Πτηνά στον παράδεισο: ταφική εικονογραφία στο ναό του Μέρμπακα

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BIRDS IN PARADISE:
FUNERARY ICONOGRAPHY AT MERBAKA CHURCH

A burial chamber discovered under the Bema at Merbaka church in the Argolid implies that the church was built for the Catholic rite, most likely at the turn of the 14th century, as a memorial to William of Moerbeke, Dominican Archbishop of Corinth until 1286. Inscriptions and details in the iconography of the frescoes in the prothesis, however, particularly a small antiquarian fresco of birds and plants over the entrance from the prothesis to the Bema, suggest that these paintings date to the early 15th century during the Venetian hegemony over Argos and Nauplion, when the translation of the local St. Peter of Argos from Argos to Nauplion occurred, and Merbaka church may have been given a new memorial purpose.

Keywords
Antiquarianism, prothesis, St. Peter of Argos, Venetians, William of Moerbeke.

One of the many topics about which Titos Papamastorakis enlightened us was that of funerary art. He recognized that the iconography and specific location of a fresco or of a painted or sculptured panel could in some cases denote the work’s previously unacknowledged funerary nature. This paper suggests another example of such an “επιτύμβια παράσταση,” in the fresco program at the Argolid monument known as Merbaka church.

Located just outside the modern village of Hagia Triada, about equidistant from Nauplion and Argos, Merbaka is a well-known, domed, four-columned sanctuary with a narthex. Traditionally dated to the mid-12th century, no

Δέξεις κλειδία
Αρχαιότητα, πρόθεση, άγιος Πέτρος του Άργους, Βενετοί, Ηλίανος Μορβέκε.

1 T. Papamastorakis, “Επιτύμβιες παραστάσεις κατά τη μέση και ύστερη βυζαντινή περίοδο,” ΔΧΑΕ 16 (1996 1997), 285-304. I wish to thank the readers whose comments greatly improved this article.


ΔΧΑΕ Δ’ (2013), 157-166
funerary connotations had been associated with the church, until 1987 when the local priest found a loose paving stone behind the altar. The stone concealed a ca. 50 cm. square, stone-fitted hole, the trap to an open area beneath the Bema. An excavation of the subterranean area was conducted by Anastasia Oikonomou-Laniadou of the (then) 5th Byzantine Ephoreia, and a further cleaning was undertaken by myself.3 The Ephoreia excavators laid out a ca. 1 m. square trench in the naos, directly in front of the central marble threshold block separating the naos from the Bema. At the eastern end of the trench, at a depth of ca. 0.52 cm. from the top of the threshold block, appeared a brick arch which spanned the trench and seemed to continue beyond it. Below this, a wall of courses of mortar and narrow stones continued down for ca. 0.37 cm. to a large poros stone block, ca. 0.135 cm. in height by 0.68 cm. across, which proved to be the lintel of a doorway. The entryway was extremely small, measuring only ca. 0.50 cm. wide and ca. 0.85 cm. tall, and had no indication of anything having been used to block it.

The doorway opened into a barrel vaulted room with an apse at the east end and the trap, that had been visible from the Bema above, opening at about the apex of the vaulting where it met the east apse wall. The chamber contained loose, unstratified fill, mounded in the middle of the area, to a height of ca. 0.55 cm. below the vault. The fill was excavated for the length of the chamber to a depth of ca. 1.25 m. from the apex of the vault. At this level, the earth became packed. The finds from this fill included small pieces of marble architectural sculpture and stuccoed stone, fragments of pottery, glass and metal, and a few chips of fresco, all of which were scattered throughout the fill, and none of which could be securely dated to earlier than the 13th century. There was no evidence of a reliquary nor of a sarcophagus or wooden coffin or coffin nails, nor, apparently, of any human bones.4 A further trench was opened across the eastern end of the chamber, extending ca. 0.50 cm. west from the central point of the apse wall and continuing down another ca. 0.60 cm, establishing that the total height of the apse wall was ca. 1.80 cm. and exposing ca. 0.15-0.20 cm. of packed earth underneath the wall. The total length of the chamber, from the interior edge of the doorway to the central point of the apse wall was ca. 3.35 m., and the width of the area, taken across the middle, was ca. 2 m.

