ВИЗАНТИЙСКО И ПОСТВИЗАНТИЙСКО ИЗКУСТВО: ПРЕСИЧАНЕ НА ГРАНИЦИ

BYZANTINE AND POST-BYZANTINE ART: CROSSING BORDERS

ART READINGS
Thematic Peer-reviewed Annual in Art Studies, Volumes I–II
2017.I – Old Art

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София, 2018
Content

Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art:
Crossing Borders, Exploring Boundaries .................................................................11
Emmanuel Moutafov, Ida Toth

Words and Images in Early Christian Inscriptions
(3rd–7th Century) ........................................................................................................39
Antonio E. Felle

“Das Licht Christi leuchtet allen” – Form und Funktion
von Kreuzen mit Tetragrammen in byzantinischen
und postbyzantinischen Handschriften.....................................................................71
Andreas Rhoby

Between Princes and Labourers: The Legacy of Hosios Christodoulous
and his Successors in the Aegean Sea (11th–13th Centuries.) ..............................91
Angeliki Katsioti

Essay on a Visual Perspective of Medieval Writing .................................................129
Vincent Debiais

The Inner Portal of St Mark’s Basilica in Venice
between East and West...............................................................................................151
Valentina Cantone

Images and Texts across Time:
The Three Layers of Mural Paintings
in the Church of St George in Sofia...........................................................................171
Elka Bakalova, Tsvetan Vasilev

The Balkans and the Renaissance World ................................................................193
Jelena Erdeljan

Panagia Eleousa in Great Prespa Lake:
A symbolic artistic language at the Beginning of the 15th Century .......................209
Melina Paissidou

Un cycle hagiographique peu étudié
de la peinture extérieure moldave:
La vie de saint Pacôme le Grand ............................................................................231
Constantin I. Ciobanu
Post-Byzantine Wall Paintings in Euboea: The Monastery of Panagia Peribleptos at Politika
Andromachí Katselaki

A Unique 15th Century Donation to Vatopedi: A Pair of Wood-carved Lecterns
Dimitrios Liakos

Between Loyalty, Memory and the Law: Byzantine and Slavic Dedicatory Church Inscriptions Mentioning Foreign Rulers in the 14th and 15th Centuries
Anna Adashinskaya

The Illustrated Slavonic Miscellanies of Damascenes Studite’s Thesauros – a New Context for Gospel Illustrations in the Seventeenth Century
Elissaveta Moussakova

Jovan Četirević Grabovan – an 18th-Century Itinerant Orthodox Painter. Some Ethnic and Artistic Considerations
Aleksandra Kučeković

Painters of Western Training Working for Orthodox Patrons – Remarks on the Evidence of Late-medieval Transylvania (14th–15th Century)
Dragoș Gh. Năstăsoiu

The Scene of the Road to Calvary in St George’s Church in Veliko Tarnovo
Maria Kolusheva

Костадин Геров-Антикаров – даскал и зограф
Владимир Димитров

Religious and National Mythmaking: Conservation and Reconstruction of the Social Memory
Antonios Tsakalos

List of Contributors
The Scene of the Road to Calvary in St George’s Church in Veliko Tarnovo

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Abstract: The study focuses on a rare iconographic type of Pilate’s Escort from the scene of the Road to Calvary in the nave of St George’s Church in Veliko Tarnovo. It highlights some peculiarities of the image by comparing it to a number of examples from the central region of the Balkans dating to the 15th–17th centuries. The study also includes several iconographic types of the scene that were used by icon painters at the end of the 16th and in the beginning of the 17th centuries.

Key words: post-Byzantine painting, iconography, the Road to Calvary, Pontius Pilate’s scroll, Archbishopric of Ochrid, Theban painters, Monastery of Kučevište

According to the founder’s inscription, the nave of St George’s Church in Veliko Tarnovo was painted in 1616 by anonymous painters. The composition the Road to Calvary is located on its western wall (Fig. 1). It represents a combination of two episodes from the
Gospel narrative: Christ Helkomenos and Pilate’s Mounted Escort. The present study focuses on the episode of the escort led by Pontius Pilate accompanying Christ on the way to his crucifixion. In this part of the scene one of the high priests holds a scroll with a text that imitates Arabic writing (Fig. 2); quite an extraordinary detail, particularly considering that commonly the Roman prefect himself carries the scroll, and that its textual content reveals his account on what is happening at that particular moment.

