

BYZANTINE ZABA: A CASE STUDY OF THE MAIL COAT FROM THE IVIRON MONASTERY (ATHOS / GR)

According to the historical sources, chain-mail armour has been already in use among the Celtic people since the 3rd century BC (Theotokis 2018, 463). One of the very first examples is the mail from Ciumești (jud. Satu Mare/RO) (fig. 1), dated in the 5th-4th century BC (Rusu 1969, 267-269). Marcus Terentius Varro (1st c. BC - 1st c. AD) considers the Celts as the inventors of the chain-mail armour (Rusu 1969, 267-269). Mail armour had been used on a massive scale in the Roman and the Sassanid armies from the 4th century AD (Theotokis 2018, 463).

In Roman historiography, the chain mail is described as *lorica hamata*. According to A. D. H. Bivar and J. Haldon, this defensive armour has been widely spread in the Roman army, among the Parthians, and the Sassanid Persians (Haldon 1975, 34). Moreover, mail has been the most preferable armour of the cataphracts in the Sassanid Empire (Bivar 1972, 282-283). The first depictions from the field of art can be traced in the murals of Dura-Europos (gouv. Deir ez-Zor/SYR). In the medieval written sources of western Europe, mail is often mentioned as *halsberg* (D'Amato 2012, 33).

A mail armour is relatively light. The example from Vimose (Syddanmark/DK) weighs approximately 8 kg (Jouttijärvi 1996, 1). T. G. Kolias has estimated the weight of a mail at 12-14 kg (Kolias 1988, 37). R. D'Amato mentions that the usual weight for a medieval thigh-length mail shirt was no more than 13.5 kg (D'Amato 2012, 34). In the Roman army, only high-rank officers could afford to maintain a mail, since its construction was very expensive. Medieval manuals mention that the construction of a mail could last even a period of six months (Robinson 1975, 164).

BYZANTINE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Due to the fact that few mails survived from the Byzantine Empire, military manuals include useful information about the chain-mail armours. Maurice's »Strategikon« mentions that the cavalry regiments wear iron mail armours, which covered their whole bodies, down their knees, like the Avar style (Maurices' Strategikon 2001, 1, 2). In addition, the soldier should also wear a large cloak with long sleeves over the mail for extra protection. The cloaks were broad, especially those made for the cavalry, and were used for covering both warrior and weapons, while the broad cloaks also provided freedom of movement and handling weapons. They were made of tanned or untanned leather, cotton, and hemp. The way they were made also provided additional protection by absorbing the strikes of different weapons. This cloak could also protect the soldier during patrols because the reflection of the light on the metal could reveal his position. A leather case was attached to the horse saddle for the storage of the mail (Haldon 1975, 35-38).

In Maurice's »Strategikon«, we are informed that the main defensive equipment of the *cataphractarii* was the mail armour because it was light and could absorb the strikes from various offensive weapons (Mauricius 1970, proem. 2). Leo the Deacon describes how a mail *chiton* saved Sviatoslav from a sword's strike of Anemas during the first battle at Dorostolon in April 971 (Haldon 1975, 28-30). The usage of the word



Fig. 1 Mail from Ciumești, 5th-4th century BC. – (https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:KMM_-_Kriegergrab_Ciuesti_Kettenhemd.jpg [30.9.2022]).

chiton may be evidence that mail fitted ideally to the body of a soldier, without losing its flexibility (Grotowski 2010, 160).

The mail shirt was often reinforced with a lamellar cuirass on top of it. It is worth mentioning that because the mail was too expensive and its construction was elaborated and time-consuming, lamellar armour was often preferred, especially when some iron sources had been lost by the Arabs (Grotowski 2010, 157-158). Continuing with the Byzantine historiography, Emperor Maurice in his »Strategikon« treatise (6th c.) often describes the mail shirt with the terms *zaba* and *lorikion*. More precisely, the author describes the armour of a cavalryman as a »hooded coat of mail reaching to his ankle« (Maurice's Strategikon 2001, 1, 2). The terms *zaba* and *lorikion* seem to have a similar meaning in the Byzantine historical sources of the 6th and the 7th centuries, indicating the mail cuirass (Theotokis 2018, 462). *Lorikion* in the military treatises of the 10th century describes exclusively the mail armour (Haldon 2002, 68-70. 73). In the *De Ceremoniis* treatise of the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (10th c.), three types of *lorikia* are documented. One of these three types is the *lorikion psilon*. This term can probably be attributed to the chain mail armours, which are made of thin and small rings. This documentation indicates the various ring dimensions and shapes which had been used to construct a chain-mail coat (Baranov 2010, 199). In the Middle Byzantine treatises, *epilorikion* is also mentioned to describe a cloak that is reinforced with leather and was worn above the *lorikion* (mail) (Haldon 1975, 39).

