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# *Pious Russian Soldiers, Devout Cretan Donors, and the Church: Transfer and Reception of Russian Icons and Ecclesiastical Utensils on the Island of Crete*

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**RÉSUMÉ :** Cet article se propose d'étudier, dans leur contexte, différents accessoires ecclésiastiques russes, tels que des épitaphes, des vêtements de prêtres et des objets eucharistiques, qui se trouvent dans les églises et dans les monastères de la préfecture de Réthymnon - district passé sous le contrôle russe entre 1897 et 1909 - et qui datent de l'époque de l'Autonomie Crétoise (1898-1913). A la lumière des relations entre la Russie et les institutions socio-politiques crétoises ; en tenant compte du fait que la Russie n'entretenait pas, avec cette île, des liens commerciaux aussi développés qu'avec les autres secteurs de la Grèce, l'auteure s'intéresse aux mécanismes de transfert et d'acquisition d'objets liturgiques russes, ainsi qu'à la reconstitution d'une cartographie. Aussi, les découvertes sont-elles étudiées dans le contexte des stratégies politiques - clés du soi-disant « soft power » déployé par la Russie impériale pour asseoir son pouvoir dans la région - employées afin de préserver et soutenir l'orthodoxie contre la propagande catholique et protestante.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** Crète ; XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles ; icônes russes ; objets liturgiques ; occupation russe.

**REZUMAT:** Acest articol studiază contextul în care, în timpul Autonomiei Cretane (1898-1913), diferite accesorii eclesiastice rusești (o serie de epitafuri, veșminte preoțești și obiecte euharistice) au ajuns în bisericile și mănăstirile prefecturii Rethymno. Districtul Rethymno s-a aflat sub control rusesc între 1897 și 1909. Articolul se concentrează asupra mecanismelor de transfer și achiziție, precum și pe o cartografiere a obiectelor liturgice rusești în lumina relației lor cu diferitele circumstanțe politice și sociale din insula Creta, ținând cont de faptul că Rusia nu a practicat niciodată același nivel de comerț cu Creta precum cel atestat în alte părți ale Greciei. Autoarea interpretează concluziile în contextul politic mai larg al strategiilor folosite pentru a păstra și susține ortodoxia împotriva propagandei catolice și protestante, un instrument politic cheie al așa-numitei soft power pentru influența rusă imperială în regiune.

**CUVINTE-CHEIE:** Creta; secolele XIX-XX; icoane rusești; obiecte liturgice; ocupație rusă.

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The district of Rethymno has been one of the case studies of the RICONTRANS research project because the area came under Russian administration between 1897 and 1909. The project included: (a) an exploratory fieldwork across the island's churches and monasteries in order to identify Russian icons and ecclesiastical items and (b) archival research in order to locate further information about the objects' transfer to and reception in Crete. Unfortunately, due to the COVID pandemic, many archives were not accessible in 2020-2021, consequently, part of the archival research has been postponed for the future. Nonetheless, during the fieldwork research in Crete, many hitherto unknown Russian religious objects, still in use today, have been identified in local churches and monasteries. It is interesting to note that the clergy using these objects are often unaware of their Russian

provenance. The recent identifications of Russian ecclesiastical utensils raised a series of questions involving their transfer to and reception in Crete. This article aims at answering some of these questions.

Neglected until now, the field of Russian ecclesiastical art in Greece began to be researched only in the last two decades, as pointed out by Yuliana Boycheva.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the conference *Russian Presence in Rethymno (1897-1909)*, organized in 2007, is a clear example of scholars starting to pay attention to the subject. The conference included the following topics of discussion: archival material, diplomacy and politics, economy and society, education and everyday life, and church and art. The conference proceedings were published four years later and include three papers presented in the session dedicated to the topic *Church and Art*.<sup>2</sup> They deal with Russian icons



◄ Fig. 1. *Russian chalice cup, Ecclesiastical Museum of the Cathedral Church of Rethymno (height 41 cm, diameter at the rim 12 cm, diameter at the base 18 cm).*

Credits: Maria Ernest Fragkopoulou.

► Fig. 2. *Russian paten and cover, Ecclesiastical Museum of the Cathedral Church of Rethymno.*

Credits: Maria Ernest Fragkopoulou.

▼ Fig. 3. *Russian asterisk and communion spoon, Ecclesiastical Museum of the Cathedral Church of Rethymno.*

Credits: Maria Ernest Fragkopoulou.

▼ Fig. 4. *Russian Blessing Cross, Ecclesiastical Museum of the Cathedral Church of Rethymno.*

Credits: Maria Ernest Fragkopoulou.

▲ Fig. 5. *Icon with St. Nicolas, Virgin Mary of the Angels Church, Rethymno.*

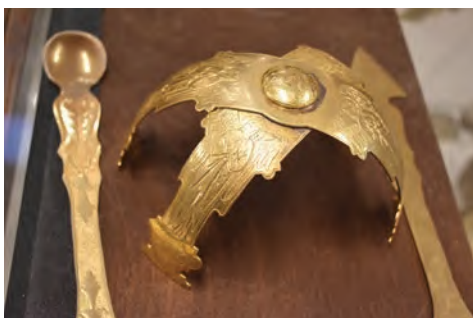
Credits: Sofia Katopi.

and ecclesiastical utensils found in parish churches and monasteries in the Rethymno region. These three articles were the obvious starting point for our research.

