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Η βυζαντινή μνημειακή ζωγραφική και το αρχιτεκτονικό της πλαίσιο

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Robert Ousterhout

## BYZANTINE MURAL PAINTING IN ITS ARCHITECTURAL SETTING

*In memory of Ruth Macrides*

Στο άρθρο διερευνάται το αρχιτεκτονικό πλαίσιο της μνημειακής ζωγραφικής στις βυζαντινές εκκλησίες. Μια λεπτομερής ανάλυση της αρχιτεκτονικής και του ζωγραφικού διακόσμου δείχνει ότι η συνεργασία ανάμεσα στους οικοδόμους και τους ζωγράφους δεν πρέπει να θεωρείται δεδομένη, ωστόσο αυτή η έλλειψη συντονισμού μπορούσε να οδηγήσει σε καινοτόμες λύσεις. Μελετώντας προσεκτικά τη σχέση της αρχιτεκτονικής και του τοιχογραφικού διακόσμου, μπορούμε να κατανοήσουμε καλύτερα τις αλλαγές στην αντίληψη των Βυζαντινών για τον ιερό χώρο αλλά και τις αισθητικές επιλογές που συνέβαλαν στη δημιουργία νέων μορφών μνημειακής ζωγραφικής.

*This paper explores the architectural setting of monumental imagery in Byzantine churches. A close analysis reveals that the collaboration between masons and painters cannot be taken for granted. The lack of coordination, however, could lead to innovative solutions. By paying closer attention to the relationship between architecture and wall decoration, we may gain a better understanding of changes in the Byzantine conceptions of sacred space and the aesthetic choices underpinning the creation of new formats of monumental imagery.*

### Λέξεις κλειδιά

Μεσοβυζαντινή περίοδος, υστεροβυζαντινή περίοδος, τοιχογραφίες, Κωνσταντινούπολη, Σερβία, Σικελία, Καππαδοκία, Ελλάδα.

### Keywords

Middle Byzantine period; Late Byzantine period; mural paintings; Constantinople; Serbia; Sicily; Cappadocia; Greece.

The church of the Dormition of the Virgin at Gračanica is perhaps the crowning achievement of Late Byzantine architecture, representing the work of a Byzantine master mason in the employ of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin of Serbia, completed in 1321 (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Although it is a small building (measuring a mere 13×16.5 m. overall –that is, similar in size to the Myrelaion in Constantinople), it is imbued with a deceptive sense of monumentality, rising

from the bold clarity in the cubic volumes of the lower facades to the exuberant complexity in the pyramidal massing of the high vaults, which step gradually upward to be crowned by five vertically attenuated domes. The spectacle of the exterior is unprecedented and almost magical. Turning to the interior, the artisans responsible for the wall painting were similarly skillful; the team employed by Milutin was likely headed by a well-known Thessalonian painter, Michael Astrapas. The figures are rapidly painted in voluminous robes, with studied facial expressions, and placed in elaborated settings and complex compositions.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Ćurčić, *Gračanica: King Milutin’s Church and Its Place in*

*Late Byzantine Architecture*, University Park 1979; and in Serbian translation, idem, *Gračanica: Istorija i Arhitektura*, Belgrade 1988. For the wall paintings of the church, see B. Todić, *Gračanica: Slikarskvo*, Belgrade 1988. Idem, *Serbian Medieval Painting in the Age of King Milutin*, Belgrade 1999.



Fig. 1. Gračanica, church of the Dormition of the Virgin. View from northeast.

And yet, when we step away from the painted surface, the images seem to vanish, lost in the dramatically attenuated proportions of the interior –the central dome rises more than six times its diameter (a mere 3.2 m.), the corner domes rise more than fourteen times their diameter. As we gaze upward, zone after zone of the painted program disappears (actually seven registers), lost in the steep angle of ascent –the naos has all the ambiance of an elevator shaft (Fig. 2). The architectural design seems to disregard its role as a framework for painted decoration, while the painted program is not well integrated into its architectural setting. In short, the talented mason(s) and the talented painter(s) appar-

ently did not communicate with each other in the conceptualization of this extraordinary monument.

How do we explain the disjunction? We like to think that in the Middle and Late Byzantine periods, the church interior provided the armature for a complex, multi-layer figural program, and that although the architectural form of the building was abstract, it was given meaning through its painted decoration.<sup>2</sup> The standard middle Byzantine church types, for example,

<sup>2</sup> See R. G. Ousterhout, *Master Builders of Byzantium*, Princeton 1999, esp. 239-254. Idem, “Collaboration and innovation in the arts of Byzantine Constantinople”, *BMGS* 21 (1997), 93-112.



Fig. 2. Gračanica, church of the Dormition of the Virgin. View into the naos vaulting.

seem to have developed hand-in-glove with relatively standardized programs of interior decoration, the pyramidal massing of forms underscoring the hierarchy of Orthodox belief and expressing the order of the Christian cosmos.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I would like to offer some thoughts on the relationship of monumental painting and its architectural setting. Were images simply fitted into a predetermined architectural framework, over which the painter had no control, or did the special requirements of the decorative program affect the architectural form? Interrogating the relationship between the monument and its monumental art may also provide some insight into the working relationships that lay behind the creation of a Byzantine church. Was it intended to be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or simply the sum of its parts?

