

RAFAŁ QUIRINI-POPLAWSKI, *The Art of the Genoese Colonies of the Black Sea Basin (1261–1475)* (The Medieval Mediterranean 136). Leiden – Boston: Brill 2023. 410 pp., 299 figures. – ISBN 978-90-04-53893-1 (paperback), 978-90-04-67890-3 (e-book)

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The appearance of RAFAŁ QUIRINI-POPLAWSKI's substantial and well-illustrated monograph on the monumental topography, architecture and art of the Genoese colonies in the Black Sea basin, which constitutes the long-awaited translation of a study originally published in Polish,¹ is nothing if not timely: whereas its original release followed relatively close on the heels of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and coincided with the ensuing Russo-Ukrainian military conflict in the Donbas, the English version comes in the midst of a full-scale invasion of Ukrainian territory by Russian forces, ongoing since 2022. International interest in the region and its history has understandably skyrocketed, and QUIRINI-POPLAWSKI's impressively comprehensive synthesis of late medieval visual and material culture, treating the period between the signing of the Genoese-Byzantine Treaty of Nymphaeum in 1261 and the Ottoman capture of Crimea in 1475, is poised to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of an educated and scholarly readership for whom the regional languages in which much of the specialist literature has been published remain inaccessible. More importantly, for this reader, the book serves as a first-rate introduction to both the region's artworks and the complex research issues raised by their study; even though, in most cases, the former might be somewhat obscure outside the geopolitical domain in question, the latter would surely be all too familiar to historians dealing with late medieval and early modern art and architecture in the Latin East and other areas of cross-cultural and interconfessional encounter, as the author himself acknowledges throughout his text.

Despite the occasional floundering of PIOTR GODLEWSKI's otherwise eminently serviceable English translation and AEDDAN SHAW's careful

1. RAFAŁ QUIRINI-POPLAWSKI, *Sztuka kolonii genueńskich w Basenie Morza Czarnego (1261–1475): Z badań nad wymianą międzykulturową w sztuce późnośredniowiecznej*. Cracow 2017.

proofreading,² the book's aims, primary research questions and overall structure are clear. The author's main stated goal is to raise awareness of the richness, significance and bewildering diversity of artistic production in the Black Sea colonies among medievalists, especially those engaged in research on the more intensely studied Genoese possessions and other Latin-ruled polities in the Eastern Mediterranean, thus providing them with appropriate comparanda for the scrutiny of analogous phenomena in their own area of study (pp. 1–4). He proposes to bridge the gap in coverage between the two fields by approaching the extant material from the Black Sea basin through the prism of fundamental socio-historical questions currently playing a major role in shaping medieval Mediterranean art history: Did builders, artists or other craftsmen belonging to non-Latin ethnoreligious groups participate in art production in areas under Latin rule? Was

2. I am flagging here only some of the most obvious linguistic mishaps, typographical and other clerical errors I encountered reading through the book's main part (emphasis mine throughout): p. 35: 'One can assume that many (possibly most *part*) of them were [the] result of private foundations'; p. 37: 'A little later, a similar situation probably occurred in *Cemablo*'; p. 53: 'However, it should be noted that the development of Lagirio had at least partly *took* shape prior to its incorporation into Pera'; p. 60: 'It was probably there *were* the Latin population of the town, offices, trading facilities, and the garrison were concentrated'; p. 66: '*On its both sides* were bays, the northern and the southern, which hosted two excellent ports'; p. 85: the second paragraph ends on a comma instead of a full stop; p. 115 n. 225: 'The *basis* literature on the subject' – 'his *another* assumption, positing that... is unconvincing'; p. 147: 'Its construction took place on the initiative... of the archimandrite Avetik Khotacharak, who also *founded* a group of manuscripts for it the same year'; p. 161: the pope having promulgated indulgences in support of the church of St. Francis, Pera, in 1414 should have been John XXIII (1410–1415), not John XXII (1316–1334); p. 171: '*Another*, probably Greek, *churches* were recorded in 1455'; p. 192: Fig. 4.7 should have been Fig. 4.8 and vice versa; p. 197 n. 28: '*Marshall* Boucicaut'; p. 217: '... the door located today in the Armenian Church of St. James in Jerusalem also *come* from the Armenian church in Caffa'; p. 225 n. 138: 'With *the* permission *from* Aleksandr Dzhhanov, I refer here to the unpublished paper presented by him *on* the conference...'; p. 272: 'However, the example of both mendicant churches increases the likelihood that such decorations were also created for *others* Latin churches...'; pp. 283–284: 'Their decorations were probably influenced by the Palaiologan style, in which certain role may have been played by the visits or migration of painters *formed* in Constantinople to Caffa, *analogically* to what has been suggested for the first half of the 14th century regarding the miniature painters'; p. 290 n. 153: 'The hypothesis positing the Constantinopolitan origin of the painting was the reason for its *another* name'; p. 304: The aforementioned documents allow *us for* an insight into the nature of the interior furnishings of the Latin churches of Pera'; p. 310 n. 220: the ellipsis seemingly has no place in the middle of the last sentence; p. 328: 'Particularly noteworthy *are* the information from 1423–1425 concerning the rebuilding of the Genoese colony in Simisso'.

