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Militarism in 11th Century Byzantium:
Conceptualization in the Icon of the Archangel Michael



Figure 1: Cloisonné Icon of the Archangel Michael



Figure 2: Monomachos Crown



Figure 3: Illuminated Painting of Basil II Bulgar Slayer

The icon of the Archangel Michael¹ is a striking example of enameling from 11th century Byzantium which features an overtly militaristic focus. The archangel himself is standing in a ready stance with sword drawn with a host of soldier saints at his side armed with lances and brandishing shields. These soldier saints appear ready and willing to join the archangel in battle as part of his heavenly host. Ornately created with precious gem stones, gold leaf and an enameling technique that was revolutionary at its time, this piece was most certainly created for the emperor or someone else of high estate. Although the origin of this piece is unknown, by having a sense of who the Archangel Michael was in scripture and what he represented to the Byzantine populace of the 11th century, examining the icon in detail and looking at the circumstances surrounding the time of its creation, it is possible to arrive at a greater understanding of the significance of this icon and its place within Byzantine history. The icon of the Archangel Michael will be shown to have been a conceptualization of the militaristic tenants of the soldier emperor Basil II during a period of Byzantine conquest and expansion into the area previously controlled by the Bulgars. The icon itself would likely have been sponsored by Basil II himself or a successor in order to capture and demonstrate the grandeur of Byzantine militarism during the period of the 11th century.

1. The Archangel Michael in Scripture and Tradition

The Archangel Michael is mentioned in the Bible as God's main intercessor on Earth and as the defeater of Satan's legions in the book of Revelations. In the book of Daniel, Michael is sent to Earth to deliver a prophesy. The archangel is also mentioned in the book of Jude as confronting Satan himself. Perhaps his most prominent role is that found in the book of Revelations in which Michael defeats Satan's legion in heaven.

¹ Figure 1.

“Michael and his angels fought against the dragon [Satan]; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found anymore in heaven.”² Having such a prominent role in the Holy Scriptures as a military figure, it is easy to understand why Christians would have venerated him as such. It would have been only natural for Christians to look to this figure who would defeat the legions of Satan during times of secular strife.

To the Byzantines, the Archangel was known as the *archistrategos*, or military commander, of the heavenly host of angels and as protector of all of the faithful. Other titles for the archangel include the “sword of God” and “right hand of God.”³ Military victory was often attributed to Michael. For Example, the victory of Emperor Constantine the Great over Maxentius was attributed to him. In honor of Michael’s assistance, Constantine had a church built in his honor which was to be called the Michaelion. In 337, an apparition of the archangel is said to have appeared to Constantine and said, “I am Michael, the chief of the angelic legions of the Lord of hosts, the protector of the Christian religion, who whilst thou wast battling against godless tyrants, placed the weapons in thy hands.”⁴ Many other accounts of the archangel’s assistance in battle exist. These stories, along with his role in scripture helped to solidify his position in Christian tradition as defender of the faithful.

2. Cloisonné Enamel Icon of the Archangel Michael

The specific art style of this piece is interesting to note because of the extraordinary expense and superb craftsmanship have would have went into its

² Revelations 12:7-8.

³ Michael Foster, “Archetypal Archangel and Archer: Actions, Apparitions and Angelic Assignment of Saint Michael,” Guild of Saint Michael, Dec. 2009, 18 April 2012, www.guildofstmichael.org/docs/st-michael-apparitions.pdf, 4.

⁴ *ibid*, 5.

production. The icon is created using a process of enameling known as cloisonné. This is an ancient enameling technique which became popular in Byzantine artwork around the ninth century. The reason for this is most likely a technical discovery that allowed craftsmen to vary the colors of the enamel and create complicated patterns of *cloisons*, or partitions, in which the enamel was poured.⁵ The icon was made with gold leaf and the perimeter was ornamented with precious gemstones, showing the great expense which went into its production.⁶ The artistic skill would have required the expertise of a master craftsman. This piece would therefore have likely been commissioned by the emperor and housed in the royal treasury of Constantinople.