Lacking the necessary documentation or work contracts that might clarify the respective roles of mason, painter, and patron in the creative process, we must rely on the close analysis of the physical evidence provided by surviving buildings and their decorative programs. My touchstone in this discussion is the early fourteenth-century *katholikon* of the Chora Monastery in Constantinople (now known as Kariye Camii or Kariye Müzesi in Istanbul), exactly contemporary with Gračanica. Restored, expanded, and lavishly decorated ca. 1316-1321, under the patronage of the statesman and scholar Theodore Metochites, the Chora and its mosaics and mural paintings are remarkably well-preserved. In dramatic contrast to Milutin's church, its decorative program is carefully and intelligently fitted to the architecture, the two working together, kept in balance – indeed, the two often refer to each other, so that the spatial setting enhances the meaning of the scenes depicted (Fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> This is all the more remarkable considering the complex articulation of the Chora's architectural spaces – again in contrast to the relative simplicity of Gračanica's planar surfaces.

The effective integration of the Chora's art and architecture is perhaps best seen in the parekklesion, a large funeral chapel designed for the interment of the

founder, his family, and close associates.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the painted program directs our attention again and again to the arcosolium tombs that line the chapel's lateral walls. For example, the Last Judgment is here uniquely situated in a domical vault, providing the scene with a heightened significance and compositional unity (Fig. 4). While drawing upon the symbolism of the dome as dome of heaven, it also gives the scene a three-dimensional character so that those buried beneath it become active participants in the unfolding eschatological drama: as the dead are called forth from their tombs in the painted program, so too are those buried in the chapel. In the dramatic composition of the Anastasis, set into the parekklesion's apse, the angled sarcophagi of Adam and Eve lead our eyes to the sarcophagi of the deceased (Fig. 5). Perhaps most dramatic, Christ's gesture in the Last Judgment – raising his right hand to signal that those on his right side are saved – extends across time and space to an image of St. Michael presenting a soul (the founder's?) for judgment, and ultimately toward the tomb of Theodore Metochites, in the large northwest arcosolium (see Fig. 3, left).

Above the tomb, the odd composition of Jacob Wrestling with the Angel also seems to have been designed specifically for its irregular setting (Fig. 6). Jacob's Ladder follows the curve of the vault, while above left, the hymnographer Theophanes pauses, pen in hand, while composing a funeral ode in which he presents Jacob's Ladder as a proof of our access to heaven. Theophanes's pen directs our gaze toward the scene, and beyond it to the tomb of the founder, below right. His text reads, "We have turned back to the earth because we have sinned against the commandments of God, but through thee, O Virgin, we have ascended from earth unto heaven, shaking off the corruption of death"<sup>6</sup>. While referring to the Theotokos, who appears as Queen of Heaven at the top of Jacob's Ladder, the hymn was part of the sixth ode of the funeral service. The message is clear: despite his

<sup>3</sup> O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium*, London 1948.

<sup>4</sup> R. G. Ousterhout, *The Art of the Kariye Camii*, Istanbul – London 2002, 103-117. P. A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, New York 1966, 3 vols. Idem (ed.), *The Kariye Djami*, vol. 4, New York 1975.

<sup>5</sup> R. G. Ousterhout, "Temporal Structuring in the Chora Parekklesion", *Gesta* 43 (1995), 63-76.

<sup>6</sup> Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, op.cit. (n. 4), vol. I, 217, 221-222: Εἰς γῆν ἂ ἀπεστρά(φημεν) \ (τοῦ) Θ(εο)ῦ <τὴν ἐντολὴν τὴν ἔνθεον> ... See also The Order for the Burial of the Dead (Laymen), I Hapgood (trans.), *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, Englewood, NJ 1975, 383.



*Fig. 3. Istanbul, Kariye Camii (Chora Monastery), the parekklesion. Looking east.*



Fig. 4. Istanbul, Kariye Camii (Chora Monastery), the parekklesion, vault. *The Last Judgment*, detail.



Fig. 5. Istanbul, Kariye Camii (Chora Monastery), the parekklesion, apse. *The Anastasis*, detail.



Fig. 6. Istanbul, Kariye Camii (Chora Monastery), the parekklesion, south wall. The Jacob's Ladder above the tomb of Theodore Metochite, detail.

earthly sins –and there were many, Theodore Metochites will gain access to heaven. In short, the parekklesion is not so much a painted program set into an architectural space as an architectural space that has become an integral part of its decoration.

Within the Chora and other churches of Constantinople we may begin to understand the close working relationships between masons and painters in the construction and decoration of a church. In most periods, the Byzantine capital was able to maintain active workshops, which in spite of shifts in personnel, were able to find regular employment. With painters and masons

readily available, the coordination of a project could have been easily managed. This is evident in many of the surviving buildings –perhaps most impressively in the Chora church, where the entire project may have been under the supervision of a single individual.<sup>7</sup> In other, less cosmopolitan locations, however, it may have been difficult to maintain workshops, and patrons would have had to rely on itinerant artisans –thus, the church would have been constructed by one team, and

<sup>7</sup> As suggested in R. G. Ousterhout, *The Architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul*, Washington, D.C. 1986, 142-144.



