

An Assessment on the Fresco Decoration and the Content of an Inscription in Theotokos' Church in Cercke, near Leskovik



Religious studies

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Abstract

The main subject of this paper is the fresco decoration of the church of St. Mary in the village of Cerckë, near Leskovik. Attention has been devoted to some thematically innovative motifs and in the analysis of stylistic features, which reveal their affiliation in the artistic tradition occurred in a broader area in South Albania and western Macedonia in the course of 14th century. Another subject discussed in this paper is an inscription, which mentions the name of a certain Michael. Although its content reveals an introductory formula usually applied to indicate patronage, the author of this paper recognizes the signature of the painter and argues that similar inscriptions mentioning painters' name are found in Albania since Middle Byzantine period. Another inscription of the same period mentioning the name of Michael is found at the church of St. George tou Vounou in Kastoria (1385).

From the many old churches in the proximity of the small city of Leskovik, district of Kolonja, the byzantine church of St. Mary (Theotokos) in the village of Cerckë is the best known and the most important monument of this area. The historical and economic development of this territory was widely determined by its location and the communication and the interaction with the nearby urban centers through the main artery which in medieval times was the important route facilitating the trade and the seasonal migration of many groups of artisans and masons³¹ and the interchange of new ideas. The importance of this area is documented through the relevant written sources since 14th century³², the archaeological ruins, case studies and the testimonies given by the peasants, which offer a more complete panorama on its cultural heritage³³. However, although the region is thought to have amassed a dozen of churches decorated with artistically noteworthy frescoes and portable icons most of them are totally lost. However, systematic archaeological excavation in the future would give a more precise account on such issues and the sequence of the development in this territory.

The church of Theotokos is the oldest religious building of Christian cult in the village of Cerckë. Its architectural vocabulary is linked by the relevant scholars with the developments that took place in western Macedonia, especially in the small urban center of nearby Kastoria, proposing a relative early date in 11th century³⁴. The monument is a small single nave building, with an apse flanked by the niche of prothesis and the diakonikon in the northern part. The nave is gable – roofed and the altar space is barrel vaulted. The narthex represents a later extension to the church original plan. The walls are mortared rubble with a facing of roughly cut stone. However the lack of embedding of the saw – tooth courses and the usual cloisonne brickwork of the architectural mannerism as evidenced in Kastoria, makes difficult to give an approximate dating. From this point of view the examination of the fresco painting are very important.

The lavish fresco decoration of the interior of the church is widely mentioned in art – historical surveys for their picturesque quality. Despite the relative wealth of the material related to this subject, there is no unanimity concerning the chronology and patronage related issues producing debates which will be marshaled here for this purpose. H. Nallbani and Th. Popa, probably influenced by the data obtained from the architectural

³¹ Prifti N., Organizim i vogël dhe trevat e muratorëve stinorë të Kolonjës, *Monumentet* 2, Tiranë, 1983, p. 119 – 122.

³² Bozhori K., *Dokumente të periudhës bizantine për historinë e Shqipërisë: shek. VII – XV*, Tiranë, 1978, p. 96 – 98.

³³ The earliest traces of settlement go back to the Early Iron Age evidenced in the ruins of the fortification of Gadeçi. See: Karaiskaj Gj., Aliu S., Vendbanime të fortifikuara në Pllajën e Kolonjës e në rrjedhën e sipërme të Luginës së Osumit, në *Monumentet* 1, 1984, p. 88; The byzantine and post byzantine period are represented mainly by Christian buildings in the village of Cerckë, Lashovë and Postenan, and by the bridge of Postenan. For architectural examination of post byzantine churches see: Thomo P., *Kishat pasbizantine në Shqipërinë e Jugut*, Tiranë, 1998, f. 87.

