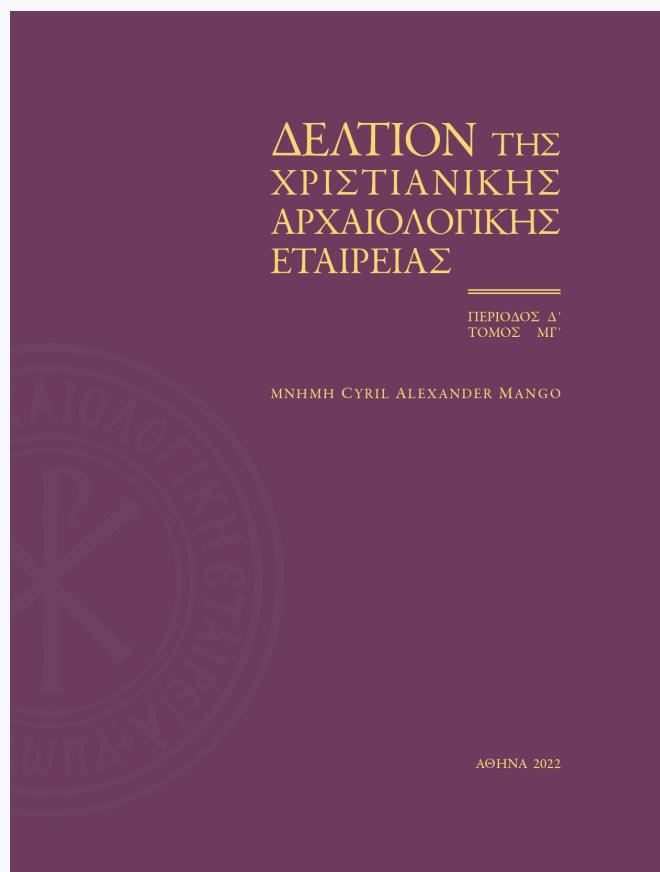


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**Notes on the construction history and architecture  
of the Protaton church at Karyes, Mount Athos**

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## NOTES ON THE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE OF THE PROTATON CHURCH AT KARYES, MOUNT ATHOS

Ο ναός του Πρωτάτου στις Καρυές του Αγίου Όρους, ο οποίος έχει αποκτήσει τη σημερινή του μορφή μετά από μακρά σειρά επεμβάσεων, οικοδομήθηκε στην έκτη δεκαετία του 10ου αιώνα. Στην αρχική του μορφή ο ναός ήταν μια μεγάλων διαστάσεων ιδιότυπη ξυλόστεγη σταυροκή βασιλική που, με τα σημερινά δεδομένα, αποτελεί unicum για τη μεσοβυζαντινή ναοδομία αλλά και μια ακόμη απόδειξη για την ύπαρξη πρωτοτυπίας στη βυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική. Σκοπός του παρόντος άρθρου είναι η βασισμένη κυρίως σε έρευνα πεδίου επανεξέταση του οικοδομικού χρονικού και της αρχιτεκτονικής του μνημείου.

*The church of the Protaton at Karyes, Mount Athos, which has acquired its present form after a long series of alterations, was built in the sixth decade of the 10th century. In its original form it was a large-scale peculiar timber-roofed cross-shaped basilica, which, based on the currently available evidence, constitutes a unicum for Middle Byzantine architecture, as well as one more proof of the existence of originality in Byzantine architecture. The aim of the paper is a re-examination of the construction history and architecture of the monument based mainly on field work.*

### Λέξεις κλειδιά

Βυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική, βυζαντινή ναοδομία, Αγιον Όρος, Άθως, Καρυές, ναός Πρωτάτου.

### Keywords

Byzantine church architecture; Mount Athos; Karyes; church of Protaton.

No doubt the famous for its Palaiologan frescoes church of Protaton at Karyes, Mount Athos has not yet acquired the position it deserves in the bibliography of the history of Byzantine architecture. It is characteristic that the reference to the monument in Cyril Mango's quintessential book on "Byzantine architecture" is limited to three rows and a single photograph, with a note pointing

out that the Byzantine architecture of Athos has never been seriously studied<sup>1</sup>. In both the first and subsequent editions of Richard Krautheimer's book on "Early Christian and Byzantine architecture"<sup>2</sup>, likewise, there is no

*Scientific Meeting dedicated to the Holy Church of Protaton in Karyes, held by the Mount Athos Center in Thessaloniki on December 8th, 2017 [S. Mamaloukos, "Ο ναός του Πρωτάτου στα πλαίσια της μεσοβυζαντινής ναοδομίας", Ήμερίδα για τον Ιερό Ναό του Πρωτάτου (<https://vimeo.com/247277287>, accessed 22.2.2022)]. The author of this study expresses his gratitude to the holy protopreslates of Mount Athos, the elders f. Pavlos Lavriotis († November 25, 2021), f. Georgios hieromonk Vatopedinos, f. Varnavas monk Vatopedinos, f. Symeon Dionysiatis, as well as to the Chief Secretary of the Holy Community f. Kosmas monk Simonopetritis for their help during his field research at Karyes.*

<sup>1</sup> C. Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, New York 1976, 216, fig. 238.

<sup>2</sup> R. Krautheimer – S. Ćurčić, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, Harmondsworth 1986.

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\*\* The present paper, which was first presented at the 39th Symposium of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Archaeology and Art of the Christian Archaeological Society on May 30th 2019 [see S. Mamaloukos, "Παρατηρήσεις στην οικοδομική ιστορία και την αρχιτεκτονική του ναού του Πρωτάτου στις Καρυές του Αγίου Όρους", 39th Symposium of the ChAE (Athens 2019), 125-126], is part of an ongoing research of the author on the architecture of the Protaton church. A synopsis of this study was presented at the

reference to the monument, as is also the case in Robert Ousterhout's recent book on the "Medieval architecture of the East"<sup>3</sup>. The aim of the present paper is to discuss several issues pertaining to the construction history and architecture of this important monument, in the hope that its conclusions will contribute to the study which the church that constitutes the symbolic center of the Mount Athos monastic community deserves.

The church of Protaton is built on flat ground, on a rather spacious terrace in the center of the peculiar settlement of Karyes. In its present form, which is the result of a series of interventions by the Greek Archaeological Service in the 1950s, the church is a *sui generis* three aisled timber roofed basilica, with external dimensions 16.90x22.90m (Figs 1-3). The western part of the building is a two-storey narthex with an interior width of 3.75m. The main church has a floor plan in the shape of an inscribed cross with cross-arms of different lengths, and corner compartments that communicate with the cross-arms through arched openings. The original openings that connect the corner compartments with the transverse cross arm have been subsequently reduced by built stone masonry tympana. The longitudinal axis is evidently emphasized in the overall layout of the church, as two wide and tall arches connect the western and eastern parts of the longitudinal internal walls, thus forming a tall, central aisle covered by a gable roof. The corner compartments were covered by lean-to roofs inclined toward the north and south, which intersected with the gable roofs over the south and north cross arms. A modern arcade with a lean-to roof, dating from the 1950s, is found along the north façade of the monument; semicircular flying buttresses bracing the north wall of the main church extend over this roof.

Enough evidence on the history of the monument is known from multiple sources, such as hagiographic texts, documents, visitors' accounts, chronicles and recorded tradition, as well as, for more recent years, inscriptions. Even though this evidence sheds some light on the history of the building, many issues, most of which pertain to the Byzantine period, still remain elusive and uncertain<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> R. Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture. The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands*, New York 2019.

<sup>4</sup> For a well-documented summary of the history of the institution

By combining information provided by various sources, one can deduce that an initial Protaton church was first erected most probably in the late 9th century to serve the worship needs of the then newly organized community of Athonite monks. This small and narrow church was rebuilt, according to the life of St Athanasios, larger and more beautiful in the decade of 960, with funds provided by Leo, the brother of emperor Nikephoros II Phokas, after an intervention by the saint himself<sup>5</sup>. According to Athonite tradition, in the late 13th century the church of Protaton suffered damages by a fire set by the supporters of the Union of the Churches<sup>6</sup> and subsequently it was repaired and decorated with wall-paintings by the famous painter Manuel Panselinos.

A comparative study of sources and the overall history of the period indicated that it is highly probable that the church was indeed repaired and painted between 1309 and 1311/12<sup>7</sup>, following damage suffered during the Catalan Company raid on Mount Athos<sup>8</sup>. It must be noted here, though, that any damage suffered at that time must not have been due to fire, as is attested by the preservation of several original wooden structural members, such as tie beams and door lintels. Lastly, a series of inscriptions

and the church of the Protaton see K. Chrysochoides, "Πρωτάτο. Τὸ κέντρο τοῦ Ἀθωνικοῦ Μοναχισμοῦ", *Κειμήλια Πρωτάτου*, 1, Mount Athos 2000, 19-41 and Idem, «Πρωτάτο. Κέντρο τοῦ ἀθωνικοῦ μοναχισμοῦ», E. N. Tsigaridas – K. Chrysochoides – D. Amponis – J. Tavlakis – Ch. Tsoumi – G. Trianaphyllidis – D. Gourrioti (eds), *Μανονήλη Πανοσέληνος. Ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ ναοῦ τοῦ Πρωτάτου*, (exhibition catalogue), Mount Athos Center, Thessaloniki 2003, 67-70. On the early history of the church see also P. G. Fountas, *Ο ναός του Πρωτάτου. Ιστορία και αρχιτεκτονικές μεταμορφώσεις* (unpublished PhD diss., open access at: <https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/23762>), National [Metsovo] Technical University of Athens, Athens 2008, 45-55.