Fig. 7. Palermo, Cappella Palatina. Sanctuary looking south.



Fig. 8. Monreale, Cathedral. Interior looking east.

then another was brought in to paint it. This, I suspect, may have led to the disjuncture at Gračanica.

Even at the court of Norman Sicily, which produced some impressive monuments, discrepancies are evident between the architectural form and the organization of the pictorial program. For example, in the mosaics of the Cappella Palatina, dated ca. 1142-1143, the artisans in the employ of Roger II –probably Constantinopolitan in origin, although this has been questioned– struggled as they confronted an unfamiliar setting: lacking a proper drum, the host of angels surrounding the Pantokrator in the dome are oddly foreshortened, while the Evangelists are all but invisible in the Arab-style squinches (Fig. 7).<sup>8</sup> The difficulties encountered are perhaps most striking in the southeast corner of the bema, where large composi-

tion of the Nativity extends around the corner and overlaps the scene of the Baptism. This in turn disrupts the symmetrical organization of the middle register, pushing the important image of the Transfiguration off-axis.<sup>9</sup>

At the Cathedral of Monreale, decorated in the 1180s, a sense of unity was created at the expense of the original architectural framework, as the Constantinopolitan mosaicists grappled with unfamiliar architectural forms (Fig. 8). Restorations revealed that during the initial mosaic decoration, windows were blocked and decorative columns were removed or suppressed to create uninterrupted mural surfaces.<sup>10</sup> This discovery

<sup>8</sup> Note the skepticism of Liz James, *Mosaics in the Medieval World: From Late Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge 2017, esp. 399-405.

<sup>9</sup> O. Demus, *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily*, London 1949, 49, pls 12, 17, 19. W. Tronzo, *The Cultures of His Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo*, Princeton 1997.

<sup>10</sup> M. Andoloro – G. Naselli Flores, *I Mosaici di Monreale: Restaure e scoperte 1965-72*, Palermo 1986, esp. 48-49. See also M. J. Duncan-Flowers, "The Mosaics of Monreale: A Study of Their

countered the view espoused by earlier scholars that one master was responsible for overseeing the construction of the church, as well as its decoration.<sup>11</sup> The impression of the harmonious interior was primarily the contribution of the mosaicist, who was willing to sacrifice features of the spatial articulation and to subordinate the architecture to the well-defined decorative program.

In fact, in provincial settings the lack of coordination between architecture and painting may be more common than its coordination. Without active workshops on hand, patrons would have had to rely on itinerant workforces, with the painters arriving on the scene perhaps only long after the architecture was completed. Indeed, this was likely the situation in Cappadocia, even at the best of times and at the highest levels of patronage.<sup>12</sup> Thus we find decorative programs often painted over initial embellishment of a folkloric style and at odds with the architecture.

To begin with a modest example, at the Saklı Kilise in the Soğanlı Valley, the piers originally had fluted surfaces with colonnettes at the corners (Fig. 9).<sup>13</sup> When the tiny church was painted, the central flutes were filled with plaster to create a flat surface broad enough for standing figures of saints. In the final form, the saints were neatly framed by the corner colonnettes, and a sense of unity was achieved. But the carvers had been less concerned with the desires of the painter, and more concerned with sculptural effects, which would have been accentuated by the lighting conditions.<sup>14</sup> While the Saklı Kilise is considerably smaller and simpler, the working relationship may have been analogous to that at Monreale. Architectural form and mural decoration were conceived separately, and the former subsequently modified to suit the latter.



Fig. 9. Soğanlı Dere, Saklı Kilise. Detail of pier.

Monastic and Funerary Contexts”, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> E. Kitzinger, *The Mosaics of Monreale*, Palermo 1960, 108. W. Krönig, *The Cathedral of Monreale and Norman Architecture in Sicily*, Palermo 1965.

<sup>12</sup> R. G. Ousterhout, *Visualizing Community: Art, Material Culture, and Settlement in Byzantine Cappadocia*, Washington, D.C. 2017, 242-56, for much of what follows.

<sup>13</sup> G. de Jerphanion, *Une nouvelle province de l’art byzantin: les églises rupestres de Cappadoce*, 2 vols, Paris 1925-1942, vol. II, 273-74.

<sup>14</sup> Ousterhout, *Visualizing Community*, op.cit. (n. 12), 244.

