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Stasidia (CHURCH STALLS) of the greek orthodox church – a standing seat for elderly

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Abstract: In Greek Orthodox Church and the liturgy taking place there, the worshipers tend to stay up standing most of the time. Especially in monasteries, the elderly people (monks) need to be facilitated in attending the liturgies of long duration and therefore, a series of chairs of special type called stasidia or stalls, are placed in the church, between the columns of the aisles. The design of this ecclesiastical furniture is unique and appears only in Orthodox Church. Stasidia are made of several wood species and constructed in such a way, that the elderly people are supported by the backrest and arms of the furniture. Initially, the stasidi was stable, whereas subsequently a moveable wooden element (misericord) was added in the structure, in order to offer a slight support to standing worshipers. The aim of this furniture construction is more to facilitate and support the people standing, rather than people seating during the worship or prayer. As the decades passed, this kind of ecclesiastical chair was transferred and spread from the monasteries to the rest of churches and the stasidi from a furniture of simple design and construction, of plain assembly of wooden elements, transformed into a furniture of more complicated design, more ornamental, that now brings several furnishings and decorative carvings in the surfaces of back and arms. The main goal of this work is to examine the evolution of architecture and designs of stasidia through the centuries and the study of designs and manufacturing processes of stasidia today.

Keywords: stasidia / church stalls, standing seat, furniture for elderly, design, manufacturing process

1 Introduction

In Greek Orthodox Church and the liturgy taking place there, the worshippers tend to stay up standing most of the time. Traditionally, in Orthodox churches there are no seats, benches, pews etc because they discourage active participation of the laity by turning them into passive spectators and severely undermine the physical nature of orthodox worship by making prostrations almost entirely impossible.

Instead of seats a series of furniture of special type called stasidia or stalls are placed in the church, between the columns of the aisles and along the side walls. Especially in monasteries, the elderly people (monks) need to be facilitated in attending the liturgies of long duration. The stasidi is not a chair, nor a throne but a stall. While a chair is something one can sit on, the purpose of the stasidi, as the name suggests in Greek language, is to help the worshipper remain standing throughout the long services. The aim of this furniture construction is more to facilitate and support the people standing, rather than people seating during the worship or prayer. The stasidia are constructed in such a way, that the elderly or infirm people are supported by the high backrest and arms of the furniture (Moutsopoulos 1989).

Historically, the stasidia were wooden stalls (kathismata) joined together in rows. During Ottoman period, in old churches with wooden roof of Basilica rhythm, six rows of stasidia were usually present (Fig.1). The two main rows were placed along the long side walls and sometimes in big churches where enough place was available they were continued along the wall of the entrance of the church under the women loft. The other four short rows

of stasidia were placed between the columns of the aisles joined in couple rows (back to back) on the left and right, correspondingly.

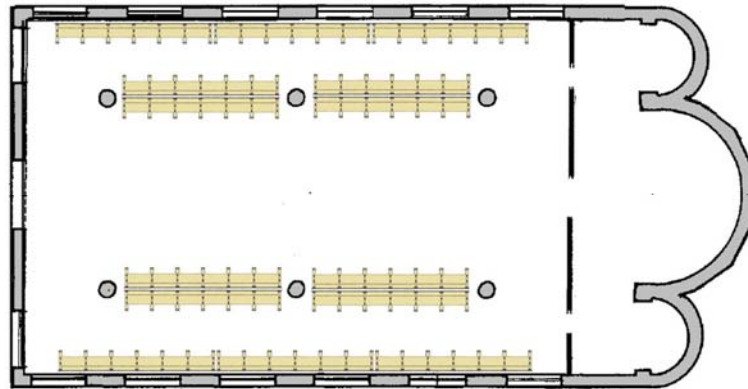


Figure 1. Position of the stasidia in the church

In order to be protected from the wet floor of the churches the stasidia are always placed on a wooden basement. Rarely, the basement is made of stone. This practice to place the stasidia a little higher than the floor level was necessary mainly in order to protect the health of elderly from the wet floor of the churches. In most of these churches of the Post Byzantine period the inside floor level was lower than the surrounding ground level and that caused the higher moisture level of the floor of the church (Moutsopoulos 1989).

Initially, the stasidi was stable, whereas subsequently a moveable wooden element (misericord) was added in the structure, in order to offer a slight support to standing worshippers by seating. As the default position of the movable seat of the stasidi is up, one can flip the seat down and no more space is needed for seating outside the stasidi.

As the time passed, this kind of ecclesiastical furniture was transferred and spread from monasteries to the rest of churches and the stasidi from a furniture of simple design and construction, of plain assembly of wooden elements, transformed into a furniture of more complicated design, more ornamental, that now brings several furnishings and decorative carvings in the surfaces of backrest and the arms (Makris 1982).

2 Design diversity evolution

The first stasidia were very simple. Just four vertical quadrangular elements joined together with traverses in the middle at the sitting level and in the upper position at the arm level of the standing position. Initially, a stable narrow plank was placed at the sitting level, in order to offer a slight support to standing worshippers (Fig.2).

The design of the first original stasidia was simple and rigid, but their function was easy and at the same time valuable. The height of its arms allowed the standing person to share his body weight on them by keeping his hands in orans position for a long period. Even more, the shape of its upper ends of the arms could help additionally the standing person by handling them. This function of the stasidi is similar to that of the prayer staff used until today by Ethiopian Orthodox monks.

Later, a narrow moveable element (misericord) almost negligible was added to the stable plank to give some more support to elderly by allowing them to seat on it. As the default position of the moveable seat is up, one can easily flip the seat down to take a more comfortable sitting position (Fig.3). The great thing about the stasidi is that, because by flipping the seat up, it only takes up a few inches of standing room, giving the standing person almost as much space as if the floor was empty (Moutsopoulos 1989).