³⁴ Meksi A., *Arkitektura mesjetare në Shqipëri (VII – XV)*, Tiranë, 1983, p. 92 – 93; Idem, *Arkitektura e kishave të Shqipërisë (shekujt VII – XV)*, Tiranë, 2004, p. 149 – 150.

rendering, proposed a dating in the 12th century³⁵ and Dh. Dhamo gives a later date in the late 13th to 14th century³⁶. A closer scrutiny devoted to this monument by the German art historian K. Kirchhainer in her comprehensive study on the history, architecture and the fresco paintings suggest a date in the late 14th century. The author has concluded that the paintings are fundamentally influenced both in their programming and style by the artistic developments that occurred in western Macedonia pointing out their close analogies with painting ensembles in the churches of St. Athanasius Mouzaki (1383/4) and St. George (Agios Georgios) tou Vounou in Kastoria (1385), as well as the church of Christ the Life Giver (Zôodotes) in Mborje near Korça (1389/90), and suggests that probably the painter was a representative of the same style known in rural, provincial setting, notably in Kastoria.

This paper attempts to reevaluate the data obtained by stylistic and programmatic analysis of the decoration, to restate and advance the former views. Furthermore, the context of a peculiar extant inscription, written in quasi indiscernible place of the church is subject of the present paper.

Notwithstanding the precarious state of preservation the murals of the church of St. Mary deserve a special consideration as they happen to be some of the few extant witnesses to an extraordinary phase of cultural and artistic vitality which took place in South Albania in the course of 14th century. The sanctuary wall, including the conch and the triumphal arch, is the most badly preserved part of the decoration. In terms of iconography the decoration is confined to subjects that were traditionally reserved for this space. At the apex of the triumphal arch are represented the Ascension, with the figures of saints below separated by the apse. In the conch are the Virgin and Child attended by cherubs and proceeding below over the altar table, are represented the Church Fathers. In the northern part are discerned the effigies of an unknown saint and of St. Stephen the *Protomartyr* in the prothesis below him. In the southern part of the apse is depicted St. Romanos the Melodist. The vision of St. Peter of Alexandria is depicted in the northern wall of the sanctuary, over the space of *proskomide* or the *diakonikon*.

The naos forms a more or less rectangular shape and its decoration is original and although neither of the remaining scenes was intact, many of them have preserve a high level of legibility, except the dedicatory inscription and the paint laying in the west wall, which has been subjected to various deteriorative factors. The iconography is organized in four zones; in the lowest one lays an ornamented band and as proceeding in the upper registers are depicted full length figures of saints such as St. Nicholas and St. Athanasius of Alexandria, and the military representations of St. George and St. Demetrius. In the west wall is depicted St. Symeon the Stylite and Archangel Michael as well as Sts. Constantine and Helen. In the north are depicted the images of Sts. Theodor Teron and Theodore Stratilates and canonical *Deisis*, with Christ *Zoodotes* flanked by Virgin *Eleousa* and St. John the Forerunner. From the register of the medallions with bust of saints which are integrated inside an intricate floral pattern decoration, we can discern the portraits of St. Habakuk, St. Tryphon, St. Nikita, St. Vikentios, St. Menas, St. Artemios and St. Solomon whereas the rest of the depicted saints cannot be identified because the accompanying inscriptions are not visible. In the upper part is developed a limited cycle of Twelve Great Feasts series. This register is confined by a decorative band of palmettes. From the extant scenes of *Dodekaorton* is the Archangel of the Annunciation, the Hypapante, the Raising of Lazarus, the Metamorphosis, the Visit of women at the empty tomb and the Dormition of Theotokos.

³⁵ Nallbani H., *Piktura murale bizantine ne vendin tonë, Traditat në arkitekturë dhe në art*, Tirana 1980, p. 13; Popa Th., *Miniatura dhe piktura mesjetare në Shqipëri* (shek. VI – XIV), Tiranë, 2006, p. 135 – 142.

³⁶ Dhamo Dh., *Fresques des XIIIe – XIVE siècles en Albanie méridionale, Hπειρωτικό Χρονικόν* 30 (1992), p. 92 – 93.