In the Middle Byzantine period treatises, *zaba* also indicates single pieces of protection constructed from mail, metallic plates, mixed organic and metallic material applied to single parts of the armour (Kolias 1980, 29-32). For instance, the *praecepta militaria* describes the metal rectangular extra reinforcements of the leather *pteryges* or padded stripes (*kremasmata*) made of felt, which were hanged from a metallic belt (McGeer 1995, 69-70). According to R. D'Amato, this implementation can be traced also in the iconography. In the folio 213^v of the illuminated manuscript of the 11th century, *Skylitzes Matritensis*, general George Maniakes is represented to wear such equipment (D'Amato 2005, 16-17).

A good representation of a *cataphractarius* in mail armour comes from the golden vase which belongs to the so-called Nagyszentmiklós Treasure (fig. 2), discovered in Hungary, which can be dated in the 7th-8th century. The Avar(?) warlord is depicted wearing a mail, which covers the whole body. The rider is holding a spear and wears a *Spangenhelm* with a coif, probably a Byzantine motif that was spread in the West. Avars or in general nomadic people couldn't possess a chain mail since its production was

conducted in armouries. Additionally, as it has already been mentioned, its manufacture demanded elaborated work. On the other hand, mails could reach the Avar territories as embassy gifts, looting or trading. The Nagyszentmiklós Treasure had been crafted by possible Byzantine craftsmen with the gold that the Avars acquired from the Byzantines as a tribute during the 6th-8th centuries (Bálint 2010, 87-88).

BYZANTINE ICONOGRAPHY

Even though we have many references from the written sources about the chain mail, the depiction of the mail armour in Byzantine art till the 11th century is considered scattered. In the illuminated manuscript of the 11th century *Skylitzes Matritensis*, the mail armours are drawn in grey or blue (Hoffmeyer 1966, 66-67). This doesn't indicate that the mail had been used lesser than the lamellar protection. M. Markovic claimed that the mail had been linked with the lower rank officers and wasn't suitable to decorate the defensive equipment of a military saint in a mural painting (Markovic 1995, 597-598).

The warrior saints gained popularity at the time of the Komnenian dynasty, a period when the respect for the warrior saints resembled a national cult (Grotowski 2010, 157). Till the 12th century, military saints did not have many similarities with the contemporary Byzantine environment, copying the uniforms from the time of the Roman Empire. As a result, mail doesn't appear in the monumental depictions. After the 12th century, the so-called neo-classical style in the depiction of warrior saints was gradually abandoned (Grotowski 2010, 158) and mail armour had been introduced to decorate the defensive equipment of the military saints.

P. Ł. Grotowski concludes that the various terms that had been used by the Byzantine historiographers to describe the chain mail armour, made the Byzantine artists hesitate to decorate the warrior saints with a mail shirt. He claims that the mail armour had been used in the regiments of the Byzantine army after the 12th century when the numerous crusading troops stormed the Empire (Grotowski 2010, 161-162). However, as we have already mentioned, the existence of the mail armour was already known in the Roman army with the contacts with the Sarmatians and the Sassanid Empire, centuries before the Byzantines faced the crusading troops or used them as mercenaries.

M. G. Parani writes about the partial representation of mail in Palaiologan art (Parani 2003, 113). A notable example is the depiction of »The Betrayal« from the Church of Panagia of Roussospiti in Crete (early 14th c.) (fig. 3). The soldiers wear chain mail armours, which are shown in realistic detail with alternate rows of iron and bronze rings (D'Amato 2013, 90).

Finally, in the depictions of warrior saints equipped with mail, dating from the 13th and 14th centuries, it is noticeable that it was usually worn under clothes made of cloth or another type of armour (Parani 2003, 113-114). It has already been mentioned in the *Strategikon* military manual, that cloaks should be worn above the mail for extra protection from bad weather conditions, while on sunny days they protected the metal from overheating.



