and particularly with the mosaics of Dafni (late 11th century), of the old Cathedral of Serres (late 11th – early 12th century), of the Church of the Archangel Michael in Kiev (1108-1113), and with the mosaic icon of St John the Baptist in the Ecumenical Patriarchate²⁹.

On the other hand, the figure of the Blessed Virgin in the Vatopaidi Deisis, with the abrupt but narrow greenish shadows bounding a flat face whose flesh is lent warmth by red markings, continues to follow methods which link it with the art of mosaics of the first half of the 11th century³⁰. More specifically, the Blessed Virgin in physiognomic type – with the broad, flat face, the deeply shadowed eyes with arched eyebrows, the thick nose, and the technique with which the face is rendered – is very close to the mosaics of the mid 11th century. Of these, it is worth mentioning the Virgin in the mosaic in the apse of the Church of Haghia Sophia in Thessaloniki³¹ and certain figures from the mosaics of the Nea Moni on Chios³². However, there is a particularly close typological and stylistic affinity of the Virgin of the Deisis with the the mosaic icon of Our Lady Pammakaristos which is kept in the Patriarchate of Constantinople and which dates, according to the prevailing view, from the 12th century³³.

A similar typological and stylistic relationship is observable between the John the Baptist of the Vatopaidi Deisis and the mosaic icon of the Baptist in the Constantinople Patriarchate, which dates from the same period as the mosaic icon of Our Lady Pammakaristos³⁴.

In its general characteristics – with the squat proportions of the figures, the relatively large heads, the lack of expressiveness in the peaceful faces, the hieratic and static character of the figures, the tendency towards the linear and the flat in

the rendering of the garments, which leads to the abstraction of the body's mass – the Deisis of the Vatopaidi Monastery shows that the anti-Classical trend in monumental painting of the first half of the 11th century, as we know this from the mosaics of Hosios Loukas and those of the Church of Haghia Sophia in Kiev³⁵, is continuing.

On the other hand, the 'softness' of the rendering of the face of Christ, and even more so, that of John the Baptist, link this mosaic, as we have seen, with the trends from painting observable in the technique of mosaic with works dating chiefly from the late 11th century, such as the mosaics of Dafni, the old Cathedral of Serres, the Church of the Archangel Michael in Kiev, and the mosaic icon of St John the Baptist in the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Consequently, if we take into account the stylistic features of the mosaic of the Deisis and the reference in the donor's inscription to the Abbot Ioannicius, we can confirm the generally-held view which places the mosaic in the late 11th or early 12th century, but favouring the early 12th century³⁶. If, moreover, we take into account that Ioannicius, as can be concluded from the inscription, was already dead (1109) when the mosaic was finished, the dating of the mosaic to the beginning of the 12th century receives further support³⁷.