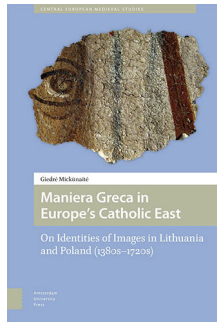


GIEDRĖ MICKŪNAITĖ, *MANIERA
GRECA IN EUROPE'S CATHOLIC EAST.
ON IDENTITIES OF IMAGES
IN LITHUANIA AND POLAND
(1380S–1720S)*

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Reviewed by
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Maniera Greca in Europe's Catholic East. On Identities of Images in Lithuania and Poland (1380s–1720s) by Giedrė Mickūnaitė can be seen as a continuation of the author's research into the topic of the "Greek manner". The book, published within the series *Central European Medieval Studies*, consists of case studies gathered in three chapters headed "Silence", "Negotiations", and "Translations". Each part encompasses a short abstract followed by a separate bibliography. They are spanned by an introduction and conclusions, in which the author discusses the book's structure and builds a context for the various cases studied.

The first chapter, "Silence", focuses on Byzantine murals in Lithuania. It is divided into subchapters discussing archaeological finds in Kreva, Medininkai, and the Lower Castle in Vilnius, all consisting of small pieces with details indicative of figurative compositions. In the next part, the author moves her attention to Trakai. She discusses the Trakai Island Castle and its painted interiors,

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chiefly known from the documentation and drawings of Wincenty Smokowski from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the murals of the parish church of Trakai that she links to the so-called Morava School. The last subchapter focuses on the Crucifixion in the crypt of Vilnius Cathedral. Mickūnaitė is particularly interested in the palaeographic features of the inscription and the number of nails piercing Christ's feet. Even though this part of the painting is in a bad state of preservation, it becomes crucial for her argumentation that the image followed the three-nail scheme (p. 100), further hypothesis on the background of the painter, and a rather broad conclusion that: "the decoration of the crypt under the Vilnius Cathedral indicates the unintentional, but unavoidable fusion of confessions" (p. 102).

The second chapter, entitled "Negotiations", focuses on examples from Poland, mostly monumental paintings commissioned by King Władysław Jagiełło and his son Casimir IV. Mickūnaitė states already in the introduction that: "This study does not analyse thoroughly the paintings that have survived in Poland up to today, but rather relies on extensive scholarship that looks for the articulation of difference and cross-confessional negotiations on the visual plane" (p. 27). Indeed, as she rightly notes, this part is rather an extensive summary of the topic's scholarly tradition and already published materials, but the book makes it perhaps more accessible to international scholarship.¹ Therefore, it can be seen as a valuable contribution to the subject literature and an accessible read for anyone interested in the topic, serving as a good entry with an extensive bibliography that will guide any potential user toward further reading. Mickūnaitė analyses the iconography of certain compositions, but pays particular attention to Latin inscriptions that, according to her, mark "clerical adoption of and indicate reservations regarding these confessionally different murals" (p. 122), which allows her to hypothesize that "spatially reserved to the literate and the dignified, these painted presbyteries provided a model for a potential confessional unity – reserved to the learned and authorized by Latin notions" (p. 123). Nevertheless, one may wonder whether such conclusions are not premature with the actual image being more complex than it seems since Latin inscriptions do not appear or have not been preserved in all of the above-mentioned commissions and it cannot be excluded that some are later additions.

In the final chapter, "Translations", Mickūnaitė reflects on *Our Lady of Trakai* and examines its remake into, as she calls it, a "pseudo-icon". She refers here to the results of the 1994 restoration,

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The bibliography on the topic is vast, for a summary, including studies in languages other than Polish, see: Mirosław P. Kruk, Malowidła *Graeco opere* fundacji Jagiellonów jako postulat unii państwowej i kościelnej oraz jedności Kościoła [Graeco Opere Paintings of the Jagiellonian Foundation as a Postulate of a State and Church Union and the Unity of the Church], in: Waclaw Walecki (ed.), *Między teologią a duszpasterstwem powszechnym na ziemiach Korony doby przedtrydenckiej. Dziedzictwo średniowiecza i wyzwania XV–XVI wieku [Between Theology and Popular Ministry in the Lands of the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland in the Pre-Tridentine Period. Medieval Heritage and the Challenges of the 15th and 16th Centuries]*, Warsaw 2017, 145–201, here 145–147, n. 1.

particularly the X-ray image that revealed the original layer of the painting and its initial composition. She speculates that it originally depicted the *Maria Gravida* (pp. 168–170), but at the beginning of the seventeenth century was altered to the current form “articulating visual characteristics that qualified the panel as a Greek image in the eyes and minds of contemporary beholders” (p. 172). She claims that it “constructs plausible iconography by quoting a number of elements indicative of the Maggiore icon” (p. 173), but it must be asked to what extent the elements mentioned later (“the Greek cross on the maphorion covering the Virgin’s head, the star on her shoulder, the Child represented as a boy wearing a long tunic and holding the book, representing the Holy Scripture”, p. 173) are indeed particular characteristics of this icon, and not, for example, a distinctive hand gesture, and thus what was its alleged role in the panel’s transformation. The author herself notes later that “Our Lady resembled neither the Maggiore, nor any other icon” (p. 174), which makes this comparison vague. One of the most fascinating parts is the subchapter “Greek images came from Greece” discussing the later “life” of *Our Lady of Trakai* with special attention being paid to the story of its origins inscribed on the panel’s reverse, stating that the icon helped John II Comnenos and was later given by Manuel II Palaiologos to Grand Duke Vytautas. This detail, as well as a song published in 1754 claiming that it was painted by Saint Luke, testifies to how *Our Lady of Trakai* was perceived in the eighteenth century and the role of such beliefs in the later process of authenticating its special status.