Fig. 2 Nagyszentmiklós Treasure, 7th-8th century. – (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:KHM_-_Nagyszentmiklos_Medaillonkrug_2.jpg [26.10.2022]).



Fig. 3 »The Betrayal«, Church of Panagia of Roussospiti, Crete, early 14th century. – (After D’Amato 2013, 89 fig. 44).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

Taking into consideration the case of the mail armour, the researchers of the weapons in the Byzantine period, both offensive and defensive, should study the written sources with a critical approach. Moreover, pictorial evidence tends to reproduce classical and anachronistic types of weapons, except for Palaiologan art, where the painters seem to represent more precisely the mail armours. This also concerns the swords depiction.

Contrary to art, archaeological material provides us with very significant information about mails in the Byzantine army, which indicates once more the vital role of the archaeological material, to study the mail armour from a typological and constructional aspect. However, the mail armours, dated to the East-

ern Roman period, discovered in the region of the Balkans and Asia Minor, such as the Byzantine mail from Chersonesus (Doroško 2016, 61-70), territories that once formed the core of the Byzantine Empire, are very rare. The only surviving specimens from Greece are the mail cuirasses from the monasteries of Mount Athos, such as Iviron, Dionysiou and Hilandar, which are documented in the present scientific paper.

Continuing, the study of the mail coat from the Iviron Monastery is presented. The study focuses on the typological and constructional characteristics of the armour. As archaeological examples, the armours from the Dionysiou and Hilandar Monastery have been used, but also some notable examples from the Balkans.

THE IVIRON MAIL COAT

Ioannes Tornikios was probably born in Tao around 920 and belonged to the local aristocracy. His paternal uncles were Aršūšay and Abuharb. Probably via Abuharb he was related or related by marriage to Ioannes the Athonite, who had probably married a daughter of the same Abuharb. Tornikios served David of Tao as an army commander in his youth and adulthood. He also served as a military to the Byzantine emperors Nicephorus II Phocas and possibly also Ioannes I Tzimiskes and gained the title of *patrikios*. Presumably, in the 970s he arrived on Mount Athos searching for his relative Ioannes the Athonite. Following the advice of Athanasius the Athonite, Ioannes the Athonite the Iberian and his son Euthymius the Athonite the Iberian, moved out with the other Iberians from the Great Lavra and settled about a mile away, where they founded a church in honour of Ioannes the Evangelist (Lilie et al. 2013).

By the end of 978, Basil II called Ioannes Tornikios to mediate with Prince David to send him troops to defeat the rebellion of Bardas Phocas. In the spring of 979, Tornikios returned with 12 000 Iberian soldiers to assist the Emperor and contributed to the final crush of the rebels (Mamalakis 1971, 63).

Emperor Basil II, to honour the services of the Iberian general with a chrysobull dated in 979/980, gave him the Monastery of Leontia in Thessalonica, the Kolobu Monastery near Ierissos and the Monastery tou Klementos on Mount Athos. The rich booty from his victory over Bardas Sclerus and the imperial donation made it possible for Ioannes Tornikios and the other Georgians on Mount Athos, namely Ioannes the Athonite and Euthymius the Athonite to build their own monastery for themselves and the other Geor-



Fig. 4 Iviron Monastery chain mail, 10th century. – (Photo E. Maniotis).

gians (Iberians). The monastery was initially called Theotokos Monastery or tou Klementos, later known under the name of Iviron (Lilie et al. 2013). Among the offers to the monastery, was also the chain mail, presented in this article.

A very important written source about the Iviron chain mail is mentioned in the work of Timote Gabashvili. The first explicit account of the Georgian collection of books in the Iviron Monastery is found in the report on a journey to Mount Athos, Constantinople, and the Holy Land by Timote Gabashvili (1703-1764), Archbishop of Kartli, who sojourned in the monastery in the winter of 1755/1756 and again in the following spring. His report, preserved in three manuscripts of the Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National Centre of Manuscripts in Tbilisi (mss. H-842, Q-80 and S-3244), was first published in printed form by P. Ioseliani in 1852 and a second time by E. Metreveli in 1956; an English translation by M. Ebanoidze and J. Wilkinson appeared in 2001.

