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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE CHURCH OF THE DORMITION IN LABOVO (ALBANIA) AND ITS MURALS

To the memory of my teacher Olga Popova (1938-2020)

Η συγκριτική τεχνοτροπική ανάλυση της τοιχογραφίας της Δέησης, που αποκαλύφθηκε πρόσφατα στην Κοίμηση της Παναγίας στο Λάμποβο, κατέδειξε ότι η παράσταση είναι πλησιέστερη σε έργα του δεύτερου τετάρτου και των μέσων του 11ου αιώνα, όπως οι τοιχογραφίες του νάρθηκα της Αγίας Σοφίας και της Παναγίας Χαλκίων στη Θεσσαλονίκη, το ψηφιδωτό του Ευαγγελισμού στη μονή Βατοπεδίου και ιδιαίτερα οι τοιχογραφίες στην Αγία Σοφία στην Αχρίδα και στον Άγιο Λεόντιο στη Vodoča. Η χρονολόγηση αυτή καθιστά δυνατή την επιβεβαίωση της οικοδόμησης του μνημείου στον 10ο ή πιθανότατα στο πρώτο μισό του 11ου αιώνα, που είχε προταθεί προηγουμένως από ορισμένους μελετητές.

The comparative stylistic analysis of the depiction of a Deesis recently uncovered in the church of the Dormition in Labovo, shows that this depiction is closest to works of the second quarter and middle of the 11th century, such as the frescoes in the narthex of Saint Sophia and in Panagia Chalkeon in Thessaloniki, the mosaic of the Annunciation in the Monastery of Vatopedi and, especially, the murals in the Saint Sophia cathedral in Ohrid and the church of Saint Leontius in Vodoča. Thus it is possible to confirm the dating of the church construction to the 10th or the first half of the 11th century previously proposed by other scholars.

Λέξεις κλειδιά

11ος αιώνας, βυζαντινές τοιχογραφίες, Δέηση, Αρχιεπισκοπή Αχρίδας, ναός της Κοίμησης της Θεοτόκου, Λάμποβο, Ήπειρος, Αλβανία.

Keywords

11th century; Byzantine wall paintings; murals; Deesis, Ohrid archbishopric; church of the Dormition of the Virgin; Labovo; Epirus; Albania.

The church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Labovo (in Albanian, Labovë) is one of the most interesting monuments of Byzantine architecture in Albania. It is situated on the outskirts of the municipality of Gjirokastër in Southern Albania, former Argyrokastro, Northern Epirus.

Nothing is known for certain about the time of the church's construction and that question remains open

(Fig. 1). One of the first scholars to study and describe the Dormition church in Labovo was Friderikos Versakis, who dated it to the second half of the 12th century¹. Subsequently, some researchers assigned it to the 12th or 13th century and associated the building with the architecture of the Despotate of Epirus². The chief proponent

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gratitude to my colleagues and friends with whom we visited and discussed the church of the Dormition in Labovo: Georgios Foustieris, Ioannis Chouliaras, Stavros Mamaloukos, Ioannis Sisiou, Kostas Vafeiadis, Elena Kostić, Svetlana Maltseva and others.

¹ F. Versakis, "Βυζαντιναὶ ναοὶ τῆς βορείου Ἠπείρου", *AEphem*, 1916, 108-117.

² G. Soteriou, *Χριστιανικὴ καὶ βυζαντινὴ ἀρχαιολογία*, 1, Athens 1942, 381.



Fig. 1. Labovo, church of the Dormition of the Virgin. View from the east.

of this view is the Albanian scholar Alexander Meksi, who made new surveys and architectural drawings and determined the main stages in the constructional history of the building on the basis of several sondages and field observations. While pointing out the similarity that the ground plan and decoration of the Labovo church display to edifices of different times, he nonetheless was inclined to date it to the second half of the 13th century³. Meksi's opinion was concurred with by Demetrios Pallas⁴, Georgios Velenis⁵, Kerstin Englert⁶, Evangelia

Hadjitryphonos⁷ and certain other scholars, who did not, however, make a special study of the church.

Other researchers dated the church in Labovo to the 10th century or first half of the 11th. A. H. S. Megaw was one of the first to observe that such elements of ceramoplastic decoration as are seen in the upper part of the church are found specifically within edifices from the time of the Macedonian dynasty and that the shapes of its dome and apses are also typical for the 10th-century style (Figs 1, 2)⁸. Nikolaos Moutsopoulos even narrowed the dating down to the second quarter of the 10th century⁹. In his book on the architecture of Western Greece

³ A. Meksi, "Dy kisha bizantine në rreth të Gjirokastrës (Deux églises byzantines du district de Gjirokastra)", *Monumentet* 9 (1975), 77-105. Id., *Arkitektura mesjetare në Shqipëri*, Tirana 1983, 179-184. Id., "L'architecture des églises à planimétrie en forme de croix à coupole en Albanie", *Αρχιός. Τιμητικός τόμος στον καθηγητή Ν. Κ. Μουτσόπουλο για τα 25 χρόνια πνευματικής του προσφοράς στο Πανεπιστήμιο*, 2, Thessaloniki 1991, 1162-1165. Id., *Arkitektura e kishave të Shqipërisë (Shekujt VII-XV)*, Tirana 2004, 230-235.

⁴ RbK, 2, entry "Epirus", 310-315 (D. Pallas).

⁵ G. M. Velenis, *Ερμηνεία του εξωτερικού διακόσμου στη βυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική*, PhD dissertation, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 1984, 181.

⁶ K. Englert, *Der Bautypus der Umgangskirche unter besonderer*

Berücksichtigung de Panagia Olympiōtissa in Elasson, Frankfurt 1991, 84-86.

⁷ E. K. Hadjitryphonos, *Το περίστωο στην υστεροβυζαντινή εκκλησιαστική αρχιτεκτονική. Σχεδιασμός – Λειτουργία* (European Centre of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Monuments – Studies 1), Thessaloniki 2004, 160-163, 189, 312-314.

⁸ A. H. S. Megaw, "Byzantine Reticulate Revetments", *Χαριστήριοι εις Άναστάσιον Κ. Όρλάνδον*, 3, Athens 1966, 18.

⁹ N. K. Moutsopoulos, "Άνασκαφή της βασιλικής του Άγίου Άχιλλείου", *ΕΕΠΣΑΠΘ. Τμήμα Αρχιτεκτόνων* 5 (1971-1972), 299-301, 333-334.