The subject is fascinating, but I feel that the content of the book might leave a curious reader hungry for more. The title promises a study of the issue of the Greek manner spanning a period of almost four centuries, but instead of a detailed study of how objects qualified as Greek were perceived by their users, we have case studies focusing on various issues. The supposed aim is explained in the introduction: “The book explores objects that qualified as Greek, functioned within the Catholic milieu of Lithuania and Poland. [...] The study focuses on perceptions of and preconceptions about Greek images among Eastern European Catholics from the late fourteenth to the early eighteenth century” (p. 18) and “in a broad sense, this inquiry is a genealogy of a Greek image in Lithuania and Poland” (p. 29), but it appears that the main issue is limited to a detailed summary of the current state of research concerning the ambiguous label *maniera greca* (pp. 19–26) and occasional presentations and rather concise analyses of the use of the adjective “Greek” in selected contemporary sources (pp. 129, 133, 138–143, 147, 151–152, 171–172, 189–194). The conclusions presented in the last part of the book are much broader (pp. 223–229): the author infers that the qualifier Greek, when applied to images, meant old and, therefore, was liberated from any stylistic allusions (p. 223); around the year 1500 “articulated Greekness was concerned less with objects and more with humans, perceived as erroneous followers of the Greek rite” (p. 226), yet “the loose and unclear notion

of Greek image had yet to be defined in practice and accepted by beholders [...]. Never articulated in writing, but sustained through repetitive practice, understanding of the Greek image was narrowed to representations of the Virgin Mary” (p. 227). I wonder whether analysis could have been conducted on a wider material base, since, as testified by late medieval and early modern inventories, objects referred to as *opere Graeco*, *tabula Graeca*, or *Graecae dispositionum* were quite numerous, even though it is sometimes hard to connect them with specific artworks.² A curious reader would perhaps appreciate a broader exploration and a slightly more detailed analysis of the meaning of the qualifier “Greek” as it was applied to images in local sources, because they can illustrate the notion and perception of “Greekness” by shedding light on the way such terms were used and understood by the beholders of such objects and how this understanding has changed during the broad period of time the book supposedly covers. As shown by Grażyna Jurkowlaniec, particular attention should be paid to the epithets that often accompany the description of works as either Greek or old, as well as to the understanding of these comparisons – because this is where the evaluation usually lies.³ As she mentioned, “the term *maniera Graeca*, as widely diffused in the early modern writings as it is – both in the Christian West and East – proves equivocal or vague [...]. However, occasionally the notion of the ‘Greek manner’ can be inferred from the context: the genre of the writing, its author and his or her aims, and, above all, time and place in which the account was created.”⁴ Probably a similar approach and taking into account a slightly broader context would allow for understanding the phenomenon more extensively. Discussing in depth more cases in which the adjective Greek has been applied to objects in primary sources might highlight the nuances between such uses and what they meant, establishing whether, and if so then to what extent and when, they were related to unusual appearance, were regarded purely descriptively, hinted more at technical and typological char-

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See, for example, Małgorzata Smorąg Różycka, Kościół wschodni i jego sztuka na ziemiach Rzeczypospolitej [Eastern Christianity and its Art in the Polish Lands], in: *Cerkiew – Wielka Tajemnica. Sztuka cerkiewna od XI wieku do 1917 roku ze zbiorów polskich. Katalog wystawy zorganizowanej przez Muzeum Zamek Górków w Szamotulach i Muzeum Początków Państwa Polskiego w Gnieźnie, kwiecień–sierpień 2001* [Orthodox Church – The Great Mystery. Orthodox Church Art from the 11th c. to 1917 from Polish Collections. Catalog of an Exhibition Organized by the Górków Castle Museum in Szamotuły and the Museum of the Origins of the Polish State in Gniezno, April–August 2001], (exh. cat. Szamotuły, Górków Castle Museum; Gniezno, Museum of the Origins of the Polish State), ed. by Dariusz Stryniak, Gniezno 2001, 17–24, here 19; Mirosław Piotr Kruk, *Ikony-obrazy w świątyniach rzymsko-katolickich dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* [Icons-Images in the Roman-Catholic Churches in the Former Poland], Kraków 2011, 53–60.

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Grażyna Jurkowlaniec, *Epoka nowożytna wobec średniowiecza. Pamiątki przeszłości, cudowne wizerunki, dzieła sztuki* [The Early-Modern Period in Relation to the Middle Ages. Relics of the Past, Miraculous Images, Works of Art], Wrocław 2008, 474–485.

