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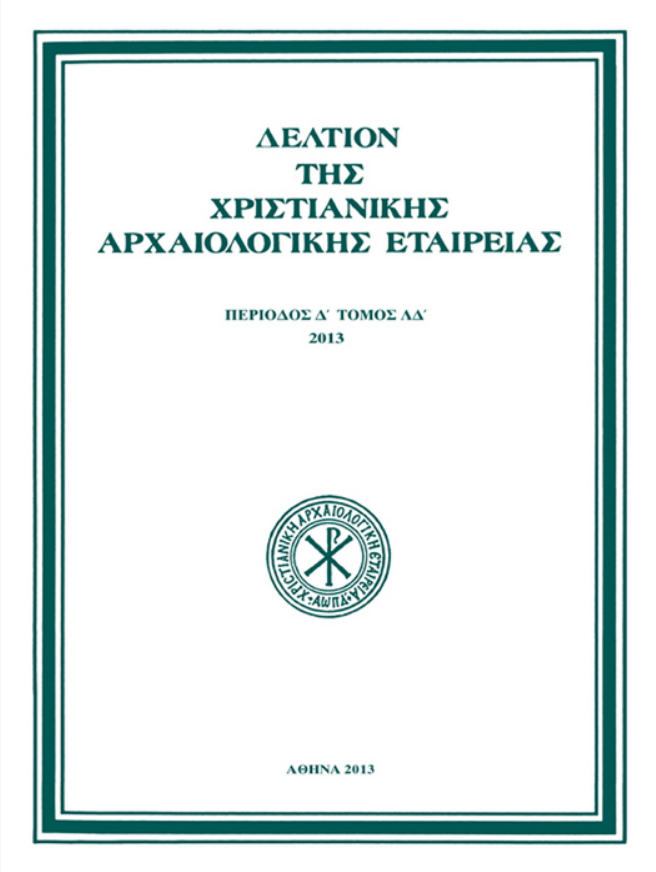

Πτηνά στον παράδεισο: ταφική εικονογραφία στο ναό του Μέρμπακα

Mary Lee COULSON

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Mary Lee Coulson

BIRDS IN PARADISE: FUNERARY ICONOGRAPHY AT MERBAKA CHURCH

Ένας ταφικός θάλαμος που αποκαλύφθηκε κάτω από το Ιερό στο ναό του Μέρμπακα στην Αργολίδα υποδηλώνει ότι ο ναός χτίστηκε για την καθολική λατρεία στο μεταίχμιο του τέλους του 13ου και των αρχών του 14ου αιώνα, ως ένα ταφικό μνημείο αφιερωμένο στη μνήμη του William Moerbeke, Δομινικανού αρχιεπισκόπου της Κορίνθου μέχρι το 1286. Ωστόσο, επιγραφές και λεπτομέρειες στην εικονογραφία των τοιχογραφιών στην πρόθεση και ιδιαίτερα μια μικρή αρχαιοπρεπής τοιχογραφία με την απεικόνιση πτηνών και φυτών πάνω από την είσοδο της πρόθεσης προς το Ιερό δείχνουν ότι οι τοιχογραφίες αυτές χρονολογούνται στις αρχές του 15ου αιώνα, κατά τη βενετική κυριαρχία του Άργους και του Ναυπλίου, όταν πραγματοποιήθηκε η μεταφορά των λειψάνων του τοπικού αγίου Πέτρου του Άργους από το Άργος στο Ναύπλιο και ο ναός του Μέρμπακα απέκτησε ένα νέο ταφικό προορισμό.

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.

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.[1] 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,[2] no

Λέξεις κλειδιά
Αρχαιότητα, πρόθεση, άγιος Πέτρος του Άργους, Βενετοί, William Moerbeke.

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

[1] T. Papamastorakis, "Επιτύμβιες παραστάσεις κατά τη μέση και ύστερη βυζαντινή περίοδο," *ΔΧΑΕ* ΙΘ΄ (1996 1997), 285 304. I wish to thank the readers whose comments greatly improved this article.