Fig. 2. Labovo, church of the Dormition of the Virgin. The ceramoplastic decoration.

in the 7th-10th centuries, Panayotis Vocotopoulos analyses the Labovo church in greater detail and associates it with buildings of the pre-Helladic and early Helladic school basing on the affinity of style, technique and decoration¹⁰. He dates the Labovo church to the second half of the 10th century and connects its distinctive features with edifices in Macedonia: the masonry technique and decorative motifs have analogies among buildings from

¹⁰ P. L. Vocotopoulos, *Ἡ ἐκκλησιαστικὴ ἀρχιτεκτονικὴ εἰς τὴν Δυτικὴν Στερεὰν Ἑλλάδα καὶ τὴν Ἡπειρὸν. Ἀπὸ τοῦ τέλους τοῦ 7ου μέχρι τοῦ τέλους τοῦ 10ου αἰῶνος*, Thessaloniki 1975 (repr. 1992), 86-92, 193-196, pls 53-56 (with complete earlier bibliography). See also a review by A. Meksi in: *Monumentet* 1 (1982), 174-177, who insists on a later dating in the second half of the 13th century.

the second half of the 9th to 11th centuries in Kastoria, such as the churches of the Taxiarches, of Saint Stephen and Saints Anargyroi¹¹.

Guntram Koch insists on an early date for the Labovo church¹². He analysed the typological characteristics, the

¹¹ Vocotopoulos, *Ἡ ἐκκλησιαστικὴ ἀρχιτεκτονικὴ*, op.cit. (n. 10), 194-196, 201.

¹² G. Koch, *Albanien. Kulturdenkmäler eines unbekanntes Landes aus 2200 Jahren. Katalog einer Photoausstellung des Seminars für Christliche Archäologie und Byzantinische Kunstgeschichte der Philipps – Universität Marburg*, Marburg 1985, 38-41. Id., “Disa mendime për kishën e Labovës së Kryqit (Einige Überlegungen zur Kirche in Labova e Kryqit)”, *Monumentet* 1 (1987), 27-62. Id., “The church of Saint Mary in Labova/Albania”, Ath. Semoglou – I. P.

proportions, techniques and decoration of the edifice and concluded that by all those parameters it accords more with a 10th-century context than a 13th-century one. For example, the tall cylindrical drum, as well as the shape of the round protruding apses (that were, however, reconstructed in the late 1700s) are close to works of the 9th and 10th centuries, such as the churches of Saint Basil *tes Gefyras* (of the Bridge) in Arta, the Panagia Panaxiotissa of Gavrolimni or the Panagia Koumpelidiki in Kastoria. Koch examines in more detail the abundant decoration that is well preserved in the drum and the upper parts of the Labovo church with triangular and diamond-shaped ceramic tiles, rows of vertical stripes and squares with crosses scratched on them (Fig. 2). The closest analogies can be found among the edifices in Kastoria from the late 9th and 10th centuries: the church of the Taxiarches, Saint Stephen's, and the Panagia Koumpelidiki, as well as the basilica of Saint Achillius on Prespa island (986-990)¹³.

Similar work was carried out recently by Panagiotis Damoulos whose paper gives the most detailed description of the Labovo church and comparisons with Greek edifices of the 9th to 11th centuries¹⁴. He follows Megaw in pointing to one more church with very similar ceramic decoration, the Cattolica di Stilo in Calabria, across the Ionian Sea from Epirus. That church dates from the turn of the 11th century and is a five-domed four-columned building very similar to Greek examples of the period¹⁵. All five tall cylindrical drums there are decorated with the same sort of ceramic diamonds as at Labovo. The central one has double windows of very similar shape and proportions with a little marble column in the middle.

Typologically the church of the Dormition in Labovo has parallels mainly among the buildings of Constantinople and Macedonia from both middle and late

Byzantine periods, therefore the typology itself cannot serve for determining the date of the building¹⁶. Researchers justly compare this edifice with a whole series of churches with an ambulatory patterned on Hagia Sophia in Thessaloniki and constructed probably in the 9th and 10th centuries in various parts of Macedonia: the Koundouriotissa in Pieria, a ruined church in Pydna, Hagia Sophia in Drama¹⁷. A close parallel is also the church of Mother of God in Drenovo (North Macedonia). Slightly larger in scale, it has similar composition, differing in details. The church was most probably constructed in the 11th century and later rebuilt¹⁸. Comparable Constantinopolitan churches include such large, prestigious edifices as the church of Saint George of Mangana (1040s), the katholikon of the Pammakaristos Monastery (12th c.), Gül Camii (12th c.), the south church of the Lips Monastery (ca 1282), and the church of Saint Andrew in Krisei (late 13 c.)¹⁹. Gül Camii, like the Labovo church, represents a combination of a church with an ambulatory and a cross-dome design, although they differ in many other ways²⁰.

In the church of the Dormition in Labovo the space below the dome is separated from the side areas of the ambulatory and the narthex by triple arcades with columns, parts of which are now bricked up. At the same time, it has the arms of the cross – high barrel vaults that run as far as the external walls of the building. While the

¹⁶ Englert, *Der Bautypus*, op.cit. (n. 6), 65-97.

¹⁷ Koch, "Disa mendime", op.cit. (n. 12), 29-33. Id., "The Church of Saint Mary", op.cit. (n. 12), 64-65. Hadjistryphonos, *To περίστωο*, op.cit. (n. 7), 124-126, 160-161, 312-314. S. Ćurčić, *Architecture in the Balkans. From Diocletian to Süleyman the Magnificent*, New Haven – London 2010, 320-321. R. Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture. The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands*, Oxford 2019, 317-318.

¹⁸ The church needs further investigation, its dating is the subject of debates. See: M. Šuput, "La chiesa della Vergine a Drenovo", *DChAE* 24 (2003), 139-144 (with complete bibliography). Hadjistryphonos, *To περίστωο*, op.cit. (n. 7), 181-183. S. Ćurčić, *Architecture in the Balkans*, op.cit. (n. 17), 400-401.

¹⁹ Englert, *Der Bautypus*, op.cit. (n. 6), 73-82. Hadjistryphonos, *To περίστωο*, op.cit. (n. 7), 123-124, 160-161, 312-314. Ćurčić, *Architecture in the Balkans*, op.cit. (n. 17), 364-369.

²⁰ L. Theis, *Flankenräume im mittelbyzantinischen Kirchenbau*, Wiesbaden 2005, 99-113. V. Marinis, *Architecture and Ritual in the Churches of Constantinople, Ninth to Fifteenth Centuries*, New York 2014, 153-158 (with bibliography).

Arvanitidou – Em. G. Gounari (eds), *LEPETYMNOS. Studies in Archaeology and Art in Memory of Georgios Gounaris. Late Roman, Byzantine, Postbyzantine Period*, Thessaloniki 2018, 61-75.