The most interesting aspect of the icon's production, however, is the use of relief enameling. This process of enameling is quite rare in Byzantine icons because of the great skill required of the artist. In fact, Byzantine artists who practiced this technique were far ahead of artists in Western Europe who would only perfect this same technique some centuries later.⁷ The technique of relief enameling was likely utilized in order to confer a sense of realism and liveliness to the icon. The shifting light over the reflective enamel would have given the figure of the archangel a lifelike complexion. According to modern scholars, the use of relief in icons is representative of what is known as theory known as *extramission*. This theory states that "the eye seeks the tactility of textures and reliefs" and that "sight is understood and experienced as touch." It is understandable, therefore, that "Byzantine icons address this tactile desire with their rich decoration,

⁵ André Grabar, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire: Byzantine Art in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Betty Forster, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1966) 176.

⁶ During the icon's restoration in 1834, the gemstones were replaced with colored glass.

⁷ Ormonde M Dalton, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1961) 513.

varied materials, and reliefs.”⁸ The creators of the icon were, in essence, attempting to incorporate all of the senses into the viewing of the icon and thereby have the viewer interact with the icon rather than simply look at it. This suggests that the artist was trying to confer the militaristic grandeur represented in the icon upon the viewer.

The icon of the Archangel Michael typifies the military stature perpetuated in Christian tradition. Everything about this icon is a personification of a militaristic ideal. The archangel, standing in an alert, upright position with wings powerfully positioned behind him, brandishing his sword and *globus cruciger* and wearing plate armor, epitomizes the military ideal. The *globus cruciger* (Latin for “cross-bearing globe”) is a powerful symbol in Christian tradition which represents Christ’s dominion over the world. The Archangel Michael would therefore be holding this symbol in order to signify his role as enforcer of Christ’s dominion. The saints who flank the archangel are all venerated as soldier saints, that is, they were martyred as soldiers either in battle or for their beliefs. These soldier saints make up the heavenly legion which Michael commands.

The background behind the archangel has been interpreted by some to represent the Garden of Paradise,⁹ but could just as easily represent any earthly domain. Having most likely been made in Constantinople under royal sponsorship, the backdrop could represent the city of Constantinople itself or the Byzantine Empire as a whole. The arches toward the bottom of the icon represent earthly architecture such as would be seen in the city of Constantinople. The floral pattern behind the arches is representative of earthly vegetation, simply illustrating that it is the secular world. Above the separation seen

⁸ Bissera V. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon”, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 88, No. 4, Dec. 2006, www.jstor.org/stable/25067280, 631.

⁹ “Byzantium 330-1453”, Education Department: Royal Academy of Arts (London, 2008) static.royalacademy.org.uk/files/Byzantium-education-guide-369.pdf, 18.

behind the archangel's wings is an illustration of the night sky with two stars clearly visible. Inside of the stars is Byzantine ligature which spells "APX MÍX" which translates to Archangel Michael.¹⁰ This inscription in the stars underscores the fact that the archangel is a heavenly being. Having Michael stand guard over this early landscape is representative of his divine protection over the Byzantine Empire.

The appearance of Christ Pantocrator in this icon is significant, although by no means uncommon in an icon of this type. *Pantocrator* simply means that Christ is enthroned or sitting with kingly majesty. He would typically be holding the Bible in his left hand blessing with his right. His position at the top and center on the icon is symbolic of his divine authority over and blessing upon everything that the icon represents. The overtly militaristic tone of the icon would lead the viewer to the belief that Christ is the ultimate arbiter of the militaristic ideal that is represented.

The exact date of the icon's creation is unknown. Most scholars attribute the piece to the 11th or 12th century. According to Klaus Wessel, "The faces of Christ and all the Saints are very similar to those on the Monomachos Crown¹¹ in Budapest, but the fold style is different ... so we put this icon in the first half of the 11th century, just before the Monomachos Crown."¹² If Wessel's analysis of the artistic style is correct, then that would date the creation of the icon to around the reign of Basil II. By examining the reign of Basil II, the overtly militaristic theme of the icon of the Archangel Michael will be seen as merely a product of its time.

¹⁰ Klaus Wessel, *Byzantine Enamels: from the 5th to the 13th century*, trans. by Irene R. Gibbons, (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society LTD, 1968) 92.

¹¹ Figure 2.

¹² *ibid* 95.