Referring to the conclusions of the relevant study³⁷ we note that the painting indicate strong links with 14th century frescoed cycles in the territory of Macedonia and South Albania and some isolated iconographic formulae chosen amongst the small number of thematically innovative motifs restate their adherence to the cultural contribution and particular artistic tradition of this specific period. The subject of Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria is introduced in monumental painting mainly from early 13th century³⁸. Notwithstanding the fact that the paint layer is damaged, a large part of its elements are still discernible to reconstruct the structure of the whole composition. Christ as an adolescent stands upon an altar table on the right of the synthesis holding with both hands the torn chiton and St. Peter of Alexandria dressed in prelatric vestments extending his hands towards Christ in a gesture of speech. The inscription in the center of the composition although in a bad condition illustrates the dialogue between the protagonists inscribed with the words of Peter: Τίς σου τον χιτώνα Σώτερ διείλε (Who tore your chiton Savior) and the answer of Christ: ούτος ο Άρειος ο άφρων Πέτρε (Arius mindless Peter). In the lower part of the composition is depicted the Mouth of Hell devouring Arius (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria (photo: author)

Additionally, the iconographic type of St. Theodore Stratelates and St. Theodore Teron facing each other is another composition which found diffusion particularly in southern Albania and western Macedonia during the 13th and 14th century³⁹.

³⁷ A detailed description of the iconographic program is given in the former studies of Th. Popa and K. Kirchhainer. A general view of the murals is given in this case for the delineation of iconographic and stylistic characteristics. Kirchhainer K., Die Fresken der Marienkirche in Cerskë bei Leskovik (SüdAlbanien). Ein Beitrag zur Spätbyzantinischen Monumentalmalerei im Nördlichen Epirus, *DChAE*, 2004, p. 89 – 110.

³⁸ Cvetkovski S., The Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria, from the Church of St. Archangels in Prilep. Iconographical research, *Zograf* 36, 2012, p. 83 – 88; A complete account on the factors that influenced the frequent depiction of this composition in byzantine churches' sanctuaries and for an inventory of the preserved examples from 13th and 14th century churches see: Koukiaris S., The depiction of the Vision of saint Peter of Alexandria in the sanctuary of Byzantine churches, *Zograf* 35, 2011, p. 63 – 71. The earliest representation of the Vision of St. Peter is identified in the manuscript illumination found at the Monastery of Holy Cross in Jerusalem, dated in late XI to early XII century. See: Grabar A., Un rouleau liturgique Constantinopolitain et ses peintures, *DOP*, 8, 1954, p. 176.

³⁹ Trifonova A., The iconographical type of saints Theodore Teron and Theodore Stratelates facing each other and its diffusion during the Byzantine and post – Byzantine period, *Zograf* 34, 2010, p. 53 – 64.

The Sts. Theodores Teron and Stratelates are depicted in three quarter view facing each other with hands raised in prayer to Christ, who is represented in bust, above them, and blessing from a semicircular divine glory (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The Sts. Theodores Teron and Stratelates (photo: author)

Another detail is a characteristic denoting the respect for the local tradition. The representation of St. Symeon Stylite in the west wall, with his gangrenous leg thrown out of the capital (Fig. 3), reveal some features that are found in a broader area of southeastern Albania and western Macedonia, at the church of Hagioi Anargyroi, of St. George tou Vounou, St. Nicholas Kyritzi, St. Athanasios Mouzaki, St. Mary in the village of Gollomboç⁴⁰, the hermitage of the Archangel in Great Prespa Lake and in the church of St. Mary in Maligrad⁴¹. The closest parallelism of these syntheses is found at the church of St. George tou Vounou in Kastoria.



Fig. 3. St. Symeon Stylite and Archangel Michael (photo: author)

⁴⁰ Xhaferaj E., Nesturi E., Marika Z., Afresket e shek. XIV të piktorit Aleks në kishën e Shën Mërisë në Gollomboç, *Iliria* XXXVII (2013), Tiranë 2015, p. 245 – 249.

⁴¹ Σίστου Ι., *Οι καστοριανοί ζωγράφοι που μετακινούνται βόρεια κατά το πρώτο μισό του 14ου αιώνα*, *Niš and Byzantium* 2, 2004, f. 300.