there any correlation between a given artistic style and the ethnic or confessional affiliation of those who commissioned, practised or consumed it? Could the overseas domains be regarded as contributing to the art-historical narrative of the metropolis, or should they be viewed above all within the context of the region or the country to which they belong? In order to efficiently broach these and related matters, the author has resolved to kick off his study with involved commentaries on the available secondary literature and textual evidence, before devoting subsequent chapters to surviving or documented examples of all artistic media hitherto known from the region, ranging from military and religious architecture, sculpture and painting to metalwork, ceramics, coinage and seals. Furthermore, each chapter typically comprises largely descriptive portions, where detailed accounts of the sites, buildings and objects under study are given, and more focused analyses, which are meant to highlight select art-historical issues mostly pertaining to the social aspects of patronage, production and consumption. Such a profoundly regimented structure may ensure lengthy discussion of each medium yet creates its own set of problems. The breaking down of a certain site or building into its constituent parts, tackled in separate chapters, often makes it harder to appreciate and evaluate the whole; the rigid segregation of descriptive and analytical parts inevitably introduces a measure of repetition between the two; and the analyses sometimes seem to concentrate on highly specific topics to the exclusion of others, potentially equally as interesting and helpful. These shortcomings are mitigated by generous conclusions, which evoke a broader interpretative context and supply the necessary perspective, not to mention blaze trails for future research. The volume ends with a concise catalogue of sites, a copious bibliography and indices of names and subjects.

As the author of this book readily admits, any study of the visual and material culture emanating from the Genoese colonies in the Black Sea basin should be prefaced with serious caveats. Late medieval art in this region happens to not only be little known, but also poorly preserved, meaning that the extant evidence is uneven and often compromised. The lion's share of the aforesaid evidence concerns the two main colonies, namely Pera (part of modern-day Istanbul, Turkey) and Caffa (now Feodosia, Crimea), yet, although the bulk of the material testimony derives from the former, the documentary sources overwhelmingly favour the latter (particularly the period 1453–1475, for which a sizable part of the financial account books kept by the Genoese *massarii* on behalf of the city's commune has come down to us). Moreover, identifying textually attested religious edifices with stand-

ing or ruined structures in these and other sites around the Black Sea coast can be daunting, considering that locating them within the urban fabric and gauging the religious rite for which they would have originally been designed and/or used during the Genoese period is often next to impossible at our current state of knowledge. Tellingly, only one Latin church has survived in fair condition in Pera, whereas none of its Greek and Armenian counterparts have had the same fate; conversely, Caffa's few remaining ecclesiastical buildings from that period belonged to the Greeks and Armenians, while only infinitesimal traces of the city's Latin churches have thus far come to light. A similarly patchy picture is evoked by the illuminated manuscripts produced in and preserved from Caffa, several hundreds of which are Armenian but none so far Latin or Greek. In the realm of monumental painting, the most extensive surviving ensemble of frescoes and mosaics, which was recently uncovered in Pera's former Dominican church, remains inadequately documented and concealed from view inside one of the city's historic mosques; what little is still to be seen in Caffa, Cembalo (present-day Balaklava, Crimea) and Soldaia (now Sudak, Crimea) is exceedingly fragmentary and far from straightforward in its interpretation. What is more, icons, metalwork and other portable objects plausibly assigned to the region have almost all been removed thence to other, occasionally faraway places, maintaining only a tenuous (perhaps, in some instances, even spurious?) link to their supposed original site. Lastly, the place of production and the biographies of the vast majority of the items retrieved by archaeology (e.g., dress accessories of precious metalwork) cannot be reconstructed with any certainty. Although, in light of the above, any conclusions reached at this stage could only be preliminary and tentative, QUIRINI-POPLAWSKI's meticulous presentation of the pertinent material and the development of the scholarly discourse surrounding it, in conjunction with the accompanying thematic vignettes allowing vistas into broader art-historical debates, enrich and nuance our understanding of key methodological issues common to all instances of artistic production situated at the intersection of distinctive cultural spheres.