[2] A. Struck, "Vier byzantinische Kirchen der Argolis," *AM* 34 (1909), 189 236; G. Millet, *L'école grecque dans l'architecture byzantine*, Paris 1916, passim; H. Megaw, "The Chronology of Some Middle Byzantine Churches," *BSA* 32 (1931 1932), 90 130; id., "Glazed Bowls in Byzantine Churches," *ΔΧΑΕ* Δ΄ (1964 1965), 145 162; G. Nikolakopoulos, *Ἐντοιχισμένα κεραμεικὰ στὶς ὄψεις τῶν μεσαιωνικῶν καὶ ἐπὶ τουρκοκρατίας ἐκκλησιῶν μας* III. *Τὰ κεραμεικὰ τῆς Παναγίας τοῦ Μέρμπακα τῆς Ναυπλίας,* Athens 1979, partially translated by Tongiorgi as, "Céramiques encastrées des anciennes églises de Grèce," *Faenza* LXVII (1981), 160 178; G. Hadji Mina

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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glou, *L'église de la Dormition de la Vierge à Merbaka (Hagia Triada),* Paris 1992; Ch. Bouras, "The Impact of Frankish Architecture on Thirteenth Century Byzantine Architecture," *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World* (eds A. Laiou R. Parviz Mottahedeh), Washington 2001, 247 262; M. L. Coulson, *The Church of Merbaka: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the 13th Century Peloponnese* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation), the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2002, now a book in progress, for which I wish especially to thank the Metropolitan Museum of Art for support through the Sylvan Coleman and Pamela Coleman Fellowship. See now also, Ch. Bouras L. Boura, "Χρονολογικές διευκρινίσεις γιά μνημεία πού εἶχαν ἀποδοθεί στόν 12ο αἰώνα," in Ch. Bouras L. Boura, *Ἡ Ἑλλαδική ναοδομία κατά τόν 12ο αἰώνα,* Athens 2002, 330 333 with further bibliography.

[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 céramique 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.

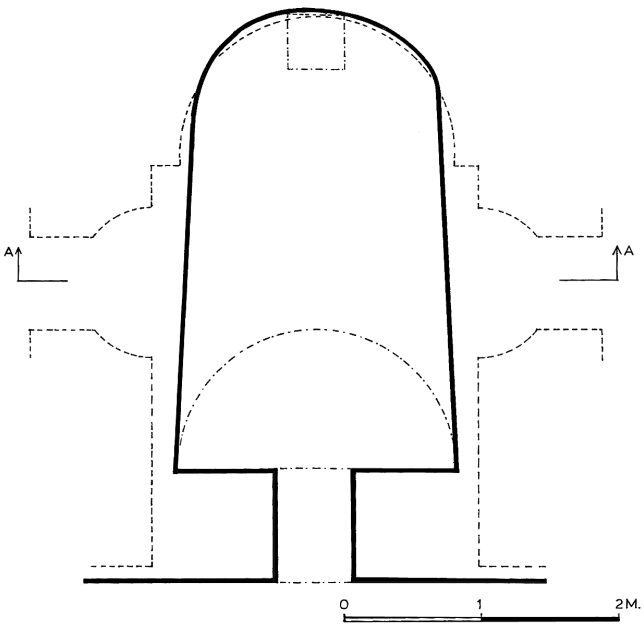

Fig. 1. Merbaka church. Plan of the Bema and of the crypt below it (plan: Tasos Tanoulas).

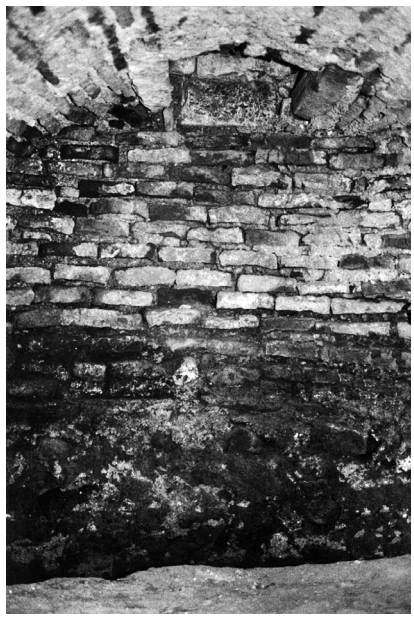

Fig. 2. Merbaka church. Crypt, view from the west (photo: author).