The distinct features of the scene from the church in Veliko Tarnovo become clear in the context of the development of this particular episode in Orthodox art in the Balkans. Moreover, such an overview allows us to distinguish several iconographic types of the image that have not been the subject of study so far.

In contrast to the episode Christ Helkomenos, whose first iconographic attestations date back to the Early Christian period, Pilate’s Mounted Escort does not emerge as an element of the Christ’s Passion cycle before the fourteenth century. It depicts the episode of Pilate ascending the Calvary in order to install the inscription ‘Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews’ in Hebrew, Latin and Greek (John, 19:19 – 22). This composition is believed to originate from the Quattrocento compositions of the groups of horsemen leaving the gates of Jerusalem on route to Calvary. The episode emerges in Orthodox art approximately at the same time, in the mural decoration of the Dečani Monastery (1348) and the Lesnovo Monastery (1347/8). In both cases the episode of Pilate’s Mounted Escort is a


4 Images from the 14th and the 15th century in Western European art can be found in: Leventis, Antonis. Η σκηνή του εφίππου Πιλάτου στη ζωγραφική Βαλκανικών ναών (14ος-18ος αιώνα). – Ηπειρωτικά Χρονικά, 1997, No. 32, 56-62, ill. 2-9. Leventis’ article includes a detailed description of the best known examples from monuments on the Balkans from the 14th–18th centuries. A great number of the images from the beginning of the 17th century, which are included in the present study, are not covered in Leventis’ article. Examples of Western European painting can be found also in: Stefanov, Pavel. Сцената “Носене на кръста” от църквата „Рождество Христово“ в Арбанаси [Scenata “Nosene na krasta” ot tsarkvata “Rozhdestvo Hristovo” v Arbanasi]. – Art Studies Quarterly, 2004, No. 3, 15-21.


6 Millet, Gabriel, Frolow, Anatole. La peinture du Moyen Age en Yougoslavie (Serbie, Macédoine
secondary element that complements the content of the scenes from the Passion cycle, without being inextricably bound to the episode of Christ Helkomenos. In these compositions Pilate, accompanied by a few Jews (most probably the high priests), is depicted in the background of the main scene, against a landscape. The image of Pilate’s Escort in Lesnovo is partially damaged; on that in Dečani, however, none of the horsemen holds a scroll.

In the first century of Ottoman rule, the theme is still included in the repertory of the mural-painting workshops decorating churches on the territory of the Arch-

7 The episode in Dečani is Christ Refuses to Drink Vinegar with Gall; in Lesnovo it is The Road to Calvary.
bishopric of Ochrid. It is found in the following churches: Dormition of the Theotokos in Zeugostasi, in the vicinity of Kastoria (1432); St Nicholas in Vevi (1460); the churches of Leskovec Monastery (1461), Dragalevtsi Monastery (1476) (Fig. 3) and Matka Monastery (1496); and the St Nicholas Magaliou church in Kastoria (1505). Based on the substantial number of examples, we can assume that in this period the episode Pilate’s Mounted Escort is associated with the scene Christ Helkomenos in particular. In contrast to the examples from Dečani and Lesnovo, the episode is depicted more frequently in the foreground of the composition; however, Pilate’s Escort appears smaller in size than Jesus Christ and the other figures represented in the scene. This ‘size deformation’ of the figures is a reference to the secondary role this episode plays in the afore-mentioned monuments from the Palaiologan period, and it provides evidence for a continuity of earlier artistic tradition in the first century of Ottoman rule. Even in this early stage of the development of the scene, Pilate holds an open scroll in his hands. In both examples of the text of the scroll that survive today (in the church in Zeugostasi and in St Nicholas Magaliou), it bears the words of vindication of the Roman prefect ΑΘΩΟΣ ΕΙΜΙ ΕΚ ΤΟΥ ΑΙΜΑΤΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ (‘I am innocent of the blood of this just person’) (Matthew, 27:24). In the 16th century, the images in these churches from the territory of the Archbishopric of Ochrid serve as a model that was imitated numerous times by painters working on

