

INSTITUTE OF ART STUDIES, BAS



Prof. EMMANUEL STEFANOV MOUTAFOV, PhD

THE METROPOLITAN CHURCH
ST. STEPHEN IN NESSEBAR AND ITS ART CIRCLE:
CULTURAL CONTEXT, INTERTEXTUALITY AND INTERVISUALITY

ABSTRACT

of

DISSERTATION

FOR AWARDING THE SCIENTIFIC DEGREE
DOCTOR OF SCIENCE

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The dissertation has a volume of 407 pages, foreword, 5 chapters, conclusion, appendices, iconographic index, summary in English and 335 bibliography titles.

The defense will be held on March 30th, 2022 at an open meeting of a scientific panel: Prof. Valeria Fol, DSc, Institute of Balkan Studies and Center of Thracology, BAS; Prof. Diana Radoyanova, DSc, University *Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov*, Burgas; Assoc. Prof. Ivan Vanev, PhD, Institute of Art Studies, BAS; Prof. Ingeborg Bratoeva-Darakchieva, PhD, Institute of Art Studies, BAS; Prof. Kristina Yapova, DSc, Institute of Art Studies, BAS; Assoc. Prof. Nikolay Gochev, PhD, Sofia University *St. Kliment Ohridski*; Prof. Rostislava Todorova-Encheva, PhD, Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen.

All materials on the defense are available to interested parties at the Department of Administrative Services of the Institute of Art Studies, Sofia, 21 Krakra Str.

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Preface

As part of my work in 2010 on editing some of the church inscriptions included in the Corpus of Wall Paintings of the Seventeenth Century in Bulgaria I was permitted to write a planned project entitled *Reading Greek Inscriptions on Murals as a Tool for the Reconstruction of the Visual Language of the 17th century in Monuments from the Bulgarian Lands*, which was accepted by the research group "Medieval and National Revival" and by the Scholarly Council of the Institute of Art Studies - BAS and registered as an academic research in NCID (COBISS.BG-ID - 1560553940), available in scientific-technical and pedagogical library, Sofia. I had to write this text because my notes and comments on the inscriptions in the churches "Nativity" in Arbanassi, the Bachkovo refectory, "St. Spas" and "St. George Mali" in Nessebar were reduced due to the format of the Corpus publication, while my participation was defined as a "consultant". I also published some of these observations in my article from 2010 entitled "*Who are the ancient wise men depicted in the frescoes of the Bachkovo refectory and the Church of the Nativity in Arbanassi?*", published in *Art Studies Quarterly*. My work on the New Metropolitan Church (St. Stephen) in Nessebar began in 2019 with my assignment to write the corpus material about the

church for the project *Corpus of Murals from the 16th century in Bulgaria*, funded by the *National Program Cultural-historical heritage, national heritage and social development* led by Prof. Dr. Biserka Penkova. This project is part of the larger international project *Corpora of Pre-modern Christian Orthodox Mural Paintings* under the auspices of Union Académique Internationale, where the leading organization is the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Such a task was quite logical, as the church is entirely with Greek epigraphy, it is not published in its entirety, I have already published the inscriptions from the church "St. George Mali" in Nessebar and I have consulted the Greek texts from the previous publications for "St. Stephen" by Georgi Gerov, as well as due to the fact that I have already worked on the development of murals and signatures of icon painters in the Balkans in the 16th – 17th centuries, published in Romania in 2018.

Historiographical review of the problems, principles and research tasks

This study deals with four key problems: 1. The Logos in its entirety, i.e. beyond the elementary connections between image and inscription and its ties with the addressee and the environment and also from the point of view of modern terminology about intervisuality and intertextuality; 2. the New metropolitan church (St. Stephen) of Nessebar and its artistic circle as an example of high art on the Bulgarian lands at the end of the 16th and the 17th c. incorporated in a broader Balkan context; 3. The cultural history of Nessebar during the Ottoman period adding new unpublished inscriptions and sources, that could assist in the reconstruction of our past of the south Black Sea region and 4 – to try and prove the existence and use of hermeneia of the Daniel type as early as the 16th century.

V. Gyuzelev believes that at the end of the 14th century "in the Balkan possessions of Byzantium after Constantinople the second most important church-religious center became Nessebar". Acad. Gyuzelev is one of the greatest researchers of the small Black Sea town, and before him J. Chimbuleva. The Mesembrian M. Constantinides has dedicated his work to the history of the city, on whose studies most of the modern research on the Southern Black Sea coast are based. Important for the exploration of the city is the reading of the Mesembrian Chronicle by P. Chilev from 1908, which is the only one so far. The limited material in my attempt to restore the general cultural history of Nessebar during the Ottoman period necessitated the attraction of information from studies of Ottoman and economic historians such as E. Grozdanova and S. Andreev, as well as research of libraries storing old printed books, of the school tradition in the city. I also had to study a number of documents to help me restore the biographies of patrons, clergy and merchants from the Black Sea city in order to create the social and educational environment for the population that consumes high-

class culture, as well as the ties of Mesembrians with Constantinople and other centers in the Balkans, reaching almost the end of the First World War. This required the deciphering and translation of many unpublished texts. The contribution of D. Radoynova is significant for the discovery of the culture of the "Bulgarian Black Sea Greeks", which she defines as inhabitants of a separate cultural zone and bearers of the idea of urban culture, which in other parts of Bulgaria during the Ottoman period appeared much later.

The research of A. Vasiliev, as well as of more contemporary authors such as D. Popova, I. Gergova, I. Vanev and others, remain invaluable regarding the art of the later churches in Nessebar.

D. Popova is convinced that for a period of 10-15 years in Nessebar there was a workshop at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, and besides the comparisons between the churches "St. Stephen", "St. Spas" and the church on the island "St. Anastasia" brings to our attention a dozen icons that belong to the same masters, noting the unity in style and quality.

Studying the path roads of the Balkan icon painters, colleagues such as M. Kuyumdzhev and M. Kolusheva determined that there are some similarities between the Nessebar churches and some monuments in present day Albania and Serbia, underlying the need of a more serious research of these parallels and in this way confirming those of B. Penkova. While G. Gergov speaks about the "Nessebar artistic production" from the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, created by icon painters that have arrived in the city in order to decorate the new Metropolitan church and who have stayed and continued to decorate with murals a number of churches and painted many icons (actually painted between 1603 and 1604) and their art marks "one of the top examples of Post-Byzantine art on Bulgarian lands".

On the other hand, as a solution to a scientific-applied problem, I set out to make a complete *corpus* of the inscriptions of the four main churches with a commentary and translations, which are missing in the institute's publishing practice and can be used by students and specialists who do not know Greek language and have no experience with epigraphy from the particular era.