According to one of the book's throughline arguments, earlier scholarship tended to emphasise – often to exaggeration – the 'Genoese' identity of much late medieval art throughout the Black Sea basin. This somewhat blunt view seems to hold water with respect to fortifications, public buildings and (to some degree) urban planning, in the conception and execution of which the Ligurian metropolis and its colonial agents were more often than not intimately involved, alongside other individuals (ranging from lo-

cal non-Genoese rulers to the pope, the higher clergy and others). Even though the author discerns no systematic attempt on the administration's part to replicate Genoa's monumental topography in the colonies, chalking up any potential resemblance to similarities in terrain morphology and allocated functions, Caffa was redeveloped from the 1310s on the basis of a unitary vision and a strict set of regulations, recalling the equally closely orchestrated mid-thirteenth-century settlement of Chania in Venetian Crete. Grand and conspicuous architectural gestures, in addition to widely circulating propagandistic devices such as coinage, were commonly branded with the symbols of Genoese authority, ranging from coats of arms (adjusted accordingly to reflect the fluid political situation in the metropolis itself during French and Milanese rule in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) to inscriptions, and with the dynastic emblems (*tamgas*) of the local Tatar rulers, who claimed sovereignty over the Genoese colonies. Italian builders and other craftsmen certainly travelled to and plied their trade in the region, as is attested by the written record, a limited number of Gothic features (e.g., pointed arches, rib vaults) integrated into both military and ecclesiastical architecture, the North Italian models evidently employed for the design of places of authority (such as the much-restored Palace of the Podestà in Pera) and the principal formal attributes of the commemorative foundation slabs once adorning the exterior surfaces of many a public building. The author singles out for discussion the motif of the arcade frieze, common in Genoa and Liguria more broadly between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries and putting in multiple appearances in the Black Sea colonies in the latter half of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The relative delay with which this motif was introduced in Crimean architecture is here interpreted as a symptom of the 'stylistic retardation' conjured up by MARIA GEORGOPOULOU to explain why the Latin churches erected in Greece did not on the whole resemble contemporary French Gothic edifices (pp. 124–126, 327).³ However, apart from the fact that the churches in question belonged to mendicant convents and were, therefore, subject to very different functional specifications and rhetorical expectations compared to French cathedrals,⁴ any alleged 'retardation' in the transmission

3. MARIA GEORGOPOULOU, *The Landscape of Medieval Greece*. In: NICKIPHOROS I. TSOUGARAKIS – PETER LOCK (eds), *A Companion to Latin Greece* (Brill's Companions to European History 6). Leiden – Boston 2015, pp. 326–368, at pp. 353–356. The phrase 'stylistic retardation', used to sum up GEORGOPOULOU's thesis regarding the outdated look of 'colonial' architecture in Latin Greece, is the author's (p. 126 n. 273).

4. For a concise overview of mendicant church architecture in Greece and its concep-

of artistic forms and ideas between the Latin West and East has yet to be conclusively proven; recent research has shown that what look (to us) like stylistic anachronisms in late medieval Eastern Mediterranean art are indicative of the development over time of local or regional preferences and traditions, a process that constituted the rule throughout Europe yet has been harder to trace in the East, where the record is plagued by considerable gaps.⁵ To come back to Crimea, not only were arcade friezes employed on the walls of Pera decades earlier, as the author relates, but a supposed ‘late’ transmission cannot be blamed on the colonies’ relative isolation from the West, given the solid documentary evidence for the activity of Italian builders in the region. It would perhaps be more apropos to ask why a motif that was purportedly past its peak in Europe by the time it is attested in the Black Sea colonies would have become so popular there in subsequent years.