¹³ Koch, "The church of Saint Mary", op.cit. (n. 12), 67-68.

¹⁴ P. Damoulos, "Ο ναός της Κοιμήσεως της Θεοτόκου ήτου Τιμίου Σταυρού στο Άνω Λάμποβο της Βορείου Ηπείρου", *Δωδώνη. Ιστορία και Αρχαιολογία* 45-46 (2019), 119-148.

¹⁵ F. Zago, "La Cattolica di Stilo e i suoi affreschi", *Zograf* 33 (2009), 43-61 (with bibliography).

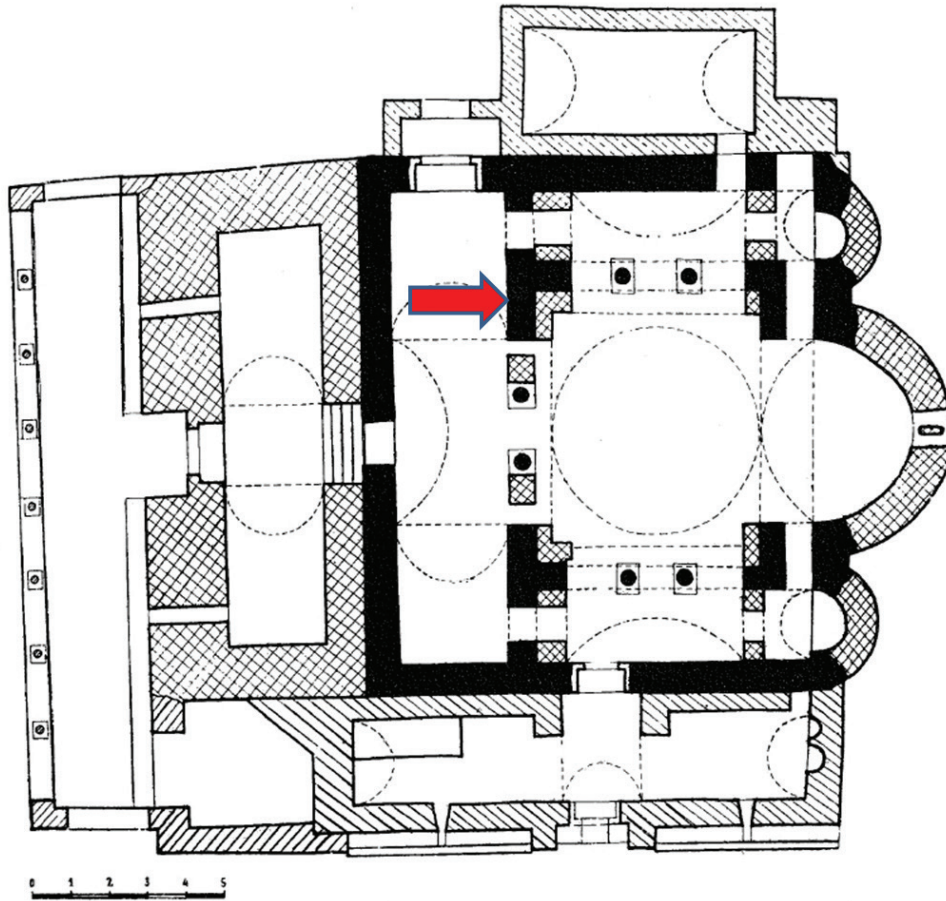


Fig. 3. Labovo, church of the Dormition of the Virgin. Plan of the church with indication of the place of Deesis.

triple arcades are all two-tiered, there is a second floor only on the west side. Today, this is wooden planking of recent date, but evidently there was a second level above the narthex in earlier times too²¹.

In the northern part of the gallery above the narthex, a fresco with a Deesis composition was uncovered from later plasterwork on the eastern wall in the early 2000s (Figs 3, 4). Koch saw it before it was cleaned and surmised only that it had been done before the 1776 refurbishment²². The presence above the narthex of such a chamber that had a fresco made in it prompted Koch to

suggest that the Labovo church was the katholikon of a monastery constructed in this remote rural location to the commission of some noble benefactor, for whom this place on the upper level was created²³. In Koch's opinion, the building was constructed by local craftsmen, while the large size and elaborate design of the church might indicate that the ktetor had connections to Constantinople or other major cultural centres of the middle Byzantine era²⁴. That hypothesis seems entirely credible to me.

Panagiotis Damoulos, who also seeks to justify an early date for the church, says nothing about the fresco. He considers the building is more likely to have been constructed in the first half of the 11th century, when,

²¹ Koch, "The Church of Saint Mary", op.cit. (n. 12), 63-64. Damoulos, "Ο ναός της Κοιμήσεως της Θεοτόκου", op.cit. (n. 15), 120.

²² Koch, "The Church of Saint Mary", op.cit. (n. 12), 63 note 10.

²³ Koch, "The Church of Saint Mary", op.cit. (n. 12), 68-69.

²⁴ Ibid.



Fig. 4. Labovo, church of the Dormition of the Virgin. Gallery, east wall, the Deesis.

after Basil II's victory over tsar Samuel of Bulgaria, Northern Epirus returned beneath the sway of the Byzantine Empire²⁵. In my view, that sort of historical and cultural context is more in accordance with the results of an analysis both of the architecture of the building and of the so-far sole fragment of mural painting which we are considering.

In recent years the fresco has already been published at least twice: in a note by Pavel Pavlinov with the date "12th century (?)"²⁶ and in a paper by Ioannis Chouliaras with the date "13th century"²⁷. In neither case, however,

²⁵ Damoulos, "Ο ναός της Κοιμήσεως της Θεοτόκου", *op.cit.* (n. 14), 126-135.

²⁶ P. S. Pavlinov, "Gjirokastra", *Pravoslavnaia Entsiklopediia*, 11, Moscow 2006, 520-522.

²⁷ I. P. Chouliaras, "Ο τοιχογραφικός διάκοσμος του ναού της Μεταμορφώσεως του Σωτήρος Πλακωτής", *Α΄ Διεθνές αρχαιολογικό και ιστορικό συνέδριο για τη Θεσπρωτία (Ηγουμενίτσα, 8-11 Δεκεμβρίου 2016)*. Πρακτικά, 2, Ioannina 2019, 499, fig. 16. My sincere thanks to Ioannis Chouliaras for sending me his article and some other bibliographical materials.

did the author analyse the mural and they only repeated opinions already expressed in the scholarly literature regarding the time when the church was built.