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Ead., West and East Perspectives on the ‘Greek Manner’ in the Early Modern Period, in: *Ikonothea* 22, 2009, 71–91, here 73.

acteristics than at stylistic features, or were evaluated positively, or negatively.

Mickūnaitė calls her work “an object-based study of images qualified as Greek by their past or present viewers” (p. 18), which prompts the question of the selection of material. While providing an extensive overview of the publications on the “Greek manner”, she notes that the term lacks a clear definition, but neither does she explain how it would be understood through the book. What is lacking is an indication of the semantic or chronological scope of the term, or an explanation of the preference for the rooted in art history’s Italian version of the *maniera greca*,⁵ even though the form *graeca* was used in Latin sources; for example, by the Polish chronicler Jan Długosz (in various forms, e.g., *Graeco opere, pictura Graeca*), whose works are used and quoted in the book. Indeed, Mickūnaitė mentions that: “The current inquiry transfers the notion of the *maniera greca* from the Mediterranean to Eastern Europe and explores the meanings of the qualifier ‘Greek’ as it was applied to images in local sources” (p. 19), but at the same time it seems that the contemporary written sources are scarce or silent about some of the cases studied, as, for example, the murals in Medininkai that have been “cloaked in silence since the Middle Ages” (p. 42). It is, therefore, difficult to establish how they were perceived by their contemporaries, and perhaps even harder to ascertain whether they were indeed qualified as “Greek” by their users. A reader might get the impression that such cases were perceived as *maniera greca* not by their contemporary beholders, but by the author herself and therefore included in the analysis. This approach might be considered problematic, because it takes for granted not only a shared perception of Greek form that in the past was perhaps different from our modern art-historically oriented perception, but also a conscious attitude to style that corresponds more to the understanding of art historians than to contemporary users. A lot of attention goes on divagations into the style of the discussed works, even the fragmentary pieces lacking clear visual characteristics. If the qualifier Greek, as the author claims in the conclusions, was not necessarily connected with specific stylistic features, then we can wonder whether such inclusions support the main aim of the book, or rather blur the image of how the adjective “Greek” was understood and what was regarded as evoking Greekness by the users of such objects given the broad time frame covered.

It must be noted that Mickūnaitė expresses her awareness of the limitations of the study: “The sporadic character of source materials is both an advantage, as it leaves space for the concepts to work in constructing narratives, as well as a flaw, as it places interpretation on thin ground generous with contradictions and lacunae that can be compensated for neither with words, nor with images” (p. 223). Indeed, the state of the preservation of the material or

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Cf. Giedrė Mickūnaitė, *Maniera Graeca in Europe's Catholic East. Byzantine Paintings in the Parish Church of Trakai, Lithuania*, in: *Ikonotheka* 22, 2009, 43–55.

lack of written sources in some cases makes “interpretation on thin ground” inevitable. This approach certainly can result in interesting new juxtapositions and insights, but, occasionally, looking for one definite answer weakens the argumentation and blurs the boundaries between facts and suppositions. For instance, attribution of the paintings in the parish church in Trakai and in the Island Castle to the same anonymous masters is timidly suggested initially:

Given the general silence of written sources, the attribution and interpretation of the paintings rely on visual and circumstantial evidence. The identical structure of the base plaster – which diverges from that of other known examples as well as from the recipes of the time – and the similar scale of human figures in the church and in the Island Castle, not to mention the patronage of Grand Duke Vytautas, supports ascription of the murals of both interiors to the same anonymous masters (pp. 66–67).

Some pages later, this exact same hypothesis gains the status of fact serving as confirmation of further hypotheses: “Perhaps more insights can be gained from the fact that the same masters painted not only the interiors of the parish church, but also those of the palace in the Trakai Island Castle” (p. 71). The author further speculates on the artists’ identity and argues that they were icon painters (p. 71), and even proposes that they were the exact same painters who accompanied Gregory Tsamblak (pp. 73–74), even though, as she later rightly observes, written sources are rather silent on Tsamblak’s companions. Such bold suggestions are hard to prove, but equally hard to disprove, but maybe they were seen by the author as inevitable due to the material’s highly fragmented state of preservation.

The series *Central European Medieval Studies* rightly aims to challenge “simplistic notions of Central Europe as periphery to the medieval ‘West’”. A huge advantage of the publication is its careful design, print quality, and rich illustration. I particularly value the author’s decision to add scales next to pieces from the first chapter that help the readers comprehend their dimensions. As mentioned by Mickūnaitė, “this study is a kind of rescue expedition, which aspires to save fragmented as well as semantically mixed images from neglect” (p. 17), so adding many illustrations definitely contributes to their documentation and scholarly recognition. It is praiseworthy that she draws attention to the overlooked, and yet very important, material presented in the book. As Mickūnaitė rightly observes, this is usually absent from broader scholarship, so hopefully, the publication will reach a broad audience and place those “small” pieces into a “big” narrative.