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AN UNKNOWN 14th CENTURY GOLDEN HORDE BOWL  
(PIYALA) FROM THE MONASTERY OF VATOPEDI,  
MOUNT ATHOS, GREECE*

The monasteries of Mount Athos (Greece) are renowned for their Middle and Late Byzantine art and architecture. The small chapel of Hagioi Anargyroi in the courtyard of the athonite monastery of Vatopedi, was constructed around 1370 by the Serbian Despot of Serres Jovan Uglješa (†1371). This church, a three aisled, timber-roofed basilica, has an external tripartite apse and was covered by a thick layer of red plaster (fig. 1) which was hiding its masonry. In the north side of the apse is embedded a hemispherical bowl of the Pula type (fig. 2).

Some years ago, after the removal of the plaster in the apse of the chapel (fig. 3, 4) there was also discovered another unknown fragmentary bowl (fig. 5), as well as the holes in which were once placed bowls of unknown types which do not survive anymore.

Glazed bowls and other vessels immured in the façades of churches, the so-called *bacini*, are also recorded in Greece, where this decorative practice is attested from the middle-byzantine period onwards.

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* I am indebted to the Brotherhood of the Monastery of Vatopedi from giving me the permission to study the bowl, as well as to the architect-restorer Ploutarchos Theocharidis for his kindness to provide me photographs of the bowl in its initial position.


Fig. 1: Chapel of Hagioi Anargyroi, monastery of Vatopedi, Mount Athos. Eastern wall and apse with the bowl of Pula type

Fig. 2 Bowl of the Pula type next to the Golden Horde bowl (phot. P. Androudis)

Сл. 1 Капела Светих Врача, манастир Ватопед, источни зид и апсида са посуда типа Пула

Сл. 2 Здела типа Пули поред посуду златне Хорде (фото. С. Андроудис)

The bowl from Vatopedi is a 14th century Golden Horde Khanate production and is one more item to be added to the two already known examples from Thessaloniki (fig. 9, 10). Its publication will certainly contribute to the discussion and dating and spread of this special and very rare kind of bowl in the late 14th century Byzantine Macedonia and mainland Greece.

The ceramics

The Golden Horde bowl from Vatopedi (fig. 5-8), is of hemispherical form, with a height of 8.5 cm and a diameter of 18 cm (the diameter of the foot is 7 cm). It is a small bowl, known as piyala. This vessel, which is not preserved intact, is of curvilinear shape and made from white clay. It is covered with polychrome under glaze painting. Its decorative elements are outlined by a black and greenish line. They stand in a thick white slip, so they appear floating under the luminous transparent and clear glaze that covers the bowl. Our vessel conserves only a small part of its decoration, which was fulfilled with a thin brush.

The rim of the bowl has a row of blue dots (fig. 6, 7). Below the rim, there was painted a band with a blue cross-hatched pattern. Six six-petalled rosettes or wheel-patterns (three of them still survive) outlined in a fine greenish-black line, embellish the cavetto and once encircled a central motif (it does not survive as well) which was occupying the well. These rosettes are framed by a white circular band, while on each petal was painted a black dot. The surviving interstices of the cavetto are decorated above with four-petalled flowers and lower with circles containing a dot. The rest of the space of the interstices is filled with small dots.

The exterior design of our bowl (fig. 7, 8) has double vertical lines of black color imitating lotus petals, with a central vertical line and cobalt dots. All these lotus petals form an arcaded exterior decoration.

5 This is the Russian term for the bowl.
Fig. 5 The immured Golden Horde bowl (phot. P. Theocharides).

Fig. 6 The Golden Horde bowl (pivala) after its removal from the wall.

Сл. 5. Златна Хорда посуда (фото. С. Theocharides).
Сл. 6. Златна Хорда посуда (пиала) након његовог уклањања из зида.

**Dating the bowl**

The Mongols of the Golden Horde conquered an area from the Black Sea to the east of the Aral Sea, during the second quarter of the 13th century and they formed an independent state (Khanate). Their two capitals, Saray Batu (= Old Saray) and Saray Berke (= New Saray), both built on the Volga, were famous as great commercial centers, visited by Europeans, Arab and Persian travelers and merchants. Saray Batu was founded by Batu Khan (1224-1255), sometimes before William of Rubruck’s visit in 1254, while its earliest minted coins date from 1266. Saray Berke is usually credited to Berke Khan (1255-1266), though the city appeared to become important only after Özbeg Khan (1313-1341), who made it the capital.

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7 F. Balodis, *Alt-Sarai und Neu-Sarai, die Hauptstädte der Goldenen Horde*, Riga 1926.
of the state sometime between 1320 and 1330. Saray Berke under Özbeg Khan and his successors prospered up to 1395 when the city was sacked by the Mongol Khan Tamerlane and the capital of the Khanate became again Saray Batu.

