

# Three Byzantine Cameos

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THE MUSEUMS of public and private collections in Europe and America contain a considerable number of Byzantine cameos from the Middle Period—in fact a far larger number than one would think, since there is no corpus of them, many remain unpublished, and those that have been published have appeared in widely scattered catalogues, articles, and books.<sup>1</sup> This note is devoted to three examples, one still with its original mount, the others of unusual and striking shape.

The mounted example<sup>2</sup> (Plate 5) is in the museum within the Kremlin walls that has so many Byzantine treasures accumulated by the tsars over the centuries, some at the time they were made, others later. The front of the pendant (fig. 1) is a sardonyx in two layers, carved with the bust of St. Nicholas. The cameo, of fine quality and of interest in itself, is one of the few Byzantine cameos still set in their original mounting. Thus it gives us a better understanding of the original appearance of these cameos. At the top is a hinge held by a pin with two pearls so that the reliquary could be suspended at the neck. The setting is in silver. The back of this setting (fig. 2) has in repoussé a superb bust of St. Spiridon, identified by his name in Greek letters. It has the shape of a rectangle with four semi-circles, one at each side, a typical shape in Byzantine art. The marginal spaces are filled with leaf-motifs in repoussé with a punched background to make them stand out clearly in relief.

The quality of the cameo and the silver repoussé reverse is fine. The silver relief indicates a date of the late tenth or eleventh century.

<sup>1</sup>Since this note was written, Dr. Hans Wentzel has published an important article on dated Byzantine cameos of the Middle Period, "Datierte und datierbare byzantinische Kameen," *Festschrift Friederich Winkler* (Berlin 1959) 9-21.

<sup>2</sup>I thank Dr. Panko, the Assistant Director of the museum in the Kremlin, for photographs of this pendant.

It may be compared for technique to the reliquary from the Sainte Chapelle in the Louvre,<sup>3</sup> which is generally attributed to the eleventh century. The leaf-decorations seem somewhat later in date than the reliquary of the True Cross, made for Basil the Proedrus, now at Limburg-on-the-Lahn.<sup>4</sup> Thus we can attribute the pendant (and the cameo, since it is in its original setting) to the late tenth or eleventh century, and add to the Middle Byzantine Period an object of great beauty.

The two other cameos, one in Prague and one in Venice, are unusual in that they are crucifixes carved out of hardstones and the figures on them are carved in relief. Thus the craftsmen had a double task, one to cut the crucifixes from the stones (the crucifix in Prague also has a loop at the top for a cord), the other to carve them as though they were cameos.

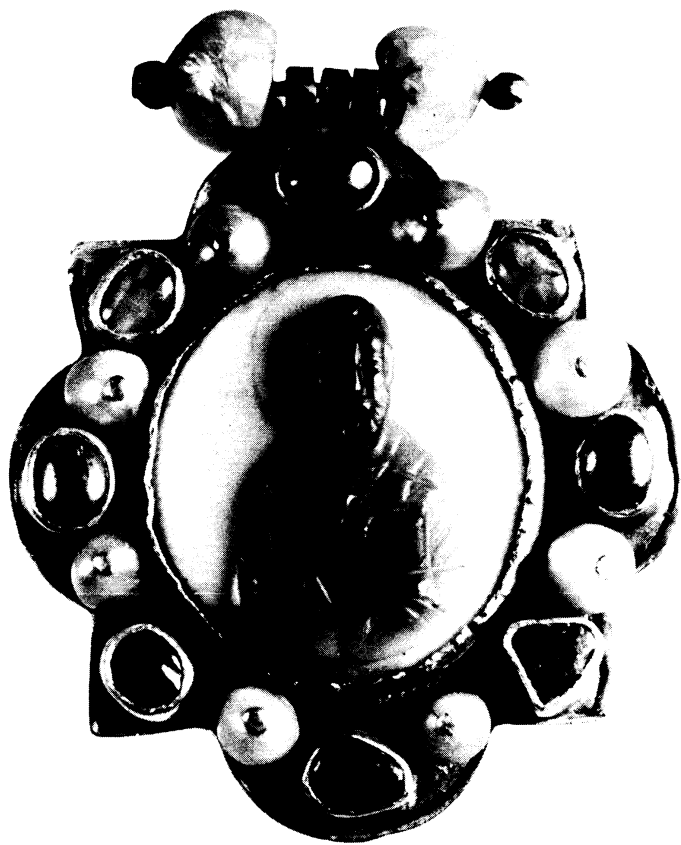
The first of these crucifixes is of green jasper (Plate 6, fig. 3) and is set in a reliquary of the Holy Blood of Our Lord in the Sanctuary of the Treasury in San Marco in Venice.<sup>5</sup> The reliquary of the Holy Blood, superbly mounted in a stand during the Gothic period by a Venetian silversmith, is said to have been brought to Venice by the Doge Dandolo in 1204 after the sack of Constantinople. Judging from the crystal, silver, gilt, and enamel, I see no reason to doubt this, since the reliquary is purely Byzantine and doubtless earlier in date than 1204. The crucifix in jasper seems not to have been made for the reliquary, since it was once slightly larger, but the reliquary was made especially to take the crucifix, so that the cameo-crucifix also antedates the removal of the reliquary to Venice.