In spite of the use of recognisably European models in the design of ‘official’, public-facing architecture, the execution of such edifices was largely in the hands of Greek, Armenian and other non-Latin builders, as both

tual premises, see now MICHALIS OLYMPIOS, *Architecture, Use of Space, and Ornament in the Mendicant Churches of Latin Greece: An Overview*. In: VICKY FOSKOLOU – SOPHIA KALOPISSI-VERTI (eds), *Intercultural Encounters in Medieval Greece after 1204: The Evidence of Art and Material Culture* (Byzantios: Studies in Byzantine History and Civilisation 19). Turnhout 2022, pp. 45–75.

5. Considering the emphasis on style in the art historiography of the Latin East, a detailed discussion of the topic of formal transmission and reception between West and East would far exceed the scope of this review. For a recent study working through the problem of stylistic anachronism to productively engage with the formation processes of local styles in this region, see MICHELE BACCI, *On the Prehistory of Cretan Icon Painting*. *Frankokratia* 1 (2020) pp. 108–164. For the ideologically motivated revival of earlier architectural and sculptural forms in Lusignan Famagusta and Venetian Cyprus, see MICHALIS OLYMPIOS, *Angevin and Lusignan Visual Claims to the Crown of Jerusalem: Parallel Lives?*. In: ALEXANDER D. BEIHAMMER – ANGEL NICOLAOU-KONNARI (eds), *Crusading, Society, and Politics in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Age of King Peter I of Cyprus* (Mediterranean Nexus 1100–1700 10). Turnhout 2022, pp. 157–173 (with earlier literature); M. OLYMPIOS, *‘Fino al tempo delli Re di Cipro’: Retro-Gothic and Nostalgic Identities in Venetian Cyprus*. In: CHARIKLEIA DIAMANTI — ANASTASIA VASSILIOU – SMARAGDI ARVANITI (eds), *Ἐν Σοφίᾳ μαθητεύσαντες: Essays in Byzantine Material Culture and Society in Honour of Sophia Kalopissi-Verti*. Oxford 2019, pp. 48–63; M. OLYMPIOS, *When Venus Met Godfrey: The Evocation of Gothic Antiquity in the Architecture of Venetian Cyprus*. In: ALICE ISABELLA SULLIVAN – KYLE G. SWEENEY (eds), *Lateness and Modernity in Medieval Architecture* (AVISTA Studies in the History of Medieval Technology, Science, and Art 16). Leiden – Boston 2023, pp. 314–345.

construction technique and written sources imply. This might have been even more emphatically the case with ecclesiastical art and architecture, for which virtually no concrete evidence exists as to the direct involvement of the colonial government or Western craftsmen. The early-fourteenth-century Dominican church (now the Arap Camii) is not only the best-preserved mendicant building, but also the major surviving example of a Latin church in all of the Black Sea colonies, whence comes the single richest ensemble of monumental painting and sculpture (funerary and otherwise). In terms of its overall visual makeup, the church reproduces a building type of North/Central Italian pedigree and its interior is adorned with frescoes incorporating distinctly Latin iconography, yet both the architecture and painting (including the mosaics) were made by Byzantine-trained craftsmen using local techniques and styles. This reliance on largely local main-d'oeuvre to erect and decorate the spaces serving mendicant corporate identity was fairly common in the Latin-ruled Greek world, and indeed comparisons between the churches of the friars in Pera – which included those of the Franciscan convent, demolished at the end of the seventeenth century – and what is now Greece are not devoid of merit. To take but one example, based on a seventeenth-century text, the author puts forward the stimulating hypothesis that the church of the Pera Dominicans would originally not have been three-aisled, as habitually reconstructed, but would possess an undivided, unified interior space. His comparison with the single-nave Dominican churches in Candia (present-day Heraklion, Crete) and Chania is both legitimate and thought-provoking, although, seeing as the transeptless churches of the same religious order in Andravida (Peloponnese) and Negroponte (now Chalkis, Euboea), which are typologically more akin to Pera, were both three-aisled, an in-depth examination of the material evidence may be necessary to settle the issue once and for all.⁶