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The island of Crete came under Ottoman control in the middle of the seventeenth century after a long war with the Venetians, in control of the island since the thirteenth century.<sup>3</sup> A hundred and fifty years later, starting from the third decade of the nineteenth century, a long series of uprisings and revolts took place, which aimed at obtaining independence from Ottoman rule and unification with the Greek State. At the very end of the nineteenth century, in 1897, during one of these revolts, a Greek force landing on the island with the aim of annexing the island. The Great Powers (Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and initially Austria-Hungary and Germany) disagreed with such military developments, each power out of its own interests, using as an excuse the violence that had escalated to such a degree that the Ottoman Empire could no longer maintain control, intervened in order to stop the fighting and the massacres between Christian and Muslim Cretans. Needless to say, however, that the main reason for the intervention of the Great Powers was the support of their own interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and the preservation of a balance of powers among themselves.<sup>4</sup> A year and a half after the intervention, at the end of 1898, a semi-autonomous or semi-colonial regime was established under the suzerainty of the Sultan, with four of the Great Powers acting as guarantors or protectors.<sup>5</sup> Prince George,<sup>6</sup> second son of the king of Greece, was appointed High Commissioner and the island was divided into British, French, Russian, and Italian areas of control, with the Russians occupying the region of Rethymno.<sup>7</sup> This period, known as the Cretan Autonomy or the Cretan State, lasted from 1898 to 1913, the year when Crete was finally annexed to Greece, even though the foreign troops had left in 1909.

Despite previous disappointments with Russia, the Christians of Rethymno received the Russian army and officials as liberators.<sup>8</sup> Local newspapers regularly praised their attempts to modernise the Ottoman town of Rethymno. Such modernisation works saw the elimination of old Venetian fortifications and of Ottoman architectural structures such as wooden additions to houses, known as kiosks. However, the Russian government was





also involved in the edification of a hospital and of the episcopal palace, besides the improvements made to the port, and the building of infrastructure such as bridges and roads.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, adherence to Eastern Orthodoxy by both Cretan Christians and Russians, as opposed to the Catholicism and Protestantism of the representatives of the other Great Powers, was emphasized again and again in the newspapers. One should naturally be aware of the strict censorship from the part of the Russian government. Such praises were to be expected, but the Christians of Rethymno still preferred the Russians to British or Italian soldiers on account of religious reasons.

As Boycheva has shown, Russian icons and other ecclesiastical items were transferred to the Greek lands via three different channels. The first channel involved sending official gifts to the Greek lands. These were either related to the tsar's personal acts of devotion or were offerings sent by the Russian State and Church authorities to the Balkan churches or secular institutions. Additionally, within the same category there are objects which were acquired through officially sanctioned missions for the collection of alms (*zeteia*). Starting in the sixteenth century, this channel remained in operation until early in the twentieth century and reflects the development of Russian foreign policy towards the Balkans and the Orthodox East. A second, 'unofficial' channel is linked to private donations made by Russian clergy or laity or by representatives of the Balkan countries living in or trading with Russia. Within this category there are the numerous private donations made by Greeks living in Russia (scholars, clerics, state officials, etc.) to their places of birth as well as the icons presented to Greek churches by pilgrims, and the family heirlooms brought to Greece by the trading diaspora. The third channel, in existence since the eighteenth century, is the result of the long-distance trade practice pursued by the so-called *afenia* – Russian itinerant merchants who traded icons not only within, but also beyond the Russian Empire, including the Ottoman and Balkan lands. This last transfer channel does not apply to Crete as the *afenia* merchants never reached Crete. The Russian religious items that were identified in Rethymno during the research were transferred to the island through the first two channels.<sup>10</sup>

### Official gifts and donations.

During the fieldwork in Crete, we found out that very few Russian icons ever reached the island. Moreover, although archival sources testify to the existence of ecclesiastical art items of Russian origin sent to the Rethymno region as official gifts, no such items were identified with certainty. When it comes to the Russian icons, some interesting findings about their symbolic value were located in local newspapers. For instance, Russian icons were offered as official gifts to Prince George when he came to Crete to take up his post as High Commissioner of the island. He sailed from Piraeus on 7 December 1898 and the following day, upon his arrival to the island of Milos, was greeted by the Russian admiral, Nikolai Skrydlov. On 9 December, Prince George's cruiser was escorted to Crete by the international flagship squadron of the Great Powers and the Council of the Admirals. Descriptions of all the festive greetings and the meetings of the prince with each of the admirals were published in local newspapers. Interestingly enough, only the Russian admiral Nikolai Skrydlov is mentioned as having offered the prince





a present, a “golden icon of Saint Nicholas in a precious box.”<sup>11</sup> A month later, another gilded icon representing Saint George was offered to him by the Russian soldiers occupying Rethymno. During a pompous ceremony upon the High Commissioner’s visit to the town, the icon was blessed by a Russian priest before it was given to the prince.<sup>12</sup> Three months later, in March 1899, another precious icon with the same subject, Saint George, was sent by the Greek community of Odessa to the bishop of Rethymno, so that the latter would present it to the prince and congratulate him upon his new appointment as Commissioner.<sup>13</sup> Nothing more is known about these three icons besides the information found in a nineteenth century local newspaper. Nonetheless, the fact that no other official gifts are mentioned in the newspapers except the Russian icons underlines their importance. In a turbulent period of acute ethnic and imperial antagonisms among the Great Powers, the Ottoman Empire and Greece, Rethymno’s local newspapers kept emphasizing again and again their homodoxy (Orthodoxy) with the Russians. It is obvious that the status of official gift that the icons had carried political and ideological meanings, besides their purely religious connotation. Such icons were expensive, prestigious, and highly valued gifts, which, in the context of Cretan Autonomy, had above all a political significance and that was to emphasize the homodoxy between the Greeks and the Russians and the latter’s role of protectors of Orthodox Christians under the Ottoman rule.