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),[6] 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 above it. 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.[7]

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

[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 Ephoreia. 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.[8] 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.[9] Curcic'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 Curcic attributes to contact with western burial customs.[10] 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."[11]

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,[12] 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.[13] 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.[14]

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.[15] 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.[16] Therefore, the date of the church can be reasonably limited to the years between about 1285 and 1320,[17] 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

[8] E. Ivison, *Mortuary Practices in Byzantium (c. 950-1453). An Archaeological Contribution* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation), University of Birmingham 1994, vol. I, 76 78.

[9] N. Laskaris, *Monuments funéraires Paléochrétiens (et Byzantins) de la Grèce*, Athens 2000, passim.

[10] S. Curcic, "Medieval Royal Burials in the Balkans," *GOThR* 29 (1984), 175 194.

[11] T. W. Green (transl.), *The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments: A Translation of the First Book of the Rationale Divinorum Officiorum,* Leeds 1843, 104.

[12] G. Fedalto, "Annotazioni sui vescovadi latini della Morea franca e l'arcivescovado latino di Corinto, durante il secolo XIII," *Acts of the Second International Congress of Peloponnesian Studies,* vol II (Patras 1980), Athens 1981 1982, 296 303.

[13] D. J. Geanakoplos, "Bonaventura, the Two Mendicant Orders and the Greeks at the Council of Lyons," in D. Baker (ed.), *The Orthodox Churches and the West*, Oxford 1976, 183 211.

[14] This manuscript details the method for inscribing a sphere on a flat surface, that is, how to make a sundial. See, M. L. Coulson, "Ηλιακά ρολόγια στη βυζαντινή Ελλάδα, ανάλημμα ή ανάθημα;" *Αρχαιολογία και Τέχνη* 74 (2000), 46 54, discussing the sundial on the south wall of Merbaka church. The best general work on Moerbeke is still J. Brams W. Vanhamel (eds), *Guillaume de Moerbeke*, Leuven 1989.

[15] G. Sanders, "Three Peloponnesian Churches and their Importance for the Chronology of Late 13th and Early 14th Century Pottery in the Eastern Mediterranean," in Deroche J. M. Spieser (eds), *Récherches sur la céramique byzantine, BCH* Suppl. VXIII, V, 1989, 189 199.

[16] G. Sanders, "New Relative and Absolute Chronologies for 9th to 13th Century Glazed Wares at Corinth: Methodology and Social Conclusions," in K. Belke *et al.* (eds), *Byzanz als Raum: Zu Methoden und Inhalten der historischen Geographie des ostlichen Mittelmeerraums*, Vienna 2000, 153 173; Y. Waksman V. Francois, "Vers une redéfinition typologique et analytique des céramiques byzantines du type *Zeuxippus Ware,*" *BCH* CXXVIII CVVIX (2004 2005), II, 629 724.

[17] For catalogue with comparative examples of the immured Merbaka bowls, including evidence that they were not immured later, see Coulson, *The Church of Merbaka*, op.cit. (n. 2), 273 323.

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,[18] when the early 20th[19] 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);[20] 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[21] 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).

Fig. 3. Merbaka church. Prothesis apse, St. Peter, Bishop of Nauplion-Argos (photo: author).

[18] A. Bakourou, "Agia Triada," *ΑΔ* 35 (1980), Χρονικά, 165 and *ΑΔ* 36 (1981), Χρονικά, 143 and pl. 79. My sincerest thanks to both Aimelia Bakourou and Maria Panayotidi for their permission and assistance in studying the Merbaka frescoes.

[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.

