

The Virgin Mary with the Baby Jesus Surrounded by Archangels (XIII-517). Encolpion in the Collection of the Princes Czartoryski Foundation

Summary

The subject of the article is a small plaque depicting the Blessed Virgin Mary with the Baby Jesus, made of steatite in the late or post-Byzantine period (7.4 × 6.2 × 1 cm, Greece?, 15th c.). The stone is framed in metal with corrugated edge, the same as two double-sided stone icons, one stored at Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai (Double-sided plaque: *Deesis* | *Two Bishop Saints*, steatite, metal, 14th–15th c.) and the other – in the Museo Sacro of the Vatican Library (Double-sided plaque: *The Virgin Mary with the Baby Jesus* | *Saint Michael*, steatite, metal, undated, Vatican, Museo Sacro).

What is particularly intriguing in the image is the epithet accompanying the Blessed Virgin Mary: Ἀκηδωθιμένη, that is 'Chasing away Acedia,' which is *hapax legomenon* in Greek; nevertheless, there is no reason to question the authenticity of this epithet referring to Saint Mary. It may have been used by Christians who lived a severe ascetic life, especially in the monastery or in the circle of clergymen brought up in a monastic way. Apathy that appeared during intensive ascetic observances was a problem for monastic circles already from the 4th century.

Probably the custom of praying to the Virgin Mary for support in the fight against this threat to monastic life developed relatively late, under the influence of the growing cult of Saint Mary. The writings of Palamite theologians contain information about help given by the Virgin Mary to monks taking part in religious observances, e.g. those striving after *hesychia*, or inner peace. Due to its emotional character, the cult of the Virgin Mary could be effective in the fight against apathy and resignation, that is the elements of Acedia.