<sup>5</sup> See Chrysochoides, "Πρωτάτο", op.cit. (n. 4), 25 and Fountas, *Ναός Πρωτάτου*, op.cit. (n. 4), 45-55.

<sup>6</sup> S. Lampros, "Τὸ πάτρια τοῦ Ἀγίου Ὄρους", *NE* 9 (1912), 160. G. Smyrnakis, *Τὸ Ἀγίου Ὄρος*, Karyes 1988, 690.

<sup>7</sup> On the dating of the wall-paintings of the Protaton attributed to Manuel Panselinos, see K. Vapheiaides, "The wall-paintings of the Protaton Church revisited", *Zograf* 43 (2019), 117-119, where also the various notions that have been suggested on the subject and relevant bibliography can also be found.

<sup>8</sup> On the Catalan Company raid on Mount Athos and the possible damage to the Protaton, see Vapheiaides, op.cit. (n. 7), 117-118 with references to previous bibliography.



Fig. 1. Karyes, Protaton church. View from southeast (July 2012).

and other accounts provide some information of extensive interventions to the church in the first quarter of the 16th century, as well as some minor or more substantial interventions during the 17th-18th and 19th centuries, that gave the church the appearance it had before the, unfortunately, inadequately documented and largely arbitrary major consolidation and restoration work carried out on the monument by Anastasios K. Orlando in the 1950s<sup>9</sup>.

Few accounts, probably of minor importance, but useful for the comprehension and interpretation of the monument, can be found in some of the older studies on Athonite and Byzantine architecture in general<sup>10</sup>. The

first rigorous scholarly study of the church, which focused more on its marble sanctuary screen, was prepared by Anastasios Orlando in 1953<sup>11</sup>. A number of accounts of the monument date to the same period and are related to extensive interventions to the monument by the Greek Archaeological Service. These, however, are extremely concise and offer minimal information on the architecture of the monument, or on the actual interventions carried out at the time<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> On the more recent history of the church, namely from the mid-20th century onwards, see D. Amponis, “Στοιχεία οικοδομικής ιστορίας του Ιερού του Πρωτάτου”, Tsigaridas et al. (eds), *Μανονήλη Πανοσέληνος*, op.cit. (n. 4), 76-80. J. Tavlakis, “Η μέριμνα της Αρχαιολογικής Υπηρεσίας για το Πρωτάτο”, ibid., 81-87. Fountas, *Ναός Πρωτάτου*, op.cit. (n. 4), 317-318.

<sup>10</sup> A. Choisy, *Histoire de l'architecture*, 2, Paris 1899, 42-43, fig. 7. H.

Brockhaus, *Die Kunst in den Athos-Klöstern*, Leipzig 1891, 23-25, fig. 3. G. Millet, *L'Ecole grecque dans l'architecture byzantine*, Vario-rum Reprints, London 1974, 70. G. Millet, *Monuments de l'Athos*, Paris 1927, pls 5-58. F. Dölger – E. Wiegand – A. Deindl, *Mönchsland Athos*, Munich 1943, 108-109, pls 59, 59a, 59b, 63, 172. At this point, it should be noted that many of the aforementioned studies also contain depictions of the monument that are invaluable to us today.

<sup>11</sup> A. K. Orlando, “Τὸ μαρμάρινον τέμπλον τοῦ Πρωτάτου τῶν Καρυῶν”, *EEBS* 23 (1953), 83-91.

<sup>12</sup> E. Stikas, «Ο ἀναστηλωτής Ὄρλανδος», *Ἀναστάσιος Ὄρλανδος. Ο ἀνθρωπός καὶ τὸ ἔργον του*, Athens 1978, 474-475, figs 78-81.

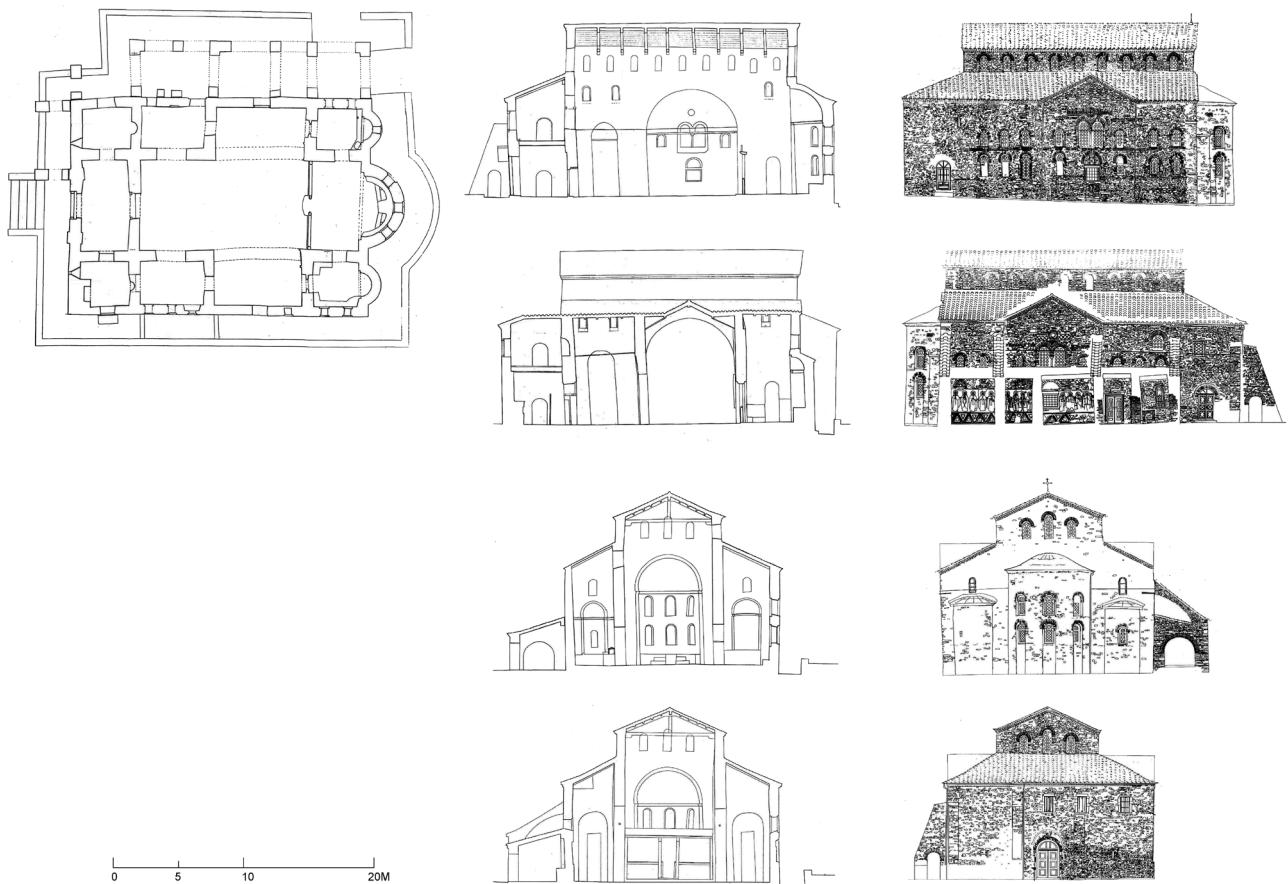


Fig. 2. Karyes, Protaton church. Survey drawings - Center for the Preservation of the Athonite Heritage.

The systematic study of the Protaton commenced with the research of the late professor Pavlos Mylonas<sup>13</sup> on the monument; from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s the eminent Greek scholar prepared measured drawings and studied the church, publishing his findings together with precise measured drawings in a series of studies<sup>14</sup>.

According to Mylonas the Protaton of the early 20th century was indeed the original, late 9th or early 10th century church (Protaton A). In its original form the church was a typical three-aisled, timber roofed basilica with arcades, each of them with three arches resting on

<sup>13</sup> For short presentations on the history of the research of P. Mylonas on the Protaton see in P. Mylonas, “Παρατηρήσεις στὸ ναὸ τοῦ Πρωτάτου”, *Nea Estia* 89/1047 (15 February 1971), 238 notes 3 and 4. Idem, “Les étapes successives de construction du Protaton au Mont Athos”, *CahArch* 28 (1979), 143 note 2.