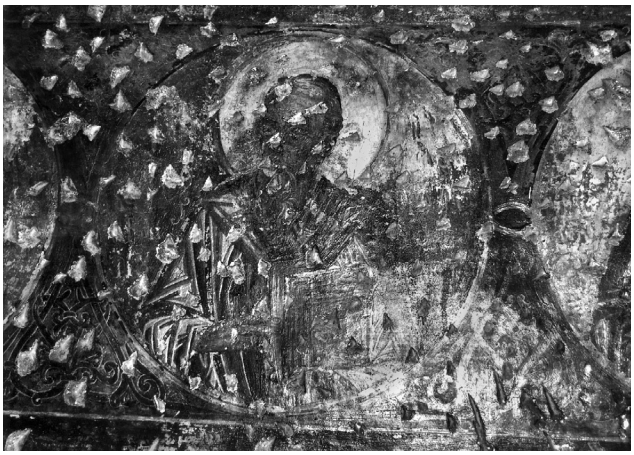

Fig. 4. Merbaka church. Prothesis south wall, clipeate busts (photo: author).

Fig. 5. Merbaka church. Prothesis vault, grisaille statue (photo: author).

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 examples of clipeate portraiture.[25] Foliate swags, traceable to Pompeian or even earlier originals,[26] appear also in and on Late Antique tombs.[27] The black panel with gold decorations is also reminiscent of Pompeian wall treatments. The Merbaka painting is located where the depiction of a fictive curtain might have been expected, but the fresco may have been meant to represent a solid, decorated panel. Both types of decoration are found in Late Antique tombs.[28]

All of these classical motifs occur in the frescoes of Mistra,[29] except for the "Pompeian red" panel with birds and

[22] D. Mouriki, "Palaeologan Mistra and the West," *Byzantium and Europe. Delphi 1986*, Athens 1987, 242.

[23] M. Chatzidakis, "Classicisme et tendances populaires au XIVe siècle," Actes du *XIV CIEB,* Bucharest 1971, vol. I, 153 188, esp. 181 82; Mouriki, "Palaeologan Mistra," op.cit.

[24] M. L. Anderson, *Pompeian Frescoes in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York 1987

[25] A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography. A Study of its Origins,* London 1969, 73.

[26] Mouiki, "Palaeologan Mistra," op.cit., 242.

[27] See, for example a relief depicting a Roman tomb with a garland strung across the entrance, in K. Baus, *Der Kranz in Antike und Christentum*, Bonn 1940, pl. 4.

[28] J. Valeva, "La peinture funéraire dans les provinces orientales de L'empire romaine dans l'antiquité tardive," *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 7 (2001), 167 208, esp. 173 174.

[29] G. Millet, *Monuments byzantines de Mistra,* Paris 1910, pl. 95.3, foliate swag tied with gold bands, Afendiko; D. Mouriki, "The Wall Paintings of the Pantanassa at Mistra: Models of a Painters' Work shop in the Fifteenth Century," in S. Curcic D Mouriki (eds), *The Twilight of Byzantium*, Princeton 1991, fig. 16: Entry into Jerusalem, statue in niche above city gate; fig. 25: fictive marble panel.

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.[30] 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.[31] 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.[32] 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.[33] Depicted with plants, they could connote Christian souls in Paradise.[34]

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[35] and was active on behalf of the Acciaiuoli in negotiations with the Venetians who gained possession of Argos in 1394,[36] by which time another Dominican, Nicholaus de Lingonis, was bishop.[37]

Fig. 6. Merbaka church. Prothesis apse, foliate swag (photo: author).

[30] Tomb 21/1969 at Andriuolo, Paestum, where several birds are depicted on either side of foliage, A. Pontrandolfo, "La pittura funeraria," in *Magna Grecia,* vol. 3, *Arte e artigianto*, Milan 1990, 370 371 and fig. 537.

[31] G. B. De Rossi, "Cubicolo dipinto," *Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana,* ser. 5, no. 4 (1894), 73 75 and pl. V.VI; A. Nestori, *Repetorio Topografico delle Pitture delle Catacombe Romane*, Vatican City 1975 (reprinted 1993), 2 6 with further bibliography.