I. Cultural context

The ancient Greek port city of Mesembria, is located on the rocky shores of the Black Sea, about 35 km from Burgas. During the Hellenistic era, the city flourished as a commercial center, retaining some of these functions in the Middle Ages within the Byzantine Empire. In the 14th century it passed into the possession of the Bulgarian kings, and for a short period it was ruled by the Genoese. In the first decades of the 16th century,

today's Nessebar was probably included in the hassa of the Silistra Sandzakhbey as the center of the kaza. It has been documented that during the rule of Sultan Suleiman I (1520-1566) the people from Mesembria provided the Silistra Sandzakhbey with an annual income of 44 760 akche (coins). But during the second half of the 16th century the feudal status of the city changed - the inhabitants of Mesembria, together with the rayah of most of the nearby villages, became subject to the waqf of Haseki Sultan, wife of Suleiman Khan, based in Istanbul. Thus, at least during the period 1561–1574, the ties between Nessebar and Istanbul were particularly intense, because the known as Roxolana /Rosana, Hurem Sultan was the beloved wife of Sultan Suleiman I and mother of Selim II, and her waqf gave to the local population some privileges in the region of Hasekia, to which Nessebar probably belonged in the 16th century.

The economy of Mesembria in the 18th – 19th centuries

As early as the 16th century, Mesembria was famous as a convenient port south of the Balkan Mountains, as a vineyard and wine center and as an important point for trade of salt and fish, wheat, barley, honey and firewood, meeting the needs of Istanbul, and for those reasons the city owned many shops and warehouses. Due to the location of their settlement, the inhabitants of Mesembria were engaged in trade, fishing and shipbuilding. Traditionally, wine production remained in the vineyards surrounding the city, part of which was probably for export.

Education in Mesembria

For the reconstruction of education in Mesembria from the Ottoman period, the available data from later times have been used, in order to create an impression of its condition in the past as well. Until the beginning of the 4th century, education in Mesembria was probably at the level of church or cell schools. From *Notes on the offerings in the God-protected Mesembrian diocese*, now kept in the Mount Athos monastery of Iviron, it becomes clear what books the clergy of Mesembria had in the late 16th century. The library of the metropolis according to these fragmentary notes had: four Gospels; *Tetraevangelion with Praxapostol* and an individual *Praxapostol* (Chosen Apostle); Book of Prophecies (probably quotes from the Old Testament); *Tacticon of the Hierarch*; *Prayer with Akathist*; *Kyriacodromion*; *Menaion* for the whole year; two issues *Menologion of Symeon Metaphrastes* (for October and November); *Synaxarion* for six months; *Panegyric* and two *Pentecostarion* (Color (Festal) Triodion).

Mesembrian Metropolis

Initially, Mesembria was an episcopate under the Metropolis of Adrianople, headed by an *autocephalous bishop of the Diocese of Haemimontus with center in Edirne*, while in the 6th century it rose to the rank of archbishopric in the diocese of the Patriarchate of

Constantinople. It was with this transfer to the jurisdiction of Constantinople that the construction of the cathedral church "St. Sophia" (Hagia Sophia) was connected. From the beginning of the 10th century Mesembria merged with the Archbishopric of Anchialos, which later separated from the Archdiocese of Mesembria, and at the end of the 12th century the Mesembrian episcopal see became a metropolis, with its bishop entitled "ἐπίσκοπος καὶ ἔσας". At the time of reign of Ivan Assen I and II, when Mesembria returned to the borders of Bulgaria and specifically under Tsar Ivan Assen II (1218-1241), the churches "St. Theodore", "St. Petka", "St. Demetrious" and others were built. From 1263 the Mesembrian see returned to the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, in 1274 the local metropolitan joined the union between Constantinople and Rome, and between 1331 and 1366 under Tsar Ivan Alexander it was returned to the diocese of the Patriarchate of Tarnovo, raising the status of most local monasteries to stavropigial.

There are few shortcomings in the list of Mesembrian bishops. The authority of the Mesembrian hierarchs - bishops and archbishops - is evident from their signatures on the many official church documents from different eras, as well as from the decisions of local and ecumenical councils, from their initiatives. As a metropolitan see, Mesembria has had many churches and chapels since the Middle Ages. There are ten surviving Byzantine churches in varying degrees of preservation, dating from the 6th – 14th century, and fragments of the ancient and medieval fortifications of the city, as well as residential buildings, mostly from the 18th – 19th century.

Mesembrian Chronicle

The *Anchialos and Mesembrian Chronicles* are very important documents about the history of the Black Sea region, kept in SS. Cyril and Methodius National Library – Bulgarian Historical Archive, col. 25, a. u. 1, pp. 1-268 (IIA 7690) replenished during the period 1834–1890 and cataloged as a “notebook of sermons and teachings”. The first and so far only publication about the codices was made by P. Chilev and is dated from 1908. Although today the codices (in Greek χρονικόν - chronicle) is digitized and available on the NLKM website with all its 539 pages. As Chilev notes, from p. 59 the texts were written by another hand and it belonged to the Mesembrian Margaritis (Margarit) Konstantinidis, whose Greek was much more correct than that of the previous writer. Margarit Konstantinidis was born in Mesembria in 1850. Some of his manuscripts and publications are now preserved in the National Library of Greece, donated by the author himself, who in return requested the title of "Doctor" of the Kapodistrian University of Athens but he was denied. In other words, what was written by Konstantinidis in the NLKM-BHA manuscript, col. 25, a. u. 1, is from the period 1878–1890, and the material for his texts in the codices was probably collected in Istanbul between 1874 and 1878.

II. Intertextuality

Reading of Greek inscriptions on mural paintings as a tool for the reconstruction of the visual language of the 16th – 17th centuries in the monuments of the Bulgarian Lands

This study is the first such attempt in our literature, as it mediates the two types of corpora known in publication practice, i.e. unites the Corpus with inscriptions with a similar one, dedicated to the frescoes, trying to restore the so-called *pictorial language* as a metaphor for the written or pictorial prototypes used by icon painters, combining them in an iconographic program designed to communicate with a specific type of recipient, in specific places and in the specific conditions of a historical epoch. Last but not least, such a research aspect could reconstruct as much the artistic processes in our lands as it could restore the creative process to some extent.

Who is engaged in writing inscriptions

Studies on Orthodox art do not pay enough attention to the peculiarities of the creative process due to the lack of written data. So far in our science S. Smyadovski asks questions such as: "Who determines the fragment of text and its place in the image, i.e. who chooses and who decides?". Internationally, Robert G. Ousterhout engaged in the reconstruction of the creative process of master builders, using mostly indirect evidence to build his hypothetical picture, as another is not possible, especially for the early periods of Christian art. Observing the very general sketches drawn on the undried mortar base on the walls of Orthodox churches, as well as the too general written instructions for characters, scenes and motifs, I am convinced that the icon painters began work without much preparation, i.e. without a detailed idea of the end result and a complete concept of composition and relationships between the images in an ensemble. At this stage of the creative process, the inscriptions come perhaps in last place, being selected, transmitted and written by an unknown person: the icon painter, his apprentices or someone more literate from the local clergy, cantor, clerk or teacher. The latter option seems to me possible in cases where the written texts are not part of the standard instructions in the iconographic manuals.

The problem of the existence of censorship is even more valid in defining the texts that accompany sacred images. In all the mediaeval literature that we know there is no direct data on the participation of the clergy in the selection of texts for murals and icons.