<sup>14</sup> P. Mylonas, “Η ἀρχιτεκτονικὴ τοῦ Ἁγίου Ὄρους”, *Nea Estia* 74/875 (Christmas 1963), 202-203. Idem, “L’architecture du Mont Athos”, *Παράτημα. Ο ἑορτασμὸς τῆς χιλιετηρίδας τοῦ Ἁγίου Ὄρους στὴ Βενετία / Thesaurismata* 2 (1963), 18-48, 31-32. Idem, “L’architecture monastique du Mont Athos”, *Le Millenaire du Mont Athos 963-1963. Etudes et Mélanges*, Venice 1964, 2, 229-246, 237-238. Idem, “Παρατηρήσεις στὸ ναὸ τοῦ Πρωτάτου”,

op.cit. (n. 13), notes 3 and 4. Idem, “Les étapes successives de construction du Protaton au Mont Athos”, op.cit. (n. 13), 143 note 2. Idem, “Two Middle Byzantine churches on Athos”, *Actes du XVe Congrès International d’Études Byzantines (Athènes 1976)*, 2. *Art et Archéologie*, Athens 1981, 552-559. Idem, “The Successive Stages of Construction of the Athos Protaton”, *O Μανονῆλ Πανοσέληνος καὶ η εποχή του*, Athens 1999, 15-37. See also: Idem, “Le plan initial du catholicon de la Grande-Lavra au Mont Athos et la genèse du type du catholicon athonite”, *CahArch* 32 (1984), 89-112, 96-97, 98-100, 103. Idem, “Remarques architecturales sur le catholicon de Chilandar. La formation graduelle du catholicon à absides latérales ou choeurs et à liti, au Mont Athos”, *Hilandarski Zbornik* 6 (1986), 23-24, 35-36, fig. 20.



Fig. 3. Karyes, Protaton church. View of the interior looking southeast (June 2017).

piers, and a passage opening into the sanctuary. This original church was modified around 965 by St Athanasios the Athonite, to make it more spacious (Protaton B). The interventions of St Athanasios consisted of transforming the floor plan of the church into a cross, by replacing the two eastern arches of each arcade with a wide and tall arch, thus forming a peculiar kind of interior *choroi* (choirs). The church of St Athanasios was repaired after the damage suffered by fire set by the supporters of the Union of Churches and painted by Manuel Panselinos around the year 1300 (Protaton C). During these repairs the roofs of the lateral aisles were raised, and a unified, gable roof was formed. Later on, in post-Byzantine times, the church was repaired again and received various additions in several phases. The most important of those was the early 16th-century rebuilding of the narthex, and the reconstruction of the timber roof with a new clerestory above the central aisle in 1802 (Protaton E). Mylonas' views on the Protaton were systematically presented and published in international esteemed journals, and thus enjoy widespread acceptance and dominate the international bibliography, despite the fact that other radically different views emerged in the meantime. It is telling that both the late professors Charalambos Bouras<sup>15</sup> and Slobodan Ćurčić<sup>16</sup> unquestioningly accept Mylonas' theory on the building history of the monument in their writings.

In the mid-1980s, nevertheless, two scholars who by that time were systematically working in Mount Athos challenged the views of Mylonas on the building history of the church. In 1985 Ioakeim Papaggelos suggested that St Athanasios "did not in fact modify an existing church, but intervened to have a new church erected on the same spot" and that the conversion of the floor plan church to a cross was carried out "between 1083 and the late 13th century, when the church was also painted by Manuel Panselinos"<sup>17</sup>. The same year Pantelis Fountas,

who at the time studied the church as an employee of the Greek Ministry of Culture, revisited sources in conjunction with a series of extremely astute observations on the monument itself, and suggested that "... St Athanasios did not 'modify' an existing three-aisled basilica, but erected from the ground a transitional, cross-in-square type church with a timber roof"<sup>18</sup>. In the two decades that followed Fountas persisted in his research and occasionally presented his findings publicly<sup>19</sup>, until in 2008 he defended his doctoral dissertation with the subject "The Protaton church. History, and architectural transformations"<sup>20</sup>. The views of Fountas on the building history of the Protaton, as they were presented in his dissertation, are briefly the following: The original Protaton church, erected by the Athonite monks in the late 9th or early 10th century, was a lowly and small building, corresponding to the meager standing and means of the land up to the mid-10th century<sup>21</sup>. This church was demolished to make way for the Protaton we see today, erected thanks to the intervention of St Athanasios sometime around 965. In its initial state (first phase)<sup>22</sup> the church had the form of "a cruciform basilica or a basilica with a transverse aisle"<sup>23</sup>. After the "global (sic) March 11th 1231 earthquake" the church was repaired by a building workshop from the Despotate of Epirus (second phase).

<sup>18</sup> P. Fountas, "Η τυπολογία της πρώτης φάσης του Πρωτάτου", 5th Symposium of the ChAE (Athens 1985), 98.

<sup>19</sup> P. Fountas, "Σκάριφος και δομική χάραξη της κάτοψης στο ναό του Πρωτάτου", 17th Symposium of the ChAE (Athens 1997), 79-80. Idem, "Το Πρωτάτο του Αγίου Αθανασίου: Αναπαράσταση Νότιας οψίης", Makedonika 31 (1997-1998), 417-419. Idem, "Το ξυλόγλυπτο τέμπλο του Πρωτάτου και η χρονολόγησή του", 18th Symposium of the ChAE (Athens 1998), 67-68. Idem, "Πρωτάτο του Αγίου Αθανασίου: Τα επί μέρους άγνωστα στοιχεία της διάρθρωσης των πλευρικών όψεων. Τεκμηρίωση", 16th Symposium of the ChAE (Athens 1999), 111-112. Idem, "Η δεύτερη οικοδομική φάση της εκκλησίας του Πρωτάτου", 21st Symposium of the ChAE (Athens 2001), 98-99. Idem, "Παλαιψήστου τοιχοδομικού επανανάγνωση. Το πρόβλημα του πλίνθινου διακόσιμου στο ναό του Πρωτάτου", 22nd Symposium of the ChAE (Athens 2002), 116-117. Idem, "Ξυλόπηκτες θολωτές οροφές σε ναούς της βυζαντινής περιόδου. Ενδείξεις για το Πρωτάτο", 24th Symposium of the ChAE (Athens 2004), 98-99.

<sup>20</sup> Fountas, Ναός Πρωτάτου, op.cit. (n. 4).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 48-55.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 45-140.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ch. Bouras, *Ιστορία τῆς Αρχιτεκτονικῆς*, 2, Athens 1994, 245. Idem, *Βυζαντινὴ καὶ μεταβυζαντινὴ ἀρχιτεκτονικὴ στὴν Ελλάδα*, Athens 2001, 70, fig. 53.

<sup>16</sup> S. Ćurčić, *Architecture in the Balkans. From Diocletian to Süleyman the Magnificent*, New Haven – London 2010, 310, fig. 326.C.

<sup>17</sup> I. Papaggelos, "Ο αρχιτεκτονικός όρος 'χορός' και ο όσιος Αθανάσιος ο Αθωνίτης", 5th Symposium of the ChAE (Athens 1985), 73.

During this repair the church was modified, by retaining its old cruciform floor plan, and covering the cross-arms with timber-framed barrel-vaults, and the central space of the nave with a timber-framed raised central bay in transverse barrel-vault acting as a dome (*troulokamara*), and timber-framed walls<sup>24</sup>. The third phase of the church dates to around 1290, at the same time as the wall-paintings of Manuel Panselinos. During this third phase the church was converted into a three-aisled basilica, with a raised central aisle covered with a timber-framed barrel vault, also visible in the exterior<sup>25</sup>. Fountas largely agrees with Mylonas on the interventions that the church received between the early 16th and the early 20th century (fourth and fifth phases)<sup>26</sup>. Fountas considers the form that the monument took following the interventions of the Greek Archaeological Service between 1935 and 1988 as the sixth phase of the church<sup>27</sup>.

As has already been mentioned, Fountas' notion that the present Protaton church was originally erected around 965 as a cruciform basilica has been viewed with skepticism and has not yet been widely accepted in the bibliography. Nonetheless, this notion has been adopted by researchers that have recently studied the monument or Byzantine Athonite church architecture in general, such as the author of the present study<sup>28</sup> and Dimitris Amponis, who studied the monument as supervisor of the interventions carried out by the Protaton Committee in the 1990s and 2000s, and published a succinct, but comprehensive article on the building history of the church<sup>29</sup>. Amponis' notion on the subject is briefly the following: The initial Protaton church, the *proto-Athonite Protaton A*, a small building erected in the 9th century or even earlier<sup>30</sup>, was replaced by *St Athanasios' Protaton B*, erected between 964 and 969, in the form of a cruciform basilica with a transept<sup>31</sup>. The church was repaired in the late 13th century after damage suffered

during the uprising of the supporters of the Union of Churches. The resulting church, *Panselinos' Protaton C*, had the form of a three-aisled basilica with a unified, gable roof<sup>32</sup>. The consecutive phases of the monument, *Patriarch Serapheim's Protaton D*<sup>33</sup> and *Smyrnakis' Protaton E*<sup>34</sup>, were produced after various interventions on the building in the 16th and 18th, and 19th and 20th centuries, respectively. Lastly, the mid-20th-century interventions form *Orlando's Protaton F*<sup>35</sup>.