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8 The scene is depicted also in the Romanian monuments that have been strongly influenced by some of these paintings (Harlau, Moldovita, Dobrovat, Humor). These examples have been presented with bibliography in: Paissidou, Melachroini. Οι τοιχογραφίες του 17ου αιώνα στους ναούς της Καστοριάς. Σύμβολη στη μελέτη της μνημειακής ζωγραφικής της δυτικής Μακεδονίας. Athens, 2002, 91, ref. 604.
9 Tsigaridas, Eythimios. Συμβολή στη χρονολόγηση των τοιχογραφιών του ναού της Κοιμήσεως της Θεοτόκου στο Ζευγοστάσι Καστοριάς. In: Φίλια Έπη εις Γεώργιον Ε. Μυλωνά. Τ. ΙΙΙ. Athens, 1989, 335, ill. 83b-84a; Sisiou, Ioannis. Οι σκηνές των Μεγάλων Εορτών και των Παθών στο ναό της Παναγίας Ζευγοστασίου Καστοριάς. – Niš & Byzantium XIV, 2016, Niš, 409, ill. 8.
10 Subotić, Gojko. Охридска сликарска школа XV века [Ohridska slikarska škola XV veka]. Beograd, 1980, fig. 70, ill. 60; Paissidou, Melina. The Frescoes of Agios Nikolaos at Vevi: A Landmark in the Monumental Painting of 15th Century in Western Macedonia. – Egnatia, 2007, No. 11, 120-121, fig. 7.
11 Subotić. Охридска сликарска школа, fig. 79.
12 Subotić. Охридска сликарска школа, ill. 86.
13 Subotić. Охридска сликарска школа, fig. 112.
14 Pelekanidis, Stylianos. Καστορία Ι. Βυζαντινά τοιχογραφία. Πίνακες. Thessaloniki, 1953, ill. 168a,b.
commission in its diocese, as well as by those influenced directly by the tradition in this region. Such an example can be found in the work of the icon painter Ioan of Gramosta who painted the murals of St Nicholas church in the Monastery of Toplica (1536/7). A distinctive feature of his composition (Fig. 4) is the background of the riding horsemen, which consists of an uninterrupted line of rocky ridges, while the fortified walls of Jerusalem are not depicted at all. The text on Pilate’s scroll is copied from the earlier monuments. These two features serve as the main distinguishing features of almost all paintings that can be attributed to this Ochrid-Kastorian

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iconographic type. Further examples that are closest to the scene from the Monastery of Toplica are the images from Temska Monastery (1576)16 (Fig. 5) and St Petka’s Church in Vukovo (1598)17. This type can be observed also in the frescoes of the following churches: in Strupetski Monastery (end of 16th c.)18; in Lomnitsa (1607/8)19; St Nicholas in Shelcan (1625)20; in Riljevo, close to Prilep (1627)21; in the Church of the Theotokos in the Agioi Anargyroi district in Kastoria (1634)22; and even in the monastery in Damandrio on the Island of Lesbos (second half of 16th c.)23. The uninterrupted fortified wall that replaces the rocky landscape background in St Nicholas Church in Plati (1591)24 and in the Monastery of Oreoec (1595)25 suggests that the images belong to the same model, as this background is still lacking in detail and the text of the scroll remains the same26.

In the second quarter of the 16th century the scene is adopted and reproduced by some of the most talented masters of post-Byzantine art together with other themes distinctive of the Ochrid-Kastorian group of monuments dating to the 15th century. These painters came from Thebes, and they executed the fresco decorations of the highly significant monuments from the region of Ioannina in Epirus; hence they are recognized in art history as members of the Epirus school27.

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16 This reference is based on my own observations; I could not access L. Pavlovic’s monograph on the monastery: *Pavlović, Leontije. Манастир Темска [Manastir Temska]. Smederevo, 1966.*
21 The frescoes here are the work of Linotopites painters: *Tourta, Anastasia. Οι ναοί του Αγίου Νικολάου στη Βίσσα και του Αγίου Μηνά στο Μονοδένδρι. Просеггие ст орго тων ζωγράφων απο το Λινοτοπι. Athens, 1991, 31-32, ill. 118a.
22 *Paissidou, Oi τοιχογραφίες του 17ου αιώνα, 96, ill. 49b.
26 Only the text of the scroll from the church in Plati survives today.
27 There is substantial literature on these painters and their decorations. Here we will mention only *Stavropoulou-Makri, Angheliki. Les peintures murales de l’église de la Transfiguration à...*
Fig. 4. St Nicholas Church in the Monastery of Toplica (1536/7). Photo: I. Vanev