P. Florensky's thesis that artists were not well educated and monitored by bishops and elders in icon painting is also hypothetical, not based on clear written sources and cannot be universal for the whole Orthodox world and for the whole history of

painting in the East. For the Byzantine scholar A. Robbie in the Middle Ages, the inscriptions carry information that is a prerequisite for dialogue with the recipient or the viewer. Their other purpose is to perform a "decorative function through words". That is why the audience of art, accompanied by inscriptions, is extremely important. My interest here is in the first function of the word in the art of the 16th – 17th centuries, i.e. in the context of readers who can read and understand Greek, which is a prerequisite for a fulfilling relationship between word and image and hence for the creation of high art.

It has been established that reading and writing in the Middle Ages were different in nature intellectual efforts, and they were not always interconnected. This is confirmed by my observations on the authorship of transcripts of hermeneia, which were not always compiled and transcribed by painters, although they certainly used them.

About the mistakes in the epigraphy of the Orthodox monuments so far

The question about the level of education and culture in general in the Middle Ages in the East has excited many researchers from the last decades of the past century. One aspect of this interest is the study of reading and writing skills. The observations of N. Economides concern the general literacy of secular and spiritual figures in certain areas of the Byzantine Empire: Mount Athos, western Asia Minor, the island of Crete, covering the period up to the end of the 13th century. Specifically, with the level of literacy and spelling knowledge of the icon painters of the 10th century in the regions of Mani, Greece and Cappadocia deals M. Panayotidi. However, there is no comprehensive study from this point of view for post-Constantinople artists writing in Greek, probably because of the vastness of the material, its uncertain origins, sensitive regional differences, and the marginalization of the Christian population in the Ottoman Empire which has led to educational deficit.

Metropolitan centers and stavropigial monasteries have significantly better positions because they had the possibility of inviting better paid and knowledgeable artists, but also due to possible censorship, which was exercised during their work. The smaller settlements are inferior in the quality of the executed order and the absence of a compact Greek population and connections with Constantinople possibly played a role.

In most of the churches discussed in this chapter, it becomes clear that a manual of the type of Hermeneia or the Book of Daniel was used. This Hermeneia is found today in the Library of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem under № 214. Among the academic circles, this manuscript is better known from its original publication by Papadopoulos-Kerameus in 1909 as one of the sources for the Dionysius Hermeneia.

Iconographic instructions from such a manuscript have been widely used since the early 18th century by a number of artists and authors of writings on paintings on the Balkans, such as Dionysius of Fournas. The Book of Daniel of 1674 is a compilation of instructions for depicting individual characters, scenes and inscriptions, drawn from an impressive previous tradition of Greek icon painting studios, as I have noticed in 2001. At that time, I suggested that such compilations with lexical borrowings from Italian and Russian art could be made before 1669 only on the island of Crete, as well as the fact that the authors should have been priests, which is evident from the knowledge of Evangelical, Patristic and Patericon literature in Greek. My assumptions have been confirmed by the current observations on the fresco decoration of the temples from the 16th – 17th c. in our lands. They are all earlier than the so-called "Second Manuscript of Jerusalem", which shows that the prophet Daniel is only one of the copyists, but not the author of such a larger compilation of iconographic guidelines, made no later than the end of the 16th century and first distributed in the Balkans. Manuscripts with content similar to that of Daniel's transcript have been circulating among clergy and artists since the early 17th century in our lands, as evidenced by the indisputable similarities between what is described there and the frescoes of churches with Greek inscriptions in our lands. Despite their value, such manuscripts have not been preserved to this day, but they have certainly been used and preserved carefully, i.e. they were kept away from dyes, siccatives and primers so as not to damage them. Of course, the main source of all inscriptions for painters, especially scrolls, are texts from the biblical corpus (Paroimia and Paroimiai pericope, Psalter), liturgical texts (St Basil's and St Chrysostom's liturgy), less often texts from homilies and hymnographic passages, which came into practice through collections such as Apophthegmata Patrum, before being included in the iconographic manuals.

III. **Intervisuality**

Some aspects of the development of Orthodox Christian art in the 16th – 17th centuries: faith, language and nationality

By the end of the 15th century, Sultan Mehmed II imposed on the Patriarch of Constantinople Gennadios II Scholarios the right to represent all Christians under the Sublime Porte, making the Ecumenical Patriarchate the only legitimate institution of the Orthodox Christians in the empire. To some extent, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, with the help of the Ottomans, gained independence from political power for the first time, as well as control over the old autonomous Slavic churches, which was unthinkable until the 15th century. It was consecrated in 1526, when the tailor from Ioannina John was tortured and burned by the Ottomans in Istanbul, which made him the first new martyr of the transformed Byzantine church. Until being

conquered by the Ottomans in 1669, the island of Crete was also a powerful art center. For the period 1453–1526, the presence of 120 icon painters was documented in Heraklion. They painted mostly icons, adhering either to the strict Byzantine tradition, or to the *Maniera Italiana*. Urban centers in the Balkans did not have such conditions because the Ottomans imposed restrictions on the construction of new churches and short deadlines for repair works on the old temples. Exceptions were some urban centers such as Ioannina (until 1611) and Athens, where due to certain privileges for the local population greater construction took place in the 16th century. From the 16th century onwards, the monasteries of Mount Athos will gain a leading place, replacing Constantinople and other centers, as the Ottoman legislation gave them special status and privileges. On the other hand, their main protectors and ktetors became the rulers across the Danube due to the wiping off of the dynasties of Byzantine rulers in Constantinople. These two factors became fundamental to the formation of the new monumental painting in the most important spiritual center of Orthodoxy - Mount Athos, and this will reflect on the art of the Balkans due to the undisputed theological and ascetic authority of the monastic peninsula. From the third decade of the 16th century, monasteries and churches were renovated throughout Continental Greece and Mount Athos, and temples, chapels and refectories were decorated with frescoes. Ktetors became both the rulers of Moldowallachia and local hierarchs, who almost without exception commissioned the repainting of existing mural ensembles in the iconic cult centers of Mount Athos and in Thessaly to the teams of Cretan icon painters Theophanes Strelitsas-Bathas and Dzordzis. It is through them that during the second and third quarters of the 16th century, mural painting would have its second prosperous period on Mount Athos. The Greek scholar D. Palace, in connection with the artist Dzordzis, believes that in Constantinople there were workshops that produced icons for the needs of Christians in the empire, but today we have no evidence of this. This thesis of Palace, in fact first stated by G. Velenis, became an occasion for serious controversy in Greek science in the 50s of the 20th c., in which prevails the opinion of M. Hadzidakis that Constantinople was not an art center during the Ottoman period, which does not sound logical. It is to this thesis that I return in the concluding part of this study, reflecting on the origins of the painters who worked in Nessebar in the 16th century and the beginning of the next century.

It was not until the end of the 16th century that Greek inscriptions began to appear in some of the former territories of the Bulgarian state, such as in the metropolitan church "St. Stephen" in Nessebar (1599), and from the next century onwards they began to prevail. Other earlier monuments in the Bulgarian lands from the 16th century are: the church "St. Petka Samardzhiyska" in Sofia; "St. Prophet Elijah" of the Elijah Monastery (1550); the monastery "St. Ivan Pusti", called Kasinets (1540); the church

"St. Elijah" of the Strupets Monastery, the churches in Dragalevski (2nd layer, from the end of the 16th century) and the Kurilovski (1596) Monasteries, etc., where, however, the epigraphy is Cyrillic with few exceptions.

