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Ottoman Greek Church Epigonation

Probably Istanbul, Ottoman Turkey

Late 16th or 17th century

40 cm square

Stock No.: A5359

Provenance: UK private collection by descent

This square textile is embroidered with couched golden threads on a red ground. The border comprises a split palmette pattern. The central field depicts the Transfiguration of Christ (the inscription at the top corner, in Greek reads "Metamorphosis"). At the left, right and bottom corner are three six-winged angels (*seraphim*), the highest rank of angles in Christian angelology. Some eight-pointed stars embellish the composition.

Christ is at the centre of the composition, flanked by Moses and Elijah. During the transfiguration, Christ's face became as bright as the sun and His clothes shone white. Unable to bear the light, Christ's disciples, Peter, James and John fell to the ground.

This type of garment, called an *epigonation*, is only worn in the Greek and Armenian churches. In the

Greek church its use is confined to bishops. The *epigonation* is worn suspended in the girdle by one corner to hang at about knee height. The transfiguration scene of one of the most commonly depicted on such textiles.

An epigonation in the Byzantine Museum, Athens (no. [BXM 01702](#)), features similar composition and vegetal border. It is dated 1689 and according to an inscription, it was made by a woman artist in Constantinople.

This epigonation is an example of the prolific and refined production of Greek Orthodox embroidery in Ottoman Istanbul. During the Ottoman rule, the Greek Orthodox church seemed to have developed a standardisation of iconographic and technical characteristics. While the uniqueness of its eclectic style primarily leans on Byzantine tradition, the generous incorporation of contemporary Ottoman and Western European elements is equally evident. It not only provides a case study for Early Modern artistic melding, but also reflects the comparatively independent social and cultural conditions of the Greek community living in the Ottoman empire.

Further reading:

Vryzidis, N. (2018). "Ottoman textiles and Greek clerical vestments: Prolegomena on a neglected aspect of ecclesiastical material culture". *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 42(1), 92-114.
doi:10.1017/byz.2017.22

Johnstone, Pauline. *The Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery*. [Tiranti Library Series]. London: Tiranti, 1967.