Looking at the bigger picture of art production in the Black Sea colonies, Byzantine-trained masons, fresco painters, mosaicists and sculptors all benefited from the flourishing job market in Pera; additionally, Genoese rule in Crimea appears to have encouraged the decisive spread of Palaiologan art there, as may now be deduced by the latter's considerable impact on local fresco and manuscript painting. The so-called Seljuk style of carving, the individual features of which might have originated in Asia Minor, among other places, and grown in popularity in fourteenth-century Crimea,

6. On the architectural typology of Greek mendicant churches, see OLYMPIOS, *Architecture, Use of Space, and Ornament*, pp. 53–55.

as well as the Armenian painting practised in Caffa round out the gamut of visual idioms encountered in the region under study. Throughout his narrative, the author judiciously dissociates traditional assumptions about the national and cultural provenance of specific styles (which could frequently be too rigid or unjustifiably reductive) from the ethnoreligious identity of the patrons and the craftsmen/artists who wielded them. Latins, Greeks, Armenians etc. all seem to have had recourse to the same range of formal options, even though the latter would have been inflected to respond to the wishes and needs of individual patrons and intended users. Based on his reading of the regular intermingling of elements associated with different modes of artistic expression (e.g., Gothic/Italianate, Byzantine, Armenian, Seljuk etc.) on one and the same artwork, the author ultimately concludes that such phenomena gave rise to hybrid visual cultures (pp. 327–328). Nevertheless, the notion of ‘hybridity’ has proven controversial and, as such, has drawn criticism from certain art historians of the Latin East, where analogous artistic blends occurred.⁷ In their view, the ‘mixing’ of different artistic traditions was not merely the pragmatic outcome of the coexistence of various ethnoreligious groups in the same space; far from being indiscriminate, it was predicated on a conscious process of selective borrowing of motifs with a view to enhancing the visual, spiritual and emotional efficacy of a given set of images. In other words, both patrons and craftsmen enjoyed greater agency in their artistic endeavours than hitherto recognised, and this may well have been as true of the Black Sea Genoese colonies as it was for the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the last chapter of his book, QUIRINI-POPLAWSKI suggests likely avenues for further research exploring the plausible impact of the art of the Black Sea colonies on that of neighbouring areas. As promising as these propositions appear to be for the future history of Eastern European art, his current work is of immense value to scholars in adjacent fields, including the art and architectural history of the late medieval Eastern Mediterranean.

7. For reasoned criticism of ‘hybrid art’ in the late medieval Mediterranean context, see, first and foremost, MICHELE BACCI, Veneto-Byzantine ‘Hybrids’: Towards a Reassessment. *Studies in Iconography* 35 (2014) pp. 73–106; M. BACCI, The Art of Lusignan Cyprus and the Christian East: Some Thoughts on Historiography and Methodology. In: MICHALIS OLYMPIOS – MARIA PARANI (eds), *The Art and Archaeology of Lusignan and Venetian Cyprus (1192–1571): Recent Research and New Discoveries* (*Studies in the Visual Cultures of the Middle Ages* 12). Turnhout 2019, pp. 21–42; M. BACCI, Along the Art-Historical Margins of the Medieval Mediterranean. In: PAMELA A. PATTON – MARIA ALESSIA ROSSI (eds), *Out of Bounds: Exploring the Limits of Medieval Art*. University Park PA 2023, pp. 79–112.

As I hope to have shown in my brief foray into some of the questions he has addressed in his compendious and multifaceted study, the author's arguments and conclusions provide much food for thought, especially concerning the finer points of methodology with regard to tackling questions of artistic patronage, facture and consumption in culturally and confessionally diverse premodern societies. Thanks to the material from the Genoese colonies of the Black Sea basin finally going mainstream, we can all pursue our individual inquiries armed with a deeper awareness of an expanding field of vision and filled with the unqualified excitement that comes from stepping forth into a larger world.

Keywords

late medieval art; medieval colonisation; intercultural and interconfessional encounters;
mendicant orders