Icon painters began to sign their works relatively late, but their signatures can serve as an interesting basis for some of the observations offered in this chapter.

IV. Intervisuality, intertextuality, perception, or the Logos in a metropolitan church and its artistic circle

The church "St. Stephen" (New Metropolis), Nessebar

The New Metropolis of Nessebar has been the subject of some general publications about the Mesembrian churches by A. Grabar and A. Rashenov, mentioned by M. Konstantinidis, while A. Vasiliev dedicates a separate article to it. In I. Galabov's book about the churches of Nessebar this can also be found. An album about the monument was published in 1976. D. Sasselov, T. Teofilov, S. Boyadzhiev and B. Kupuzov dealt with the problems of its restoration in their articles. I. Gergova has also dedicated a corpus-type survey to the church "St. Stephen" in Nessebar, where she examines mainly the frescoes in the church from the 18th century. With some paintings from the Metropolis and its artistic circle have dealt up to now: V. Mardi-Babikova, D. Popova, I. Gergova in co-authorship with me, M. Zaharieva (a comparison between "Book of Acts" and "Miracles of Christ" with the frescoes in the katholicon of the Cherepish Monastery) and others. The most serious and respectively numerous so far are the publications related to "St. Stephen", by G. Gerov. It should be noted that in some of the colleague's texts the deciphering of the inscriptions was done by me as well as the reading of some sources. I. Gergova and I. Vanev dealt with the iconostasis of the metropolitan church and the fate of its icons. Recently, N. Klimukova has also been working on the New Metropolis, relying mainly on the publications of Gerov and Dionysius of Fournas, but without having any knowledge of the Book of Daniel and without commenting on the epigraphy of the monument. Other publications that mention the church without being specifically dedicated to it are cited in the text.

At least since the 16th century, the New Metropolis of Nessebar has been dedicated to the Theotokos of the Lifegiving Spring, and in the 19th century - to St. Stephen. In Nessebar with its numerous temples there are examples of second or double initiation. The New Metropolis, originally "Theotokos of the Lifegiving Spring" was later called "St. Stephen", receiving the patron saint of the sunken church of the same name.

The building

Its current form, the decoration of the church was architecturally designed in the late 12th and early 13th century, when, for example, in place of masonry arches lighter structures of wooden beams were placed. During this period, the upper wooden beams on the east wall and the altar apse were also renovated. It was then that the fronton of the façade was formed on the west side, which in its attic space ends with bricks arranged in the form of fascia dentata (jagged strip), and under it a triple arched window was built. On the apse of the diaconicon there is a plastic decoration of the so-called Lombard arches, and everywhere on the outer walls there are the typical decoration of the era, expressed in the alternation of processed stones with rows of bricks horizontally or shaping arches around the windows. It is believed that by the end of the 16th century the church had a marble iconostasis, which was replaced by a wooden one under Metropolitan Christophoros. Parts of the marble panels from this early altar partition were used as spolia in the walls and floor. The church has undergone some minor architectural changes over the centuries. In the 15th or early 16th century, a synthronon was built in the apse of the altar, which probably indicates a change in the function of the temple. The side entrances from the north and south must have been built at that time. At the end of the 16th century the temple was extended to the west. During this century, the windows on the north side, the central apse and the diaconicon were also closed. The main reconstruction is associated with the personality of the Mesembrian Bishop Christophoros (1593-1607), who carried out the renovation with donations from the entire local population. The restoration and painting of churches continued with his successor Cyprian, when the churches "Ascension of Christ" ("Holy Spas") and "St. George Mali" from the beginning of the 17th century was decorated. The narthex in the New Metropolis, which can be seen today, was added in the first decades of the 18th century, and the two windows on the west wall of the old church were walled during the time of Metropolitan Macarios of Mesembria. He must have also been the guarantor of the "Last Judgment" in the narthex, where he is depicted. Again in 1712 an extension was built to the narthex to the west from the north, reaching the middle of the naos along the west-east axis. The next reconstruction was carried out during the time of Metropolitan Constantius (Constantine?) (1789–1791).

Frescoes – general presentation

The mural decoration consists of three layers. The first pictorial layer, which is found in fragments on the western parts of the walls of the altar pylons (northern altar pillar), dates from the 10th – 12th century. Unfortunately, the current poor condition of the fragments does not allow more accurate dating. The walls of the middle nave were painted in the 15th century, while according to I. Gergova this took place in the 14th

century, but due to the threefold restoration and strong retouching the frescoes from this period are difficult to distinguish. In 1598–1599 the temple was completely repainted. Also at the end of the 16th century, the main structure of the iconostasis was installed and most of the icons were painted. It was not until the end of the 17th century that the wood-carving elements were probably added, as well as the altar doors, the frame and the wedding wreath of the iconostasis. It has been dismantled and the icons are in various museum collections in Bulgaria. Some of these icons, which are currently in the collection of the City Art Gallery - Plovdiv, are associated by researchers with the work of the Cretan Iakovos Daronas. In 1702 the founder's portrait of Metropolitan Makarius was painted. With his donation the entrance was painted. Another stage of the painting of the church is associated with the local bishop Constantius from the end of the 18th century and this can be seen in the image of the metropolitan as a donor and the image of St. Charalampos. Their author is anonymous, but his style is evident in many icons preserved on the southwest coast of the Black Sea.

Restoration

In 1964 the restoration of the frescoes of the church began, when the iconostasis was dismantled. This restoration lasted until 1974, when "St. Stephen" was opened for visitors. During this ten-year restoration period, the iconostasis was cleaned, its painting layer was strengthened, additional paintings were removed and inserts were placed, but its construction was assembled with significant changes. Many of the icons that decorated "St. Stephen" until the restoration, are scattered in the collections of AM - Nessebar, National Archeology Museum - BAS and City Art Gallery - Plovdiv, and their removal took place in stages in 1926, 1932 and 1947. Two more restoration interventions followed, the last of which was by a team led by P. Popov, which started in 2006.

Frescoes from the 14th century

Fragments of an earlier layer of frescoes, probably from the 14th century, have been preserved on the upper end of the decoration on the south wall of the middle nave. The preserved elements are parts of an architectural and natural landscape in a rectangular strip between the wooden ceiling and the 16th century painting layer. It is possible that in some places it is a repainting of the damaged earlier layer, but these fragments do not offer sufficient grounds to make a categorical assumption. In any case, repainting and reconstruction of the building during the time of Palailogos has taken place.

Frescoes from the 16th and 18th century

Description

The description of the murals follows two main principles: top to bottom and left to right. The material is arranged in parts (spaces) of the temple, following as much as possible the logic of the iconographic program. The inscriptions in Greek are presented first as close as possible to the original, then in a normalized form, and finally in a translation into modern Bulgarian with reference to the sources. In cases when the text of the translation differs from the common name of a certain scene or character, my modern Bulgarian translation in italic is offered. In the rare cases when I have not found an adequate translation, I have offered my reading marked with my initials (E.M.).