Lora Gerd has uncovered important information about systematic donations made by the Holy Synod of Russia to churches and monasteries in the Balkans and in the Holy Land.<sup>14</sup> An example is a letter written by the Russian Consul in Crete Spyridon Dendrinis in 30 January 1866,<sup>15</sup> concerning the request of Metropolitan Misail of Kanea (Chania) for an epitaph for his new church. The Holy Synod decided to send an epitaph, a Gospel, and a set of eucharistic utensils.<sup>16</sup> It is highly possible that the donation was connected to the presence of Catholic missionaries and their aggressive proselytism in Crete from 1859/1860 up to 1870.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly enough,

the General Russian Consulate was established in Chania in April 1860 in response to the sudden rise of conversions to Catholicism in the preceding months. In November 1859, Serafino da Caltanissetta, a Capuchin monk, mediated in favour of an Orthodox priest to the French Embassy, resulting in the removal of the Ottoman guard from his village. The priest subsequently converted to Catholicism in order to obtain protection from the French. In the months that followed the incident, Orthodox Cretans of the wider Chania and Rethymno regions were told by the Catholic missionary (with the support of the French Consul) that if they converted to Catholicism they would come immediately under the protection of France and become, more or less, its citizens. Additionally, they were told that no further action was needed but for signing a declaration and commemorating the Pope during liturgical services. More than 6000 (some testimonies exaggerate and talk of 60,000) Orthodox Cretans “converted” to Catholicism in such manner. Entire villages, led by their priests, were coming to Chania to sign the declaration of their conversion to Catholicism, hoping to avoid mistreatments from the Ottoman army and enjoy the protection promised by the French.<sup>18</sup> These developments seriously alarmed not only the Ottoman authorities, but also the Cretan Archdiocese, the Patriarchate, the Greek government, the British consuls as well as the Russian State and Church. The Patriarchate sent a patriarchal exarch and three preachers to these regions, who for a whole month tried to bring the newly converted back to Orthodoxy. However, the most important consequence of the Catholic “movement of proselytism” was the immediate involvement of Orthodox Russia. Having left the position of deputy consul vacant for six years, Russia immediately established a Consulate General in April 1860. The following year, deputy consulates were established in Heraklion and Rethymno (1861). French archives attest that Spyridon Dendrinis made Russia’s presence immediately felt with friendly gestures.<sup>19</sup> As the letter located by Gerd proves, these friendly gestures included Dendrinis’ mediation to the Holy Synod of Russia on the part of Cretan churches, monasteries etc.





► Fig. 6. *Russian Epitaph, St. Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province.*  
Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▲ Fig. 7. *Icon with the Pantocrator, St. John the Baptist church, Apodoulou village, Rethymno Province, (22 x 17,7 cm).*  
Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▼ Fig. 8. *Russian Blessing Cross, St. John the Baptist church, Apodoulou village, Rethymno Province (28 x 18 cm).*  
Credits: Sofia Katopi.

It is known that Russia joined the Great Powers in competing for influence in the Balkans and the Middle East as early as the 1830s. As it has been pointed out by Gerd, “preserving and supporting Orthodoxy against Catholic and Protestant propaganda became a key element in the Russian policy. Pious donations, therefore, became a political instrument, the so-called ‘soft power’ for influence in the region.”<sup>20</sup> The Russian consuls to the Ottoman Empire invested a great deal of personal energy in supporting the local bishops or in restoring churches and monasteries.<sup>21</sup> It seems that Spyridon Dendrinis was one of them.

In the last decade, the Russian art historian and researcher Valery Igoshev who specializes on metal art and works in the field of restoration of church and liturgical objects among others, has embarked in the study of Russian church art that was transferred to Greek lands since the seventeenth century.<sup>22</sup> He found archival evidence asserting that the Russian Holy Synod ordered and then donated liturgical objects and icons to poor (and in-need) Orthodox churches. Igoshev has pointed out that these documents preserve information about the cost of production and delivery of church items from Russia, but unfortunately gives no archival references. According to him, by order of the Holy Synod, sets of silver liturgical vessels used for eucharistic rituals and sets of church vestments were sent to ten churches in Crete in 1870. Again in 1897, the Holy Synod of Russia granted the churches and monasteries of the Cretan Metropolitan See five sets of eucharistic vessels, five



sets of priestly vestments, five icons of the Twelve Great Feasts as well as twenty icons of the Saviour, the Mother of God, Nicholas the Wonderworker, and others.<sup>23</sup>

The lavishly gilded set of silver chalices and the blessing cross with its enamel decoration (Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4), which belonged to the cathedral church of Rethymno before being transferred to the Ecclesiastical Museum of the same town, could belong to this group of religious objects sent by the Holy Synod of Russia to Crete in 1897.<sup>24</sup> The icon of Saint Nicholas (Fig. 5) found in the Church of Our Lady of the Angels in Rethymno could also be one of the icons sent to Crete in 1897.

