

Teaching Sinai Module

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Icon of St. Theodosia



Tempera and gold on panel

early 13th century

34 x 25.6 x 2.2 cm

Possibly Constantinople

Brief description

In this bust length portrait, a female saint, wearing a dark brown cloak over a beige tunic and holding a gold cross in her left hand, faces the viewer with a steady gaze. The cross she holds lets us know she is a martyr, while her dark garment and headdress tell us that she is a nun. She is labeled in Greek as “Saint Theodosia,” a bit of text connecting the image to the entity of the saint. Her intent brow, small fleshy mouth and a gently gesturing right hand reassure the faithful spectators of her readiness to hear their prayers. While the juxtaposition of the dark garment and gold background seems to flatten the image at first, the fine modeling of the face and hands make her presence and humanity more palpable.

Teaching exercise

This icon lends itself well to an introduction of Byzantine icons and a variety of related contexts.

1. **Formal analysis:** The instructor can begin by asking questions of the class about the formal aspects of the image: what they see, how it affects them and why. Use the answers to explain how a Byzantine icon works as a focus of prayer. The intense gaze of the saint encourages the viewer to interact with the saint directly. Although the saint is not physically there, the image serves as a connection, and the saint functions as an advocate on behalf of the viewer. She inhabits a different space, marked by the gold background, which represents the divine light. Yet, at the same time, the gold pushes Theodosia into the viewer's space, enhancing the immediacy of the interaction. Note the relation between text and image and explain how the naming of figures establishes their connection to specific holy entities.
2. **Materiality and physicality.** The material aspects of the icon can be addressed next, to introduce medieval panel painting techniques. From the construction, preparation and gessoing of the wood panel, to sourcing the pigments and binding them with egg tempera, to production and application of gold leaf, discuss the various parts of the icon making process. The high quality of the painting and gold point to a Constantinopolitan origin. The size of the icon is relevant in determining how it was used: small enough to presume one viewer at the time, big enough to be used in a church, thick enough to have been used on a *proskynetarion*, an icon stand where the icon of the saint would have been placed on the day of her commemoration. (This can be used as an entry point into commemoration of Byzantine saints during the liturgical year, the act of venerating an icon, listening to the narrative of a *vita*, physical contact between the faithful and the image, etc.) The icon renders the entity of the saint visible, touchable, kissable in a physical sense.
3. **Connection to Iconoclasm.** This icon can also be used as an introduction to the period of Iconoclasm as the story of Theodosia is closely tied to the defense of images in the 8th century. In a number of sources, she is mentioned as one of the nuns who were attempting to protect an image of Christ at the Chalke gate in Constantinople from being destroyed. Theodosia inadvertently killed a soldier and was brutally executed, which secured her a martyr status. To illustrate the story, show the image of the iconoclast Patriarch John Grammatikos ordering the destruction of images [Madrid Skylitzes, Madrid, Nat. Library, Vitr. 26-2, fol. 64v] and the image of St. Stephen the Younger, another defender of images, being dragged through the city and tortured by the iconoclasts [Menologion of Basil II, Cod. Vat. Gr 1613, fol 210]. To illustrate how early Byzantine images were destroyed in Constantinople and saved at Sinai, show the cross in the apse of Hagia Irene and the 6th century Transfiguration mosaic at Sinai, explaining the historical circumstances and the role of Sinai in preserving early Byzantine art, as it was no longer subject to the laws of the Byzantine Empire. To show how Theodosia is remembered in later centuries, introduce the 14th century Triumph of Orthodoxy Icon (British library) in which Theodosia is shown alongside other defenders of images, holding an icon of Christ.
4. **Problematic biography:** Theodosia's story may be a product of iconophile propaganda, as the sources are not uniform. She is mentioned in the Synaxarion of Constantinople, but not picked up in the Menaphrastian menologion. Did Theodosia exist and does that matter? Is she a criminal or a martyr? This very image made centuries later attests to the power of a myth, especially a myth imbued with violent details. Theodosia's gory story was used as an effective tool to keep alive the memory of the plight of iconophiles, offsetting their adversaries as violent tyrants.
5. **Healing cult:** At some point the relics of St. Theodosia in Constantinople became known for their healing powers and there was a renewed interest in the saint in Constantinople in the Palaiologan

period. The icon in front of us was an image of a healing saint, whose miracle working relics are mentioned in numerous sources from this period. Yet, whose relics were they, if Theodosia did not actually exist? She was originally venerated on July 18, but at some later point her cult was conflated with that of Theodosia of Tyre, after which her feast day shifted to May 29. It is very likely that the relics of Theodosia of Tyre became known as the relics of Theodosia of Constantinople. Paradoxically, even if the bones had been that of Theodosia of Tyre, after they were associated with Theodosia of Constantinople, she was the one assigned the status of a healing saint. (This may serve as an intro point to healing cults in Byzantium: this would be geared more toward a graduate student audience.)

6. Sinai context: There are four other icons of Theodosia at Sinai, all available on the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria website. Five icons of the same female saint in one location is a large number, but we do not know why they are there. Did they belong to nuns in a nearby (unattested) convent? Were some of them brought from Constantinople and others produced at Sinai at request of the monks? The cult of Theodosia was strong in Constantinople, but not elsewhere, so the presence of these icons may indicate a close relationship between the monastery and the capital. Compare the iconography of this image with the other four. Compare with other images of Theodosia elsewhere. Compare and contrast with other icons of female saints. What can be concluded? (This may be more suitable for an upper-level paper topic or a graduate level inquiry.)
7. Three photographs of the icon on the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai website reveal stages in the removal of a green overpainting. The icon was at some point covered with gold paint and the saint relabeled as St. Theodora. In the 1960s, during the expedition, the overpainting was removed, revealing the original name. This could be an interesting theoretical exercise about the connection of words and images. Without a specific attribute and faced with a relatively generic representation of a female monastic figure, we rely on the written name to identify the saint. Was she Theodosia while the name Theodora was assigned to it? Or was she actually Theodora for a while? To whom were the prayers directed? And how do we know which Theodosia is she: Theodosia of Tyre or Theodosia of Constantinople? At some point these two cults were conflated in Constantinople, and Theodosia of Constantinople is no longer venerated on July 18, but on May 29, the feast day of Theodosia of Tyre. (Interestingly enough, a quick internet search for Theodosia of Tyre results in several sites in which the story of Theodosia of Tyre is illustrated with the image of this very icon. The same image is used for the story of Theodosia of Constantinople. The conflation and confusion are alive and well today as they were in the Palaiologan period, and this image serves as a locus of that confusion.)

Further Reading

- Constanas, Nicholas. "Life of St. Theodosia of Constantinople." In *Byzantine Defenders of Images*, edited by A. M. Talbot, 1–8. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998.
This is a translation of the vita of St. Theodosia, a primary source, with a brief introduction. It could be a good exercise to read this text while looking at the icon of Theodosia, contrasting the peaceful image to the violent narrative of her vita.
- Mouriki, Doula. "Portraits of St. Theodosia in Five Sinai Icons." In *Thymiamata ste mneme tes Laskarinas Boura*, 213–19. Athens: Benaki Museum, 1994.
This publication lists and closely describes all five images of Theodosia from Sinai, puts them in contexts of the cult of the saint and offers some possible explanations for their presence at Sinai.

- Tirnanic, Galina. "Image in Pain: Icons, Old Bones and New Blood." In *Beholding Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, edited by Allie Terry and Erin Labbie, 125–42. UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012.

This essay explores connections between the peaceful image of martyred saints and the gory details of their demise.