The most common parallels that are presented in the next pages are with the frescoes from the first phase of the inscription of the katholicon of the monastery "St. Stephen" in Meteora (from the end of the 16th century) based on the dissertation of I. Vitaliotis, as well as with those in the churches in the Divrovuni Monastery, Southern Albania (1603) and in the Novo Hopovo Monastery, Serbia (1608), for which I rely mainly on personal observations, as well as with those in the Pateron Monastery, Ioannina (painted between 1590 and 1631), for which a serious monograph has been published. The last church - "Assumption" in the village of Zitsa, or the katholicon of the monastery Pateron - I consider indicative of the development of mural painting on the threshold of the 16th and 17th centuries in the Balkans and specifically for mixing Epirus, Northern Greece and Cretan tradition. That is why I am constantly looking for parallels and differences between them and Nessebar's "St. Stephen" church in this study. However, in no case, should parallels with Pateron be taken as an attempt to search for the same style of drawing or the same icon painter. I also have to clarify why I have chosen these particular churches in my search for parallels. My first reason for choosing them is that they are also "Greek" or at least made by Greek icon painters. That is why I have chosen churches for comparison that have functioned in a monolingual confessional environment. The other criterion for their selection is the already noted similarity with the frescoes of "St. Stephen" by other authors. It is by this logic that the comparative base includes the Novo Hopovo Monastery, which, although painted mainly in Church Slavonic, sometimes presents Greek epigraphic material, but according to its previous researchers it was painted by Greek masters. The katholicon of the Pateron Monastery is often compared to the Nessebar church, as it is well published and interpreted in its entirety, believing in the adequacy of the parallels mentioned by A. Karaberidi.

The iconographic program is presented in registers, and the scenes and/or images are numbered for clarity. Before the presentation of each space, a diagram is presented to

make clear the location of each mural. In this abstract I omit the detailed description of the scenes according to space and their epigraphy, translations and analysis, which follow the above content in the actual text. The modern names of the scenes are given according to the titles used by Dionysius of Fournia in his *Hermeneia*. His manuscript is from the beginning of the 18th century, but for all serious researchers it is clear that this is a compilation of older texts, which was earlier proven by Papadopoulos-Kerameus by the publication of the First and Second Jerusalem Manuscripts as sources in the edition of the Dionysian *Hermeneia* dated 1909. Certainly the sources of a Mount Athos monk-painter were more reliable than the late interpretations of the scenes and the imposed terminology in our, Russian and Yugoslav science in the 20th century.

Parallels of the images from the layer in "St. Stephen" church, dated from the 18th century, are not mentioned in the text, as this was commented by E. Popova in the introduction to the *Corpus of Wall Paintings of the Eighteenth Century in Bulgaria*.

Pulpit and Episcopal Throne

The pulpit of "St. Stephen" is carved with floral elements, as well as with the following images: St. Luke with text on the scroll according to Luke 1: 1; St. Matthew with an inscription on the scroll of Matt. 1: 1; Jesus Christ with a citation from John 15: 5; St. John the Apostle, who holds a scroll with the text of John 1: 1; St. Mark, scroll with text from Mark 1: 1.

The Episcopal throne, placed during the same period as the above-mentioned pulpit, has a similar decoration, and the icon painter who made the images is certainly the same and his name is John of Ahtopol, as established by A. Kuyumdzhev. The main image in the decoration is that of Christ the Great Hierarch - IC XC ὁ ὢν, holding a scroll with a Greek inscription from Matthew 5: 14-15. Below the image of Christ we find the following donor inscription: ἐπί ἀρχιερατείας Θεοκλήτου Μεσημβρίας ἀΨ'Η'Γ' - *during the hierarchy of Theocletus of Mesembria* in 1793.

Iconostasis

Most probably the main structure of the iconostasis was installed in the 16th century together with the painting of the church. For I. Gergova the apostolic order is earlier, while the royal gates (sacral doors), the frame and the **wedding wreath** date from the 17th century, and most probably around 1606, judging by the northern wing of the doors from Byala. The history of the iconostasis is examined in detail by I. Vanev together with the fate of the original icons. It is interesting in this context to mention three two-sided icons from the Sovereign tier of the original iconostasis. The double-sided icons were most likely used in processions or they have two sides in order to be

turned to the iconostasis in accordance with the festive cycle of liturgy in the church. Another important detail concerning the so-called festive icons from the original iconostasis, now in the CAG - Plovdiv, is that they are attributed to the Cretan artist Jacobs Daronas (died 1626). However, this attribution was made before the publication of the doors from Byala, and if we consider their "Epirus style" wood carving, then most likely the images can be associated with the icon painters of the frescoes. It should also be noted that after the restoration the iconostasis was assembled on site with significant changes to the structure and its original proportions from the 16th century. Now the row of festive icons is missing, and the Deesis frieze has been moved to the level of the tensioners; a passage to the diaconicon is also open, while in the early 20th century there was no such passage, etc. In my dissertation I present the altar partition in its current form, i.e. after the 1974 reconstruction and with the icons that were there in 2021.

The iconostasis is crowned by a Crucifix, which dates from the 17th century. At the base of the Crucifix are fragments of a donor inscription written in red pigment on a gold background that is difficult to restore. The images of the Holy Mother of God on the left and St. John the Apostle on the right are also connected with the Crucifixion.

Another icon painter presents Christ's disciples from the apostolic order of the iconostasis, which probably dates from the 16th century.

From the original for the beginning of the 20th century iconostasis, only the above-mentioned two-sided icon "Christ the Great Hierarch and the figures of St. Evplos, St. Modestus and St. Stephen with life scenes" has been preserved (Archeological Museum - Nessebar, inv. № 13, dimensions 125 x 87). Christ, King of Kings and High Hierarch, holds the Gospel open with a text from John 15:10. The icon dates back to the beginning of the 17th century, although some researchers mention about the inscription τοῦ ἔτους 1710, and parallels are found in two icons from the Nessebar churches "St. George the Great" and "St. Theodore", i.e. probably they belong to the same atelier. On the reverse side another icon painter has presented: St. Evplos - ὁ ἅγιος Εὐπλος; St. Modestus of Jerusalem - ὁ ἅγιος Μόδιστος (sic! (ὀδεστος); St. Stephen - ὁ ἱγιος πρωτομάρτυς Στέφανος. Under the main images of the three saints there are four life scenes. The signature of the painter is: χεῖρ Κωνσταντίνου Κοημίτζη Μαΐου... 18..1 - *by the hand of Konstantinos Koimitsis May... 1841?* (year not visible). At the bottom of the icon is a dedicatory inscription, which is earlier and in another handwriting. In connection with the last icon in the text, the history of the holy relics kept in the temple is traced, which are published and commented here for the first time.

V. Problems in the interpretation of the monument and its context

The iconographic program

This chapter to some extent repeats what was written above in the description of the frescoes of "St. Stephen", but is intended for those who are not interested in the epigraphy, which is essential for this study.