The jasper crucifix has a shape frequently seen in Byzantine art — equal-armed, with a semi-circle at the end of each arm. On it is engraved a cross with the plaque for the titulus, a suppedaneum, and at the foot of the cross the skull of Adam to indicate Golgotha. Christ is carved in relief, suspended on the cross. Above the cross are engraved stylized representations of the sun and the moon,

<sup>3</sup>A. Grabar, *L'art byzantin* (Paris 1938) pl. 42.

<sup>4</sup>See *Das Münster* 8 (1955) Hefte 7-8, pp. 201-240.

<sup>5</sup>I am most indebted to the authorities of San Marco for permitting me to have the reliquary opened so that the cameo could be properly photographed and to Oswald Boehm of Venice for making the photographs.



*Figure 1. Obverse*



*Figure 2. Reverse*

PENDANT IN THE KREMLIN MUSEUM



*Figure 3. Cameo set in  
Reliquary of the Holy Blood  
in San Marco, Venice*



*Figure 4. Cameo of the Virgin  
in the Walters Art Gallery*

CAMEOS IN VENICE AND BALTIMORE



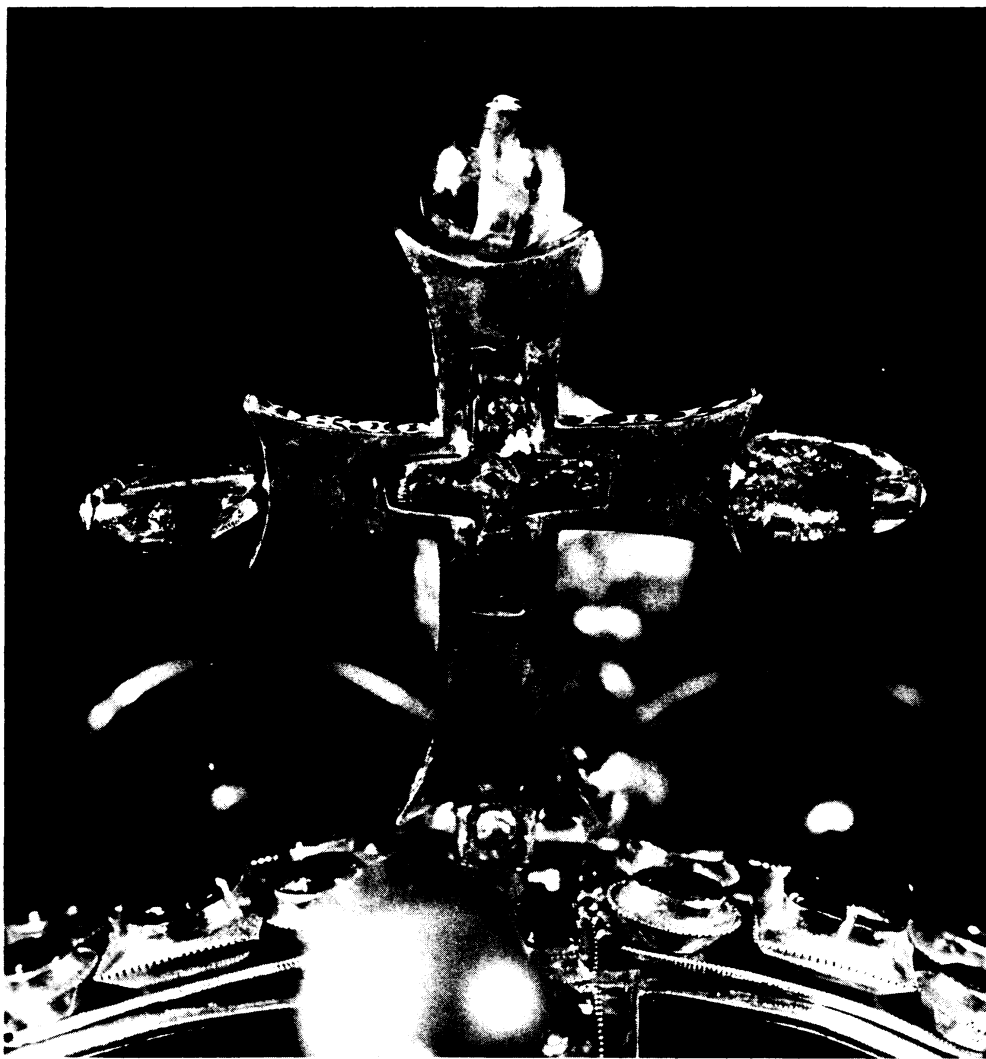
*Figure 5. Obverse*



*Figure 6. Reverse*

DOUBLE CAMEO IN THE COLLECTION OF COUNT CINI IN VENICE

PLATE 8 Ross



CAMEO SET IN THE CROWN OF BOHEMIA, PRAGUE

pagan symbols that survived into Christian times. The quality of the jasper cameo is not equal, for example, to the truly superb tenth century Virgin (fig. 4) from a crucifixion or deesis group in the Walters Art Gallery. It seems closer in its rough carving to a cameo (Plate 7, figs. 5 and 6) formerly in the De Gruneisen Collection and now in the collection of Count Cini in Venice.<sup>6</sup> De Gruneisen, on the basis of the inscription on the cameo, attributed it to the reign of the emperor of Constantinople, Alexius Dukas V. It is to this period that the jasper crucifix should be attributed.