3. Militarism Under Emperor Basil II Bulgar Slayer

Basil II obtained the moniker “Voulgaroktonos” (Bulgar Slayer) from the Emperor Isaac II Angelos while he was facing a military challenge from Bulgaria during the late 12th century.¹³ By referring to the late emperor as such, Isaac was most certainly trying to recall the memory of the emperor who was able to pacify the Bulgars and push the borders of the Byzantine Empire to their greatest extent since the Islamic Conquests. Having been on campaign against many enemies for the majority of his forty-eight year reign, from 976 until 1025, Basil II has obtained a reputation as “a man of iron strength of purpose and unique ability: among all the descendants of Basil I, he alone was a natural ruler and a truly great statesman.”¹⁴

A revolt headed by the general Bardas Sclerus early in the career of Basil II helped to form his militaristic character. “His body and mind began to assume those deeper lineaments of sternness and inflexibility which characterize his later years.”¹⁵ When Sclerus tried again to usurp the throne in 987, Basil personally lead the army, aided by an alliance with the Kievan Rus, to crush the rebellion.¹⁶ After these internal squabbles had been put down, he turned his attention to the Balkans. The Bulgars had been chipping away at Byzantium’s northern frontier and carving out their own empire for some decades before and Basil meant to put a stop to it. His subjugation of the Balkans would become mythic in the minds of Byzantines for centuries to come.

¹³ Judith Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) 218.

¹⁴ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. by Peter Charanis, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969) 299.

¹⁵ Romilly Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries A.D. 610-1071*, (New York: Random House, 1966) 305.

¹⁶ *ibid* 307-310.

The crucial battle of Basil's campaign to retake the Balkans was fought on 29 July 1014 at the pass of Kleidion. After butchering the Bulgarian force, Basil's savage reprisal against them was to have "all the Bulgarian captives ... blinded, save for one in every hundred who was left with one eye to guide his comrades back to the Bulgarian tsar."¹⁷ The ultimate defeat of the Bulgars and the subjugation of the Balkans under Byzantine rule were thenceforward assured. Basil's military success and horrific reprisal would come to define and perpetuate his own historical memory in the minds of his successors.

4. Conceptualization of the Militaristic Ideal

The illuminated painting of Basil II¹⁸ that ornaments a psalter (book of psalms), which is believed to have belonged to Basil himself, is a striking illustration of the militaristic ideal which came to prominence during his reign.¹⁹ This painting is interesting because of the striking similarities it shares with the icon of the Archangel Michael described previously. Both of these incorporate an overtly militaristic theme and display soldier saints prominently flanking the main figures. Some of these saints are the same in both images, including Saints Theodore, Demetrius and George.²⁰ Although the primary figures in these images are different, the Archangel Michael is present in the portrait of Basil II as the angel who is arming him with a lance. Christ Pantocrator is present in both of the images as well. In the icon he is giving his blessing while in the painting he is lowering a divine crown to Basil. The actions of Christ Pantocrator in both

¹⁷ Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971) 132.

¹⁸ Figure 3.

¹⁹ Constance Head, *Imperial Byzantine Portraits: A Verbal and Graphic Gallery*, (New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas Brothers, Publishers: 1982) 90.

²⁰ Enno Franzius, *History of the Byzantine Empire: Mother of Nations*, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1967) 259.

images can be viewed as representing the same message. The militaristic content of both of these images has the divine blessing and consent of Christ.

By examining both of these images it can be clearly seen that they are both trying to convey to the viewer the same sense of militaristic grandeur. The Archangel Michael is standing guard over the Byzantine Empire while the Emperor is standing over the defeated and groveling Bulgars.²¹ Both are dressed in full military regalia with soldier saints at their flanks ready and willing to follow them into battle. Both are standing in a similar position, upright and alert. The symbols of divine authority are similar also. The archangel is holding a sword and globus cruciger while the emperor is wielding a lance and being given a divine crown. Both of these are representative of military might and divine authority, respectively.

The Archangel Michael is represented in scripture and Christian tradition as the archistrategos of the heavenly host and as the divine being who would cast Satan's legion out of heaven. For this reason, he was often venerated by Christians during times of war and when in need of protection. The icon of the archangel typifies this belief and underscores his importance as a military figure. By examining the circumstances of the early 11th century, it becomes quite clear why an icon of this type would be so important to the Byzantine people and especially to the emperor. Basil II especially would have venerated the Archangel as a military figure because of his own military campaigns during which he would have been in need of divine assistance and protection. The icon may not have been commissioned by Basil himself, but whoever did commission it was doing so in order to relive the militaristic ideal so prominently displayed by the soldier emperor.

²¹ Head, *Imperial Byzantine Portraits*, 90.