The tenth-century New Tokalı Kilise is larger, more elegant, and its painting is better preserved, but nevertheless there are many details that attest to the lack of coordination between carver and painter (Fig. 10). The New Church, which may be dated on the basis of its paintings shortly before 963-964 presents difficulties of



Fig. 10. Göreme, New Tokalı Kilise. Nave looking north.

interpretation in part because its transverse plan with a barrel vault is unique to the region and in part because it represents the expansion of an older foundation. The carvers, who created the unique interior, filled it with carefully sculpted detail, which were initially highlighted with red and green pigments, including cornices and capitals, as well as the fluting and arrisses of the piers.<sup>15</sup> Arches are framed by friezes of triangles, dots, and parallel brushstrokes; their surfaces covered with a colorful diaper pattern. Crosses appear regularly in the spandrels of the arcades. Even architectonic details suppressed in the second phase of painting were high-

<sup>15</sup> These details are best seen in the dramatic folio of photographs by Ahmet Ertuğ; see C. Jolivet-Lévy – A. Ertuğ, *Sacred Art of Cappadocia. Byzantine Murals from the Sixth to 13th Centuries*, Istanbul 2006, pls 31-59. See also R. G. Ousterhout, “Sightlines, hagioscopes, and church planning in Byzantine Cappadocia”, *Art History* 39/5 (2016), 848-867.

lighted. Because of the scale of the church, it would not have been easy to paint, particularly when we consider the amount of surface coverage on the vaults. The popular-style painting could have been done rather quickly, for which extensive scaffolding would seem excessive. It seems more likely that the initial painting was done at the time of the carving, executed by the same workers. This seems to be what is indicated by the inscription, in green paint, prominently displayed on the pier to the left of the opening into the sanctuary: *ΕΤΕΛΗΘΗ Ο ΝΑΟC ΙΟΥΝΙΟΥ ΙC ΤΑC ΔΕΚΑΙΕΝΤΕ. Κ<ΥΠΙ>Ε ΒΟΙΘ[Ι] ΤΟΝ ΜΑΪCΤΟΡ[Α]* “The church was completed on the fifteenth of June; Lord help the *maïstor*”.

The title *maïstor* usually designates a master mason.<sup>16</sup> Notably, the inscription would have been com-

<sup>16</sup> Ousterhout, *Visualizing Community*, op.cit. (n. 12), 193. Idem, *Master Builders*, op.cit. (n. 2), 44. A similar inscription in the

pletely obscured when the second layer of mural painting was added. The question remains open as to why the masons went to such trouble if the church was to be repainted, but it is clear that the painters of the second phase arrived only after the carving was completed.

Subsequently the imported painter, probably from Constantinople, filled the interior with a rich program of figural images set against a brilliant blue background. For the most part, he ignored the carved detailing, which was apparently foreign to his experience, as well as to his conception of the decorative program.<sup>17</sup> Along the sanctuary aisle, for example, the surfaces of the piers had been elegantly fluted, and above the cornice, the horseshoe arches were framed with a double torus molding. All of this detail was filled with plaster and suppressed when the surfaces were painted (Fig. 11). The arcades of the lateral walls were similarly smoothed over. The grooves and undulations of the cornice were filled with plaster to create a flat band on which the dedicatory inscription was painted. For the most part, the painter preferred expansive figural scenes with simple red frames; in exposed areas, sculpted frames were either plastered over or cut away. Within the sanctuary aisle, where the images were somewhat less visible, the thin pilaster strips were simply painted over, so that the Koimesis and Transfiguration were left with vertical wrinkles running through them.

This is not to suggest that the unfamiliar architectural framework frustrated the painter, but only rarely did he choose to highlight architectural details. For example, with the elaborately articulated wall elevation, a frieze zone was easily filled with a band of continuous narration (see Fig. 10). Above this level, the lateral walls were subdivided into quadrants by vertical and horizontal bands. The lower quadrants were further detailed with eight arched recesses. Here the painter placed standing figures of saints within the niches, the horseshoe arches neatly framing their haloes, and he painted the pilasters and spandrels with bases, fluted shafts, elaborate capitals, and sculptured spandrels, all in grisaille. The painter created fictive architectural detailing while ignoring that which he inherited from the carver.

The upper quadrants and the barrel vault easily lent

themselves to large framed panels of the so-called Feast Cycle. These surfaces provided no impediment to the painter. Perhaps the best –and possibly only– example of the creative uses of the architectural framework are the cross divisions in the lunettes of the north and south walls. The painter elaborated these to appear as great, jeweled crosses. A bust of Christ within a pearl-framed roundel appears at the centers of each. The cross's arms are studded with great gems surrounded by pearls and terminate with roundels containing busts of saints. Details such as these indicate the talent of the painter, but in the final analysis –as at Monreale– he achieved a unified impression in spite of the architecture. The painter and carver clearly did not plan the interior together, and for the most part, the painter resisted the cues of the carver and imposed his own, foreign concept on the interior.

The nearby Karanlık Kilise at Göreme of the mid-eleventh century is often regarded as one of the most regular of the rock-cut churches, with a decorative program carefully coordinated to the architectural setting (Fig. 12).<sup>18</sup> Under careful scrutiny, however, discrepancies begin to appear. In this instance, both the carver and the painter were following familiar, established models, and the discrepancies arise not from a dramatic difference of vision, but as a matter of scale. By the standards of masonry architecture, the interior of the Karanlık Kilise is simply too small to contain a fully developed painted program. The carver had carefully delineated the architectural forms, accentuating the internal divisions with pilasters and engaged columns, with cornices encircling the interior at the springing of the vaults. In a larger, masonry church, the lunettes would have been filled with framed narrative scenes of the lives of Christ and the Theotokos.