The lower courses of the north, the south and the apse walls of the chamber, up to ca. 0.80 cm. above the packed dirt, were constructed of stones and mortar. Above this, the side walls rising to the barrel vault, and the apse wall, were constructed of bricks. The western wall appeared to be bonded in a few places to both the north and south walls of the chamber. Both north and south walls also appeared to be integrated into the curvature of the apse wall, and it was primarily to verify this that further cleaning of the area was undertaken in 1995.

A trench was laid out for the entire length of the south wall up to the baulk that had been left at the east end of the chamber by the Ephoreia excavators.5 Exploration in this trench continued down to ca. 1.83 m. from the vault apex, exposing the bottom of the south wall, at a depth of ca. 1.77 m., and ca. 0.05 cm. of packed earth beneath. It also revealed that the south wall was ca. 0.40 cm. deeper than the western wall of the chamber. The southern end of the baulk was then removed to expose the entire length of the south wall and the earth beneath it. It was then possible

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3 The Ephoreia excavation was conducted in two short campaigns in September and October of 1988 by the late Mrs Oikonomou Laniado who, although she never published the excavation herself, very kindly made copies of her excavation notes available to me and granted me permission to study the excavation finds and to undertake the cleaning. The description of the excavation is mine, based on her notes. The cleaning campaign took place in 1995. The excavation is noted in B. Kondi, “Αργολικά σημειώματα,” Σύμμεικτα 9 (1994), 267, note 64; it, the cleaning and finds are fully discussed in Coulson, The Church of Merbaka, op.cit., 103 110 and 119 153.

4 The stone and stucco finds were first catalogued by I. Varalis, whom I thank for kindly making his notes available to me. Some of the pottery was published by A. Oikonomou Laniado, “La cérámica protomajolique d’Argos,” La ceramica nel mondo bizantino tra XI e XV secolo e i suoi rapporti con l’Italia (ed. S. Gelichi), Siena 1991, 307 316.

5 My thanks to Charles K. Williams, II for suggestions about how to proceed with the cleaning.
to see that the south wall was completely integrated down to its foundation with the apse wall. The measurements of the chamber and the manner in which it was constructed indicate that it was not dug into the church at a later date, but is contemporary with the building above it. As can be seen from the plan of the Bema of the church (Fig. 1), the apse wall of the chamber lies directly under the Bema apse above, and is, therefore, its foundation wall. As determined by the excavation and cleaning, the south, and presumably also the north, chamber wall is contiguous for its full depth with this apse chamber wall, and both the depth of the apse wall and the method of construction employed there are maintained in the side walls, including the size of the bricks used and the depth of the mortar beds, further indications of a single building campaign (Fig. 2).

The depth of the western walls of the chamber argues against the rather unlikely possibility that an earlier subterranean chamber was incorporated into the church. The north and south walls of the chamber, as the inner faces of the Bema foundation walls, were, predictably, as deep as the apse foundation wall which they continue. The western walls, however, as non-weight-bearing elements did not have to continue to the same depth. If the chamber had been built independently, and the church later erected around it, it is reasonable to assume that all of the chamber walls would have been sunk to the same depth. Furthermore, a comparison of the total depth of the chamber beneath the naos floor (ca. 2.30 m.) with the depth of the exterior foundations of the church, also measured from the naos floor level (ca. 2.21-2.28 m.) reveals that they are almost identical, as might be expected if they were built at the same time.

There can be little doubt that the vaulted chamber under the Bema of Merbaka church was intended as a burial space. This conclusion makes it extremely unlikely that the church originally was constructed for the Orthodox rite. In his study of Byzantine mortuary practices, Ivison