[32] E. Marki, "Τα χριστιανικά κοιμητήρια στην Ελλάδα. Οργάνωση, τυπολογία, ταφική ζωγραφική, μαρτύρια, κοιμητηριακές βασιλικές," *ΔΧΑΕ* ΚΒ΄ (2002), 163 176; ead., *Η Νεκρόπολη της Θεσσαλονίκης στους υστερορρωμαϊκούς και παλαιοχριστιανικούς χρόνους (μέσα του 3ου έως του 9ου αι. μ.Χ.)*, Athens 2006 was not available to me, however, a summary of some of Marki's con clusions and her table of the subjects depicted in the Thessaloniki graves are reproduced in J. Dresken Weiland, *Bild, Grab und Wort: Untersuchungen zu Jenseitsvorstellungen von Christen des 3. und 4. Jahrhunderts,* Regensburg 2010, 314 318; Valeva, op.cit. (n. 28), 179 180.

[33] In the New Testament: Matt. X:16; among patristic writers, Justin Martyr, Origen and Tertullian all commented on the dove as a symbol, Dresken Weiland, op.cit., 33 36; H. Maguire, *Earth and Ocean, The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art,* University Park 1987, esp. 58 59.

[34] Marki, " Τα χριστιανικά κοιμητήρια," op.cit., 166 167.

[35] G. Fedalto, *La chiesa latina in Oriente*, vol. II, Verona 1976, 45. The name is recorded as Pigalordi in G. Eubel, *Hierarchia Catholica Medei Aevi (1198-1431),* Regensberg 1913, 106.

[36] A. Luttrell, "The Latins of Argos and Nauplion: 1311 1394," *PBSR* XXXIV (n.s. XXI) (1966), 34 55, esp. 48 49; P. Topping, "The Cornaro of Venice and Piscopia (Cyprus) in Argos and Nauplia, 1377 1388," *Φίλια έπη εις Γεώργιον Ε. Μυλωνάν*, Athens 1989, 323 331, esp. 325 326.

[37] Two intervening bishops held the post 1367 1392 and 1392 1395, Eubel, op.cit.