However, the painter found the lunettes to be too small for the many details the narratives required. To remedy the situation, cornices were simply removed, and the lower borders of the scenes dropped below the level of the capitals. While expanding the surface, this gave the panels odd, keyhole-like shapes. In some of the panels, as in the Crucifixion, there is a ghost image of the removed cornice, where the roughened wall surface is still evident behind the painted plaster. In the Nativity, the upper

parekklesion gives the date 20 February; see Jerphanion, *Églises*, op.cit. (n. 13), vol. I, 302.

<sup>17</sup> Ousterhout, *Visualizing Community*, op.cit. (n. 12), 244-246.

<sup>18</sup> Jerphanion, *Églises*, op.cit. (n. 13), vol. I, 393-430; Ousterhout, *Visualizing Community*, op.cit. (n. 12), 246-249.



Fig. 11. Göreme, New Tokalı Kilise. View into sanctuary aisle, looking east.

frame was smoothed and painted over, and the busy story of the Nativity explodes into the crossarm vault. In other framed scenes, as in the Transfiguration, the ground line appears at the level of the former cornice. In still other less visible images, as in the Baptism, the cornice was left in situ and simply painted over (Fig. 13). The same sort of treatment is evident in several of the minor domes as well, where the arms and elbows of the angels extend from the surface of the cupola onto the cornice. Figures and narratives seem to burst beyond the limits of the frames.

There are similar, if less dramatic, discrepancies in the Elmalı Kilise at Göreme (Fig. 14). While there were no carved cornices, the pilasters had thin setbacks at the springing of the arches, and in several examples, full-length figures were painted over these.<sup>19</sup> Thus Sts. Bakchos and Floros have setbacks at their knees. Figures in the Last Supper and Transfiguration overlap the set-

<sup>19</sup> Jerphanion, *Églises*, op.cit. (n. 13), vol. I, 432; Ousterhout, *Visualizing Community*, op.cit. (n. 12), 249-253.



Fig. 12. Göreme, Karanlık Kilise. Interior looking south toward the Nativity.

backs in the arches, and the painted frame was moved outward beyond the architectural frame. Within the vaulting zone, the painter might have been more comfortable with the continuous curved surfaces of pendentives rather than with the abrupt transitions from wall to corner triangles, to flat ceiling. Most often, the triangles and adjacent areas of ceiling were filled with non-figural decoration. Under the main dome, the painter attempted to treat the triangles as pendentives and painted over the angles. In the northeast corner compartment, he attempted to square off the frames of the Myrrhophores and Entombment scenes and simply painted a line down the middle of the triangle (see Fig. 14, far left).

There are many other examples that could be cited of carvers and painters working at cross-purposes. The basic problem of coordination was the impossibility of having both a master carver and a master painter present at the same site, at the same time, to plan in advance. While carvers may have been available locally –

and much of the work could have been done by unskilled laborers, the painter of an elaborate figural program required specialized skills and materials. Moreover, many established painters and their workshops seem to have been itinerant and may have arrived with different ideas, not necessarily fully cognizant of the standard forms and scale of the region's architecture.

While the architectural framework was often constraining for the painter, there are also notable instances in which the limited conditions actually encouraged new or experimental compositions, taking advantage of the expressive potential of the setting. The Elmalı Kilise is most dramatic in this respect, as several of the wall panels connect directly to the domes above. The Ascension, unfortunately poorly preserved, was conceived as a polyptych, consisting of four related, framed panels (Fig. 15). The central scene on the west wall shows the Theotokos surrounded by the Apostles, gesturing to the heavens. In the truncated lunettes to either side are an-



Fig. 13. Göreme, Karanlık Kilise. Detail of the northwest corner bay.

gels bending toward the central scene, also gesturing to the heavens. One is inscribed with a verse from Acts 1.11: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?”<sup>20</sup> The dome above shows Christ in a mandorla carried heavenward. A zigzag of heavenly light surrounds the mandorla, echoed in the colorful frame to the dome. While framed as separate images, all relate to each other compositionally and thematically as part of the same narrative. Throughout the Elmalı Kilise the domes are treated as a “heavenly zone”, filled either with Christ or angels, while the upper wall zone may be read as the Holy Land, filled with the narratives of sacred events.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Jerphanion, *Églises*, op.cit. (n. 13), vol. I, 447-448.

<sup>21</sup> See Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, op.cit. (n. 3), 14-29, for the classic formulation.