Gabashvili describes the monastic life before returning to the monastery's possessions again, mentioning Ioannes Tornikios and the founders but also several of their successors:

»In the treasury of the Monastery there are great numbers of church decorations and vestments donated by the Georgians. Tornikios's battle equipment is also there: a helmet, a coat of mail, a sword and other armour that he had put on when, as a monk, he fought against the Persians and put them to flight. The successors to Ioannes, and his son Euthymius of the Holy Mountain, and George of the Holy Mountain, were venerable people: George, the Abbot of Oltisi, Ioane of Ninotsminda, Ioane son of Rekhvai, Saba Tukhareli, Klimi of the Wilderness, Basil of Olympus, and the venerable priest Jacob the painter – all of them Georgians« (Ebanoidze/Wilkinson 2001, 86).

To begin with the description of the mail, the specimen is preserved in a relatively good condition (**fig. 4**). Unfortunately, there is evidence of rust, which has penetrated the iron rings. It is vital to mention that the

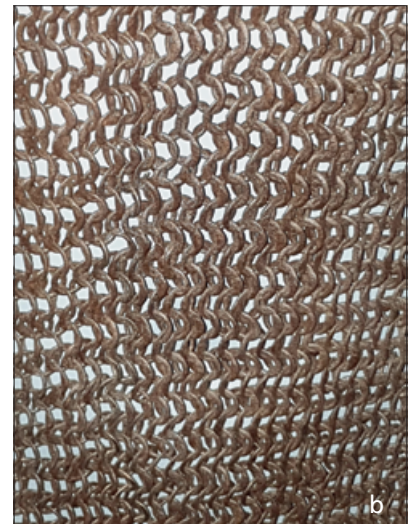


Fig. 5 Dionysiou Monastery chain mail, 14th century (a) and detail (b). – (Photos E. Maniotis).

state of preservation of historical and archaeological mail differs greatly. Historical mail usually has been passed from person to person and tends to be in good and complete condition, relatively easy to examine and understand. Older specimens that come from the archaeological record are often so heavily corroded that they form a solid block.

The Iviron mail consists of a mixture of flat and oval rings. The length of the mail coat is 70 cm and the width 50 cm. The thickness of each ring is approximately 1.0-1.6 mm. The coat should have been larger. The diameter of each ring is approximately 1 cm, making the mail compact to absorb the strikes of the offensive weapons. The chain mail is composed of hoops intertwined 4 to 1: each hoop is connected to four others. The connection between the rings is achieved by a rivet and due to that fact, we deal with a *riveted mail coat*. This type is made of a wire that is bent, overlapped, and connected using a rivet. The rings alternate in rows allowing each riveted ring to hold four jointless rings. This fact often indicates the authenticity and the solid construction of a mail coat, unlike the mails whose rings are connected without riveting, forming a net. The overlap in riveted rings can go in two directions, clockwise or anti-clockwise. Hypothetically, a single coat of mail could be constructed from a combination of clockwise and anti-clockwise rings. All the rings in a single coat of mail always overlap in the same direction. This is a very significant clue because, in the Middle Ages, there is a radical change in the direction of the ring overlap in mail armour. Whereas the



Fig. 6 Hilandar Monastery chain mail, 14th - 15th century (a) and detail (b). – (Photos E. Maniotis).

clockwise direction had been dominant in Roman times, from the 6th century and onwards, all mail turned anti-clockwise (Wijnhoven 2021, 26). The Ivron mail coat bperiod and especially in the 10th century, taking also into consideration the historical place where it is stored and the testimony of the written sources, which have been previously examined.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARALLELS

From the region of Mount Athos we have another two chain mails, but they can be dated later. The first comes from the Dionysiou Monastery (fig. 5). The mail has dimensions of 87 cm × 47 cm. The sleeves are 57 cm long. The diameter of the rings is 5 mm. The mail could be dated to the 14th century because the monastery was founded in the 14th century by Saint Dionysius of Korisos, and it was named after him. The riveting of the rings is achieved with the anti-clockwise method.

The second parallel comes from the Serbian Monastery of Hilandar (fig. 6). The dimensions of the coat are 62 cm × 60 cm. The length of the collar is approximately 29 cm. The dimensions of the sleeves are 32 cm × 18 cm. The diameter of the rings is 8 mm. The riveting of the rings is achieved with the anti-clockwise method. According to the Abbot of the Hilandar Monastery, this coat could be dated to the 14th-15th century. In any case, both mail coats could have been offerings after an event that took place in the monasteries, such as a successful repelling of an attack, or they might have belonged to a monk. Monks were also soldiers, responsible for the defence of the monasteries from a possible raiding by a foreign enemy or pirates.