In 2015, as part of the monumental publication of the conservation project of the Protaton wall-paintings<sup>36</sup>, the archaeologist supervising the project, Andromachi Nastou, covered the subject of the construction history of the church in a short article; Nastou generally maintained the notions of Amponis, with some minor alterations<sup>37</sup>. Nebojša Stanković, in his 2017 doctoral dissertation, utilizing the limited available evidence, dealt with narthex of the church, which is completely altered by post-Byzantine and modern interventions<sup>38</sup>. Lastly, the author of the present study, in an article on Athonite church architecture published in 2021, endorsed the notion that the church was erected from the ground up to replace an older, small church built in the 6th decade of the 10th century, namely the period of maximum growth of Athonite monasticism, as a timber-roofed, cruciform basilica<sup>39</sup>.

Following this overview of the state of the art of research, and the presentation of the various views held

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 141-228.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 229-301.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 303-313 and 315-316 respectively.  
<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 317-318.  
<sup>28</sup> S. Mamaloukos, *To Καθολικό της Μονής Βατοπεδίου. Ιστορία και Αρχιτεκτονική*, Athens 2001, 279-280.

<sup>29</sup> Amponis, "Οικοδομική ιστορία Πρωτάτου", op.cit. (n. 9).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 76-78.

<sup>36</sup> J. Kanonidis (ed.), *Πρωτάτο II. Η συντήρηση των τοιχογραφιών*, two volumes, Polygyros 2015.

<sup>37</sup> A. Nastou, "Η αρχιτεκτονική του Πρωτάτου – Οι κύριες οικοδομικές φάσεις", J. Kanonidis (ed.), *Πρωτάτο II. Η συντήρηση των τοιχογραφιών*, II, Polygyros 2015, 10-11.

<sup>38</sup> N. Stanković, *At the Threshold of the Heavens: The Narthex and Adjacent Spaces in Middle Byzantine Churches of Mount Athos (10th-11th centuries) – Architecture, Function, and Meaning*, Princeton University 2017, 37-41, figs 1-6.

<sup>39</sup> S. Mamaloukos, "Παρατηρήσεις στην αθωνική βυζαντινή ναοδομία", *International Symposium in Honour of Emeritus Professor George Velenis (Thessaloniki, Amphitheatre of Ancient Agora, 4-7 October 2017), Proceedings*, Athens 2021, 614-616, fig. 1.

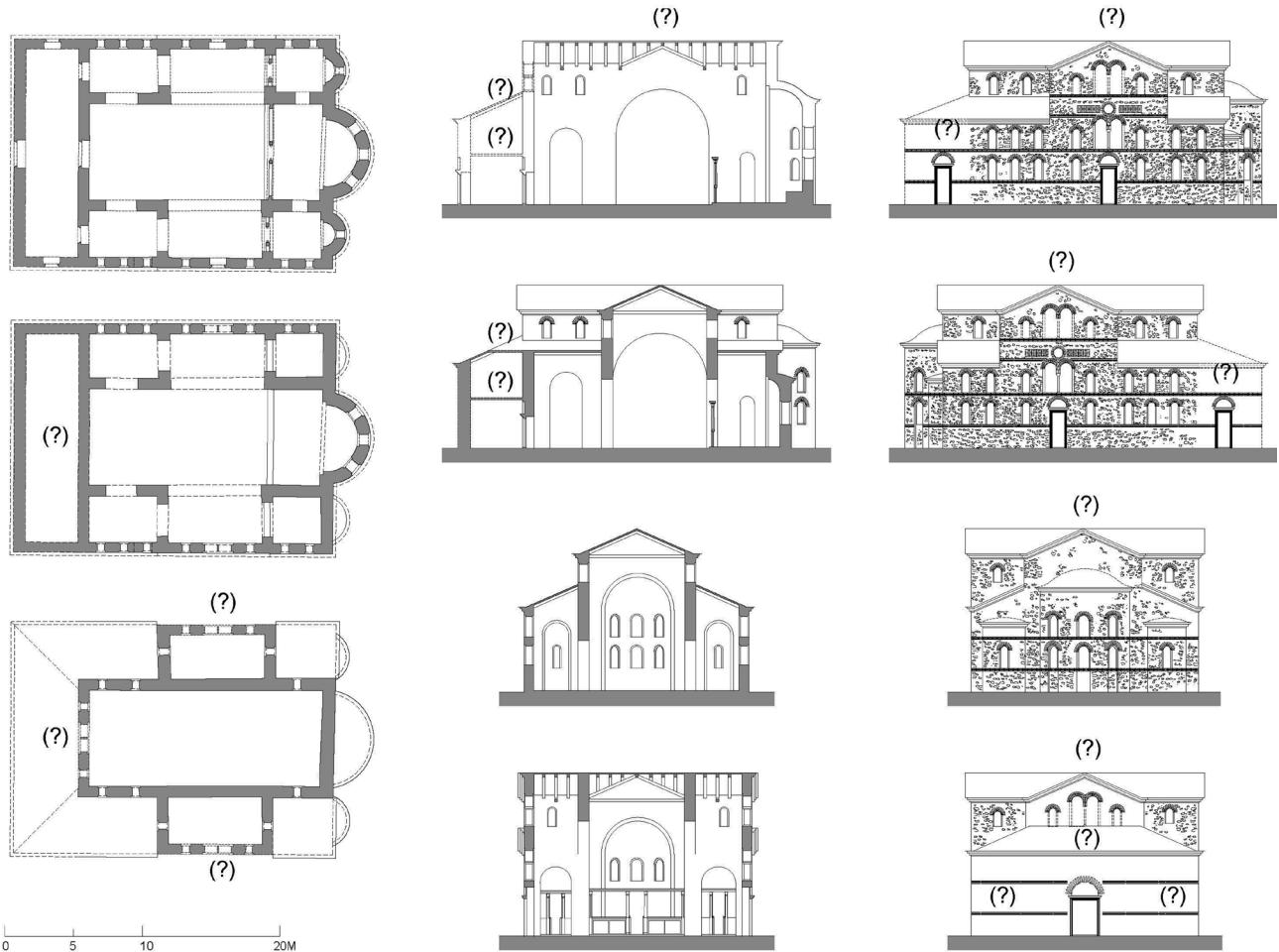


Fig. 4. Karyes, Protaton church. Reconstruction drawings of the first phase (ca. 965).

on the history and architecture of the Protaton, I shall now present my views on the construction history of the church, and reconstruct its appearance in the various phases during the Byzantine era.

As for the small and humble (*πάνυ βραχύτατον*) initial Protaton church known to us from sources, whose building date, according to Kriton Chrysochoidis, must be placed around the last decades of the 9th century<sup>40</sup>, it must be taken for certain that it was utterly demolished around 965, to make way for the new, magnificent Protaton church that survives to this day. This new church, whose building was funded by Leo Phokas with the intervention of St Athanasios in the second half of the

960s, was a large-scale, peculiar, timber-roofed, cruciform basilica (Figs 4, 5.a-d). The floor plan of the building was rectangular with external dimensions approximately 16.90x22.90m excluding the three semi-circular sanctuary apses that protrude from the east façade. The shape of an inscribed cross with cross-arms of different lengths is clearly outlined on the floor plan; the width of the cross-arms was approximately 6.70m, the length of the north and south cross-arms approximately 4.00m, that of the east approximately 4.40m and that of the west approximately 5.50m. The rather isolated corner compartments were connected with the cross-shaped main body of the church via wide and tall arched openings. Given the extremely peculiar form of the building in the context of middle-Byzantine architecture, reconstructing its of old and in several successive phases completely

<sup>40</sup> K. Chrysochoides, “Πρωτάτο. Το κέντρο του Αθωνικού Μοναχισμού”, *Κευτήλια Πρωτάτου*, 1, Mount Athos 2000, 25.