Russian excavations in both sites have revealed among other imported ceramics, vessels of local manufactures8. Characteristic shapes are curvilinear bowls and dishes decorated with concentric bands framing a centrally placed design situated at the well; their reverses are usually decorated with a degenerate form of petal panels. Common are floral and epigraphic motifs, though birds also appear9.

Parallels of the decorative patterns of our Vatopedi Golden Horde vessel can also be attested on Golden Horde ceramic wares which were unearthed at Saray Batu and Saray Berke, as well as to a bowl imured in the south wall of the 14th century byzantine katholikon of the Vlatadon monastery in Thessaloniki. The latter was published together with another Golden Horde bowl of the same type (piyala) by Helen Philon (fig. 9, 10)10.

The white clay pottery became very popular in South-Eastern Europe after the establishment of the Golden Horde. It was produced from stony rock which was grinded into powder and then received additions of glue.

The six petal rosettes or wheel-patterns on our piyala can be found in many vessels which were excavated in Golden Horde sites. For instance we find it in the

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neck of a Golden Horde jug (or jar) which was unearthed at Mizdakhkan, as well as in a bowl fragment from Saraichik (fig. 12). It is noteworthy that the decoration of a series of rounded rosettes is known from other Golden Horde wares, now exhibited in the museums, as well as from excavated material at Selitryonoye.

As for the cross-hatched pattern in blue it is not only recorded in Golden Horde vessels, but also on other wares produced in Syria and Egypt, usually credited to the 14th century. In Saray Batu it was unearthed a vessel which is decorated with radiating twigs bearing six petal rosettes and a cross-hatched pattern in blue just below the rim.

The arcaded exterior decoration of our bowl is typical for the bowls of Golden Horde Khanate productions. We find almost identical arcaded decoration on a small bowl which was excavated by N. Veselovsky in 1896, on a small


17 See R.A. Wade-Haddon, *Fourteenth Century fine glazed wares*, II, 110, no 2.1.2b (no
piyala unearthed at Saraichik\(^\text{18}\) and on two vessels also discovered during excavations at Saraichik (one rosewater bowl\(^\text{19}\) and on the fragment of a small bowl, see fig. 12\(^\text{20}\)).

The grid pattern embellishing the rim of vessels is recorded on other Golden Horde ceramics, as well as on Egyptian wares, the latter dating from circa the middle of the 14th century onwards.

As it was already noted, the white clay pottery in the western regions of the Khanate of the Golden Horde (from the basin of river Dniester to the basin of the Lower Don) presented certain characteristics before the end of the first third of XIV century\(^\text{21}\). Among it typical elements we could enumerate the huge rosettes (or wheel-patterns) at the center, the knots of vertical lines, the vegetable leaves. The painting of the vessels was made with thin brush.

But how this Golden Horde piyala reached the Vatopedi monastery on Mount Athos?

Thessaloniki in the Palaiologan era was an important economic metropolis\(^\text{22}\) , inhabited not only by Greeks, but also by several ethnic and religious minorities, especially Genoese and Venetians, with close commercial relations with their co-religionists in other parts of the world. Products from the Balkans and the Black Sea arrived there to be bought or exchanged by others imported by Spanish, Genoese, Venetians, Syrians, Egyptians, etc\(^\text{23}\). According to H. Philon, the Golden Horde bowls immured in the katholikon of Vlatadon monastery were inserted in the church be-

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\(^{18}\) R.A. Wade-Haddon, *Fourteenth Century fine glazed wares*, II, 110, no 2.1.6a-b.


\(^{23}\) See in particular D. Jacoby, “Foreigners and the Urban Economy in Thessalonike, ca. 1150- ca.1450”, *DOP* 57 (2003), 85-132, with all related bibliography.
between ca. 1350 and ca. 1370. Similarly, the bowl from the chapel of Hagioi Anargyroi at Vatopedi must have been immured around 1370. Of major importance is the presence in both churches of Spanish Moorish ceramic vessels (fig. 2 and 11). According to H. Philon the Spanish ceramics in Vlatadon (fig. 11) were brought there by Catalan traders who used Thessaloniki as a stopover in their sails to Constantinople or Levantine ports. We should not exclude that the three piyala bowls were once part of the same collection.

Conclusion

The Golden Horde bowl (piyala) from the chapel of Hagioi Anargyroi in the monastery of Vatopedi, Mount Athos, is a very rare and important ceramic vessel of its kind and a very special find in Late Byzantine world. Its polychrome underglaze decoration presents many similarities with the decoration of the two other bowls of the same type embedded in the katholikon of the monastery of Vlatadon, Thessaloniki and they probably were made in the same workshop. The bowl in Vatopedi came probably from Thessaloniki and its use is another proof of the commercial relations of Thessaloniki or its foreign merchants with Constantinople and the ports of the Black Sea and the Khanate of the Golden Horde in the second half of 14th c.


\[25\] Ibidem, 303-306 and 312-314.