Nadezhda Chesnokova wrote extensively on the policy of patronage adopted by Russia towards the Orthodox population of the Ottoman Empire and the high pace of icon donations and transfers in the seventeenth century.<sup>25</sup> According to her, these donations became a permanent element of government spending in the Russian Empire. “Archive documents from the 1880s describe how these items were sent from Russia in entire boxes filled to the brim.”<sup>26</sup> Russian epitaphs and priests’ vestments, along with vessels used for eucharistic rituals are some of the most common religious objects found in churches and monasteries in Rethymno (Fig. 6). Once again, it should be mentioned that although many of the ecclesiastical items currently preserved in Crete could be donations of the Russian Holy Synod to the Cretan Church, during our on-site research we were not able to identify specific items and relate them to relevant archival records.

#### Unofficial private donations: Icons.

As already mentioned, an interesting finding that we came across during the early stages of our research was the rather small number of Russian icons located in Crete. In the Rethymno region in particular, contrary to what was expected due to the Russian presence on site, the number of icons found in churches and monasteries does not compare to the abundance of Russian icons in other areas such as Macedonia or the Cyclades Islands. As already mentioned, Russian *afenia* merchants never reached







◀ Fig. 9. Detail of Russian Gospel cover, St. John the Baptist church, Apodoulou village, Rethymno Province.

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

◀ Fig. 10. Icon with Saint Nicolas, Diskouriou Monastery, Rethymno Province, (22, 5 x 18 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▶ Fig. 11. Russian silver chalice cup, Church of Prophet Elijah, Ancient Eleftherna village, Rethymno Province (height 30, diameter at the rim 11.8 cm, diameter at the base 16.6 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▶ Fig. 12. Russian silver chalice, Sacristy of the parish of Margarites village, Rethymno Province, (height 23.5 cm, diameter at the rim 10.6 cm, diameter at the base 14.2 cm).

Credits: Kostas Papadakis.

◀ Fig. 13. Russian Gospel cover, Diskouriou Monastery, Rethymno Province (36 x 27 x 4.5 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▶ Fig. 14. Russian silver chalice, Church of the Dormition of Virgin Mary, Philoti village, Naxos (height 11.2 cm, diameter at the base 14.2 cm).

Credits: Maria Ernest Fragkopoulou.

▶ Fig. 15. Russian silver chalice donated by Theodoros Triphyllis, Saint Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province (height 27 cm, diameter at the rim 10.5 cm, diameter at the base 13 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.











◀ Fig. 16. Russian silver chalice, Saint Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province (height 41 cm, diameter at the rim 11.7 cm, diameter at the base 16 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

➤ Fig. 17. Russian silver paten, Saint Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province (diameter at the rim 17 cm, diameter at the base 8 cm, height 8 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

➤ Fig. 18. Russian silver liturgical tray, Saint Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province (diameter at the rim 12.5 cm, diameter at the base 9 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

◀ Fig. 19. Russian silver asterisk with enamel decoration, Saint Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province.

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▲ Fig. 20. Russian silver Gospel cover (front), Saint Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province (34.5 x 17.5 x 6 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▼ Fig. 21. Russian silver Gospel cover (back), Saint Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province (34.5 x 17.5 x 6 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

Crete. In addition, Crete never had the intense commercial relations with Russia as other parts of Greece – Epirus or the Aegean and Ionian islands are cases in point. However, mentions in local newspapers of Russian icons found in households prove their high value.

One such example is a gilded Russian icon of the Virgin Mary. The artefact is mentioned in a lawsuit report in one of Rethymno's newspapers.<sup>27</sup> The report was written by the lawyer Georgios Athanasiadis, who was also the plaintiff. Athanasiadis left his house, together with all his



belongings locked in a room, to a certain Tzorbatzakis, so that the latter could take his residence in the house as well as guard its items for the duration of Athanasiadis stay in Athens. According to the report, Athanasiadis together with his family had to flee Crete on 2 February 1897, afraid that Rethymno would be bombed by the ships of the Great Powers. As he explains there was no time for a regular contract and when Athanasiadis returned two years later, Tzorbatzakis had disappeared along with all his belongings. In the lawsuit there is a long list of items paralleled by their value in money that the lawyer required to be returned.<sup>28</sup> The Russian icon of Mary was the most expensive item in the household (500 grosia or *kurus*). Another expensive item was a new Singer sewing machine (400 grosia) and a big table made with walnut wood (300 grosia). The rent for the house was 600 grosia. Based on the list of the items and the rent expense, it is clear that the lawyer was prosperous, though not to the point of having many luxury items in his household. A question that arises is how and when did Athanasiadis obtain the Russian icon? He obviously acquired it before the Russian arrival to Rethymno. Had he ordered it directly from Russia sometime in the late nineteenth century or had he bought it during his travels to mainland Greece or to the Ottoman lands (Asia Minor or Constantinople)? Could it be an older item of heirloom? Unfortunately, these questions remain unanswered for the time being.