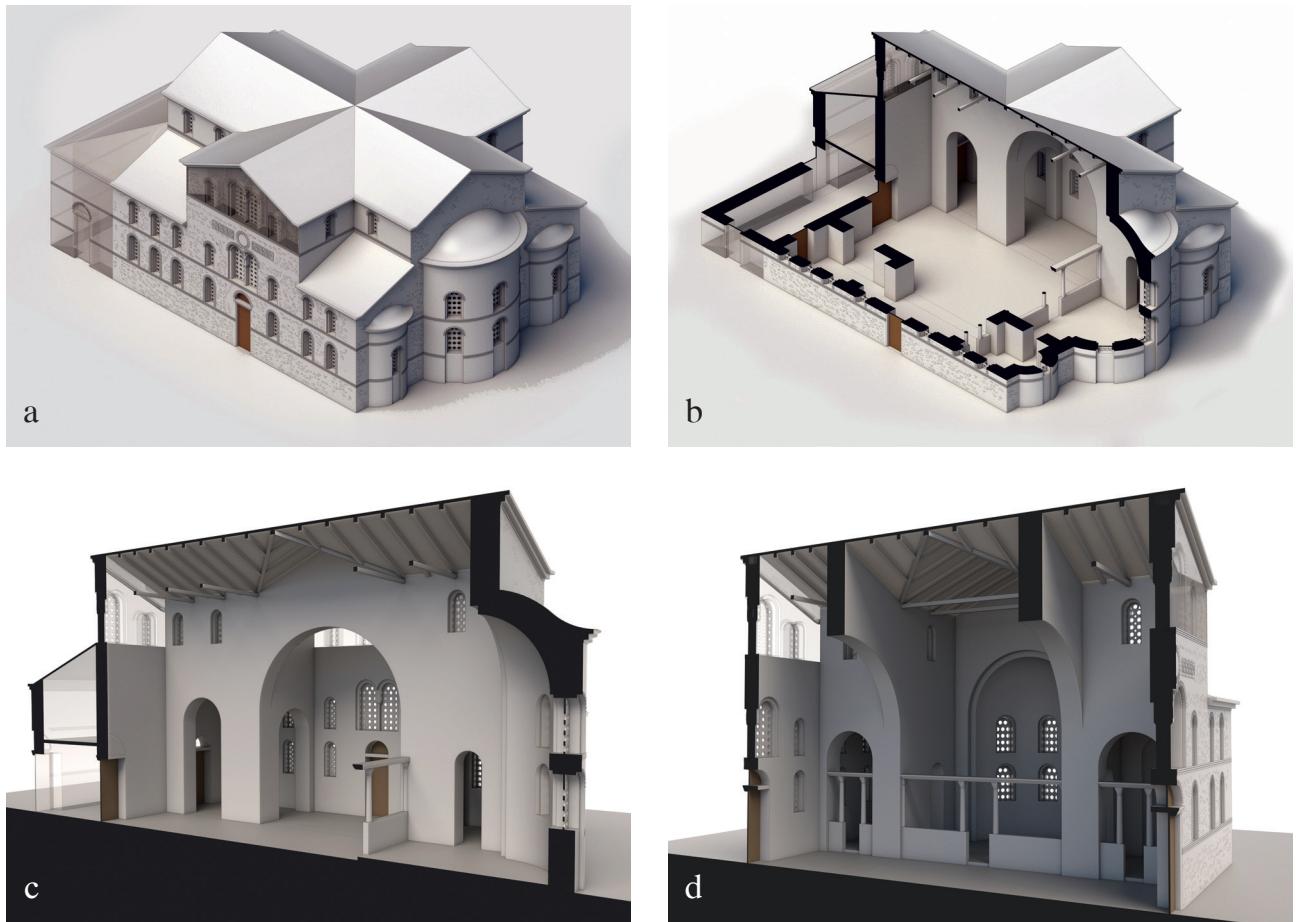


Fig. 5. Karyes. Protaton church. Reconstruction of the first phase (ca. 965): (a) Axonometric view from southeast. (b) Axonometric view from southeast. (c) Perspective longitudinal section. (d) Perspective cross section.

altered superstructure is not easy at all. The corner compartments were undoubtedly covered with lean-to roofs inclined towards the north and south. The surviving windows in the upper part of the walls noted by Pantelis Fountas indicate that the cross-shaped main body of the church doubtlessly extended as a sort of clerestory over the corner compartments, with its form visible from the interior as well, thus dominating the overall articulation of volume of the church.

The lateral cross-arms must have been covered with, probably intersecting, gable roofs. This solution is also encountered in the cruciform basilica of Santa Maria e San Donato at Murano, Venice, dated to the 11th or 12th century<sup>41</sup>, but also in a series of cruciform, free or partly

inscribed, Athonite buildings of the early Ottoman period, namely the refectory (*trapeza*) and the bakery (*manigipeion*) of Megisti Lavra Monastery<sup>42</sup>. If the old refectory of Vatopedi Monastery indeed belonged to this type,

ison with the church of Protaton, see Fountas, *Ναός Πρωτάτου*, op.cit. (n. 4), 118-119. On the monument in general, see G. Suitner-Nicolini, *Vénétie romane*, Paris 1991, 79-81, 121-122, fig. on p. 80 (plan), 83, 120, figs 22-35. G. Zucconi, *Venice. An architectural guide with an essay by Donatella Calabi*, Verona 1995, 26. D. Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice*, New Haven – London 2005, 13-14, fig. 9.

<sup>41</sup> On these two important early Ottoman monuments of Mount Athos, see respectively P. Theocharides – S. Mamaloukos, “Παρατηρήσεις στην οικοδομική ιστορία και την αρχιτεκτονική του κτηριακού συγκροτήματος της τράπεζας της Μεγίστης Λαύρας”, *DChAE* 32 (2011), 33-50. P. Theocharides – S. Mamaloukos, “Το μαγαζείο της Μεγίστης Λαύρας του Αγίου Όρους”, *DChAE* 35 (2014), 9-18.

<sup>42</sup> For the church of Santi Maria e Donato at Murano in compar-

and if this phase of the building is dated by the surviving inscription of 1319/20<sup>43</sup>, then this type of roof layout is substantiated in at least one Athonite Byzantine building. However, if the two large arches that connect the east and west parts of the nave's lateral walls (Figs 2, 3) are original, which I find much more likely in contrast with Fountas' notion, the roofing of the cruciform main body of the Protaton differed from all the aforementioned buildings: in the case of the Protaton church the impression of the interior space would be completely different from that of all the other buildings, since the longitudinal axis of the edifice would be emphasized by the existence of the distinct longitudinal nave (Fig. 4), as it happens today (Figs 2, 3). What actually happens with the two arches in question is very difficult to ascertain under the present circumstances, as frescoes cover all the internal surfaces of the church. Nevertheless, a convincing hint that these may indeed be original, is offered by three small-scale, peculiar Athonite basilicas with transepts covered by roofs supported by transverse arches, which have of old been suggested to be small copies of the Protaton<sup>44</sup>. These are the 11th-century katholika of Ravidouchos monastery near Karyes and Kalamitsion monastery in the district of Vatopedi and the Hagioi Anargyroi chapel in Vatopedi monastery, which apparently was built around 1370 with funds provided by the Serbian Despot Jovan Uglješa<sup>45</sup>.

Access to the church was via three doors on the west façade, and two more doors on the axes of the lateral cross-arms. The interior received natural light from two double-light windows on the axes of the lateral façades, two *oculi* over them, and numerous single-light windows arranged in two rows on the lateral façades and on the sanctuary apse, one series of windows on the clerestory of the main cruciform body of the church, and one window on each of the two side apses.

The construction of the church appears to be quite regular. Fountas rightly deduced the construction layout

and design principles of the church<sup>46</sup>. The façades were arranged symmetrically, with an emphasis on the vertical axis. Three semi-circular axes dominated the east façade. The façades of the north and south cross-arm, which were probably crowned with pediments, dominated the lateral façades. A distinctive morphological feature was the grouped openings, an element also encountered in the church of the Ravidouchos<sup>47</sup>. The windows of the lower row are opened into high blind arches. The arch faces of the sanctuary conches were recessed down to the floor, as is often the case in Byzantine church architecture up to the 11th century<sup>48</sup>.

The church had a narthex, about the exact form of which little is known<sup>49</sup>. The overall dimensions of its floor plan must have been identical to those of the present, 16th-century narthex (Figs 2, 4). The original narthex might have extended over two floors, as in most of the large middle Byzantine churches on Mount Athos<sup>50</sup>.

The walls of the church were constructed of stone masonry, composed of medium rubble stones, and some scarce large stones mostly in the corners, interspersed with unevenly distributed brick shards<sup>51</sup>. As it can be seen on the lower portion of the north façade of the church, sadly the only part of the façades that has remained intact (Fig. 6), but also on older drawings and photographs of the monument that predate the destructive alteration of the façades during the restoration project of Anastasios Orlandos, the walls were pointed with wide joints in off-white mortar. The pointing was flush with the faces of the stones, the mortar was pressed with a trowel, and the outlines of the stones and bricks

<sup>43</sup> On the monument, the inscription and its possible form, see P. Theocharides, "Το συγκρότημα του περιβόλου", I. Papaggelos (ed.), *Ιερά Μεγίστη Μονή Βατοπαιδίου Παράδοση – Ιστορία – Τέχνη*, Mount Athos 1996, 155, fig. 121 and fig. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Mamaloukos, "Αθωνική βυζαντινή ναοδομία", op.cit. (n. 39), 616-618, fig. 2, where prior relevant bibliography can be found.

<sup>45</sup> See P. L. Vocopoulos, *Η έκκλησιαστική άρχιτεκτονική εις την Δυτικήν Στερεάν Ελλάδα καὶ τὴν Ἡπειρον ἀπὸ τοῦ τέλους τοῦ Ζουμέχοι τοῦ τέλους τοῦ 10ον αἰώνος*, Thessaloniki 1992, 154-155.

<sup>46</sup> For the narthex of Protaton, see Fountas, *Ναός Πρωτάτου*, op.cit. (n. 4), 61-63. Stanković, *Threshold of the Heavens*, op.cit. (n. 38), 37-41, figs 1-6. See also G. Subotić, "Priprata Saborne crkve u Kareji početkom XVI veka", D. Dželebdžić – B. Miljković (eds), *Perivolos. Zbornik u čast Mirjane Živojinović / Perivolos. Mélanges offerts à Mirjana Živojinović*, 2, Belgrade 2015, 457-467.