Fig. 5. St George’s Church in Temska Monastery (1576). Photo: I. Vanev
In contrast, the Cretan painters who worked on Mount Athos and in the Meteora during the same period did not include this scene in their repertory. The Theban painters, on the other hand, paid special attention to the depiction of Pilate’s Escort. In some of their fresco programmes, this episode’s role becomes equally important to that of the remaining scenes from the cycle, and it is framed separately from the composition Christ Helkomenos. The Theban painters added new elements to the iconographical scheme of the episode – its main feature becomes a back-facing Pilate heading the group of horsemen. Another typical feature of the Epirus model are the fortress gates, which are given a prominent place in the composition. Without exception, one of the horsemen and his horse is depicted at the precise moment of exiting the Jerusalem fortress, in some instances as viewed from the side, and in others – from a frontal point of view. Another distinctive feature of these images is the content of the scroll held by Pilate. The words inscribed on it are a precise visualization of the testimony in the Gospel of John (19:17–22). Thus in the scenes painted by members of the Epirus school we read the following: ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΝΑΖΩΡΑΙΟΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΤΩΝ ΙΟΥΔΕΩΝ.

28 As is done in the following monasteries: St Nicholas Dilios and Eleusa in Ioannina, Varlaam in Meteora, Transfiguration in Veltsista (present-day Klimatia).


31 With insignificant variation this text is found in the monasteries of Philanthropinon, St Nicholas Dilios, Transfiguration in Veltsista, Varlaam in Meteora and in the church of St Demetrios in Veltsista; see Acheimastou-Potamianou. Η μονή των Φιλανθρωπιών, 85, ref. 647. The scroll from St Demetrios Church in Veltsista has not been published – our observations come from field research.

32 On dating the murals in the nave see the interpretations of Acheimastou-Potamianou. Η μονή των Φιλανθρωπιών, 21-34, as well as of Semoglou, Athanasios. Ο εντοιχισμός διάκοσμου του καθολικού της Μονής Μυρτάς στην Αιτωλία (φάση του 1539) και η θέση του στη ζωγραφική του Α’ μισού του 16ου αιώνα. – Egnatia, 2001–2002, No. 6, Thessaloniki, 185-238.
able symbols, which – according to M. Acheimastou-Potamianou who has studied the monument, – probably represent the additional inscriptions in Latin and Hebrew that the Evangelist mentions. The same detail is present also in the Varlaam Monastery in Meteora (1548) (Fig. 6).

The influence of this new iconographical model is already evident in the art of some painters after the middle of the 16th century, for example in the frescoes in St Athanasius (St. Nicholas) Church in Šiševo (1565), produced by an anonymous painter. A rare example

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33 Acheimastou-Potamianou. Η μονή των Φιλανθρωπηνών, 85, ref. 647.
34 There is still no monograph on this monument, a true representative of the art of the Theban painters.
35 J. Novakovic does not mention this scene in her article on the work of the artistic workshop that has produced the frescoes; see Nikolić-Novaković, Jasminka. Црквата во Градовци и една slikarska rabotilnica od vtorata polovina na XVI век vo okolinata na Skopje [Crkvata vo Gradovci i edna slikarska rabotilnica od vtorata polovina na XVI vek vo okolinata na Skopje].

Fig. 6. Nave of the catholicon of the Varlaam Monastery, Meteora (1548). Photo: I. Vanev
of the distribution of the ‘Epirus type’ in the Bulgarian lands is the image from the church of the Dormition of the Virgin in the village of Priboy (17th c.)\(^{36}\) (Fig. 7). Painters from some of the workshops, originating from the village of Linotopi, also adhere closely to the elaborate artistic style of the Theban master painters. For example, a certain Michael and his son Constantine consecutively ran a workshop that was active for a long period in the region of Epirus\(^{37}\) (Fig. 8).

To summarize, we can distinguish two main iconographical types of the episode of Pilate’s Mounted Escort in the Central Balkan
Peninsula in the post-Byzantine period: the first is used mostly by painters working on the territory of the Archbishopric of Ochrid; the second is the version created by the Theban painters and subsequently recreated far outside the borders of Epirus.

In comparison with the preceding period, the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century was a time when many painters’ workshops were active and productive. Quite often they did not sign their work. The problem of their identification is complicated further by the syncretism of their painting style: in their repertoire the same painters include models that were used by different

Fig. 8. St Nicholas Church in Vitsa, Epirus (1612) (An. Tourta)
schools from the middle of the 16th century, together with the preceding models from the end of the 15th century, as well as from the Palaiologan period. In such a complex environment the typology of the scene that is suggested in the current study could contribute for determining the origin of the painters that worked on a particular fresco programme. In combination with a number of other iconographic features this typology could serve as one of the markers, hinting at the place where the painters received their education, or indicating the region where they were hired most frequently.