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6 My thanks to Tasos Tanoulas for this plan.
7 Trenches to expose the church’s foundations were opened at the southeast corner of the church, in front of the door into the narthex on the south wall and at the northwest corner of the building, in the summer of 1995, under the direction of K. Gerolymou of the 5th Byzantine Ephoria. See, K. Gerolymou G. Hadji Minaglou, “Merbaka (Agolide),” BCH 123 (1999), 531-540; and the short report by G. Hadjiminoglou, in D. Blackman, “Archaeology in Greece 1998-99,” JHS 119 (1999), 27.
cites the text of the early 15th-century Archbishop Symeon of Thessaloniki, describing who should be buried where in a church (priests within the altar precinct, and monks in front of the templon, laity elsewhere in the naos, “...according to their order of rank.”) as an example of an idealized social hierarchy of burial that Symeon states was being violated, thus prompting his commentary. According to Ivison, however, the archaeological record confirms only a few late Byzantine burials in parekklesia, and none, not even of priests, in the Bema area of churches. This is also the conclusion of a comprehensive study of Byzantine burials in Greece by Laskaris: none are found in the altar area of the church. Curic’s examination of royal burials of the Palaeologan period in the Balkans does document three burials in front of the altar in a mausoleum chapel which was part of the Bosnian rulers’ palace at Bobovac. These royal tombs boasted gisants and Latin inscriptions which Curic attributes to contact with western burial customs. Indeed, Catholic tradition sanctioned the burial of eminent clergy and laymen near the altar, as declared by the 13th-century Dominican canonist, William Durandus:

“No body, therefore, ought to be buried in a church or near an Altar... except the bodies of the Holy Fathers... and Bishops, and Abbots, and worthy, Presbyters, and laymen of eminent sanctity.”

The most obvious candidate for burial at Merbaka church is William of Moerbeke, Dominican Archbishop of Corinth from 1278 until 1286, who died at an unknown location. Moerbeke, whose jurisdiction included the suffragan bishopric of Argos, was both a papal confessor and a papal legate, who had resided at the Frankish court at Thebes as well as at the Byzantine one at Nicea. He was a devoted philhellene who became the official translator at the Council of Lyons in 1274, held with the hope of uniting the Orthodox and Latin churches. He is most well-known today for his translations of Greek manuscripts, especially of Aristotle, some of which were used by St. Thomas Aquinas, and of scientific texts, many of which, such as Ptolemy’s “Peri Analymmata” are now lost.

Interest in the many bacini immured in the church led Sanders to suggest assigning the monument to the time of the Archbishop, thereby dating the pottery to the late 13th century. Recent excavations at Corinth, have now confirmed this date for the extant Merbaka ceramics, all but one of which is definitely imported. Of the two main types of pottery immured at the church, that from the Veneto area is not found at Corinth, the nearest site with large pottery deposits, until the end of the century; and both it and the other most prevalent pottery at the church, the south Italian Proto-maiolica wares, were apparently no longer being imported into Corinth after the Catalan conquest of 1312. Therefore, the date of the church can be reasonably limited to the years between about 1285 and 1320, the later date coinciding with the 100 year anniversary of the death of St. Dominic in 1221. Indeed, the church, may best be understood as a burial monument, built specifically to house the tomb of William of Moerbeke, although it seems that he was never laid to rest in the church.
there, and the church, Byzantine in appearance and constructed with many antique spolia, became in fact a fitting memorial to him.

The medieval frescoes at Merbaka were revealed in the 1980’s, when the early 20th century paintings in the church were largely removed, allowing for the partial cleaning and conservation of the few remaining earlier paintings, a large number of which are within the prothesis. The discovery of the burial chamber at the church throws new light on a possible interpretation of these paintings. The program consists of four scenes from the Life of the Virgin on the vault. In the apse, an inscription identifies a bust of St. Leon, Bishop of Catania, *orans*, in the conch with, below, an unconserved painting of a standing bishop to the left of the window, and St. Peter, Bishop of Nauplion and Argos, holding a closed book and identified by inscription, to the right (Fig. 3). St. Stephen, Protomartyr, so labeled, is depicted full-length with censer on the south wall, next to the entrance to the Bema, and on the other side of the entrance, are two life-size frontal depictions of bishops, also with inscriptions identifying them as St. Constantine, Bishop of Nauplion and Argos, and St. Clement, Bishop of Rome, each holding a closed book. Filling the register above these standing bishops, twelve portrait busts (six on each side wall) of unidentifiable saintly bishops, each holding a closed book, are shown within alternating red and gold *clipei* which are joined by gold rings and surrounded by elaborate vine-scrolls. The entire north wall beneath the *clipei* preserves only the faded depictions of three standing figures, most likely also bishops.