The other crucifix, carved from a sapphire (Plate 8), is known to me only in photographs, one of them in color.<sup>7</sup> It is even more remarkable in one way, in that the stone is carved at the top with a crosswise hole, through which a cord or chain could be passed. Carved on the crucifix in cameo are Christ suspended on the Cross, the bust of an archangel above, the half-figure of Mary at the left and of John at the right. There may have been a skull at the bottom. The crucifix is now mounted in the crown of Bohemia and is kept in the vault in the cathedral of St. Vitus.

Sapphires were especially prized for cameos by the Byzantines. A number are known in museums, one of the most notable being the one with the bust of Christ in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection.<sup>8</sup> The blue of the sapphire may have recalled the blue of heaven and so of Paradise promised by the sacrifice of Our Lord on the Cross. The sapphire cameo-crucifix in Prague, like the jasper crucifix in Venice, is somewhat roughly carved and probably should be attributed also to a Byzantine craftsman and dated about A.D. 1200.

These three objects add considerably to our knowledge of Middle Byzantine art. The cameo in the Kremlin gives us an excellent idea of the appearance of the many unmounted cameos now in museums and private collections before they lost their settings. The other two are unusual — unique, one might say — for their form. All three are remarkable both for their beauty and for the material in which they are carved.

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<sup>6</sup>See Wentzel, *op cit.*, figs. 2, 3.

<sup>7</sup>On the cover of *Zprávy památkové Péče* 15 (1955) Hefte 6-8; also p. 258. I owe the photograph to the Slavic Institute in Prague.

<sup>8</sup>*Handbook of the Collection* (Washington 1955) no. 216.