The creator of the fresco programme of the church of St. Mary shows a sophisticated character and knowledge of his cultural environment, although his artistic language is not innovative and doesn't propose new solutions or developments. However, his portraiture with the serene movements, the delicate facial features and the gentle expressions, the harmonic composition reflect the work of a virtuous painter. In some cases he is somewhat reminiscent of the classicizing monumental trend of the first Paleologan era, as is best represented by the rendering of the apostle John in the Transfiguration (Fig. 4), where the taste for luminescence and expressionist qualities manifested by the refined movements of the body is evidenced; the employment of vigorous convolution generate the impression of movement. Dark and quasi vertical lines accentuate the legs and bright colour, decorative oval patterns outline the knees and the shoulders in an abstract unrealistic way thus creating a rhythmic effect that energize the otherwise static figures.



Fig. 4. Apostle from the Transfiguration (photo: author)

However, these features are opposed to the rather conventional treatment of the hairs in many cases as shown by the representation of the Virgin Eleousa in the composition of Deisis. The stylistic features are best paralleled with the paleologan frescoes executed in the last quarter of 14th century especially as regards the plastic rendering of the body, its proportion and refined movements, the treatment of both hair and facial features and the effort for realistic treatment of some details as the fingers and eyes.

The dominant colours for the figures were ochre, red brown, black, vinegar and grey set against a blue and ocher background. The most conservative approach from the point of view of colour was reserved for the bishops, deacons and the stylite, painted mainly in grey, ochre and red brown.

From a stylistic point of view the rendering of the painting may be attributed to a local painter who might be responsible for the decoration of several churches in a broader geographical area. In fact, the question of artistic patronage is an issue of particular interests in the study of monumental painting and as well in the understanding of painters' role in the artistic creation and generally of this group in medieval Byzantine society. From this point of view the examination of an inscription preserved in the southern wall of the church, between the medallion of St. Habakkuk and that of another saint, constitutes an attempt to seek certain indications. In my opinion the content of this text is embodies its substantial explanation and importance. In the inscribed text has been paraphrased: (ΔΕΗΣ)ΙC του ζ(ωγρα)ΦΟΥ ΤΟΥ Θ(Ε)ΟΥ ΜΙΧΑΗΛ (Supplication of the painter of God Michael) (Fig. 5)⁴².

⁴² Part of the inscription has been identified by K. Kirchner but the author doesn't give any annotation except the fact that she hypothesizes the existence of the depiction of St. Michael inside the medallion which content has not been preserved. See: Kirchner K., Die Fresken der



Fig. 5. St. Habakkuk and painters' inscription (photo: author)