<sup>47</sup> Mamaloukos, *Καθολικό Βατοπεδίου*, op.cit. (n. 28), 154-155.

<sup>48</sup> On the type of masonry of the church, see also Fountas, *Ναός Πρωτάτου*, op.cit. (n. 4), 71.



Fig. 6. Karyes, Protaton church. Detail of the masonry of the north facade (March 2011).

were emphasized by small oblique cuts with the trowel, a practice also found in several specimens of Byzantine masonry contemporary with that of the Protaton<sup>52</sup>. The masonry was reinforced with three consecutive brick bands (Figs 1, 2), each made of three rows of bricks; these brick bands extended along the entire width of the wall, and may at times have included hidden wooden reinforcements in the interior of the wall<sup>53</sup>. It appears that the walls were also equipped with wooden reinforcements at their foundations<sup>54</sup>. The arches and vaulting of the building are constructed exclusively of brick (Figs 1, 2, 7). The cornice at the springing of the sanctuary conch vault was composed of two projecting layers of brick.

The door openings of the Protaton (Figs 1, 2, 4)

<sup>52</sup> S. Mamaloukos, "Treatment of the facades with inscribed and painted architectural forms and decorative features in mid Byzantine Architecture", D. D. Jolshin (ed.), *Transactions of the State Hermitage Museum 33. Architecture of Byzantium and Kievan Rus from the 9th to the 12th Centuries., Materials of the International seminar November 17-21, 2009*, Saint Petersburg 2010, 79, fig. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Fountas, *Ναός Πρωτάτου*, op.cit. (n. 4), 72-73.

<sup>54</sup> Tavlakis, "Μέρημνα για το Πρωτάτο", op.cit. (n. 9), 82, fig. 3. Fountas, *Ναός Πρωτάτου*, op.cit. (n. 4), 71-72, fig. 26.

belonged to the most common door type in Byzantine architecture, namely doors with jambs perpendicular to the wall face, with rather shallow protrusions forming the door frame on the exterior, behind which were the door leaves were fastened<sup>55</sup>. The openings had simple masonry jambs, and wooden lintels. Simple raised brick arches, with a width equal to the underlying opening, stood over the lintel; these were sealed with gypsum frameworks and also functioned as lighting windows. Marble or wooden frames were installed on the exterior faces of the openings, but these have not survived. The marble frame of the modern north door of the church does not appear to belong to the initial phase of the monument.

<sup>55</sup> See S. Mamaloukos, "Observations on the Doors and Windows in Byzantine Architecture", R. Ousterhout – R. Holod – L. Haselberger (eds) – A. T. Jones (ass. ed.), *Masons at Work: Architecture and Construction in the Pre-Modern World (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, March 30 – April 1, 2012)*, October 2012 = <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/ancient/masons/mamaloukos.pdf> (accessed 22.2.2022), 5-6. Idem, "Παρατηρήσεις στη διαμόρφωση και την κατασκευή των ανοιγμάτων των θυρών στη βυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική", V. Katsaros – A. Tourta (eds), *Αφίέρωμα στον ακαδημαϊκό Παναγιώτη Λ. Βοκοτόπουλο*, Athens 2015, 117-119, fig. 1Γ.



Fig. 7. Karyes, Protaton church. Partial view of the north façade (June 2017).

The single and double-light window openings of the church (Figs 1, 2, 7) belong to the typical window type of Byzantine architecture<sup>56</sup>. All had simple masonry jambs and brick, arched lintels. Their faces were recessed both on the interior and exterior. Single-light windows had arched lintels, in the form of raised brick arches, without an enveloping brick band. The arches of the windows on the lateral façades and the upper row on the sanctuary apse were constructed of carefully cut bricks<sup>57</sup>. The double-light windows of the lateral façades of the church (Figs 1, 2, 7) are of the arcade type, typical in works of the Middle Byzantine School of Constantinople and in Middle Byzantine architecture in general<sup>58</sup>. Their arches are raised, and the arch faces are recessed up to the springing of the raised arches. The common part of the two exte-

rior arches over the axis of the windows is formed by a simple vertical brick that projects out of the abacus of the capital. This particular detail is also encountered in other Byzantine churches on Mount Athos, for example, in the *lite* of the katholikon of Vatopedi monastery, on the first floor, double-light windows of the church of Saint Prokopios in the Vatopedi kelliion of Saint Prokopios, on the double-light windows on the faces of the lateral façades and the sanctuary apse in the *kyriakon* of the Vatopedi skete of Saint Demetrios, on the double-light and triple-light windows of the apses of the same church, etc. The mullions between the window lobes have impost block-like capitals with low impost blocks and impost bases. All windows had gypsum frames, original samples of which might still survive on the monument today.

The church façades have some limited brickwork decoration (Figs 1, 2, 7), which consists of short friezes on either side of the *oculi* on the lateral façades (Figs 4, 7). The friezes are composed of simple brick frame and reticulate ornament in the form of a row of rhomboid

<sup>56</sup> On the form of window openings in Byzantine architecture, see Mamaloukos, "Doors and Windows", op.cit. (n. 55), 26-29.

<sup>57</sup> Fountas, *Ναός Πρωτάτου*, op.cit. (n. 4), 73.

<sup>58</sup> See Mamaloukos, "Doors and Windows", op.cit. (n. 55), 29.

shapes with bricks across the diagonal elements<sup>59</sup>. Pantelis Fountas suggests that the brickwork decoration of the Protaton must not belong to the initial phase of the monument, but rather to “the 13th-century modifications”<sup>60</sup>. I consider this notion highly unlikely. Apart from the fact that the technical information provided by Fountas is not very convincing, similar brickwork decoration appears in other safely dated Middle Byzantine Athonite monuments, such as the old refectory of Docheiariou monastery, which, according to Ploutarchos Theocharides, is dated to the late 11th or early 12th century<sup>61</sup>, and on a blind arch tympanum on the façade of the kyriakon of the Vatopedi skete of Saint Demetrios, itself also dated to the 11th century<sup>62</sup>, thus justifying an earlier date for the decoration of the Protaton.

The sanctuary was separated from the main church with a marble sanctuary screen, which still survives *in situ* in a quite good state of preservation (Figs 2, 4); based on stylistic elements the sanctuary screen can be dated to the 10th century<sup>63</sup>. Intricate proskynetaria with a frame composed of complex colonettes decorated with an Heracles’ knot, capitals and an arch with sculpted relief ornament, are formed on the sides of the sanctuary wall-pillars. The *proskynetaria* are constructed with gypsum mortar, a technique encountered often in Byzantine sculpture, several specimens of which are still preserved on Mount Athos<sup>64</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> See Fountas, *Ναός Πρωτάτου*, op.cit. (n. 4), 74, pls 10, 13, 14.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 179-185.

<sup>61</sup> On the monument, see P. Theocharidis – J. Tavlakis, “Ερευνες στην παλιά τράπεζα της Μ. Δοχειαρίου Αγίου Όρους”, 2nd Symposium of the ChAE (Athens 1982), 29-30. P. Theocharides, “Architectural Organization of the Athonite Monasteries during the Byzantine period”, G. Galavaris (ed.), *Athos, la Sainte Montagne. Tradition et renouveau dans l'art* (Αθωνικά Σύμψειτα / Athonika Symmeikta 10), Athens 2007, 106-108.

<sup>62</sup> On the monument, see Mamaloukos, *Καθολικό Βατοπεδίου*, op.cit. (n. 28), 284-285. P. Androudis, “Le catholicon du monastère byzantin de Saint Demetrios (Chalkeos) au Mont Athos (actuel Kyriakon de la skete de Saint Demetrios de Vatopedi)”, *DChAE* 29 (2008), 195-206.

<sup>63</sup> Orlando, “Τὸ μαρμάρινον τέμπλον τοῦ Πρωτάτου τῶν Καρυῶν”, op.cit. (n. 11). N. Melvani, “The Middle Byzantine sanctuary barriers of Mount Athos: Templa and iconostasis”, P. Petridis – V. Foskolou (eds), *Δασκάλα. Απόδοση τημής στην καθηγήτρια Μαίρη Παναγιωτίδη-Κεσίσογλου*, Athens 2015, 305-335.