The subject of the iconographic program from the end of the 16th century is extremely rich according to G. Gerov, because it does not include only scenes from the Great Feasts and the Passion of Christ, which include some deeds and miracles described in the Color Triodion and Sunday Gospels read during the morning service; scenes from the childhood of the Holy Mother of God; feasts of the Mariological cycle; Assumption of the Virgin; Old Testament and Gospel subjects; liturgical scenes, as well as images of numerous individual saints. The arrangement of the images is unusual in many respects. The complexity of the task was that the church had to fulfill its function of a metropolitan church, but also to comply with the existing architectural structure of a three-nave basilica. The ideologue of the iconographic program is Bishop Christopher. The order of the scenes of the Great Feasts and the Passion of Christ, which are located here on the isles, is unusual, and the nave is free to depict scenes from the Book of Acts and Miracles of the God-man.

After a detailed reading of all the epigraphic material, it can be confirmed that the mural program contains relatively few Great Feasts and Passion of Christ, many Miracles and Acts, mixed in a vast Christological cycle, which extends approximately according to the New Testament. However, each wall and separate space in the temple also contains some accents according to its register and relies on changed proportions compared to other images (for example *The slaughter of infants*) or hymnography moments such as "O Tebe raduetsya (All of Creation Rejoices in Thee)" and "Svishe prorotsi" (The prophets from on high)", which break the sequence or lead to omissions in the general narrative. Some of the Post-Resurrection appearances of Christ are presented on the altar. I would not say that in "St. Stephen" there are scenes from the Color Triodion, because in the three scenes with the healing of the man born blind, the meeting with the Samaritan woman and the baptism are not in sequence and nowhere in the titles of the compositions is mentioned " ρυριακή - *Sunday of* ", but there are certainly titles directly borrowed from the Morning Gospels, as can be seen from the descriptions in the previous chapter. Due to the lack of opportunity to decorate the arch "St. Ceramide", archangel Raphael, arch. Uriel, the evangelists Luke, Mark and others they are not in pandatives, but on the walls of the middle nave, which shows how decisive the architectural environment is for the decoration and the compromise with the canons. For A. Kuyumdzhev, the icon painters

here are trying to fit a program for a domed church into a fresco ensemble of a church without arches.

For me in the altar apse the central image of the All-Blessed Virgin (Pammakaristos), which has a connection with the Church of Constantinople and specifically with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, is decisive, as such a connection is evidenced by the inclusion of St. Proclus in the program of the bema. Another accent in the decoration is the scene "Communion of the Apostles", which follows both Palaiologos and later, probably Epirus models. Below them is the scene "Melismos", where in addition to the concelebrating bishops in two registers (in medallions and standing), two groups of four angel deacons participate, which spatially pass into the decoration of the middle nave. At the center of the concelebrating, however, is not the little Jesus as the Eucharistic sacrifice, but Christ the Great Hierarch, who practically presides over the Divine Liturgy here and at the same time receives it. The most interesting solution in the apse of the New Metropolis of Nessebar is that the entire Eucharistic pyramid of the bema is crowned by the composition *Ark of the Covenant, carried by the king and the people to the house of King David* (III Kings 8: 5-6), again following Constantinople models from the Palaeologus era, transformed through Cretan aesthetics. For some researchers, however, the fragments of this image belong to the Abraham's Sacrifice scene.

The top register on the south wall of the middle nave (from east to west) depicts six healings: *Christ heals the two possessed men and sends their demons to the pigs; Christ tames the winds and the waters; Christ heals the possessed son of the rich; Christ heals the daughter of the Canaanite woman; Christ heals the man with a withered hand; Christ heals Peter's mother-in-law*. It can be said that the first two healings are adjacent due to the presence of the sea in the compositions and because they correspond spatially. Here an adoption is made as much from the Palaiologos art (Decani), as well as tendency for some elements that are common to the Epirus monuments (Divri). Schemes are already being used that can be seen in the Pateron Monastery near Ioannina, as well as in the "Transfiguration" monastery in Driovuno and the "Dormition of the Theotokos" church in the village of Zervat, Albania. For example, the scene *Christ heals Peter's mother-in-law*, which is found in "St. Stephen", cannot be found in the works of famous Cretan painters, but is typical of monuments such as Philanthropinon, Pecs, Driovuno, Pateron and Novo Hopovo. However, thematic coincidences, even similar compositions, do not mean that the style of the compared mural ensembles is identical. In most cases, the talent of the artists from Nessebar surpasses that of their predecessors or contemporaries in Epirus, more reminiscent of the brush of the Palaiologos masters or the Cretans working on Mount Athos.

In the second register of the frescoes on the south wall of the middle nave, the icon painters begin the cycle of the Miracles of the God-man with the scene *Jesus expels the money-changers from the temple*; another miracle is painted: *Christ heals the man born blind*. The last healing is included in the repertoire of the Cherepish Monastery from that era. The lack of a dome in the church leads to the placement of the evangelists Matthew and Luke on this wall, and in the narrow spaces between the zenith of the arches and the small windows of St. Ceramidion - archangel Raphael.

The arches under the south wall of the middle nave depict martyrs in medallions and their descriptions are grouped in much the same way in later iconographic manuals. St. Elpidophoros and St. Aphthonius, along with three other Persian saints (Acindynos, Pegasios (from the next arch), Anempodistos), for example, are celebrated on November 2, i.e. there is also a certain life-calendar dependence in their selection.

On the west wall of the middle nave is the impressive scene Ἐπί σοὶ χαίρει ("O Tebe raduetsya"). In the Nessebar composition the characters are mixed, i.e. they are not divided into groups, as Dionysius recommended in the 18th century, they do not have scrolls, Eden is not depicted, but rather the Heavenly Jerusalem (at the level of the altarpiece of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem), as in the famous Cretan icon of the same name painted by Georgios Klontzas from the end of the 16th century, but there is no sea, the Holy Mother of in the Doxa above a strange mountain causes reminiscences with the event of Sinai and respectively with the composition "Transfiguration".

The arch under the west wall depicts the holy martyrs Maccabees, their mother Solomonias and their teacher Eleazar, who are in semantic and compositional relation to the *Three Holy Children in the Fiery Furnace* (Dan. 3: 10-23). After the images of the prophet Samuel and the prophet Aaron, it is important to pay attention to an interesting decision of the icon painters to depict St. Macarius of Egypt in a cave without any data for this in his vita, but in order to be in a balanced relationship with the image of St. Elijah in the cave.

The first register of decorations on the north wall of the middle nave depicts six more Miracles of Christ.

The second register on the same wall begins with an image of evangelist Marco, next to him is archangel Uriel, who is a rare personality, continues with the miracle *Jesus heals a man with dropsy*, Ubrus, evangelist John and the miracle *Jesus calls his disciples with the first fish net*. In the Bulgarian lands the healing of the man with dropsy has survived in the frescoes from the 17th century of "St. Theodore" church, Dobarsko; "Nativity", Arbanassi and "Assumption" in the Cherepish Monastery, which shows that it is not a

common choice of the icon painters. The miracle of the first catch is a rare scene, which is a combination of two episodes of Matt. 4: 21-22 and Matt. 4: 18-20.