Figure 2. Old stasidia since 1820 still in use, where the original and hardly damaged moveable seats have been replaced by a stable plank (St.Taxiarches Achladoxori, Serres)

Additional features of the stasidia which enrich their function are the following. There are arms for placing the elbows of the standing person in both positions the standing and the sitting. Even more, the wooden elements which are fixed in the bottom part of the front legs offer a more comfortable position to the sitting person by putting his feet on them, avoiding the wet and cold floor of the church. These extra wooden elements were necessary when the stasidia were not placed on a wooden basement (Makris 1982).



Figure 3. Old stasidia from a monastery in Holy Mount Athos

Generally, the stasidia are classified according to their specific features in the following three types: 1. Holy mount type – On the two sides of these stasidia the spaces between the moveable seat and the lower arms are especially rich in decorative carvings (Fig. 3, 5). But their most distinctive feature is the small seat which has been fixed under the moveable seat offering a new sitting position, a little higher, when the moveable seat flips up (Fig.3). 2. Secular (Kosmiko) type – Both arms (lower and upper) are simple in decoration and sometimes the lower arms are missing, when the strength of the total construction permits it (Fig. 7, 8). 3. Psalters' (Chanters') type – The stasidia of Psalters are placed a little higher on a double wooden basement in relation to the rest stasidia of the church. Their back is

especially rich in carved decoration and very often it extends in height than the rest of stasidia (Fig. 5).

3 Construction processes

Stasidia are made of several wood species and constructed in such a way, that the elderly people are supported by the backrest and arms of the furniture. The main wood species which are used in the construction of stasidia are of local origination, but occasionally some imported and tropical wood species are also used like Pitch pine, Anigre, etc. From the domestic woods are mainly used hardwoods of high strength: Beech wood, Oak wood and in a lesser degree Cypress, Pine, Walnut, Lime etc.

The main connection which is used in the construction of stasidi is tenon and mortise. The total height of stasidi ranges from 130 cm to 170 cm. The seat is placed in a height of 45 cm to 48 cm. Its depth ranges from 50 cm to 52 cm and its width (internal dimension) ranges from 44 cm to 52 cm. The medium arms are placed in a height of 76 cm (75 – 80 cm) and the moveable seat has a mean width of 22 cm, ranging from 18 cm to 26 cm. The height of the basement ranges from 5 cm to 20 cm (Fig.4).

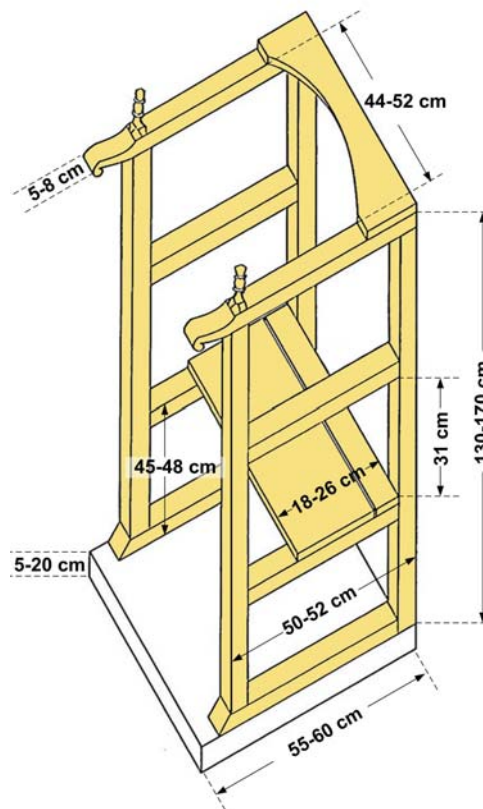


Figure 4. Dimensions of stasidi

4 Examples of modern designs

Nowadays, there are many small sized companies which produce this kind of ecclesiastical furniture very well equipped with modern machinery. It is remarkable that these companies are healthy and robust even under the current conditions of economical crisis. The modern stasidia are produced in many different designs by automatic machines (CNC machines), based on some old designs, originated from famous historical churches. They are very rich in decoration and bring several furnishings and decorative carvings in the surfaces of back and arms. Especially, the back of stasidia is very rich in decoration and the basic

figures which are present here are the double-head eagle (the symbol of Byzantine empire), the cross and many others. The ends of the upper arms are also a special part with very rich decoration: fiction animal heads, flowers, etc. Some examples of modern designs are given below (Fig.5-8).



Figure 5. Psalters (Chanters) type stasidia (Xaxiras, Attiki)



Figure 6. Holy mount type stasidia (Amanatidis, Derveni-Thessaloniki)



Figure 7. Secular (Kosmiko) type stasidia (Kosmidis, Thessaloniki)



Figure 8. Secular (Kosmiko) type stasidia (Evagelidis, Serres)

5 Conclusions

The stasidia – church stalls are historical ecclesiastical furniture of very specific design and construction. Their design is unique and appears only in Orthodox Church. The aim of this furniture construction is more to facilitate and support the people standing rather

than people seating during the liturgies of long duration taking place in churches. The main goal of stasidia is to support elderly or infirm people during the worship or prayer.

The stasidia were first appeared in monasteries. As the centuries passed, they were transferred and spread to the rest of churches and nowadays the stasidia from a furniture of simple design and construction, transformed into furniture of more complicated design that now brings several furnishings and decorative carvings in the surfaces of back and arms.

Hundreds of years have passed since they first appeared but they still insist to exist and support elderly people in churches. The original form of stasidia and the idea of their construction keep sometimes inspiring the designers of today in creating modern chair designs and also it could be an inspiration for the construction of chairs of similar form, aiming at offering rest to working people standing long periods.

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