Notable in the iconography of these paintings is the occurrence of several “classical” motifs. In addition to the medallions and vine-scrolls (Fig. 4) there are small grisaille “statues” which adorn the buildings visible in the backgrounds of the scenes of the Life of the Virgin (Fig. 5); a luxurious foliate swag, tied at intervals with gold bands, ascends the wall around the curve of the apse (Fig. 6); scant remains of a black panel with traces of possible fringe at the bottom, and what seems to be a band or ribbon of gold, looped along its height and at the corners, appears beneath the depiction of St. Stephen Protomartyr and depicted over the entrance into the Bema are two birds, standing on either side of small plants, against a “Pompeian red” background (Fig. 7).

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18 A. Bakourou, “Αγία Τριάδα,” ΑΔ 35 (1980), 165 and 166 161
Fig. 3. Merbaka church, Prothesis apse, St. Peter, Bishop of Nauplion-Argos (photo: author).

19 An inscription over the central door from the naos into the narthex records restoration in 1912.
20 The lower portion of this swag has been destroyed on both sides of the prothesis apse.
21 This fresco has now completely disappeared.
Taken together, these details might seem to indicate only a penchant for the antique in the Merbaka frescoes. The little grisaille “statues,” for example, occur as barely noticeable motifs in the architectural backgrounds of the Merbaka narrative scenes, their appearance contributing a visual nod to antiquity, similar to that of the jar with an upturned cup on the table in the Last Supper fresco at the Peribleptos at Mistra.22 Such depictions in Late Byzantine frescoes are thought most likely to have developed in the workshops of Constantinople in an intellectual climate of renovation, as descendants of similar depictions found in earlier mosaics and sculpture or most especially in manuscript illuminations of the “Macedonian Renaissance” period.23 It is possible, however, that the classical motifs at Merbaka represent more than mere antiquarianism. Although all of these motifs in the Merbaka frescoes may be found in Roman domestic painting,24 they also are depicted in Roman and earlier funerary contexts. Representations of statues in architectural settings were common images on antique sarcophagai which also provided exam-
plants which seems to be unparalleled in Late Byzantine painting. The motif of birds depicted on either side of plants, devoid of any background setting, may be traced back at least as far as an early-4th century BC tomb fresco from Paestum. The motif continues in the Early Christian period, as in the catacomb of Bassilla and S. Ermete in Rome, where it appears twice, in two opposing lunettes of a cubiculum vault fresco. A recent study which examines Early Christian graves and their decoration from the 3rd to the 7th centuries in Thessaloniki concludes that symbolic images were preferred, among which the bird (or birds) with plants was one of the most popular. The carefully depicted birds in the Merbaka fresco are almost certainly meant to be doves, which apparently had polyvalent meanings in early Christian iconography. Based on New Testament and patristic writers, they could be understood to represent several different aspects of Christian belief: Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church and the Faithful, the soul and peace. Depicted with plants, they could connote Christian souls in Paradise.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the style of the Merbaka paintings, however, the uniformity in the style of the lettering in all of the legible inscriptions on the prothesis frescoes attests to their being contemporaneous, and the fact that three of the prelates are identified as Bishops of Nauplion and Argos suggests that the paintings date to the late 14th-century or beyond, when Nauplion took episcopal precedence over Argos, and when, moreover, there were several Dominican Bishops at Argos and Nauplion who doubtless would have been aware of the local monument memorializing one of the most illustrious members of their order. Iacobus Petri de Pagalotis (or Pigalordi), a Dominican, was appointed Bishop of Argos and Nauplion in 1367 and was active on behalf of the Acciaiuoli in negotiations with the Venetians who gained possession of Argos in 1394, by which time another Dominican, Nicholaus de Lingonis, was bishop.
In 1396 the bishop, possibly still the Dominican, Conradus Flader, appealed to the Venetian senate to transfer the episcopal seat from Argos to Nauplion.38 In 1418 Secondus Nani, a Venetian, although not a Dominican, became bishop.39 Nani was responsible for the translation in 1421 (coincidentally, the 200-year anniversary of St. Dominic’s death) of the relics of the local 9th-century Orthodox bishop and thaumaturge, St. Peter of Argos, from Argos to Nauplion.40 The presence in the Merbaka frescoes of abundant details with funerary associations suggests that Morini was correct in first surmising that Merbaka was the church to which these relics might have been translated.41