The composition of the Ascension, representing an event in which heaven and earth are joined, merges two different zones of the building in a way that is dramatic, innovative, and meaningful. Most successful in this respect is the Elmalı Crucifixion (Fig. 16). Here the frame of the wall panel extends upward to surround the dome to form a single composition. Smaller scenes to either side show related episodes: the Betrayal and Christ led to the Crucifixion.<sup>22</sup> But the larger scale of the Crucifixion overpowers these. Christ’s cross extends upward into the heavenly zone, where it is surrounded by a host of angels. Heaven and earth thus unite in mourning the dead Christ. The sun and the moon appear at the line

<sup>22</sup> Jerphanion, *Églises*, op.cit. (n. 13), vol. I, 444-445.



Fig. 14. Göreme, Elmalı Kilise. Interior looking east.



Fig. 15. Göreme, Elmalı Kilise. The Ascension, detail.



Fig. 16. Göreme, Elmalı Kilise. *The Crucifixion, detail.*

where the two zones join together, and the Centurion, who recognizes the divinity of Christ, gestures heavenward. It is an innovative and dramatic use of space. Borders disappear, as the composition becomes three-dimensional. The viewer could become enveloped by the scene, potentially an actor within the sacred drama.

Images, effectively set into the architectural space thus encourage a response from the viewer, who occupied the same space. While the scenes discussed above engaged the viewer with images representing the central tenants of Christianity, others utilized their setting in a more site-specific way. Because many of the chapels in Cappadocia were funerary, images could often highlight the tombs of the deceased. The image of the Myrrhophores, for example, often appears in relationship to burials. At the Karanlık Kilise, the scene is set in the southwest corner of the naos (Fig. 17).<sup>23</sup> The angel

addresses the women, while pointing toward the Tomb of Christ, represented by an arch with the winding sheet inside it. In the narthex, immediately to the west of the scene, is a tomb chamber, clearly part of the original program. This would seem to be where the angel is pointing—now clearly evident through the broken wall. In fact, originally there was an internal window where the wall is now broken. The scene of the Holy Women thus becomes part of a visual message of salvation for the deceased, who were probably the founders of the establishment. In this example, the scene would have had a double resonance, for like Christ, the deceased were buried in a tomb hewn from the living rock. The angel's gesture, pointing to both tombs, indicates that the life-giving power of the tomb of Christ is accessible to those buried within the chapel. Larger than the other figures,

the Contemplative Mode", in *Wonderful Things: Byzantium through its Art*, eds A. Eastmond – L. James, Farnham 2013, 229-246.

<sup>23</sup> R. G. Ousterhout, "Women at Tombs: Narrative, Theatricality, and



Fig. 17. Göreme, Karanlık Kilise. Interior looking southwest, showing the relationship between the Myrrhophores and the donors' tomb in the narthex.

facing forward, the angel addresses the viewers directly, so that the viewers assume the roles of the Holy Women—at once mourners *and* witnesses to the central event of the Christian faith. The use of space seen in these Cappadocian examples parallels that at the Chora Monastery, discussed earlier. Just as Theophanes directs our attention and the message of salvation to the tomb of the founder, at the Karanlık Kilise, the angel does the same.

What the Cappadocian and Constantinopolitan examples also share is their compartmentalization of the interior, something that works well with the framed iconic images of the Middle Byzantine program. The sense of architecturally framed narrative continues in the surviving Late Byzantine examples in Constantinople as well: the parekklesion of the Theotokos Pammakaristos, constructed and decorated ca. 1310, articulates the surfaces for mosaic decoration exactly the same as

the Myrelaion had four centuries earlier—with lunettes in the high walls and groin vaults above.<sup>24</sup> Even the Chora's extended narratives are framed within the spatial compartments of the narthexes and parekklesion. But this is not the case in all parts of the Byzantine world.

In Greece and the Balkans, we often find a different approach to the architecture, one that prioritizes the wall as an uninterrupted surface—lacking both the spatial articulation and the openness characteristic of the capital. Windows are smaller and fewer; internal wall surfaces are often unbroken. At the twelfth-century Hagios Petros at Kastania in the Mani, for example, the exterior features

<sup>24</sup> See H. Belting, "The Style of the Mosaics", H. Belting – C. Mango – D. Mouriki, *The Mosaics and Frescoes of St. Mary Pammakaristos (Fethiye Camii) at Istanbul*, Washington, D.C. 1978, 77-111.



Fig. 18. Kastania (Mani), Hagios Petros. View into vaulting.

false windows, the openings closed by windowless panels, allowing unbroken surfaces for mural decoration inside (Fig. 18).<sup>25</sup> We witness a similar emphasis in the churches of Kastoria, as Nancy Ševčenko has recently discussed: the wall as an unmodulated surface, as a vehicle for expression, is given priority, on both the interior and exterior.<sup>26</sup> The same occurs in Serbian monuments. One wonders how this might have affected the development

of the wall painting, particularly as we move into the thirteenth century. For example, did the dramatic monumentality in the paintings at Sopoćani develop in recognition of the expressive potential of an unbroken wall surface (Fig. 19)?<sup>27</sup> Did the development of expanded narrative cycles, as occurs at the Perivleptos at Ohrid, come about as a product of the same architectural changes, as the Koimesis expands from an isolated image into the continuous narration of five episodes (Fig. 20)?<sup>28</sup> These are fundamental questions that encourage us to look beyond the decorated surface as we address change—particularly stylistic change—in Byzantine art.