<sup>64</sup> See V. Papadopoulou, “Γύψινα υστεροβυζαντινά ανάγλυφα από

The majority of the researchers that have studied the Protaton in recent years acknowledge that the church built (or modified) in the 960s was repaired again around the year 1300 after suffering damage from the supporters of the Union of Churches or the Catalan Company. The sole exception is Pantelis Fountas, who, as has already been mentioned, upholds the view that another building phase that corresponds to the “global (*sic*) March 11th 1231 earthquake” lies between the two aforementioned phases. It must be reminded that, according to Fountas, during this repair phase, a building workshop from the Despotate of Epirus modified the church by retaining its old cruciform floor plan and covering the cross-arms with timber-framed structures in a cross-vaulted layout. It is quite possible that in Byzantine architecture, and on Mount Athos nonetheless, there existed timber-framed vaulting structures, equivalent to those found both in the East and the West, as Fountas claims, based on an extensive and systematic research<sup>65</sup>. However, I consider the evidence used to support such a hypothesis in the case of the Protaton quite shaky; it appears highly unlikely that

την ‘Ηπειρο’, *AD* 56 (2001) A – Meletes, Athens 2006, 341-364. S. Kalopissi-Verti, “The Proskynetaria of the Templa and Narthex: Form, Imagery, Spatial Connections, and Reception”, S. E. J. Gerstel (ed.), *Thresholds of the Sacred. Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, Harvard University Press, 2006, 110. Th. Pazaras, “Γύψινες διακοσμήσεις στο καθολικό της Μονής Ιβήρων”, *Makedonika* 36 (2007), 47-64. Fl. Vanni, “Working Stucco in Byzantium: Some Evidence from the Written Sources”, *Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Belgrade 22-27 August 2016*, Belgrade 2016, <https://www.academia.edu/29156663> (accessed 22.2.2022). Eadem, “Does a cheap material make a patron poor? The church of St. John Eleimon in Ligourio, Peloponnese”, *Skint: Peasants and Poverty in Byzantium, International Medieval Congress of Leeds (3-6 July 2017)* = <https://www.academia.edu/33883480> (accessed 22.2.2022). Eadem, “Aspetti meno noti della scultura mediobizantina: la decorazione a stucco”, Co-sentino – Pomero – Vespignani (eds), *Dialoghi con Bisanzio. Spazi di discussione, percorsi di ricerca. Atti dell’VIII Congresso dell’Associazione Italiana di Studi Bizantini (Ravenna, 22-25 Settembre 2015)*, 1, Spoleto 2019, 1119-1140. Eadem, “Men at work. Stucco workshop(s) on Mount Athos”, *Byzantine Materialities. IV: Workshops, Trade, and Manuscripts, International Medieval Congress of Leeds (1-4th July 2019)* [= <https://www.academia.edu/40765831>] (accessed 22-2-2022). Eadem, *Byzantine stucco decoration (ca. 850-1453). Cultural and economic implications across the Mediterranean*, two volumes, University of Birmingham 2021, 1, 148-151 and 2, 148-151, figs 4.10-4.11, 9.1-9.5.

<sup>65</sup> Fountas, *Ναός Πρωτάτου*, op.cit. (n. 4), 319-345.

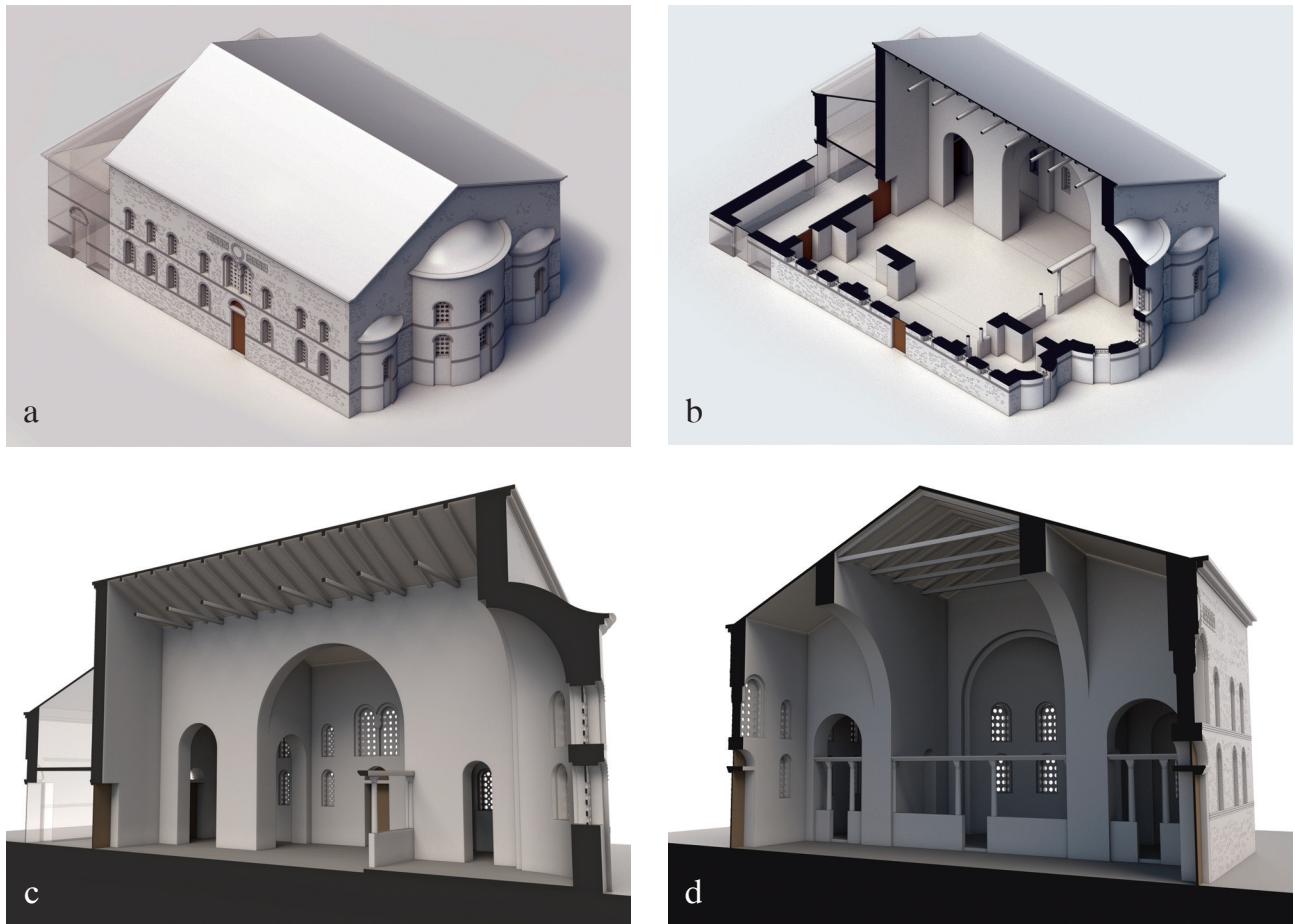


Fig. 8. Karyes, Protaton church. Reconstruction of the second phase (early 14th century): (a) Axonometric view from southeast. (b) Axonometric view from southeast. (c) Perspective longitudinal section. (d) Perspective cross section.

the superstructure of the church could have been constructed out of timber-frame vaulting to the extent suggested by Fountas' reconstruction, as this goes against all current knowledge on Byzantine church architecture.

Once we set aside, due to lack of convincing evidence, the hypothesis of an early 13th-century repair, we are left with a building phase that is both reported in oral tradition, and can be corroborated by evidence, namely the building phase associated with the Palaiologan wall-paintings of the church, apparently sometime in the 14th century<sup>66</sup>. Out of the various reconstruction attempts, the safest one, though again not without some problematic issues, must be that of a three-aisled basilica, with a unified

gable roof, set forth by Mylonas and Amponis (Fig. 8. a-d). In terms of the two alternative reconstructions suggested by Fountas, one must retain serious reservation. In the case of the roofing of the timber-framed clerestory with a gable roof, I have already expressed my reservation about the excessive use of timber-frame structures in the superstructure of a church. As for the roofing of the central aisle with a timber-framed raised central bay, my reservations stem from the fact that such a solution would be quite foreign to the character of the building.

Following this discussion, I shall now attempt an assessment of the Protaton in the context of Middle Byzantine architecture, and endeavor to interpret the peculiarities that the architecture of the monument presents. Hence, one could, in summary, make the following points:

<sup>66</sup> Vapheiades, "Wall-paintings of the Protaton Church", op. cit. (n. 7), 117-119. See also above.

First, based on the surviving evidence and current knowledge, the Protaton church constitutes a *unicum* for Middle Byzantine church architecture. Nevertheless, the possibility that there were other churches with characteristics similar to those of the Athonite monument, which, given the relative sensitivity of their construction, have since been destroyed and thus are not known to us today, cannot be ruled out at all.

Secondly, the creation of the type of a cruciform timber-roofed basilica that the church follows could be interpreted as a conscious choice to reuse an old, early Byzantine model, namely that of the cruciform basilica<sup>67</sup>, as for example those of Gerasa (465)<sup>68</sup>, Salona (530-533)<sup>69</sup>, Thasos (6th century)<sup>70</sup>, and the so-called Cumanin Camii church in Antalya, Asia Minor (second half of the 5th – early 6th century)<sup>71</sup>, in a manner similar to the way the

architects of San Marco of Venice creatively copied the church of the Holy Apostles<sup>72</sup>. From this point of view, the Protaton could be another proof that, despite the opposing views that have been expressed, many of the most important works of Byzantine architecture are characterized by remarkable originality<sup>73</sup>, and that the typological choices that led to the creation of the Protaton could be associated, even in a broad sense, with the architectural renaissance of the Macedonian dynasty, which Richard Krautheimer discusses in the chapter “New building types and the ‘Middle-Byzantine renaissance’ of his book *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*”<sup>74</sup>.

chte und ihre byzantinischen Ursprünge Bauaufnahme, Istanbul 2010.