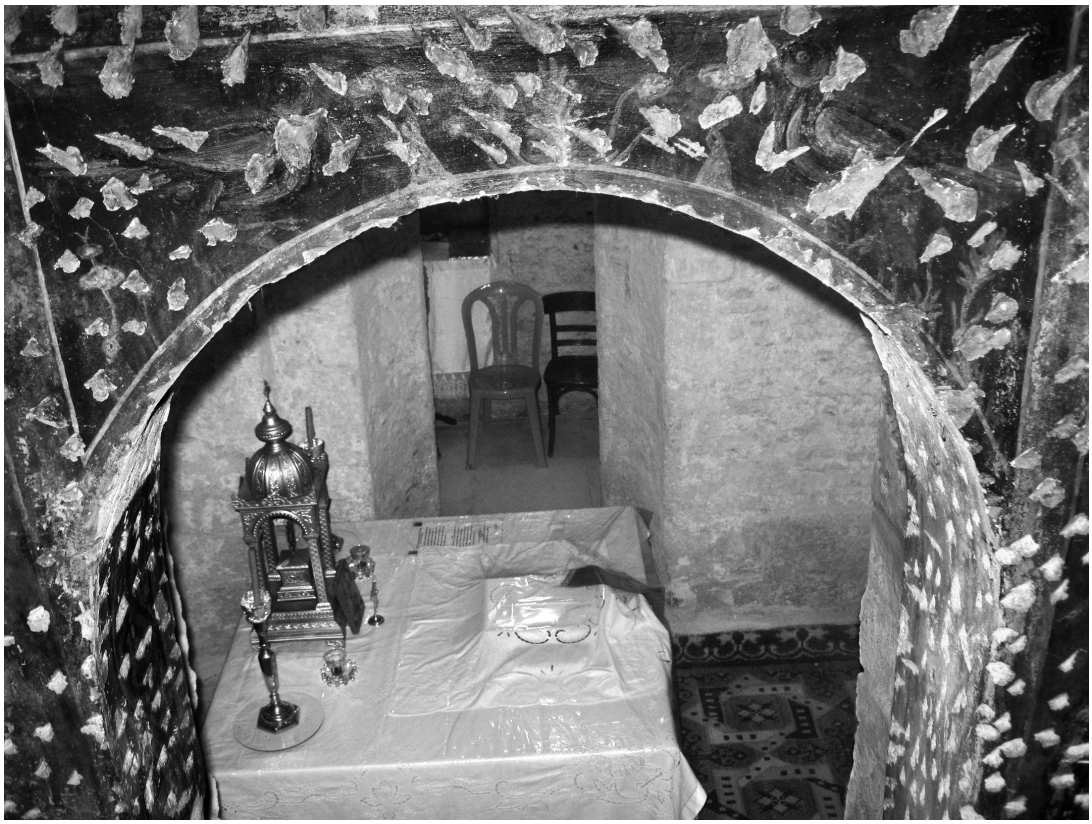

Fig. 7. Merbaka church. Prothesis, south wall, birds and plants (photo: author).

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 Secundus 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-

[38] M. Foskolou, "Η Καθολική Εκκλησία Άργους Ναυπλίου," *Ναυπλιακά Ανάλεκτα* I (1992), 31 48; A. Major, "Un héritage de la quatrième croisade : les Vénitiens à Nauplie et Argos au XV siècle," *Pèlerinages et Croisades; Actes du 118 congrès national annuel des sociétés historiques et scientifiques* (Pau 1993), Paris 1995, 277 297, esp. 280.

[39] Foskolou, op.cit.

[40] *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* 2nd ed., Rome 1990, vol X, 731 733 with earlier bibliography; R. J. Loenertz, "La chronique brève, moréote de 1423," *Mélanges E. Tisserant II (Studi e Testi 232)*, Vatican 1965, 399 439, esp. 408, 434. Foskolou, op.cit., 33 suggests that the translation was done in the spirit of ecumenism. St. Peter's relics were eventually translated to Venice, then to Rome, from which they have now been returned to Argos. See also, Episkopou Fanariou Agathagelou, Chrisa Maltezou, E. Morini, *Ιερά λείψανα αγίων της καθ' ημάς Ανατολής στη Βενετία,* Athens 2005.

[41] Personal communication from Enrico Morini, Universty of Bologna.

[42] C. Walter, *Art and Ritual of the Byzantine Church*, London 1982, 212.

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.[43] 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,[44] is "...a masterful piece of ninth-century crypto-Iconophile hagaiography...[45] 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[46] 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 καιρό αποδεκτός στην έρευνα ως δείγμα της βυζαντινής αρχιτεκτονικής των μέσων του 12ου αιώνα. Πρόσφατες εργασίες στο ναό επιτρέπουν τώρα την πρόταση μιας νέας χρονολόγησης για την αρχιτεκτονική και τις τοιχογραφίες της πρόθεσης, οι οποίες μπορεί να θεωρηθούν ότι παρουσιάζουν έναν ταφικό χαρακτήρα. Οι ανασκαφικές 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 καταπακτή πίσω από το Ιερό οδηγεί 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 καθολικού, γεγονός που καθιστά εξαιρετικά 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*, Athens 2001, 344 and passim.

[44] See especially, N. Drandakis, "Ὁ ναὸς τοῦ Ἁϊ Λέου εἰς τὸ Μπρίκι τῆς Μάνης," *ΔΧΑΕ* ΣΤ΄ (1972), 146 168.

[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.