The idea of the icon-painting program continues in the diaconicon, beginning with two scenes from the childhood of the Holy Mother. At the zenith of the diaconicon's niche a miracle is presented: *Jesus talking to the scribes in the temple* (Luke 2:46). Next is the scene of the *Virgin Mary, blessed by the hierarchical priests*, which is also called the *Meeting with the High Priests*, as it is known from the mural programs of the first layer of paintings in the monastery of Philanthropinon and the one in Diliou. Continuing the cycle of the Virgin's childhood, two scenes are united - *Zechariah and the twelve rods* (Prayer over the rods) and the *Virgin Mary is handed over to Joseph*, described in Proto-Gospel 8: 2-9. The same scenes, but separated, exist in the program of the katholicon of the monastery Diliou from 1543. In their interpretation, a connection with the miniatures of Cod. Var. Gr. 1162 has already been noticed with the Words of the monk Jacob from the Kokinovafu monastery, where the cycle of the childhood and youth of the Holy Mother was very seriously developed.

The decoration of the top register on the south wall of the church begins with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30). In the katholicon of the Pateron monastery the scene has a similar composition, but there, apart from Prophet Moses and St. John the Baptist included also is the Prophet Aaron. The scene is described in a completely different way in the instructions for the parables of Dionysius of Fourni from the first half of the 18th century, i.e. in "St. Stephen" the scheme of the parable is not of Mount Athos origin. With "The Wedding in Cana of Galilee", noted here as the *First Miracle in Cana of Galilee*, again the icon painters of "St. Stephen" bring the viewer back to the cycle of "The Miracles of Christ". The closest compositional parallel I find is in the church in Divrovuni. In "St. Stephen" *The Miracle in Cana of Galilee* follows the Cretan model rather than the Epirus model, although its closest parallel is in Divri, Northern Epirus. In the frescoes of the Novo Hopovo monastery the model of the wedding is entirely Epirus: there are musicians, the Mother of God and Christ are not on the table, but are standing and in the foreground, i.e. one cannot speak of a parallel with "St. Stephen". *The Devil Tempted Jesus* follows, where three episodes are combined. The scene is also found in Divri, where again the compositional resemblance to "St. Stephen" is most visible. In the Bulgarian lands, except in "St. Stephen" church "The Temptation of Christ in the Desert" can also be found in the church of "St. Elijah" in the village of Boboshevo, and some researchers attribute Mount Athos origin to it. *Baptism of Christ* is depicted near the "Temptations". The same scene presents more iconographic analogies with the composition in the Pateron Monastery, while in the village of Divri there are other similarities and other differences from the "Baptism" as presented in "St. Stephen".

In the later temple prophet Isaiah is missing; there are only three angels; Jordan does not spring from human faces; the tree with the ax is not visible either (perhaps because the scene is damaged); the personifications of the sea and the river have changed positions, and under the supedaneum of Jesus no strange reptiles peek out. In Pateron, the female figure who symbolizes the sea also rides a large fish, but holds a boat in her hand, which is surprising since Ioannina is not at sea, unlike Nessebar, where affinity for the sea, fish and vessels is implied. In all three compared monuments the words of the prophet Anna are missing. So far, the conclusion is that the guiding principle for the selection of scenes in the upper register of the southern wall of "St. Stephen" may be the presence of bizarre and somewhat scary creatures such as devils, robbers, dragons. The *Birth of Jesus Christ* was also roughly painted over during the restoration, but its composition is close to the interpretations of the Pateron and Divrovuni monasteries. Again, however, there can be no question of absolute compliance. The Post-Resurrection appearances of Christ follow. The first is *Christ appearing to his disciples on the Mount of Galilee* (Matt. 28:18). Similar to the scene in "St. Stephen" is a composition in "St. Nikola", Novo Hopovo, but Christ has not set his foot on a hill there, and the two groups of apostles are led by St. Peter and St. Paul. The epigraphy in the Serbian monument is Cyrillic, and in this case the Slavic translation is written Matt. 28:18. Next to Christ on the Mount of Galilee is an *Angel announcing the resurrection, appearing to the myrrh-bearers* (Matt. 25: 5-7; Mark 16: 1-7; John 20: 11-13). The title of the scene from the mural is from the Second Sunday Gospel (Ἐωθινὸν Β'). In "St. Stephen" the scene is quite succinct, Cretan style, while in the katholicon of the Pateron Monastery above the tomb a second angel is painted, and in front of him - several soldiers sleeping in different poses, as the episode is incorrectly called - ἡ ἐν τάφῳ κουστῳδία. The next scene is *Christ appearing to Mary Magdalene*, called here: τῆς Μαγδαληνῆς Μαρίας. As I noted above, this is another Post-Resurrection appearance of Christ described in Mark 16: 9-20, and the title is also a Sunday morning hymn (Ἐωθινὸν Γ') and does not coincide with the scene "Touch Me not!" (John 20:17). The third hymn of the Sunday Gospel, dedicated to Mary Magdalene, is too concise and does not even describe part of the story painted on the south wall of "St. Stephen". Dionysius' description of the same name concerns John 20: 14-17, and I prefer to call the other scene "Touch Me not!" (Μή μου ἅπτου). For example, it is depicted in the frescoes on the east wall of the church "St. Athanasius" in Arbanassi. The icon painters' interest in women myrrh-bearers continues, as the next scene is the true composition *Myrrh-bearing women at the grave* with a badly damaged inscription, which is probably also the title of a chant like the ones above. The scene is described in Matt. 25: 5-7; Mark 16: 1-7; John 20: 11-13. It is possible that the scene was titled with another quote from Ἐωθινὸν Β'. Here there must have been depicted: Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of Jacob and Josiah (or of Cleophas), Joanna, wife of Chuza and Salome, mother of Zebedee and Sosana. Thus,

in the last three scenes the affinity of the master to the image of Mary Magdalene stands out, which will also appear for the fourth time in the third register of the southern wall in scene 27 (from the corresponding scheme in the text); a compromise is made between the two versions of whether or not the Virgin Mary participates in the anointing - one evangelical, the other patristic. The scenes that make up the cycle of the Post-Resurrection appearances of Christ according to the so-called morning gospels, illustrate eleven texts that are read during the morning service on the Sundays between Easter and Pentecost, as well as at the services of Thomas Sunday (Low Sunday), Ascension (Savior's Day) and Pentecost. For G. Gerov, even in the middle of the 16th century, the presentation of the complete register of scenes from the morning gospels was perceived as something "new" and therefore their full iconographic description is found in the First Jerusalem Manuscript.