In Apodoulou, a small village in the southern part of Crete where a Russian squad was stationed, there was information about three humble, not very high quality, small (less than 20 centimetres in height) icons in the church and three more in a priest's house.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, we were able to locate only one of them – the icon of Christ Pantocrator, preserved in the church of Saint John the Baptist (Fig. 7). It has a dedicatory inscription of a certain Konstantinos Psaroudakis of Ioannis on the back. In the





▼ Fig. 22. Russian chalice cup (detail), Church of Saint Constantine, Agios Konstantinos village, Rethymno Province (height 28 cm, diameter at the rim 11 cm, diameter at the base 14.3 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

◆ Fig. 23. Russian chalice cup (detail), parish museum of Skordilo village, Rethymno Province (height 28.5 cm, diameter at the rim 9.8 cm, diameter at the base 11.8 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▲ Fig. 24. Russian chalice cup (detail), parish of Agios Nikolaos, Agia village (height 24.5 cm, diameter at the rim 9.7 cm, diameter at the base 12 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▲ Fig. 25. Russian paten, Church of Saint Constantine, Agios Konstantinos village, Rethymno Province (diameter at the rim 13.8 cm, diameter at the base 8.5 cm, height 5.5 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▼ Fig. 26. Russian paten, parish museum of Skordilo village, Rethymno Province (diameter at the rim 13 cm, diameter at the base 8.5 cm, height 5.8 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▼ Fig. 27. Russian paten, Church of Saint John and the Annunciation, Argyroupolis village, Rethymno Province (diameter at the rim 15.5 cm, diameter at the base 8.5 cm, height 5 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

same church, there is an additional Russian blessing cross (Fig. 8) and a Gospel with a Russian binding (Fig. 9). The latter has a dedicatory inscription mentioning that it was donated to the church by Nikolai Kapetanovitch Petrov in 1900. These items are cheap, mass produced, made from copper alloys, which seem expensive due to the gilding.<sup>30</sup> We have not been able to trace back the exact routes through which the icons had arrived in this remote Cretan village, but they were probably not commissioned specifically for the church of Apodoulou. I assume that the icons were carried to Crete by Russian soldiers, maybe even for reasons of personal piety, and were donated or sold upon the soldiers' departure.. The information about the priest having three Russian icons in his house as heirloom



probably means that his grandfather, who was the village priest at the time of the Russian Administration, bought them or received them as a gift. Another interesting information concerning Russian vestments is recorded by the local scholar Vasileios Volanakis, who authored an article dedicated to the presence of Russian ecclesiastical items in Apodoulou, the place of his origin. One of his childhood memories from the 1950s is of the parish priest wearing Russian vestments when performing the liturgy of the Great Feasts and, because of their preciousness, of them creating a special atmosphere of solemnity. Unfortunately, and according to local custom the priest was buried wearing the Russian vestments in 1964 so they were lost forever. According to Volanakis, these vestments were given to the church by Russian officers.<sup>31</sup> The inscription in the gospel, the blessing cross, the icon in the church, the vestments, along with the information cited above support the assumption that as late as 1900 Russian soldiers and army officers would carry small icons and other religious objects to be given as presents to the local Orthodox clergy and communities

Another such example is a small icon of Saint Nicholas, painted on metal, that passed as heirloom to the hegumen of the Diskouriou Monastery from his grandfather, who was priest at the time of Russian Administration (Fig. 10).

### Precious eucharistic items.

The most common Russian religious objects located in Rethymno during our fieldwork belong to the category of eucharistic utensils: chalices, patens, trays, asterisks, spoons, lances, blessing crosses, censers as well as epitaphs, gospel bindings, and episcopal vestments. With regard to chalice sets and gospel covers, one can roughly classify them into two categories: the more precious ones, made of silver or gilt silver and the cheaper ones, higher in number, made of different types of copper alloys.

The silverware found in the churches and monasteries of Rethymno usually present some information of their provenance, which allows us to hypothesise upon their circulation. Stamps and hallmarks identify the workshop and the city of their manufacture as well as the artist/designer and/or the inspector involved in their creation. Some have a dedicatory inscription naming the donor(s). It was usually incised after the object reached the island

of Crete, as we assume that in most cases the dedication was incised after it had come to the possession of the donor. Unfortunately, the dedicatory inscriptions do not say much about the routes through which the object reached Crete. What they do say, however, is that the donation of Russian religious objects was not only a sign of personal devotion, but, because of their value, it was also a sign of wealth and a way to display one's affluence.

A number of questions arise regarding the presence of these ecclesiastical items in Crete. How did the donors get them in the first place? So far, we have no information about a specific donor traveling to Russia. In addition, as already mentioned, Cretans had not developed commercial relations with Russia as opposed to the inhabitants of the Cycladic or the Ionian islands who had done so already by the eighteenth century. Could donors buy chalice sets in Rethymno, where they arrived through some other commission or perhaps through Russian officers acting as agents? That could be the case for some objects, but most of the donations of silver and gilt silver chalice sets and gospels to Cretan churches and monasteries date before the Russian Administration period.