In order for St. Peter to be venerated and to continue to work his miracles, though, he could not have been slipped into the inaccessible crypt under the Bema, but must have been exhibited somewhere in the church. The prothesis, a barrel vaulted, tomb-like space which in an Orthodox church was traditionally associated with the cult of saints,42 and which would not have had a necessary litur-
gical function in a Catholic rite, provided a location within which the saint was placed, pictorially, and could have been placed physically as well, in the company of other sainted bishops. The faithful could have passed by the reliquary or coffin, much as worshipers today pass by the coffin of Blessed Luke at the monastery of Hosios Loukas. The remarkable fresco of little birds (doves) and plants over the entrance to the Bema is arguably the key to identifying this use of the Merbaka prothesis. Not only is the subject matter of the fresco consistent with a burial space, but the Pompeian red background of the painting is striking, emphasizing the unusual iconography and encouraging a more careful inspection of the other frescoes. The foliate swag, for example, not only defines the apse, but also encloses the three bishops depicted there so that they are seen as if through an arch in Paradise, a depiction which also seems to be unique. St. Leon of Catania was, like St. Peter of Argos, a thaumaturge who was proclaimed saint in response to his eventual triumph over the magician Heliodorus. It has recently been suggested that the Vita of this spurious saint, who is depicted in several other Peloponnesian churches, is "...a masterful piece of ninth-century crypto-Iconophile hagiography..." It is regrettable that the name of the third bishop in the apse cannot be read. The gold-ribboned black panel is doubtless one of a series that would have encircled the room, contributing an elegant dado, complemented by the gold-ringed chain of portrait medallions above, together creating a "jewel box" interior, suitable for the eternal prothesis or "lying in state" of a saint.

The location of the doves and plants frescoes is also important; it marks the passage from one commemorative space to another and acts as a reminder of the existence of the earlier burial space beneath the Bema. The depiction of the local Sts Peter and Constantine with inscriptions privileging Nauplion over Argos, implies these saints’ complicity in the actions of the Venetians and the Catholic church as represented by St. Clement, portrayed next to St. Constantine, in renewing and adapting the memorial function of Merbaka church to honor an Orthodox saint, something with which William of Moerbeke surely would have concurred.

Mary Lee Coulson

ΠΤΗΝΑ ΣΤΟΝ ΠΑΡΑΔΕΙΣΟ:
ΤΑΦΙΚΗ ΕΙΚΟΝΟΓΡΑΦΙΑ ΣΤΟ ΝΑΟ ΤΟΥ ΜΕΡΜΠΑΚΑ

Ο ναός της Κοίμησης της Θεοτόκου, γνωστός ως Μέρμπακας στην Αργολίδα, έχει γίνει από χαρδό απο-
δεκτός στην έρευνα ως δείγμα της βυζαντινής αρχιτε-
tονικής τους μέσων του 12ου αιώνα. Πρόσφατες εργα-
σίες στο ναό επιτρέπουν τώρα την πρόταση μιας νέας χρονολόγησης για την αρχιτεκτονική και τις τοιχογρα-
φίες της πρόθεσης. Οι οποίες μπορεί να θεωρηθούν ότι παρουσιάζουν έναν ταφικό χαρακτήρα. Οι ανασκαφι-
κές εργασίες αποκάλυψαν έναν υπόγειο θάλαμο κάτω από το Ιερό, του οποίου οι διαστάσεις και οι τεχνικές κατασκευής δείχνουν ότι είναι σύγχρονος με το κτήριο της εκκλησίας. Μια κατασκευή πίσω από το Ιερό οδη-
γεί στο θάλαμο αυτό που μπορεί να ερμηνευθεί μόνο ως χώρος με ταφικό προορισμό. Η θέση αυτή του ταφικού
θαλάμου είναι άγνωστη σε ναούς ορθόδοξου δόγματος, αλλά όχι σε καθολικούς, γεγονός που καθιστά εξαιρετι-
kά πιθανό ότι ο ναός χτίστηκε αρχικά κατά τη διάρκεια της λατινοκρατίας στην Πελοπόννησο το 13ο αιώνα, για την τέλεση της καθολικής λατρείας. Η μελέτη των εντοιχισμένων σκυφίων του ναού έχει