In the Deesis one can see the upper parts of the figures of the Virgin Mary and Christ, the latter sitting on a throne (Fig. 5). The depiction of John the Baptist is very badly abraded, but his silhouette, pose and even some elements of the portrayal of the face and clothing can be made out well enough. The level of the flooring in the corner chamber of the gallery was probably more or less the same as today so that the figures would have been almost on a level with someone standing there and only slightly larger in scale. The position and the size of the figures, as well as the choice of the Deesis theme bolster Koch's hypothesis that this space was finished as a small private prayer chapel.

The fresco may have included a depiction of a kneeling donor, as may be indicated by the gesture of the Virgin's lowered right hand. Otherwise the iconography of the three-figure Deesis is entirely traditional²⁸. Christ is

²⁸ On the iconography of Deesis in Byzantine monumental painting



Fig. 5. Labovo, church of the Dormition of the Virgin. Gallery, east wall, the Deisis, second quarter or middle of the 11th century.

depicted sitting on a back-less throne, on a purple cushion. He is holding a Gospel open to the words *Ἐγὼ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου* (John 8:12). The Saviour is wearing a bright blue chiton and a purple himation. His cross-patterned halo is embellished with rhombi imitating precious stones. The Virgin Mary is wearing a dress with blue sleeves and a purple maphorion (Figs 5, 10). The figures are depicted in static poses. They are widely spaced and have slightly squat proportions.

Both the solemn, aloof character of the images in general and individual nuances of style make it possible to assign this fresco to the second quarter or the middle of the 11th century. The art of this period was particularly singled out and described by scholars²⁹, in greatest detail

see: M. I. Kazamia-Tsernou, *Ιστορώντας τη «Δέηση» στις βυζαντινές εκκλησίες της Ελλάδος*, Thessaloniki 2005.

²⁹ D. Mouriki, "Stylistic Trends in monumental Painting of Greece during the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries", *DOP* 34-35 (1980-1981), 79-94. Ead., *The Mosaics of Nea Moni on Chios*, 1, Athens 1985, 253-266. V. Djurić, "Un courant stylistique dans la peinture

through the examples of the mosaics and frescoes of Hosios Loukas monastery and the Saint Sophia cathedral in Kiev marked by a striving after maximum fullness in the spiritual content of the images. They are all filled with an exceptional sense of significance, grandeur and inner strength. This expresses itself in the strict orderliness of the powerful monumental shapes, the immobility of the figures and gazes, the austerity and remoteness of their appearance. To achieve such a result, the artists rejected the language of classic forms and resorted to a more abstract style. This special conventional, schematic

byzantine vers le milieu du XIe siècle", *Zograf* 15 (1984), 15-23. M. Panayotidi, "La peinture monumentale en Grèce de la fin de l'Iconoclasme jusqu'à l'avènement des Comnènes (843-1081)", *CahArch* 34 (1986), 75-108. O. Popova, "The Ascetic Trend in Byzantine Art of the Second Quarter of the 11th Century and its Subsequent Fate", *Ampelokepion. Studi di amici e colleghi in onore di Vera von Falkenhausen*, 2 (*Nea Rome. Rivista di ricerche bizantinistiche*), Rome 2005, 243-257. O. Popova – V. Sarabianov, *Mosaics and Frescoes of Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev*, Moscow 2017, 203-439, 483-483.



Fig. 6. Thessaloniki, church of Panagia ton Chalkeon. Narthex, Christ enthroned from the Last Judgement, detail, 1028.

idiom enabled them to get close to conceptions of the ideal celestial world. It was, however, rarely used in its pure form and more often combined with more customary painting methods.

Among the first works of this sort were the murals in the church of Panagia ton Chalkeon in Thessaloniki from the year 1028³⁰. Comparing the Labovo fresco with, for example, the Deesis from the Last Judgement in the narthex of the Panagia Chalkeon, it is possible to observe many features of fundamental similarity (Fig. 6). The immobility of the images is matched by the frozen

nature of the countenances with large features outlined with precise dark contours. In both cases the clothing is treated in a more detailed and picturesque manner. It forms fine folds, carefully modelled with darker and lighter areas, and is similar in pattern on both the frescoes, as is the shape of the purple cushion on the throne.

The Virgin Mary in Labovo can be compared with

(with earlier bibliography). K. M. Skawran, *The Development of Middle Byzantine Fresco Painting in Greece*, Pretoria 1982, 65-68, 158, 159. A. Tsitouridou, *The Church of Panagia Chalkeon*, Thessaloniki 1985. Panayotidi, "La peinture monumentale", op.cit. (n. 29), 91, 92. Ch. Mavropoulou-Tsioumi, *Byzantine Thessaloniki*, Thessaloniki 1993, 104-110. E. Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou – A. Tourta, *Wandering in Byzantine Thessaloniki*, Athens 1997, 177-182. D.

³⁰ K. Papadopoulos, *Die Wandmalerei des XI. Jahrhunderts in der Kirche Panagia ton Chalkeon in Thessaloniki*, Graz – Cologne 1966



Fig. 7. Labovo, church of the Dormition of the Virgin. Virgin from the Deisis (detail of Fig. 5).



Fig. 8. Thessaloniki, church of Panagia ton Chalkeon. Naos, south vault, angels from the Nativity, detail, 1028.

the corresponding image in the Last Judgement in the Panagia Chalkeon. Their countenances have similar proportions and shapes with the broad lines of the dark eyebrows and very large eyes enclosed by dark shadows. An even closer physiognomic likeness can be found between the Labovo Virgin and the angels in the Nativity scene in the Panagia Chalkeon (Figs 7, 8). The resemblance is not only in the general character of the images and the proportions of the countenances, but also in the specific shapes of the eyes, lips and nose with a triangular shadow on the bridge.

The Labovo fresco shows the greatest resemblance, though, to a number of slightly later works, created around the middle of the 11th century. Thus, the Virgin can be compared with the mosaic *Annunciation* in the

monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos³¹, the similarity lying above all in the depth of the spiritual state expressed (Figs 10, 11). In the Labovo fresco Mary is prayerfully addressing her Son; in the Vatopedi mosaic she seems to be considering the Archangel Gabriel's words. In both instances, however, the motif of a dialogue is conveyed only by the minimum necessary pose and gesture that are more symbolic in nature. The movement of the hands seems slowed or everlasting, the gaze halted and turned within, making it possible to invest the image with a sense of concentration and inner power. That impression is promoted by the generalization and enlargement of forms, especially the facial features. Despite the difference in method of execution, there is much in common

Nalpantes (ed.), *Byzantine and Postbyzantine Monuments of Thessaloniki*, publ. Rekos, Thessaloniki 1997, 86-91. E. N. Tsigaridas, "Η μνημειακή ζωγραφική στη Θεσσαλονίκη κατά τη μέση και ύστερη βυζαντινή περίοδο", F. Karagianni (ed.), *Το ημετέρον κάλλος. Βυζαντινές εικόνες από τη Θεσσαλονίκη*, Thessaloniki 2018, 79-80.