<sup>72</sup> Krautheimer – Ćurčić, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, op.cit. (n. 2), 407-411.

<sup>73</sup> S. Mamaloukos, “Από τον σχεδιασμό στην κατασκευή: Ζητήματα εφαρμογής στη βυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική”, *DChAE* 39 (2018), 3-96, 86-87.

<sup>74</sup> Krautheimer – Ćurčić, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, op.cit. (n. 2), 335-353.

#### Illustration credits

Figs 1, 3, 6, 7: Photographs by Stavros Mamaloukos. Fig. 2: Center for the Preservation of the Athonite Heritage, Fountas, Ναός Πρωτάτου, op.cit. (n. 4), drawings 2-18. Figs 4, 5 (a-d), 8 (a-d): Drawings by Vasileios Mamaloukos under the instructions of Stavros Mamaloukos.

## Σταύρος Μαμαλούκος

# ΠΑΡΑΤΗΡΗΣΕΙΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΟΙΚΟΔΟΜΙΚΗ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΝ ΑΡΧΙΤΕΚΤΟΝΙΚΗ ΤΟΥ ΝΑΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΠΡΩΤΑΤΟΥ ΣΤΙΣ ΚΑΡΥΕΣ ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΟΡΟΥΣ

Σύμφωνα με την άποψη που είχε διατυπωθεί παλαιότερα από τον καθηγητή Παύλο Μυλωνά, ο ναός του Πρωτάτου στις Καρυές είχε κτιστεί περί το 900 ως τοίκλιτη βασιλική και αναμορφώθηκε, ώστε να αποκτήσει ένα είδος εσωτερικών χορών από τον άγιο Αθανάσιο τον Αθωνίτη περί το 965 (Εικ. 1-3). Νεώτεροι, ωστόσο,

ερευνητές (Π. Φουντάς, Δ. Αμπόνης, Σ. Μαμαλούκος) υποστήριξαν με βάσιμα επιχειρήματα ότι ο σημερινός ναός οικοδομήθηκε εκ θεμελίων εις αντικατάστασιν ενός αρχικού μικρότερου, στην έκτη δεκαετία του 10ου αιώνα. Ο νέος αυτός ναός ήταν μια μεγάλων διαστάσεων ιδιότυπη ξυλόστεγη σταυρική βασιλική (Εικ.

4-6). Το κτήριο είχε σε κάτοψη σχήμα ορθογωνίου παραλληλογράμμου. Στην κάτοψή του διαγραφόταν σαφώς το σχήμα ενός εγγεγραμμένου ανισοσκελούς σταυρού. Τα σχετικά απομονωμένα γωνιακά διαμερίσματα του ναού επικοινωνούσαν με το σταυρικό του σώμα μέσω φαρδιών τοξωτών διόδων. Το σταυρικό σώμα του ναού αναμφίβολα υπερψυφωνόταν εν είδει φωταγωγού επάνω από τα γωνιακά διαμερίσματα και διαγραφόταν σαφώς στο εξωτερικό του κτηρίου. Τα σκέλη του σταυρικού σώματος πρέπει να καλύπτονταν με δίριχτες στέγες, οι οποίες πιθανότατα αλληλοτέμνονταν. Πρόκειται για μια λύση γνωστή από τη σταυρική βασιλική της Παναγίας και του Αγίου Δονάτου στο Μουράνο της Βενετίας, του 11ου ή του 12ου αιώνα, αλλά και από μια σειρά σταυρόσχημων, ελεύθερων ή εν μέρει εγγεγραμμένων, αθωνικών κτηρίων της πρώιμης οθωμανικής περιόδου, και συγκεκριμένα την τράπεζα και το μαγκιτείο της Μεγίστης Λαύρας. Ωστόσο, αν τα δύο τόξα που συνδέουν τα δυτικά με τα ανατολικά τμήματα των διαμήκων εσωτερικών τοίχων, είναι αρχικά (Εικ. 2, 3), πράγμα που φαίνεται πολύ πιθανό, παρά τα όσα περί του αντιθέτου υποστηρίζει ο Παντελής Φουντάς, η στέγαση του σταυρικού σώματος του Πρωτάτου διαφοροποιείται από όλα τα παραπάνω παραδείγματα: στην περίπτωση του αθωνικού ναού η αίσθηση του εσωτερικού του χώρου (Εικ. 4, 5) θα ήταν εντελώς διαφορετική, καθώς θα τονιζόταν ο κατά μήκος άξονας με τον ορισμό ενός διακριτού διαμήκους κεντρικού κλίτους, όπως συμβαίνει και σήμερα (Εικ. 2, 3).

Όσον αφορά την οικοδομική ιστορία του μνημείου στους επόμενους αιώνες, αν η υπόθεση που έχει διατυπωθεί από τον Π. Φουντά για μια επισκευή του ναού στις αρχές του 13ου αιώνα παραμεριστεί προς το παρόν, ελλείψει στοιχείων, τότε απομένει η παραδιδόμενη αλλά και τεκμαιρόμενη, καθώς μπορεί να συνδυαστεί με την παλαιολόγεια τοιχογράφηση του ναού, οικοδομική φάση του τέλους του 13ου ή των αρχών του 14ου αιώνα (Εικ. 8). Από τις διάφορες προτάσεις αναπαράστασης που έχουν ώς τώρα επιχειρηθεί, ασφαλέστερη, αν και όχι χωρίς προβλήματα, είναι εκείνη της τρίκλιτης βασιλικής, με ενιαία δίριχτη στέγη. Οι εκτεταμένες εργασίες του πρώτου τετάρτου του 16ου αιώνα και εκείνες των επομένων αιώνων έδωσαν στο μνημείο τη μορφή που είχε πριν από τις ελάχιστα τεκμηριωμένες εργασίες αποκατάστασης που έγιναν

στο μνημείο από τον Αναστάσιο Κ. Ορλάνδο κατά τη δεκαετία του 1950 (Εικ. 1-3).

Μετά από όσα αναφέρθηκαν παραπάνω, θα μπορούσε να επιχειρηθεί μια αξιολόγηση του Πρωτάτου στο πλαίσιο της μεσοβυζαντινής αρχιτεκτονικής και να καταβληθεί μια προσπάθεια ερμηνείας της ιδιοτύπιας που παρουσιάζει η αρχιτεκτονική του μνημείου. Επ' αυτών των ξητημάτων θα μπορούσε κανείς να διατυπώσει τις παρακάτω θέσεις:

Με τα σημερινά δεδομένα και το επίπεδο των γνώσεών μας το Πρωτάτο αποτελεί *unicum* για τη μεσοβυζαντινή ναοδομία. Παρά ταύτα δεν μπορεί να αποκλειστεί η πιθανότητα να υπήρχαν στη βυζαντινή εποχή και άλλοι ναοί με χαρακτηριστικά όμοια με εκείνα του αθωνικού μνημείου, τα οποία, δεδομένης της σχετικής ευαισθησίας της κατασκευής τους, έχουν καταστραφεί και έτσι δεν μας είναι σήμερα γνωστά.

Η δημιουργία του τύπου της ξυλόστεγης σταυρικής βασιλικής, που ακολουθεί ο ναός, θα μπορούσε να ερμηνευθεί ως συνειδητή επιλογή επαναχρησιμοποίησης ενός παλαιού, της πρωτοβυζαντινής περιόδου, προτύπου, και συγκεκριμένα μιας σταυρικής βασιλικής, όπως λ.χ. εκείνες των Γεράσων (465), της Θάσου (6ος αιώνας) ή του γνωστού ως Cumanin Camii, ναού της μικρασιατικής Αττάλειας (δεύτερο μισό του 5ου – αρχές του 6ου αιώνα), κατά τρόπο ανάλογο της δημιουργικής αντιγραφής του ναού των Αγίων Αποστόλων από τους αρχιτέκτονες του ναού του Αγίου Μάρκου της Βενετίας. Υπό την οπτική αυτή, το Πρωτάτο θα μπορούσε να αποτελεί μια ακόμη απόδειξη ότι, παρά τις αντίθετες απόψεις που έχουν κατά καιρούς διατυπωθεί, πολλά από τα σημαντικότερα έργα της βυζαντινής αρχιτεκτονικής χαρακτηρίζονται από αξιοσημείωτη πρωτοτυπία και ότι οι τυπολογικές επιλογές που οδήγησαν στη δημιουργία του Πρωτάτου, θα μπορούσαν αν ενταχθούν στην, έστω και με μια ευρεία έννοια, αναγέννηση της αρχιτεκτονικής της εποχής των Μακεδόνων, που σχολιάζει ο Richard Krautheimer στο κεφάλαιο με τίτλο «Οι νέοι κτηριακοί τύποι και η “μεσοβυζαντινή αναγέννηση”», στο βιβλίο του *Παλαιοχριστιανική και Βυζαντινή Αρχιτεκτονική*.

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