Another hypothesis is that the objects were brought to Crete from other Greek regions or islands, such as Santorini, where numerous similar liturgical items have been recently located.<sup>32</sup> A silver chalice (Fig. 11, 31) from the Church of Prophet Elijah in the village Ancient Eleftherna has a dedicatory inscription mentioning a pilgrim, Konstantinos Zacharioudakis, which leads us yet towards another possible direction. The fact that the donor identifies himself as a pilgrim means that he had been on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He may have bought the Russian chalice in the Holy Land and donated it to the church of his village in the Rethymno area.

Even though the stamps on the silver objects do not say much about the object's route from Russia to Crete, nevertheless, through the stamps, interesting connections have been made. For example, the chalice in the village of Margarites (Fig. 12) has exactly the same stamp as the chalice from the Cycladic Island of Naxos (Fig. 14): Moscow, B. C. (initial of the workshop or of the inspector), 1869 (year of production). This could mean that there was an exchange network of Russian ecclesiastical items connecting the Cyclades and Crete. It is well known that many wealthy Cretans, but also Cretans





involved in the uprisings, fled to the Aegean Islands during times of revolt. During that time, they could have ordered or bought various items for donations through those common exchange routes. Most of the identified stamps placed on silver objects found in the Rethymno region come from muscovite workshops. However, we have also identified a stamp from a workshop in Novotserkask, which is placed on the Gospel cover of the Diskouriou Monastery (Fig. 13). There is an icon revetment from Santorini that was made in the same workshop in Novotserkask.<sup>33</sup>

An interesting finding made during the fieldwork research on Crete was that of a silver chalice donated by Theodoros Triphyllis to the female Monastery of Kera, a metochion of the much bigger Monastery of Prophet Elijah in Roustika (Fig. 15, 32, 33). Triphyllis was a very rich merchant, originally from Corfu, who was involved with different athletic and philharmonic associations to which he made donations. He also financed the construction of the belfry of the cathedral of Rethymno, its mechanical clock, and one of its bells. He was also vice-consul to England and Austria in Rethymno, representative of the latter's insurance company, Lloyd, and a famous smuggler of Cretan antiquities.<sup>34</sup> There is no information about him travelling to Russia, however, his network of contacts involved people with commercial relations with Russia, so it would have been easy for him to obtain the chalice from those networks.

The donation made by monks Ioakim and Symeon to their monastery in Roustika is the most expensive one we have encountered so far. It consists of a complete chalice set comprising of paten, tray, asterisk, lance, and spoon as well as a censer and a Gospel (Fig. 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21). According to the stamps, they were manufactured in Moscow in the years 1892-1893. These are not handmade, but they are lavishly decorated. The inscriptions with religious texts around the rims and the dedicatory signs are in Greek.<sup>35</sup> All inscriptions applied onto the objects present the same calligraphy, orderly incorporated, meaning that they were incised at the same time, by the same hand. This suggests that the objects were commissioned directly to the Russian workshop. We do not know much more about the two monks, nor about how they brought these precious liturgical objects to Crete and donated them to their monastery. Considering the value of the objects, it is possible that they travelled to Russia; or else, they could have obtained them from someone else who travelled to Russia. For example, we know that in the years 1894-1896, an alms collection mission of the Arkadi Monastery (*zeteia*) had been organized. We know that the Archbishop of Rethymno ordered a miter to the "travellers" (the hegumen of the monastery and another monk). It is therefore possible that they took orders for the Roustika monastery monks as well.<sup>36</sup>



► Fig. 28. Russian zeon cup, Church of Saint Constantine, Agios Konstantinos village, Rethymno Province (length with handle 12.6 cm, diameter at the rim 7 cm, height 4 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▲ Fig. 29. Russian zeon cup, parish museum of Skordilo village, Rethymno Province (length with handle 12 cm, diameter at the rim 7 cm, height 3 cm).

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

► Fig. 30. Complete Russian chalice set at the Church of Saint Constantine, Agios Konstantinos village, Rethymno Province.

Credits: Sofia Katopi.

### Cheaper ecclesiastical items.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the "anonymous", cheap Russian chalice sets or parts of them that were located in different churches all across the Rethymno region (more than twenty different items). They are made of copper alloys, brass or bronze. Some of them are still in use and were recently restored by the method of silver plating or gilding. All the chalices have very similar representations around the perimeter of the cup: a Deisis divided in three medallions – with Jesus in the centre, the Mother of God to the left, and John the Baptist to the right – and with the Cross of Golgotha placed opposite to the figure of Christ (Fig. 22, 23, 24). All of them present similar geometric patterns and an inscription around the rim of the cup, done with the technique of impression and incision. The same type of decoration can be seen on the patens, trays, and zeon cups<sup>37</sup> (Fig. 25, 26, 27). The zeon cups are almost identical with a representation of the Cross of Golgotha on the handle and an inscription running around the rim (Fig. 28, 29). The inscriptions come from religious texts relevant to the liturgical use of each item. For example: the same inscription runs around the rims of all the chalices: "Receive the Body of Christ, taste the fountain of immortality." The inscription around patens reads, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world;" around zeons – "Fervour of faith full of the Holy Spirit;" and accordingly, there are specific inscriptions accompanying the trays representing the Mother of God and the Cross of Golgotha.