³¹ Th. Stepan, "Die Mosaiken des Athosklosters Vatopaidi. Stil-kritische und ikonographische Überlegungen", *CahArch* 42 (1994), 88-94. E. N. Tsigaridas, "Εντόχιο ψηφιδωτό του καθολικού της μονής Βατοπεδίου", *Θυμίαμα στη μνήμη της Λασκαρίνας Μπούρα*, I, Athens 1994, 317-324. Id., "Τα ψηφιδωτά και οι βυζαντινές τοιχογραφίες", *Ιερά Μεγίστη Μονή Βατοπαιδίου. Παράδοση – Ιστορία – Τέχνη*, 1, Mount Athos 1996, 220-224, figs 182-183.



Fig. 9. Vodoča, church of Saint Leontius, now in the Museum of North Macedonia, Skopje. Western church, sanctuary, Saint Isauros.



Fig. 10. Labovo, church of the Dormition of the Virgin. Virgin from the Deisis (detail of Fig. 5).

in the way they are depicted: arched eyebrows meeting at the bridge of the nose; a short straight nose, delineated on both sides by dark blurry stripes; the almost straight line of the mouth with a smoothly delineated groove above the upper lip and soft shadows in the corners; the general rounded outline of the cheeks and the somewhat heavy chin. The absence of any manifestations of an expression makes both images beyond emotional.

There is also a kinship between the Labovo Deesis and the frescoes from the church of Saint Leontius in Vodoča that fragmentarily survived and have now been taken from the walls and placed in the Museum of North Macedonia in Skopje³². The best-preserved depiction,

of the Deacon Isaurus, has the look of aloof contemplativeness (Fig. 9). The huge eyes are wide open, their gaze is directed a little off to the side and at the same time not focussed on anything. The features in the Deacon's countenance are completely symmetrical and immobile. Their ideal character is emphasized by the dark contour that outlines the regular arches of the eyebrows, the almond-shaped eyes and straight nose. This physical type with an almost round head, broad cheekbones and rather heavy proportions is very characteristic of

³² V. Đurić, *Vizantijske freske u Jugoslaviji*, Belgrade 1974, 11, 180 (n. 4). Djurić, "Un courant stylistique", op.cit. (n. 29). P. Miljković-Peppek,

Kompleksot crkvi vo Vodoča, Skopje 1975, 26-49. Id., "Dva nepoznati fragmenta na freska od Vodočkata crkva", *Zbornik za srednovekovna umetnost* 3 (2001), 34-49. E. Dimitrova – S. Korunovski – S. Grandakovska, "Srednovekovna Makedonija. Kultura i umetnost", P. Kuzman – E. Dimitrova – J. Donev (eds), *Makedonija. Mileniumski kulturno-istoriski fakti*, Skopje 2013, 1584-1586. E. Dimitrova, "Ars



Fig. 11. Mount Athos, Vatopedi Monastery, katholikon. Naos, Virgin from the Annunciation, detail.

the second quarter and middle of the 11th century. A certain softening appropriate to the saint's youthful age is introduced by the figured shape of the lips and the rounded lines of the soft chin. This all looks almost identical to the Labovo Virgin with the qualification that she is shown in a three-quarter turn, which rules out full symmetry.

However, other fragments of the murals from the church of Saint Leontius in Vodoča present a somewhat different style testifying to a turn towards greater plasticity and emotionality. This enabled Vojislav Đurić³³ to

Inimitabilis: the Church Complex of St. Leontius at Vodoča", *Niš & Byzantium. The Collection of Scientific Works* 14 (2016), 343-355.

³³ Đurić, *Vizantijske freske*, op.cit. (n. 32), 10-11, 180 notes 3, 4. Djurić, "Un courant stylistique", op.cit. (n. 29).

speak of a distinctive tendency in art around the middle of the 11th century to which he also assigned the frescoes in the prothesis of the church of Saint Nicholas in Myra of Lycia³⁴, in the narthex of Saint Sophia in Thessaloniki³⁵ and in the church of Saint Sophia in Ohrid, noting the very strong similarity between the ensembles in Macedonia.

In the 11th century Ohrid emerged as another artistic centre for the northern regions of Epirus and Macedonia besides Thessaloniki. In 1018, following the final crushing defeat of the First Bulgarian empire, Basil II established the Archbishopric of Ohrid that was directly subordinated to Constantinople. Under Archbishop Leo (1037-1056), the frescoes of Saint Sophia were created – an ensemble of metropolitan standard that reflected the most important iconographic and stylistic trends of the period³⁶.

³⁴ On these wall paintings see also, O. Feld, "Die Innenausstattung der Nikolaoskirche in Myra", J. Borchardt (ed.), *Myra, eine lykische Metropole*, Berlin 1975, 385-387.

³⁵ On these wall paintings see also: S. Pelekanidis, "Νέαι ἔρευναί εἰς Ἁγίαν Σοφίαν Θεσσαλονίκης καὶ ἡ ἀποκατάστασις τῆς ἀρχαίας αὐτῆς μορφῆς", *Πεπραγμένα τοῦ Θ' Διεθνoῦς Βυζαντινολογικοῦ συνεδρίου*, 1, Athens 1955, 404-407, pls 81-83. R. Cormack, "The Apse Mosaic of S. Sophia in Thessaloniki", *DChAE* 10 (1980-1981), 133-134. K. M. Skawran, *The Development*, op.cit. (n. 30), 69-71, 159-160. Panayotidi, "La peinture monumentale", op.cit. (n. 29), 97, 98. Ch. Mavropoulou-Tsioumi, *Byzantine Thessaloniki*, op.cit. (n. 30), 99. E. Kourkoutidou-Nikolaïdou – A. Tourta, *Wandering*, op.cit. (n. 30), 209, 212. E. N. Tsigaridas, "Ἡ μνημειακὴ ζωγραφικὴ", op.cit. (n. 30), 80.