αποδείξει ότι ανήκουν σχεδόν όλα σε δύο κύριους τύπους της ιταλικής κεραμικής, από τους οποίους ο ένας δεν εισαγόταν στην Κόρινθο, το πλησιέστερο κέντρο με μεγάλες αποθέσεις κεραμικής, πριν από τα τέλη του 13ου αιώνα, και ο δεύτερος, με προέλευση από τη νότια Ιταλία, δεν εισαγόταν μετά την καταλανική εισβολή το 1312. Δεδομένου ότι μπορεί να αποδειχθεί ότι τα σκυφία δεν αποτελούν μεταγενέστερες προσθήκες στο κτήριο, η χρονολογία ανέγερσης του ναού θα πρέπει να τοποθετηθεί μεταξύ του 1285 και του 1320. Τα όρια αυτά συμπίπτουν με το τέλος τόσο της θητείας το 1286 του Δομινικανού William Moerbeke, ως αρχιεπισκόπου της Κορίνθου (εκ των οποίων το Άργος ήταν μια επισκοπή) και, επίσης, με την επέτειο των εκατό χρόνων από το θάνατο του αγίου Δομίνικου το 1221. Ο ναός μπορεί να γίνει καλύτερα κατανοητός ως ταφικό μνημείο για τον αρχιεπίσκοπο, αν και ποτέ δεν ενταφιάστηκε εκεί.

Ο μερικός καθαρισμός και η συντήρηση των παλαιότερων τοιχογραφιών στην πρόθεση επιτρέπει την εξέτασή τους. Σκηνές από το βίο της Θεοτόκου απεικονίζονται στο θόλο, και εκτός από την απεικόνιση του αγίου Στεφάνου του Πρωτομάρτυρα, δίπλα στην είσοδο της πρόθεσης προς το Ιερό, το υπόλοιπο των τοιχογραφιών φαίνεται ότι θα ανήκε σε παραστάσεις επισκόπων. Από αυτούς που μπορούν να ταυτιστούν, ο άγιος Λέων από την Κατάνη απεικονίζεται δεόμενος στο τεταρτοσφαίριο της αψίδας, με τον άγιο Πέτρο του Άργους χαμηλότερα, ο οποίος ταυτίζεται με τον επίσκοπο Ναυπλίου και Άργους, και έναν ακόμη αδιάγνωστο επίσκοπο. Στο νότιο τοίχο εικονίζονται ο άγιος Κωνσταντίνος, ο οποίος, επίσης, επιγράφεται επίσκοπος Ναυπλίου και Άργους και δίπλα του ο άγιος Κλήμης της Ρώμης.

Υπάρχει ένας αριθμός στοιχείων εμπνευσμένων από την αρχαιότητα σε αυτές τις τοιχογραφίες. Μικρογραφημένες προτομές σε τεχνική μονοχρωμίας (grisaille) έχουν απεικονισθεί στο αρχιτεκτονικό βάθος των σκηνών από το βίο της Θεοτόκου. Μια μεγάλη ελισσόμενη φυλλοφόρος γιρλάντα περιβάλλει την αψίδα και μια σειρά προτομών επισκόπων σε μετάλλια ενωμένα μεταξύ τους με χρυσούς κρίκους σε βάθος από περίπλοκα ελικοειδή φύλλα αμπέλου βρίσκεται πάνω από τις απεικονίσεις των αγίων Κωνσταντίνου και Κλήμη.

Ένας μαύρος πίνακας κάτω από την παράσταση του αγίου Στεφάνου, που προοριζόταν για να απεικονίζει είτε ένα παραπέτασμα είτε ένα μαρμάρινο θωράκιο διακοσμημένο με περίτεχνο χρυσό πλαίσιο, δείχνει ότι υπήρχε αρχικά μια κομψή διακοσμητική ζώνη στο κάτω μέρος του τοίχου. Μεγαλύτερο ενδιαφέρον έχει μια μικρή τοιχογραφία πάνω από την είσοδο που οδηγεί από την πρόθεση στο Ιερό, στην οποία απεικονίζονται δύο πτηνά, πιθανότατα περιστέρια, εκατέρωθεν μικρών φυτών και σε ερυθρό βάθος, που θυμίζει πομπηιανό ρυθμό. Όλα αυτά τα κλασικά μοτίβα απαντούν στη ρωμαϊκή τέχνη σε κοσμικά, καθώς και σε ταφικά μνημεία.