During our research it became clear that even though these chalice sets are found in many different churches all across the Rethymno region, sometimes together with more precious objects, they all belong to the same group. I believe that these liturgical objects can be identified with a group of chalice sets that was transferred to Rethymno in 1900 in order to be distributed to the parish churches, a fact which was hitherto known only from an archival source. Konstantinos Papadakis located and published an encyclical from the ecclesiastical archives of his village, Margarites, which had been sent by the



bishop of Rethymno, Dionysius Kastrinogiannakis, to the priests of his bishopric in May 1900. Papadakis was the first to connect the encyclical with chalice sets preserved in Rethymno churches, even though he did not try to identify the objects themselves.<sup>38</sup>

The encyclical contained six articles, most of which were political in nature, as the bishop was supporting the modernisation attempts of the Cretan Autonomous State. He exhorted the priests to take an active role in the census that was about to take place, checking and correcting the misbehaviour (accidental or intentional) of the parishioners. He also urged them to act as informants about the general conduct of the parishioners. He asked, for example, how often they received communion, how many of them were married, and if there were any illegal couples and why (implying that they could possibly be relatives and thus incestuous), how many births there were, who took care of the children and the elderly, etc. He aimed at introducing “Christian associations” against sinning and asked for information concerning confessions. Finally, he exhorted the priests to persuade their parishioners to be friendly and on good terms with their Muslim neighbours, and to inform local justice in case they witnessed a crime, not only because that made them

good Christians but mainly because in that way “they act[ed] as good patriots towards their beloved and honourable country.”

The interesting thing about the fifth article of the encyclical is its rather “commercial” nature, as opposed to the “political” nature of the rest. The bishop informed the priests that: “From what we have seen during our brief tour, many villages do not have holy chalices for the official (ceremonial) days. We inform you that we brought, from Russia to Argyroupolis, sets of chalices, patens, lances, communion spoons, asterisks, zeon cups, two small trays, all beautifully gilded, costing only eight mecits. In this way parishes that lack chalices should attend to sending us the eight mecits and after one month you will have these beautiful, gilded, holy vessels.”<sup>39</sup>

It seems that many priests responded positively and ordered chalice sets, parts of which are the ones identified during our research. The most complete set comes from the village of Agios Konstantinos (Fig. 30), comprising of a chalice, a paten, a lance, a communion spoon, an asterisk, a zeon cup and two small trays. Other churches have a chalice, a paten, and an asterisk; or only two trays; or just a zeon cup.





▲ Fig. 31. Russian silver chalice, Sacristy of the parish of Margarites village, Rethymno Province (detail of fig. 11).  
Credits: Sofia Katopi.

▼ Fig. 32. Russian silver chalice donated by Theodoros Triphyllis, St. Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province (detail of fig. 15).  
Credits: Sofia Katopi.

◆ Fig. 33. Russian silver chalice donated by Theodoros Triphyllis, St. Elijah Monastery in Roustika, Rethymno Province (detail of fig. 15).  
Credits: Sofia Katopi.

Of course, once again, many questions arise. The most important one concerns the transfer of the objects from Russia and the reasons they were brought to the specific village. Argyroupolis was a rather large village at that time, set in the western part of Rethymno Prefecture on a mountainous region, about 25 kilometres from the seat of the bishop and the base of the Russian army, the town of Rethymno. This implies that the commission was not done by the bishop of Rethymno. On the other hand, it was the bishop who sent the encyclical, saying “we brought”, as if directly involved with the commission. There is no mention of any purchases of religious objects in the archive of the vice-consul of Russia in Rethymno.<sup>40</sup> Maybe, the chalice sets were purchased through the general consulate of Chania and that is why they were

brought to Argyroupolis, which is closer to Chania than to Rethymno. Still, at the time the transport of objects via sea was the easiest route to take, so that for the chalice sets to be brought to the mountainous village of Argyroupolis appears like an odd choice. Could it be that a Russian official stationed in Argyroupolis was involved in the commission and purchase of the objects?

These chalice sets have no markings, so we do not know where they were manufactured. It is clear, however, that they correspond to a big commission of liturgical objects to be sold to parish churches of the Rethymno area as mentioned in the encyclical. They were not for donation. Unless it was a donation to the bishopric of Rethymno made by the Russian Holy Synod upon which the bishop decided to make a revenue. The price at which these liturgical objects were sold was not very high, but it was not low either, for those were times of extreme poverty, especially in the villages. The eight mecsits accounted for about 80 kilos of olive oil or about 20 days of agricultural work in the grape harvest. Some almost identical chalices and patens have been located on the island of Santorini, implying once again that there existed established networks of transfer.<sup>41</sup> The only way to answer these questions and so understand the ways these transfer networks worked, is to keep looking for more evidence in the archives.

## Notes:

1 Boycheva 2021; Boycheva 2016a, p. 15.

2 Troulis 2011; Mantzouranis 2011, p. 455-470; Papadakis M.K. 2011, p. 471-482; Volanakis 2011, p. 483-494. Even though the period of the Russian occupation of Rethymno is very important for the modern history of Crete, the topic is mainly covered by local scholars.

3 After the Fourth Crusade, Crete was allotted to Boniface of Montferrat who sold it to Venice. The island came under Venice's full control in 1211 and remained part of Venice's *Stato da mar* for the next four centuries. In 1645, the Ottomans attacked the island. By 1648, most of the island had come under the Ottoman control except for the city of Candia. The long siege of the Cretan town lasted from 1648 to 1669, when the Venetians finally surrendered it to the Ottomans. Crete remained under Ottoman control until 1898.