³⁶ For the vast bibliography on this ensemble see: Đurić, *Vizantijske freske*, op.cit. (n. 32), 9-11, 179-180 note 3. Cv. Grozdanov, *Études sur la peinture d'Ohrid*, Skopje 1990, 24-41. Id., *Freskite na Sveta Sofija Ohridska*, Skopje 1996. The recent works include: S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, Milan 2006, 52-56. Dimitrova – Korunovski – Grandakovska, "Srednovekovna Makedonija", op.cit. (n. 32), 1584-1586. B. Todić, "Représentations de papes romains dans l'église Sainte-Sophie d'Ohrid. Contribution à l'idéologie de l'archevêque d'Ohrid", *DChAE* 29 (2008), 105-118. Id., "Arhiepisop Lav – tvorac ikonografskog programa fresaka u Svetoj Sofiji Ohridskoj / Archbishop Leo – the creator of the iconographic fresco program in Saint Sophia in Ohrid", *Vizatijski svet na Balkanu / Byzantine World in the Balkans*, 1, Belgrade 2012, 119-136. O. Popova, "Freski sobora Sv. Sofii Ohridskoi i iskusstvo 40-50kh godov 11 veka", *Vizantiiskii vremennik* 74 (2015), 212-224. S. Brodbeck, "Soixante saintes femmes dans le narthex de Sainte-Sophie d'Ohrid (XIe

Like the mosaics of Nea Moni on Chios, the frescoes of Saint Sophia in Ohrid represent a particular tendency in mid-11th century art³⁷. In these ensembles the departure from the ideal and almost abstract principle towards a more softened and humanized one is expressed in an idiom that is less conventionalized and closer to the classical norm. The images as a whole have the same austere, tense character as in the mosaics and frescoes of Hosios Loukas and Saint Sophia of Kiev, but they manifest a greater psychological specificity. The forms retain their monumental, strict structure, but they have been worked up with more plasticity, detail and variety.

It is the murals of Saint Sophia in Ohrid that in my view are the closest analogue to the frescoes in Labovo (Figs 12, 13, 15). The similarity shows at all levels: the overall impression, the content of the artistic images as a whole, and the specific forms and painterly devices. Of course, the two figures in the Labovo Deesis do not provide all that many possibilities for comparison. Nonetheless, I shall try to enumerate the features that in my opinion provided evidence of the common time of creation and common origin of the creators of these frescoes.

Both ensembles present a very similar combination of large big-headed figures in tense frozen poses with a detailed and classically correct depiction of the folds of the clothing, carefully worked up with areas of light and shade. They have a similar strict colour scheme in which rather mute dark colours predominate, but there are at the same time quite a lot of bright, vivid accents. The types of faces and the methods used to paint them are very similar.

The countenances of Christ in Labovo and in the Communion of the Apostles in Ohrid are nearly identical (Figs 12-14). They have the same regular proportions and precise symmetrical structure brought out with the aid of contours. The outlines of the almost straight nose transition into the lines of the raised arch-shaped

eyebrows, which invests both images with some kind of firmness and clarity. Decisive significance attaches to the seemingly unseeing gaze of the identically shaped enlarged eyes. The semicircles of the eyelids and brows are repeated like an echo in the shape of the ruddy patches on the cheeks, which are more noticeable on the Ohrid Christ and just barely indicated on the one in Labovo. This geometrized treatment of the facial features is one of the most important devices serving to amplify the ideal character of the images. At the same time, there are other elements here that serve to soften and humanize them. The gaze of the large eyes does not seem entirely detached: it does have a certain hint of thoughtfulness to it. The same impression is produced by the wrinkles on the forehead and the bridge of the nose, the slight sideways shift in the positioning of the oval pupils and the soft modelling of the mouth with mobile shadows in the lowered corners of the lips. Some vigour is introduced by the thick head of hair with individual locks drawn with parallel lines. It forms naturally shaped waves and frames the countenances with a smooth oval. The light-coloured contour delineating the Saviour's beard and neck is rendered almost identically in both frescoes. Of course, the Ohrid image –the key one in the central composition on the main apse of the cathedral– is somewhat more abstract in character. The image in Labovo is more private in its purpose and scale, invested to a greater degree with intimate, personal connotations. Its emotional component is heightened by a barely detectable asymmetry and a more energetic technique in the painting of the countenance.

In this context a comparison with other frescoes in Saint Sophia in Ohrid that display a similar interest in a more emotional and individualized treatment is telling. Not only among the apostles in the scenes of the Ascension and the Communion of the Apostles, but also among the numerous frontal depictions of saints in the sanctuary one can see the artists' striving, if not to dramatize the images, then to diversify their psychological characterization (Fig. 15). This is accomplished by means of more active facial expressions, complex relief in the countenances and more contrasting modelling. Frowning brows, sideways looks, mouths with lowered corners, sunken cheeks and prominent wrinkles, often noticeable asymmetry in the countenances and pronounced lightened areas or chromatic accents –all these

siècle): un programme hagiographique exceptionnel", S. Brodbeck – A. Nicolaïdès – P. Pagès – Br. Pitarakis – I. Rapti (eds), *Mélanges Catherine Jolivet-Lévy*, 2 (TM 20/2), Paris 2016, 13-37.

³⁷ Mouriki, "Stylistic Trends", op.cit. (n. 29), 88-94. Ead., *The Mosaics of Nea Moni*, op.cit. (n. 29), 215-265. Djurić, "Un courant stylistique", op.cit. (n. 29). Popova, "Freski sobora Sv. Sofii Ohridskoi", op.cit. (n. 36). Popova – Sarabianov, *Mosaics and Frescoes*, op.cit. (n. 29), 394-439.



Fig. 12. Ohrid, church of Saint Sophia. Sanctuary, *Communion of the Apostles*, detail, before 1056.

things can add complexity and richness to the emotional structure of the images³⁸. Similar devices were used by the creator of the Labovo Deesis. He introduces into the elevated ideal image of the Saviour quite a few individual accents of this sort: a slight asymmetry in the depiction of the dimple on the bridge of the nose and the wrinkles on the forehead, the gaze to the side, the slightly stronger shadows on the right-hand (as we see it) half of the face, the colour accents in the outlining of the ruddy patches on the cheeks, the upper eyelids and nose. All this, as has already been said, makes it possible to bring the image somewhat closer to the world of human feelings, to make it more accessible for ordinary human perception, to get away from the abstruse ideal of the ascetic character of art.