As the wall was given priority as a vehicle for expression, we lose the sense of transparency characteristic of

<sup>25</sup> Ch. Bouras – L. Boura, *Ἡ ἐλλαδική ναοδομία κατά τόν 12ο αἰώνα*, Athens 2002, 178-180; more recently, M. Kappas, “Approaching Monemvasia and Mystras from the outside: the view from Kastania”, S. E. J. Gerstel (ed.), *Viewing Greece: Cultural and Political Agency in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean*, Brepols, Turnhout 2016, 147-181.

<sup>26</sup> N. P. Ševčenko, “Observations on Some Churches of Kastoria”, *Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Round Tables*, Belgrade 2016, 141-144.

<sup>27</sup> V. J. Djurić, *Sopoćani*, Belgrade 1963.

<sup>28</sup> S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macédoine byzantine: Histoire d’art macédonienne du IXe au XIVe siècle*, Paris 2006, 150-161.



Fig. 19. Sopoćani, church of the Holy Trinity. Naos looking west, showing the Dormition.



Fig. 20. Ohrid, church of the Peribleptos. Naos looking west, showing the Dormition.

Middle Byzantine Constantinople –where exterior articulation reflected the interior spatial and structural divisions. By the Late Byzantine period, exterior and interior were treated as separate concerns. Could this loosening of architectural rigor also have affected the relationship of architecture and painting? That is, more than simply masons and painters not communicating with each other, could the disjunction between interior and exterior evident at Gračanica represent a fundamental shift in how a Byzantine church was understood by its makers and users?

Certainly, more painted programs could be brought into the discussion. For example, the careful relationship of architecture and mosaic decoration at Nea Mone is unique in many respects; even the unique nine-sided dome seems to have been intended to feature nine angels in its drum.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the Palaiologan churches of

Thessalonike and Mystras could benefit for this sort of analysis. Nevertheless, I hope my point is clear. An attempt to situate the discussion of Byzantine monumental painted programs more broadly, interrogating the evidence provided by the architectural setting and the circumstances of production may lead us to new insights into their social and intellectual milieu. Conversely, by paying closer attention to the relationship between architecture and wall decoration, we may gain a better understanding of changes in the Byzantine conceptions of sacred space and the aesthetic choices underpinning the creation of new formats of monumental imagery.

#### Illustration credits

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<sup>29</sup> D. Mouriki, *The Mosaics of Nea Moni on Chios*, Athens 1985, vol. 1, 126.

**Robert Ousterhout**

## Η ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΗ ΜΝΗΜΕΙΑΚΗ ΖΩΓΡΑΦΙΚΗ ΚΑΙ ΤΟ ΑΡΧΙΤΕΚΤΟΝΙΚΟ ΤΗΣ ΠΛΑΙΣΙΟ

Στο άρθρο διερευνάται το αρχιτεκτονικό πλαίσιο της μνημειακής ζωγραφικής στις βυζαντινές εκκλησίες. Η λεπτομερής ανάλυση της αρχιτεκτονικής και του ζωγραφικού διακόσμου αποκαλύπτει ότι η συνεργασία ανάμεσα στους οικοδόμους και τους ζωγράφους δεν πρέπει να θεωρείται δεδομένη και ότι η βυζαντινή τοιχογραφημένη εκκλησία μπορεί να μην είναι πάντα ένα “συνολικό” έργο τέχνης (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), δηλαδή ένα έργο που έχει προκύψει από τη σύνθεση διαφορετικών μορφών τέχνης. Αυτή η έλλειψη συντονισμού, ωστόσο, μπορούσε να οδηγήσει σε καινοτόμες λύσεις, καθώς οι ζωγράφοι αγωνίζονταν να εκμεταλλευτούν

στο έπακρο το αρχιτεκτονικό κέλυφος που καλούνταν να γεμίσουν με ζωγραφικές παραστάσεις.

Το άρθρο ξεκινά με μια αντίθεση ανάμεσα στη φανερή έλλειψη ενσωμάτωσης της ζωγραφικής, που διαπιστώνεται στην εκκλησία της Κοίμησης στην Γκρατσάνιτσα (Εικ. 1, 2), και στην πλούσια και συνεκτική αφομοίωση του ζωγραφικού προγράμματος στο αρχιτεκτονικό πλαίσιο στη σύγχρονή της Μονή της Χώρας στην Κωνσταντινούπολη (Εικ. 3-6). Η συνεργασία οικοδόμων και ζωγράφων παρατηρείται σε κοσμοπολίτικα περιβάλλοντα, όπου οικοδομικά και καλλιτεχνικά εργαστήρια μπορεί να ήταν παρόντα ταυτόχρονα και

είχαν τη δυνατότητα να συμμετέχουν στον σχεδιασμό του μνημείου. Στην Γκρατσάνιτσα, παρά την υψηλή ποιότητα της ζωγραφικής και της αρχιτεκτονικής, οι ζωγράφοι φαίνεται ότι ανέλαβαν εργασία μόνο αφού είχε ολοκληρωθεί το κτήριο και έτσι ήταν υποχρεωμένοι να αντιμετωπίσουν έναν άγνωστο εσωτερικό χώρο.