4 In those times of intense colonial antagonisms, there was also fear that one of the Great Powers might annex the island. After all, twenty years earlier, in 1878, Great Britain took possession of Cyprus. The Cretan question was part of the bigger Eastern Question. For bibliographical reference, see: Frary, Kozelsky 2014; Petmezas, Tzedaki-Apostolaki 2014; Detorakis, Kalokairinos 2001; Kent 1984; Anderson 1966; Marriott 1917.

5 Austria-Hungary and Germany had withdrawn their forces because they disagreed on various issues regarding the proposed solution and opted for a more pro-Ottoman stance.

6 Prince George's mother, Olga of Greece, was the granddaughter of Tsar Nicholas I. Prince George was proposed for the position of High Commissioner of Crete by Russia and was selected amongst many candidates. The Russians strongly supported him throughout the period of this commissionership (1898-1906), even when the other Powers had turned against him after the end of his first term in office.

7 The British occupied Heraklion region in the center of Crete, the French occupied Lasithi in the eastern part of the island, the Italians occupied Chania region in the west, while the capital city of Chania was occupied by all four of the Great Powers. For the Russian occupation of Rethymno, see Sokolovskaja 2006.

8 Many Christian Cretans believed that the Orthodox Russians would run to their help every time they revolted. There was widespread disappointment when this did not happen, especially during the revolution of 1866-1869.

9 Hadjidakis 2011; Papadakis H.A. 2011.

10 Boycheva 2021; Boycheva 2016b, p. 109-110.

11 *Αναγέννησις*, 12 December 1898 (local newspaper in Rethymno).

12 *Αναγέννησις*, 23 January 1899. This interesting information about the Russian army can be added to the documentary evidence of 1769, when the Russian fleet, which reached the Eastern Mediterranean, brought no less than fifty sets of icons meant to equip the mosques which would be turned into churches. Korais 1805, p. 23-24. The same practice was adopted on the Imbros and Samothraki Islands, according to the *Diaries* of the Russian naval officer, Vladimir Bronevsky, during the military actions of the Russian navy in the course of the Russo-Turkish War of 1806-1812. Бронеvский 1819, p. 36-37.

13 *Αναγέννησις*, 27 March 1899.

14 Gerd 2020; Gerd 2014.

15 Spyridon Dendrinis was born in 1811 in Istanbul to a family originally from Corfu. His father served as an ambassador of

the Ionian State. In 1821, during the outbreak of the Greek revolution and its repercussions on Istanbul, his family followed the Russian embassy and fled to Odessa, where he went to school. In 1830, he was appointed secretary to the Consulate General of Russia in Bucharest. In 1850, he was appointed Consul in Trabzon. During the Crimean War, he took refuge in Tbilisi, later returned to Trabzon, and was appointed Consul General in Brazil, from there to Epirus, and finally he was appointed as the first Russian Consul General in Crete in 1860. Papadopoulos-Vretos, 1868, p. 357.

16 This information was located by Dr. Gerd in the Holy Synod archives, in the context of her collaboration with the RICONTRANS project. It will be accessible to the public through its publication on the RICONTRANS database. In addition to that, some information has surfaced recently about the existence of a Russian epitaph in the church that used to serve as the cathedral of Chania during the Cretan Autonomy period. This information is yet to be confirmed.

17 Kalliataki-Mertikopoulou 2005, p. 179-194. Zambetakis 1957, p. 244-258.

18 Da Terzorio 1914, p. 272-279.

19 Kalliataki-Mertikopoulou, 2005, p. 193.

20 Gerd 2020, p. 228.

21 Gerd 2020, p. 233.

22 Igoshev 2013. Igoshev 2011a. Igoshev, Smilyanskaya 2013.

23 Igoshev 2011b.

24 Kamilakis 1995, p. 74-76. Mantzouranis 2011, p. 460.

25 Indicatively, Chesnokova 2017.

26 Chesnokova 2020, p. 225.

27 *Αναγέννησις*, 20 August 1899.

28 The lawsuit with the whole list of the household items that the accuser demands from the accused takes up two of the four pages of the newspaper.

29 Volanakis 2011, p. 483-494.

30 Two almost identical blessing crosses have been located by Valery Igoshev in the island of Santorini. See Igoshev 2011a, p. 15, 22, 31, 49.

31 Volanakis 2011, p. 492.

32 Igoshev 2011a, Mouzakis 2011, Mouzakis 2017.

33 Igoshev 2011a, p. 33-34.

34 Sakellarakis 1998.

35 This is the only example where all the inscriptions are in Greek. Usually, the religious text around the rim of the chalices and the trays can be in Russian, while the dedicatory inscription, in Greek, is usually transcribed on the base of the chalice.

36 Due to the COVID pandemic, I have not been able search the archive of the Arkadi Monastery for more information about this *zeteia*. For the Arkadi *zeteia* see, Maragoudakis 2016, p. 223.

37 Small ritual vessel used for carrying hot water to be mixed with wine by the priest during Liturgy.

38 Papadakis 2011, p. 478-481.

39 Papadakis 2011, p. 480.

40 The Archive of the deputy Consulate of Russia in Rethymno is preserved in the Public Library of Rethymno.

41 Igoshev 2011, p. 46.

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