A very significant example of a mail coat comes from the Archaeological Museum of Sofia, Bulgaria (fig. 7). The chain mail was found accidentally before the Second World War in a settlement mound near Mihajlovo (obl. Stara Zagora/BG). There are traces of a medieval settlement from the 10th - 12th century on the same mound. The dimensions are 75 cm × 47 cm, and it weighs 4.2 kg. The chain mail has two clearly distinguishable parts. One comprises the front, covering the chest and lower abdomen. The other part comprises the back, the sleeves, and the lower part. This chain mail was probably used by an officer. It has been interpreted in connection with the presence of Rus' military groups in the Balkans in 968-971, but it



Fig. 7 Chain mail from Sofia, 10th-11th century. – (After Vagalinski 2014, 133).

is more likely that it was of Byzantine origin (Zlatkov 2014, 134).

The final example is the mail from the Treskavec Monastery near Prilep in North Macedonia, currently kept at the Prilep Bureau and Museum. The specimen is a large fragment of mail armour, made of rings linked with rivets. The fragment measures 59 cm × 44 cm. The outer diameter of the rings is 1 cm. It is made of wire 1 mm thick with an approximately circular cross-section, with 6 mm of overlap at the ends where the rings are flattened. In addition, the research team also applied a metallographic analysis on the mail, combined with SEM, EDX and XRF methods. Since the mail hasn't been found in an archaeological context, it cannot be dated precisely. The researchers claim that a chronological range from the end of the 13th to the beginning of the 14th century can be used as a *terminus post quem* for the deposition of the armour. Although, it is highly likely that the mail was used for a long time before being deposited (Petrov/Manojlović/Trpčevska 2015, 572-590).

CONCLUSIONS

The manufacture of the Iviron mail shirt indicates that it could be a characteristic example of a mail coat that the Byzantines used during the Middle Byzantine period. Taking into consideration the written sources and the chronology of the foundation of the Iviron Monastery accompanied with the archaeological examples from the region, the mail coat could be linked with the general Ioannes Tornikios, dated in the 10th century. It is very crucial that the mail is kept in a holy place. At first, it is considered bizarre for a mail coat to be stored in a place that is related to a monastery complex because Christianity did not alter the custom of laying up weapons in holy places. However, it is known from the sources that weapons have been deposited as votive offerings in churches. For example, according to the testimony of Archbishop Antonius of Novgorod, who was on a pilgrimage from Rus to Constantinople around 1200, Saint Theodore Stratelates had been laid to rest in the Blachernae Church and his sword and shield were to be found there (Markovic 1995, 585 no. 137). Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus mentions in his work »On themes« that Saint Theodore Teron's shield was hung as a relic under the dome of the church dedicated in his honour at Dalisandos in Seleucia, in the Isauria region. These weapons are usually associated with holy relics connected with the warrior saints (Walter 2003, 49).

Indeed, the mail from the Treskavec Monastery may also have been deposited as a relic, left by a warrior who became a monk. Another possibility is that the chain mail had been used by the monks to defend the monastery from a foreign invasion. Monasteries were thought to be an easy prey by the invaders. In the Late Byzantine period, monks were responsible for arming themselves since the Imperial army was in decline and couldn't reach for assistance. A notable example is a sabre which had been found in a mon-

astery complex in the region of Sithonia, Chalcidice in Greece. More precisely, the sabre was discovered, along with other weapons, in a destructional archaeological context in the monastery's tower, which had been destroyed by a fire in the early 14th century. The destruction of the monastery has been correlated with a possible pirate invasion. The results have been announced in the recent Symposium of the Christian Archaeological Society of Greece in Athens and are going to be published by the researchers (Dogas/Maniotis in prep.).

To conclude, from the archaeological testimony, a similar votive offer is the ring-pommeled sword from the city of Amorium in Phrygia, discovered in the atrium of the Church A along with some other objects, such as a candlestick, stored in this area of the Lower City Church. This sword is dated to the Middle Byzantine period (Maniotis/Gökalp 2021, 1287).