Such inscriptions of churches mentioning painters' names are not an isolated occurrence and we have frequently encountered them in monumental painting of Albania, in the form of signatures, invocations or in dedicatory inscriptions⁴³. A similar example is found in the fresco decoration of the hermitage (*asketerion*) of St. Mary located in the village of Letëm near Librazhd dated in 9th – 10th century, where in the space between the nimbus and the right hand of the Virgin is the inscription recording the painters' name reading as follows: Ηστοριθ(η)/ ο θηος ν/αος τ(ης) Υ/περαγίας Θ(εοτο)κ(ου) δη(α) χηρος εμου/Στανου (Was painted this saintly temple of the Holy Theotokos by my hand, Stanos). In the himation of the Virgin, is also depicted the family portrait of the donor, whose name is not mentioned in the inscribed text. In my opinion the donor and the monk of the hermitage, may be identified with the name of Stano mentioned in the only inscription. It is a usual phenomenon in medieval times for a layman to become a monk at the end of his life⁴⁴. Another example of signatures of such types written in non – conspicuous places of the church are introduced by the painters Eutybios and Michael Astrapas, who were engaged in during the last decade of 13th century and early 14th century at first by Progonos Sgouros, *heteriarches* and son – in – law of the Byzantine emperor Andronikos II Paleologos and subsequently by the Serbian Krajl Milutin for the decoration of their foundations. Although they are never mentioned in dedicatory inscriptions of their employers, they have left their signatures and monograms in secondary places of the churches or in the garments of various saints. The 14th century fresco decorations of the humble chapels scattered on the shores of Great Prespa Lake, preserve the names of two other painters which introduce themselves in churches' dedicatory inscriptions; in the cave church of Archangel hieromonk Visar, to which is attributed the authorship of the murals, wrote under the representation of St. Symeon the Stylite a short invocation asking for remembrance: Μνηστητη κ(ύρι)ε τ(ήν) ψ(υ)χ(ήν) του δούλου του Θ(εο)υ/Βησαρηου ιερομοναχου (Remember Lord the soul of your servant Visarion the hieromonk). The inscription written by another painter named Alexios probably in the late 14th century, under the representation of Virgin Glykofilousa in the cave church of St. Mary Gliboko near the village of Bezmisht reads: Ανηστωρίθη (η) θεία πύλη υπερενδό(ξου θεοτόκου παρά εμού του ταπηνού αμαρ)τολου Παρθενίου και τής συνο/δίας ημών πάσης. Ο Θεός συνχορίσι τούς. Προεδόθησαν πέντι άσπρ(α) ο κάματος όλως. Αλέξ(ου)/διά χιρός τάχα και μαθητού του

Marienkirche in Cerskë bei Leskovik (SüdAlbanien). Ein Beitrag zur Spätbyzantinischen Monumentalmalerei im Nördlichen Epirus, *DChAE*, 2004, p. 94.

⁴³ Such classification is proposed by Sophia Kalopissi – Verti. See: Kalopissi – Verti S., *Painters in Late Byzantine Society. The evidence of church inscriptions*, Cahiers Archéologiques, 42, Picard, 1994, p. 139 – 158.

⁴⁴ Panayotidi M., *The Question of the Role of the Donor and of the Painter. A Rudimentary Approach*, *Δελτίον ΧΑΕ* 17 (1993 – 1994), Περίοδος Δ'. Στη μνήμη της Ντούλας Μουρίκη (1934 – 1991), p. 143 – 156.

Ιω(άννου) ζωγράφου (Was painted this divine gate of the glorious Virgin from Parthenios the humble sinner and from the whole community. Lord, forgive them. Five aspres were invested in advance for all the work. By the hand of Alexios, the so – called disciple of Jovan Zographos)⁴⁵.

These examples document the painters' will to record their role in the artistic creation. In our case, the context of our inscription leaves no doubt that this is a short invocation of Michael, who might be the author of the paintings. Inscriptions mentioning the name of a certain Michael are reported from the relevant studies in the church of St. George tou Vounou, in the sword of Archangel Michael, which is depicted in the west entrance of the church, and in the narthex of church of the monastery of Lesnovo. Some of the authors, who studied these monuments, have recognized the signature of the painter who has placed his name close to the representation of his homonymous protector, Archangel Michael⁴⁶. The coincidences detected in both churches with the name of the painter and similar thematic choices as the composition of Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria, the depiction of Sts. Theodores and the representation of Stylites, showing that the number of observed similarities is larger than that of differences, as well as the short intervals between their dates, may indicate the involvement of the same team of artists. Notwithstanding these facts, further more detailed comparative analysis needs to be done in this direction in order to verify such an assumption. Also, from the lengthy dedicatory inscription written in majuscule letters above the entrance in the west wall of the church has been preserved only the fragment writing "...ΑΝΙΣΤΟΡΗΘΗ Ο ΠΑΝΣΕΠΤΟΣ ... ΤΟΥ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ..." while the rest of the content has been demolished due to the weather conditions and human activity, which makes impossible the identification of donors probably mentioned there.

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⁴⁶ Σίστου Ι., *Οι καστοριανοί ζωγράφοι που μετακινούνται βόρεια κατά το πρώτο μισό του 14ου αιώνα*, *Niš and Byzantium* 2, 2004, p. 306.

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