Η έλλειψη συνεργασίας ανάμεσα στους οικοδόμους και τους ζωγράφους δεν απαντά μόνο στην Γκρατσάνιτσα, αλλά παρατηρείται και σε μνημεία της νορμανδικής Σικελίας, όπου οι βυζαντινοί ψηφοθέτες κλήθηκαν να διακοσμήσουν εκκλησίες με άγνωστο για αυτούς αρχιτεκτονικό σχεδιασμό (Εικ. 7, 8). Στο Μονρεάλε, για παράδειγμα, η αρχαιολογική έρευνα έχει εντοπίσει πολλές τροποποιήσεις στο αρχιτεκτονικό σχέδιο προκειμένου να βελτιωθεί η προσαρμογή της ψηφιδωτής διακόσμησης στις διαθέσιμες επιφάνειες. Η εντύπωση, δηλαδή, της ενότητας που διαπιστώνεται, τελικά είναι αποτέλεσμα των παρεμβάσεων των ψηφοθετών και όχι της συνεργασίας τους με τους οικοδόμους.

Στις υπόσκαφες εκκλησίες της Καππαδοκίας η κατάσταση ήταν παρόμοια, καθώς υπάρχουν ισχυρές ενδείξεις ότι οι ζωγράφοι πραγματοποίησαν τροποποιήσεις στις επιφάνειες του κτηρίου που προσφέρονταν για εικονογράφηση. Σε πολλές από τις εκκλησίες στα Κόραμα ανάγλυφες λεπτομέρειες εξαλείφθηκαν, γείσα αφαιρέθηκαν και επιφάνειες εξομαλύνθηκαν για να εξασφαλιστούν επαρκείς επιφάνειες για το ζωγραφικό πρόγραμμα (Εικ. 9-16). Ταυτόχρονα, οι προκλήσεις που έθετε το καινούργιο αρχιτεκτονικό πλαίσιο, στην περίπτωση αυτή η μικρή κλίμακα των εκκλησιών, οδήγησαν σε μια ποικιλία εφευρετικών λύσεων, όπου οι παραδοσιακές ζώνες ενός μεσοβυζαντινού προγράμματος συμπτύχθηκαν. Μια ανάλογη περίπτωση εντοπίζεται στο Elmalı Kilise, όπου η σκηνή της Σταύρωσης αναπτύσσεται όχι μόνο στον κατακόρυφο τοίχο αλλά

και στον θόλο όπου το δράμα κορυφώνεται με τους θρηνούντες αγγέλους, οι οποίοι ενώνουν ουσιαστικά τη γη με τον ουρανό και δημιουργούν μια τρισδιάστατη παράσταση (Εικ. 16).

Στο εσωτερικό των εκκλησιών της Κωνσταντινούπολης και της Καππαδοκίας διαμορφώνεται ένα αρχιτεκτονικό πλαίσιο με διακριτά διάχωρα, όπου αναπτύσσεται ο γραπτός διάκοσμος. Αυτό όμως δεν συμβαίνει σε πολλές σύγχρονες τους εκκλησίες της Ελλάδας ή των Βαλκανίων, όπου δίδεται προτεραιότητα στην ενιαία επιφάνεια του τοίχου, αφήνοντας συχνά μια αδιάσπαστη επιφάνεια για τον εντοίχιο διάκοσμο, ενώ τα παράθυρα περιορίζονται στο ελάχιστο (Εικ. 18). Το γεγονός αυτό αντανακλά ίσως μια διαφορετική αντίληψη της έννοιας του φωτισμού, δηλαδή της διαφοράς ανάμεσα στον φυσικό και τον τεχνητό φωτισμό. Ταυτόχρονα, επιτρέπει δραματικές αλλαγές στο εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα του εσωτερικού. Κατά συνέπεια, τίθεται το ερώτημα αν η μνημειακότητα της τοιχογραφίας της Κοίμησης στη Σοπότσανι είναι αποτέλεσμα της μεγάλης ενιαίας επιφάνειας των τοίχων και αν το εκτενές ζωγραφικό πρόγραμμα της Περιβλέπτου στην Αχρίδα, όπου η Κοίμηση εκτείνεται σε πέντε σκηνές συνεχούς αφήγησης, είναι αποτέλεσμα της προσαρμογής της σκηνής στον διαθέσιμο αρχιτεκτονικό χώρο (Εικ. 19, 20). Συμπερασματικά, μπορούμε να πούμε ότι, εάν εξετάσουμε με μεγαλύτερη προσοχή τη σχέση ανάμεσα στην αρχιτεκτονική και τον εντοίχιο διάκοσμο, μπορούμε να κατανοήσουμε καλύτερα τις αλλαγές στις βυζαντινές αντιλήψεις για τον ιερό χώρο και τις αισθητικές επιλογές που συνέβαλαν στη δημιουργία νέων μορφών μνημειακής τέχνης.

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