Τέτοια παραδείγματα στροφής προς την αρχαιότητα, τα οποία θεωρείται ότι έλκουν την καταγωγή τους από την Κωνσταντινούπολη, σε ένα πνεύμα αναγέννησης κατά τη διάρκεια της λεγόμενης Μακεδονικής Αναγέννησης, δεν είναι ασυνήθιστα στη ζωγραφική των Παλαιολόγων. Οι περισσότερες από τις λεπτομέρειες που εντοπίζονται στον Μέρμπακα υπάρχουν, επίσης, στον Μυστρά, με εξαίρεση τη σύνθεση των πτηνών και των φυτών, η οποία φαίνεται να είναι μοναδική.

Αξίζει να σημειωθεί ότι οι δύο τοπικοί επίσκοποι που απεικονίζονται, ο άγιος Πέτρος και ο διάδοχός του, ο άγιος Κωνσταντίνος, χαρακτηρίζονται ως επίσκοποι Ναυπλίου και Άργους. Το στοιχείο αυτό θα μπορούσε να οδηγήσει στη χρονολόγηση των τοιχογραφιών στα τέλη του 14ου αιώνα, όταν οι Βενετοί είχαν αποκτήσει τον έλεγχο της περιοχής και η επισκοπική έδρα μεταφέρθηκε από το Άργος στο Ναύπλιο. Επιπλέον, το 1421 ένας Βενετός επίσκοπος (ο διάδοχος σε μια σειρά από Δομινικανούς επισκόπους, ο οποίος δεν ήταν ο ίδιος Δομινικανός) μερίμνησε για τη μεταφορά των λειψάνων του αγίου Πέτρου του Άργους από την πόλη αυτή στο Ναύπλιο.

Η απεικόνιση αυτού του αγίου στην αψίδα της πρόθεσης στον Μέρμπακα, η αφθονία των αρχαιοπρεπών λεπτομερειών με ταφικές προεκτάσεις, και ιδιαίτερα η ασυνήθιστη απεικόνιση των πτηνών και των φυτών στις τοιχογραφίες της πρόθεσης συνηγορούν στην ταύτιση του σημείου με το χώρο όπου τα λείψανα είχαν αποτεθεί. Η πρόθεση, που σχετίζεται με την απόδοση τιμής στους αγίους σε ναούς ορθόδοξου δόγματος, δεν θα είχε καμία απαραίτητη λειτουργική χρήση στην καθολική λατρεία παρέχοντας ένα χώρο ως τάφο, όπου τα λείψανα αγίων θα μπορούσαν να εκτίθενται στους πιστούς για προσκύνηση, όπως οι προσκυνητές κάνουν σήμερα στον τάφο του οσίου Λουκά στο ομώνυμο μοναστήρι.

Το γεγονός ότι δύο τοπικοί επίσκοποι, οι άγιοι Πέτρος και Κωνσταντίνος, επιγράφονται ως επίσκοποι Ναυπλίου και Άργους υποδηλώνει ότι ενέκριναν τις ενέργειες των Βενετών και της καθολικής εκκλησίας, που εκπροσωπείται από τον άγιο Κλήμεντα, η παράσταση του οποίου βρίσκεται δίπλα στον άγιο Κωνσταντίνο, για τη μεταφορά της επισκοπικής έδρας και των λειψάνων του αγίου Πέτρου από την πόλη αυτή στο Ναύπλιο. Η θέση της παράστασης των πτηνών και των φυτών πάνω από την είσοδο, που οδηγεί από την πρόθεση στο Ιερό, όχι μόνο αναδεικνύει τον ταφικό της χαρακτήρα, αλλά υπενθυμίζει συγχρόνως τη θέση της παλαιότερης κρύπτης κάτω από το Ιερό και αποτελεί μια αφορμή για μνημόνευση του αρχιεπισκόπου Moerbeke.