This trend, it seems, became a general one in art

³⁸ These features are most vividly described in: Đurić, *Vizantijske freske*, op.cit. (n. 32), 10-11, 180 note 3. Djurić, “Un courant stylistique”, op.cit. (n. 29), 17, 20. Popova, “Freski sobora Sv. Sofii Ohridskoi”, op.cit. (n. 36). Popova – Sarabianov, *Mosaics and Frescoes*, op.cit. (n. 29), 394-418.

around the middle of the 11th century. As we have seen, it can be traced in a whole number of Byzantine ensembles, including ones in Macedonia. It seems highly likely that, at a time when ecclesiastical life across the region was taking off under Archbishop Leo, a team of artists that he invited to Ohrid did not only paint murals in the cathedral of Saint Sophia: some of the artists might have been sent to do more work in other churches³⁹, one

³⁹ Some scholars suggested that the frescoes in St. Sophia and Vodoča belong to the same group of painters: V. Lazarev, *Storia della pittura bizantina*, Torino 1967, 208, 259. Đurić, *Vizantijske freske*, op.cit. (n. 32), 11, 180 note 4. Id., “Un courant stylistique”, op.cit. (n. 29), 21. Dimitrova – Korunovski – Grandakovska, “Srednovekovna Makedonija”, op.cit. (n. 32), 1584-1586. P. Miljković-Pepek considered the fragments from Vodoča western church to be slightly earlier than the wall paintings of St. Sophia, although stylistically very close: Miljković-Pepek, *Kompleksot*, op.cit. (n. 32), 26-38. Id., “Dva nepoznati fragmenta”, op.cit. (n. 32), 48. Z. Rasolkoska-Nikoloska added some other fragments surviving at Gorni Kozjak and Morodvis to the oeuvre of the same atelier: Z. Rasolkoska-Nikoloska, “Slikarskata rabotilnica od Sv. Sofija (1037-1056) vo Ohrid i nejinoto sledenje vo drugi hramovi vo Makedonija”,



Fig. 13. Ohrid, church of Saint Sophia. Sanctuary, Christ from the Communion of the Apostles (detail of Fig. 12), before 1056.



Fig. 14. Labovo, church of the Dormition of the Virgin. Christ from the Deisis (detail of Fig. 5).



Fig. 15. Ohrid, church of Saint Sophia. Sanctuary, Saint Leo the Pope of Rome, detail, before 1056.

of which could have been the church of the Dormition in Labovo.

I hope that the restoration work at Labovo will be continued in the near future and will bring to light other fragments of murals from the same phase which, in my opinion, should be dated to a time around the middle of the 11th century. Perhaps further researches will also make it possible to determine more precisely the time and circumstances of the construction of that outstanding church.

Srednovekovnata umetnost vo Makedonija, Skopje 2004, 35-58.

Illustration credits

Figs 1, 2, 4-10, 12-14: Photo by A. Zakharova. Fig. 3: Vocotopoulos, *Η ἐκκλησιαστική ἀρχιτεκτονική*, op.cit. (n. 10), fig. 44. Fig. 11: *Τερὰ Μεγίστη Μονή Βατοπαιδίου. Παράδοση – Ἱστορία – Τέχνη*, 1, Mount Athos 1996, fig. 183. Fig. 15: Photo by R. Novikov.

ΠΑΡΑΤΗΡΗΣΕΙΣ ΓΙΑ ΤΟΝ ΝΑΟ ΤΗΣ ΚΟΙΜΗΣΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΥ ΣΤΟ ΛΑΜΠΟΒΟ (ΑΛΒΑΝΙΑ) ΚΑΙ ΤΙΣ ΤΟΙΧΟΓΡΑΦΙΕΣ ΤΟΥ

Ο ναός της Κοίμησης της Θεοτόκου στο Λάμποβο, στην περιφέρεια του Αργυρόκαστρον στη νότια Αλβανία (βόρεια Ήπειρος), είναι ένα από τα πιο ενδιαφέροντα μνημεία βυζαντινής αρχιτεκτονικής στην Αλβανία (Εικ. 1, 3). Τίποτε δεν είναι γνωστό με βεβαιότητα για τον χρόνο οικοδόμησής του και το ζήτημα αυτό παραμένει ως σήμερα ανοιχτό στην έρευνα. Ο Φρειδερίκος Βερσάκης έχει χρονολογήσει τον ναό στο δεύτερο μισό του 12ου αιώνα. Στη συνέχεια ο Α. Meksi συνέδεσε το κτήριο με την αρχιτεκτονική του Δεσποτάτου της Ηπείρου και το χρονολόγησε στο δεύτερο μισό του 13ου αιώνα. Με την άποψη του Meksi συμφώνησαν ο Δ. Πάλλας, ο Γ. Βελένης, ο Κ. Englert και ορισμένοι άλλοι μελετητές, οι οποίοι όμως δεν μελέτησαν ειδικά τον ναό.

Άλλοι ερευνητές, όπως ο Α. Η. S. Megaw, ο Ν. Μουτσόπουλος, ο G. Koch και ο Π. Α. Βοκοτόπουλος, χρονολόγησαν τον ναό στον 10ο αιώνα. Ο τελευταίος κατέδειξε ότι η Κοίμηση στο Λάμποβο είναι τεχνοτροπικά κοντά στα κτίσματα της προ-Ελλαδικής και της πρώιμης Ελλαδικής Σχολής, ενώ ορισμένα από τα χαρακτηριστικά της συνδέονται με μνημεία της Μακεδονίας. Συγκεκριμένα, η τεχνική της οικοδόμησης και η διακόσμησή της βρίσκουν παράλληλα στους ναούς της Καστοριάς του 9ου-11ου αιώνα. Ο G. Koch κατέληξε επίσης στο συμπέρασμα ότι όλα τα χαρακτηριστικά του κτηρίου συγκλίνουν στο ότι πρόκειται για ένα οικοδόμημα του 10ου και όχι του 13ου αιώνα. Σε πρόσφατη εργασία του ο Π. Δαμούλος δίνει την πιο λεπτομερή περιγραφή του ναού και κάνει συγκρίσεις με ελληνικά μνημεία του 9ου-11ου αιώνα. Συγκεκριμένα, θεωρεί ότι το κτήριο κατασκευάστηκε από τεχνίτες της περιοχής και το χρονολογεί στο πρώτο μισό του 11ου αιώνα, όταν η βόρεια Ήπειρος επέστρεψε στην κυριαρχία της βυζαντινής αυτοκρατορίας και συμπεριλήφθηκε στην Αρχιεπισκοπή της Αχρίδας.

Στις αρχές της δεκαετίας του 2000, στο βόρειο τμήμα του υπερώου πάνω από τον νάρθηκα αποκαλύφθηκε,

κάτω από τον σοβά, μια τοιχογραφία με την παράσταση της Δέησης (Εικ. 3, 4). Ο G. Koch και ο Π. Δαμούλος δεν ασχολήθηκαν με τη χρονολόγησή της. Ο Koch διατύπωσε την υπόθεση ότι η Κοίμηση του Λάμποβο ήταν το καθολικό ενός μοναστηριού που κατασκευάστηκε από τοπικούς οικοδόμους μετά από παραγγελία κάποιου ευγενούς χορηγού, για τον οποίο δημιουργήθηκε το υπερώο πάνω από τον νάρθηκα.