Could the image from St George’s Church in Veliko Tarnovo belong to one of the two iconographical types mentioned earlier? And what would that association reveal about the origin or the place of education of the painters that worked in Tarnovo in 1616? In the scene, recreated by the painters in St George, the body of the last horse from the escort is depicted halfway through the gates of the Fortress of Jerusalem – a feature that is typical for the Epirus school. At the same time, Pilate is not facing backwards; this sets the image apart from this iconographical type, and makes it more similar to the Ochrid model. There is another detail that is not found in either of the aforementioned models: the scroll – traditionally held by Pilate – is in the hands of one of the high priests. Even more extraordinarily, the text on the scroll does not correspond with either version; the scroll from the church in Veliko Tarnovo contains symbols that are neither Cyrillic nor Greek, with elements and lexemes in Arabic; these, however, do not form a coherent text38. It should be noted that this is not a case of Pseudo-Kufic ornamentation, as the purpose of the scrolls is to convey particular information; in other words, in their essence they have semantic value (even when their content is unclear, as is the case here), whereas Kufesque in Christian art has a mainly decorative function39.

An earlier example of imitated text on Pilate’s scroll can be found.

38 My deepest gratitude goes to Dr Anka Stoilova, archivist-Arabist at the Oriental Collections Department of Sts Cyril and Methodius National Library for her help with the inscription. We could presume that the painters are familiar with examples of Arabic writing, they can imitate it but they are hardly transcribing an existing text. Besides, there are some elements from the Greek writing on the scroll.

39 On this topic see: Orlova, Maria. О некоторых декоративных приемах в стенописи собора Рождества Богоматери Антониева монастыря в Новгороде (1125) [O nekotorykh dekorativnykh priyemakh v stenopisi sobora Rozhdestva Bogomateri Antoniyeva monastyrya v Novgorode (1125)]. – Art Studies Quarterly, 2010, No. 1, 3-11.
Fig. 9. Holy Archangels Church in the Monastery of Kučevište (1591) (An. Serafimova)

Fig. 10. Detail of the scroll from the Monastery of Kučevište
on the frescoes in Yashunski Monastery St John the Baptist (1524) in the vicinity of Niš; however, in iconographical terms the episode of Pilate's Escort there differs from all images known at present, so it will not be discussed here. The closest parallel to the scene from Veliko Tarnovo can be found in the Monastery of the Holy Archangels in the vicinity of Kučevište (1591) (Fig. 9). Here the scroll is once again held by one of the horsemen, and its inscription is an imitation of text (Fig. 10); the last of the horsemen, coming out of the fortress, is depicted only halfway visible passing through the gate. Certain similarities with these images can be found also in the scenes from Pustinja Monastery (1622), as well as in Monastery of the Holy Apostles in the Patriarchate of Peć (1633/4); hypothetically, they could also be ascribed to this peculiar type.

It is not easy to interpret the painter’s decision to fill the scroll with an imitation of Arabic writing. The fact that the painters in Veliko Tarnovo – who beyond doubt spoke Greek, – omitted the Greek text that is present in the scene from the Philanthropinon Monastery, as well as from the Varlaam Monastery, reveals that this is not a modification of the Epirus model of Pilate’s Escort. Furthermore, in the scene from Veliko Tarnovo – same as in the scene from Kučevište, – the scroll is not in Pilate’s hands but in those of one of the horsemen from the escort, i.e. the meaning of the text must be different both from Pilate’s vindication (in the Ochrid-Kastorian type), as well as from the depiction of the Gospel narrative (in the Epirus type). We believe that the unique iconographic similarities between the images in the two churches suggest the existence of a common model that was rarely used in the post-Byzantine period on the Balkans.

According to the scholar Aneta Serafimova – who studies the Monastery of Kučevište – the authors of the frescoes in the nave were

40 No special research has been carried out on this monument, and the image has not been published. The scene is extraordinary also because the episode Pilate’s Escort has been added to the scene Crucifixion, and not the scene The Road to Calvary. For some information about the monastery and the frescoes see Rakocija, Miša. Jašunjski manastir Sv. Jovana [Jašunjski manastir Sv. Jovana.]. In: Mанастири и цркве јужне и источне Србије [Manastiri i crkve južne i istočne Srbije]. Niš, 2013, 113-115.
educated on the territory of the Archbishopric of Ochrid\textsuperscript{44}. She believes that this scene in particular follows the ‘Kastorian model’, and its closest iconographic parallels can be found in the church of St Athanasius (St Nicholas) in Šiševo (1565), and in St Nicholas Šiševski Monastery (1630)\textsuperscript{45}. As we have demonstrated, both suggestions are inconclusive.