43 For a related “view” into the dome of the Peribleptos (at Mistra), see now T. Papamastorakis, Ο Διάκοσμος του τρούλου των ναών της παλαιολόγειας περιόδου στη βαλκανική Χερσόνησο και την Κύπρο Αθήνα 2001, 344 and passim.
44 See especially, N. Drandakis, “Ὁ ναὸς τοῦ Ἅϊ Λέου εἰς τὸ Μπρίκι τῆς Μάνης,” ΔΧΑΕ ΛΔ´ (1972), 146 166.
45 A. G. Alexakis, The Greek Life of St. Leo bishop of Catania (BHG 981b), Bruxelles 2011, 73.
46 C. Walter, “Portraits of Local Bishops: A Note on Their Significance,” ZRVI XXI (1982), 7 17.
ΜΑΡΙ ΛΕΗ ΚΟΥΛΣΟΝ

Όλα αυτά τα κλασικά μοτίβα απαντούν στη ρωμαϊκή τέχνη σε κοσμικά, καθώς και σε ταφικά μνημεία. Τέτοια παραδείγματα στοιχείων προς την αρχαιότητα, τα οποία θεωρείται ότι έλεγχουν την καταγωγή τους από την Κορίνθο - Ναύπλιο, σε ένα πνεύμα αναγέννησης κατά τη διάρκεια της λεγόμενης Μακεδονικής Αναγέννησης, δεν είναι ασυνήθη στην ζωγραφική των Παλαιολόγων. Οι περισσότερες από τις λεπτομέρειες που εντοπίζονται στον Μέρμπακα υπάρχουν, επίσης, στο Μυστρά, με εξαίρεση τη σύνθεση των πτηνών και των φυτών, η οποία φαίνεται να είναι μοναδική.

Αξίζει να σημειωθεί ότι οι δύο τοιχογραφίες που απεικονίζονται, ο Άγιος Πέτρος και ο Ιερέας του, είχαν αποτεθεί στο τάφο του Ελευθέρου το 1221. Οι εφαρμογές της σειράς πτηνών και των φυτών πάνω από τον Άγιο Κωνσταντίνο, για την επιγραφή, επιμένει σαν αφορμή για τη συνεχή ζωή του πολιτισμού, καθώς και την επέτειο των εκατό χρόνων από τον Κορίνθο - Ναύπλιο. Επιπλέον, το 1421, ένας Βενετός επίσκοπος (ο διάδοχος σε μια σειρά από Δομινικανούς επίσκοπους, ο οποίος δεν ήταν ο Ιδίος Δομινικανός) μετέφερε την αφθονία των αγίων Κωνσταντίνου και Αθανασίου, της παράστασης των πτηνών και φυτών πάνω από τον Άγιο Πέτρο στο Ναύπλιο. Επιπλέον, το 1421, ένας Βενετός επίσκοπος (ο διάδοχος σε μια σειρά από Δομινικανούς επίσκοπους, ο οποίος δεν ήταν ο Ιδίος Δομινικανός) μετέφερε την αφθονία των αγίων Κωνσταντίνου και Αθανασίου, της παράστασης των πτηνών και φυτών πάνω από τον Άγιο Πέτρο στο Ναύπλιο. Επιπλέον, το 1421, ένας Βενετός επίσκοπος (ο διάδοχος σε μια σειρά από Δομινικανούς επίσκοπους, ο οποίος δεν ήταν ο Ιδίος Δομινικανός) μετέφερε την αφθονία των αγίων Κωνσταντίνου και Αθανασίου, της παράστασης των πτηνών και φυτών πάνω από τον Άγιο Πέτρο στο Ναύπλιο.