Στην παράσταση της Δέησης διακρίνεται το επάνω τμήμα των μορφών της Παναγίας και του ένθρονου Χριστού, ενώ η απεικόνιση του Ιωάννη του Προδρόμου είναι πολύ κατεστραμμένη (Εικ. 4, 5). Η θέση και το μέγεθος των μορφών καθώς και η επιλογή του θέματος της Δέησης ενισχύουν την υπόθεση του Koch ότι ο χώρος αποτέλεσε μικρό ιδιωτικό παρεκκλήσιο. Η τοιχογραφία μπορεί να περιλάμβανε απεικόνιση ενός γονυπετούς κτήτορα, όπως φαίνεται από τη χειρονομία του δεξιού χεριού της Παναγίας που δείχνει προς τα κάτω. Η εικονογραφία του τρίμορφου της Δέησης, κατά τα άλλα, είναι απολύτως τυπική.

Τόσο ο επίσημος και απόμακρος, γενικά, χαρακτήρας της παράστασης όσο και οι ιδιαίτερες αποχρώσεις του ύφους την συνδέουν με την αντικλασική τάση της βυζαντινής ζωγραφικής του δεύτερου τετάρτου και των μέσων του 11ου αιώνα, η οποία χαρακτηρίζεται από εξαιρετική εσωτερική δύναμη, μνημειώδεις δυναμικές μορφές, λιτότητα και υπερβατικότητα στην έκφραση των απεικονιζομένων.

Το πρώτο έργο αυτής της τάσης ήταν οι τοιχογραφίες στην Παναγία των Χαλκίων στη Θεσσαλονίκη, του 1028. Η τοιχογραφία του Λάμποβο, ειδικά η Παναγία, είναι πολύ κοντά σε αυτές από πολλές απόψεις (Εικ. 6-8). Ωστόσο, παρουσιάζει ακόμη μεγαλύτερη ομοιότητα με μια σειρά λίγο μεταγενέστερων έργων που δημιουργήθηκαν γύρω στα μέσα του 11ου αιώνα, τα οποία ανήκουν στην επόμενη φάση ανάπτυξης της ίδιας τάσης: την ψηφιδωτή παράσταση του Ευαγγελισμού στη μονή Βατοπεδίου (Εικ. 11), τις τοιχογραφίες στον

νάρθηκα της Αγίας Σοφίας στη Θεσσαλονίκη (περί το 1040) και ιδιαίτερα τις τοιχογραφίες των ναών του Αγίου Λεοντίου στη Vodoc̆a (Εικ. 9, 10) και της Αγίας Σοφίας στην Αχρίδα (πριν από το 1056). Σε αυτά τα σύνολα όλες οι παραστάσεις έχουν την ίδια αυστηρότητα και την ίδια ένταση, αλλά εμφανίζουν περισσότερο συγκεκριμένη ψυχολογική έκφραση. Οι μορφές διατηρούν τη μνημειώδη, αυστηρή δομή τους, αλλά έχουν αποδοθεί με μεγαλύτερη πλαστικότητα, λεπτομέρεια και ποικιλία.

Η έκφραση του προσώπου του Χριστού στο Λάμποβο και στην Κοινωνία των Αποστόλων στην Αχρίδα είναι σχεδόν ταυτόσημες (Εικ. 12-14). Τα πρόσωπα έχουν τις ίδιες κανονικές αναλογίες και την ίδια ακριβή συμμετρική δομή, που επιτυγχάνεται με τη βοήθεια των περιγραμμάτων και της γραμμικής απόδοσης των χαρακτηριστικών του προσώπου. Αποφασιστική σημασία αποδίδεται στο βλέμμα των πανομοιότυπων μεγάλων ματιών. Εντούτοις, το βλέμμα δεν φαίνεται εντελώς απόμακρο και είναι μάλλον στοχαστικό. Αυτή η εντύπωση προκαλείται από τις ρυτίδες στο μέτωπο και την καμπύλη της μύτης, την ελαφρά πλάγια μετατόπιση της θέσης της οφθαλμικής κόρης και το απαλό πλάσιμο του στόματος με απαλή σκίαση στις χαμηλωμένες γωνίες των χειλιών. Η τοιχογραφία στο Λάμποβο έχει περισσότερο προσωπικό χαρακτήρα ως προς τον σκοπό και την κλίμακά της, και εκφράζει σε μεγαλύτερο βαθμό εσωτερικούς συνειρμούς. Το συγκινησιακό της στοιχείο ενισχύεται από μια ελάχιστη ανιχνεύσιμη ασυμμετρία και μια πιο ενεργητική τεχνική στη ζωγραφική του προσώπου.

Η Αχρίδα γίνεται ένα σημαντικό καλλιτεχνικό κέντρο για τις βόρειες περιοχές της Μακεδονίας και της Ηπείρου κατά τον 11ο αιώνα. Το 1018, μετά την τελευταία συντριπτική ήττα του πρώτου βουλγαρικού βασιλείου, ο Βασίλειος Β΄ ίδρυσε την αρχιεπισκοπή της Αχρίδας. Όταν ήταν αρχιεπίσκοπος ο Λέων, δημιουργήθηκαν οι τοιχογραφίες της Αγίας Σοφίας, ένα σύνολο μητροπολιτικής τέχνης που αντανάκλασε τις πιο σημαντικές εικονογραφικές και τεχνοτροπικές τάσεις της εποχής. Φαίνεται πολύ πιθανό ότι, σε μια εποχή που η εκκλησιαστική ζωή σε όλη την περιοχή ήταν συγκεντρωμένη στο πρόσωπο του Λέοντα, μια ομάδα καλλιτεχνών που προσκάλεσε ο ίδιος, ζωγράφησε τις τοιχογραφίες στον μητροπολιτικό ναό της Αχρίδας αλλά όχι μόνο. Ορισμένοι από τους ζωγράφους αυτούς ίσως είχαν αποσταλεί σε άλλες εκκλησίες, μία από τις οποίες θα μπορούσε να ήταν και η εκκλησία της Κοίμησης στο Λάμποβο.

Ελπίζω ότι τα έργα αποκατάστασης στο Λάμποβο θα συνεχιστούν στο εγγύς μέλλον και θα αποκαλύψουν και άλλα τμήματα τοιχογραφιών από την ίδια φάση, η οποία, κατά τη γνώμη μου, θα πρέπει να χρονολογηθεί γύρω στα μέσα του 11ου αιώνα. Ίσως περαιτέρω έρευνες θα επιτρέψουν επίσης τον ακριβέστερο προσδιορισμό του χρόνου και των συνθηκών κατασκευής αυτής της ιδιαίτερα ενδιαφέρουσας εκκλησίας.

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