The clarification of the main iconographical models of the scene and thence the specification of the type, used in St George’s Church in Veliko Tarnovo, aimed to take us one step closer to identifying the origin of the painters who worked here. The general study of the painting style, used in the church,\textsuperscript{46} led us to the suggestion that the painters were most frequently hired from Thessaly, as their iconographical repertory was influenced most prominently by the mural decorations in the region attributed to the famous Dzordzis from Crete\textsuperscript{47}. But this scene is not observed either in the repertory of the Cretan painters, or in that of Dzordzis. However, this can only partially account for its divergences from the two main types. The unusual iconography of the episode, along with a few other distinctive features of the repertory of the painters working in Veliko Tarnovo\textsuperscript{48}, provide evidence that the latter followed models that are not typical for the Balkans; their origin – as well as their authors’ – is yet to be determined and clarified.

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\textsuperscript{44} Serafimova. Кучевшци манастир, 306.
\textsuperscript{45} Serafimova. Кучевшки манастир, 83. The painting from the Monastery of Šiševo has not been published.
\textsuperscript{46} Kolusheva. Църквата „Св. Георги”, 188.
\textsuperscript{47} Several fresco paintings from Thessaly are also attributed to Dzordzis from Crete and members of his workshop, besides their works on Mount Athos – namely, the main churches of the monasteries of Metamorphosis (The Great Meteoron) (1552) and Roussanou (1560) in Meteora, as well as St Vissarion Monastery (Doussikou) (1557) in the vicinity of Trikala. A detailed bibliography about research on Dzordzis’ work can be found in: Perrakis, Ioannis. Συγκριτικές εικονογραφικές παρατηρήσεις στα έργα του Θεοφάνη και του εργαστηρίου του Τζώρτζη, σε παραστάσεις του Χριστολογικού κύκλου. In: Ανταπόδοση. Μελέτες βυζαντινής και μεταβυζαντινής αρχαιολογίας και τέχνης προς τιμή της καθηγήτριας Ελένης Δελιγιάννη-Δωρή. Athens, 2010, 370, ref. 2. See also: Anagnostopoulou, Aleksandros. Οι τοιχογραφίες του καθολικού της Μονής Ρουσάνου των Μετέωρων. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Thessaloniki, 2010.
\textsuperscript{48} Kolusheva. Църквата „Св. Георги“, 244.
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В наоса на църквата „Св. Георги“ във В. Търново (1616) е представен популярният в поствизантийското изкуство епизод на Конницата на Пилат като част от сцената Пътят към Голгота. В текста е обрнато внимание на няколко интересни иконографски детайли от изображението, които го отличават от повечето известни примери от периода. За да бъдат открени по-ясно особеностите на епизода от търновската църква, в изследването са набелязани два основни иконографски типа на сцената, използвани от зографите в края на XVI и началото на XVII в., които досега не са били предмет на специално проучване. Единият от тях е утвърден в Охридско-костурския регион през XV и XVI в., а другият е разработка на зографите, изпълнили стенописите на редица важни църкви и манастири в района на Епир през XVI в. Вариантът, представен в църквата „Св. Георги“ в Търново, не съвпада с нито един от разгледаните иконографски типове. Най-близък негов паралел е известен от църквата на Кучевишкия манастир (1591). Сходствата между двете изображения показват съществуването на общи модел, рядко прилаган през поствизантийския период на Балканите. Заедно с още няколко характерни особености в репертоара на зографите, работили в Търново, той е свидетелство за следването на редки за Балканите модели, чийто произход все още не е установен и предстои да бъде изясняван.
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ВИЗАНТИЙСКО И ПОСТВИЗАНТИЙСКО ИЗКУСТВО: ПРЕСИЧАНЕ НА ГРАНИЦИ

BYZANTINE AND POST-BYZANTINE ART: CROSSING BORDERS

Институт за изследване на изкуствата, БАН
Institute of Art Studies, BAS

съставители
Edited by

Емануел Мутафов
Emmanuel Moutafov

Ида Тот (Великобритания)
Ida Toth (United Kingdom)

отговорен редактор
Copy-editor

Тереза Бачева
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превод
Translation

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предпечат
Content Management

Любомир Маринчевски
Lyubomir Marinchevski

Майя Лачева
Maya Lacheva

печат
Press

Дайрект сървисиз
Direct Services

ISBN 978-954-8594-70-7
ISBN 978-954-8594-70-7

ISSN 1313-2342
ISSN 1313-2342