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Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

Byzantinische Zaba: Eine Fallstudie des Kettenpanzers aus dem Iviron-Kloster (Athos/GR)

Der vorliegende wissenschaftliche Artikel untersucht die Kettenpanzer, die in den Klöstern Iviron, Hilandar und Dionysiou aufbewahrt werden, nachdem die Klöster die freundliche Erlaubnis gegeben haben, die betreffenden Objekte zu dokumentieren und zu studieren. Unseres Wissens nach sind dies die einzigen Kettenhemden, die aus der byzantinischen Zeit in Griechenland bekannt sind. Die Studie konzentriert sich auf den Iviron-Kettenpanzer mit dem Ziel, seine typologischen Merkmale zu erforschen, Informationen, die die Identifizierung und Datierung des Objekts erleichtern. Darüber hinaus werden in der Studie auch historische Bezüge zu derartigen Objekten und ihren Darstellungen in der Kunst als Vergleichsmittel herangezogen, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf den archäologischen Zeugnissen liegt. Der Überlieferung nach wird der Iviron-Kettenpanzer mit dem byzantinischen General Johannes Tornikios in Verbindung gebracht, der Ende des 10. Jahrhunderts das Iviron-Kloster gründete. Der General war ein Spross der großen Tornikios-Familie von Iberia, deren Mitglieder seit dem 10. Jahrhundert hohe Ämter bekleideten. Obwohl bereits Mönch, diente Johannes Tornikios in Basilius' II. erfolgreichem Feldzug gegen den Rebellen Bardas Skleros, und der Kaiser gab ihm die Erlaubnis, einen Teil der Beute zu behalten und um das Jahr 980 das Kloster Iviron zu gründen.

Byzantine Zaba: A Case Study of the Mail Coat from the Iviron Monastery (Athos/GR)

The present scientific article studies the chain-mail cuirasses that are kept at the Iviron, Hilandar and Dionysiou Monasteries, following the monasteries' kind permission to document and study the objects in question. To our knowledge, these are the only mail coats known from the Byzantine period in Greece. The study focuses on the Iviron chain-mail cuirass with the aim of studying its typological characteristics, information that will facilitate the identification and dating of the object. In addition, the study also makes use of historical references to objects of this kind and their representations in art as comparative means, with an emphasis mainly on the archaeological evidence. According to tradition, the Iviron chain-mail cuirass is associated with the Byzantine general Ioannes Tornikios, who founded the Iviron Monastery in the late 10th century. The general was a scion of the great Tornikios family of Iberia, whose members, from the 10th century onwards, occupied high offices. Though already a monk, Ioannes Tornikios served in Basil II's successful military campaign against the rebel Bardas Skleros and the emperor gave him permission to keep some of the booty and to establish the Monastery of Iviron in about the year 980.

Summary: B. Paffgen

Zaba byzantine: une étude de cas de cotte de mailles du monastère d'Ivion (Athos/GR)

Le présent article scientifique étudie les cottes de mailles conservées aux monastères d'Ivion, Hilandar et Dionysiou, après l'aimable autorisation des monastères de documenter et d'étudier les objets en question. A notre connaissance, ce sont les seules cottes de mailles connues de l'époque byzantine en Grèce. L'étude vise les caractéristiques typologiques de la cotte de mailles d'Ivion pour en tirer des informations qui faciliteront l'identification et la datation de l'objet. En outre, l'étude utilise également des références historiques à des objets de ce type et à leurs représentations dans l'art comme moyens de comparaison, en mettant l'accent principalement sur les preuves archéologiques. Selon la tradition, la cotte de mailles d'Ivion est associée au général byzantin Ioannes Tornikios, qui a fondé le monastère d'Ivion à la fin du X^e siècle. Le général était un descendant de la grande famille Tornikios d'Ibérie, dont les membres, à partir du X^e siècle, occupaient de hautes fonctions. Bien que déjà moine, Ioannes Tornikios a servi dans la campagne militaire réussie de Basile II contre le rebelle Bardas Skleros et reçut de l'empereur la permission de garder une partie du butin et d'établir le monastère d'Ivion vers l'an 980.

Schlüsselwörter / Keywords / Mots-clés

Griechenland / Berg Athos / Kloster Ivion / byzantinische Rüstung / Kettenhemden

Greece / Mount Athos / Ivion Monastery / Byzantine armour / chain-mails

Grèce / Mont Athos / Monastère d'Ivion / armure byzantine / cottes de maille

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