The second register on the south wall depicts the scene of the *Massacre of the Innocents* entitled *Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem* (Matt. 2: 16-18). The composition combines three scenes: "Herod orders the massacre of innocent babies in Bethlehem", "Mothers grieve for their children" and "The escape of Elizabeth and John the Baptist", as in the monastery of Chora. The important litmus test for determining the origin of this particular iconography of the scene is the presence of Prophet Jeremiah, which is most characteristic of the Cretan and Mount Athos interpretations, respectively (Koutloumousiou, Dionysius, Dohiar (Docheiariou), "Transfiguration" in Meteora, Dryovouno, "The Entry of the Theotokos" in Kostur, "Transfiguration Flamuriou" in Pilion, etc.). In Novo Hopovo, the scene is even more "wordy" in its part about the slaughter of the infants: there are more participants, but Prophet Jeremiah is missing; and Rachel is not pulling her hair out, she is shown with raised hands at the top of the composition of women and children, as painted by Theophanes the Cretan and his followers. The scene is very indicative of this comparative analysis - there are no absolutely identical parallels in the monuments that I know; the composition is reminiscent of other churches, but it differs in the details - some of them lead to Crete, respectively Mount Athos, others - to Epirus, but they are mixed in such way that we cannot talk about complete identity and transparency of their origin, and when the nature of the order is taken into account, along with the tastes of the local parish, which the masters try to please, then parallelism becomes a chimera for the researcher.

The third register on the south wall begins with an image of the ktetor Christophoros praying to the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus, accompanied by an inscription according to John 11:26. The composition of the scene is quite similar to the image from the narthex of the monastery Chora in the archosolias (sunken arches) with tomb G from the 15th

century. And because of the presence of scenes of death (*Massacre of the Innocents*, etc.), as well as the extended cycle with the tomb of Christ, Mary Magdalene, myrrh-bearers and disciples on this wall, I cannot rule out the hypothesis that Christophoros planned at this place in the south nave of the church to be held memorial services in his capacity as a ktetor after his death. The impressive ktetor inscription is followed by images of St. Daniel the Stylite and the martyrdom of St. Ignatius the God Bearer (Theophorus). According to G. Gerov, the depiction of St. Ignatius the God Bearer to the right of the door of the south nave is connected with the fact that the predecessor of Metropolitan Christophoros (depicted on the same wall) was called Ignatius. In his opinion, the reason for this is the fact that Bishop Ignatius bequeathed his property to the Nessebar Metropolis in 1593, which turned him into a donor, albeit post mortem. Almost realistically, the icon painters drew the papal tiara (triregnum) of St. Sylvester of Rome, which probably means that models close to the Western tradition were used.

The first register of frescoes on the west wall of the church begins with a scene entitled *Christ, true peace bearer for men*. Parallels with the composition of the scene, which is most often called "Peace be unto you! (Ειρήνη ὑμῖν)" from "St. Stephen" exist in Cretan iconography, they are also found in the frescoes of the katholicon of the Vatopedi monastery from the 14th century. However, the next scene is very rare. It is called the *Mother of God, prays in the mountains* and illustrates a moment described in the life of the Blessed Virgin by Maximus the Confessor, according to which the Virgin Mary was directed by an angel before her death to pray and give thanks on the Olive Forest (Olive Hill). As she prayed to God and thanked him for taking her to her Son, all the trees around her bowed (probably this was depicted on the left of the scene in "St. Stephen", where only the outline of the hill is currently visible). Of course, this moment of the mural narrative is connected with the scene "Assumption" near the western wall. There are five apocryphal biographies of the Mother of God: Maximus the Confessor (early 7th century), Epiphanius the Monk (late 8th century), John the Geometres (late 10th century), Simeon Metaphrastes (late 10th century) and one Nestorian biography. The version of St. Maximus the Confessor, who is present in the frescoes of "St. Stephen" is preserved in the Georgian original, the others are in Greek. In addition to these, there is a Coptic fragmentary vita in Sahidic. According to another Egyptian apocrypha, the Mother of God prayed at Golgotha. At the time of the Gospel events, Golgotha was a hill, but it was not called a mountain, while Eleon has always been considered as such, so I believe that the source of this motif is in the vita attributed to the work of St. Maximus. The absence of an early Greek text (before the middle of the 10th century) leads modern researchers to believe that the "Ancient Extensive Vita" is not an original work of St. Maximus the Confessor. In the 16th century, apparently his Greek translations or other later vitae influenced by this text circulated among Christians in the Ottoman Empire.

On the west wall of the church, the scene "Assumption" logically dominates. The main elements of the composition, as mentioned above, were established in the 11th century. In the Pateron Monastery the scene "Assumption" is far more concise due to the limited space it occupies. There are no groups of angels among the apostles and mourning women; only one trikirion is presented in the foreground, not two, as in "St. Stephen"; there are only three hierarchs and no texts; the apostles in the clouds and the transmission of the girdle to Thomas the Apostle are omitted. The same scene in the village of Divri includes the apostles in separate clouds with the handing over of the girdle, although Thomas the Apostle is there on the right side of the Mother of God; the two angels in the doxa of Christ are transparent, but on top of the scene is depicted the missing in "St. Stephen" Six-Winged Seraph; there are three hierarchs, and only the right one holds an open book with a different one from the inscriptions in "St. Stephen" text that is identical to the one in Hopovo and normalized reads: Μακάριοι οἱ ἄμωμοι ἐν ὁδοῦ οἱ πορευόμενοι ἐν νόμῳ Κυρίου (Psalm 118: 1). We should note, however, that in Fruška Gora the text is written with errors such as the phonetic notation of ἄμομη, πορεβόμενη, which means firstly that in Serbia the icon painters are not as literate as in Nessebar, and secondly that they are unable to translate the texts on scrolls from Greek to Church Slavonic, by directly and uncritically transcribing them from an iconographic manual. The scene there is titled *успение бци*. There are two trikiricons in Novo Hopovo; there are no sobbing angels and women, etc.

The second register of the decoration on the west wall of the church begins with the scene "The Martyrdom of St. 40 Martyrs of Sebaste". In monumental art, images of Sebaste martyrs in medallions (with martyrdom tiaras, a cross in the right hand and the left on the chest) are even more common, and they are often a solution for decorating arches or narrower registers/friezes in the iconographic program as this is the case in Pateron, for example. The second register of frescoes on the west wall depicts the *Martyrdom of St. 40 Martyrs of Sebaste*, as well as *Christ the Savior of the world* and the *Dormant Eye with Patriarch Jacob*. The last two scenes are semantically connected, and Christ Emmanuel Ἀναπεσὼν should be perceived first. The presence of Patriarch Jacob, which is optional, emphasizes the theophanic and Old Testament character of the scene, which is apparently semantically related to the Savior of the World. On the other hand, Christ the Dormant Eye symbolizes the incarnation of the divine Logos for the salvation of mankind, as the power of the Son of God to overcome death like a lion. In the composition *Christ the Savior of the World* above the halo of Christ the universe is depicted as a starry sky and it is part of the general message of the composition.

The first register of images on the north wall of the church consists of prophets in medallions holding scrolls of texts. The prophets from west to east are as follows:

Prophet Isaiah, Prophet Jeremiah, Prophet Hosea, Prophet Obadiah, Prophet Nahum, Prophet Joel, Prophet Amos, Prophet Jonah, Prophet Micah, Prophet Ange, Prophet Malachi, Prophet Zechariah and Prophet Zephaniah. In the description I compare both the images of the prophets and their inscriptions, which show serious similarities with those in the monastery of Pateron near Ioannina, where, however, Prophet Nahum, Prophet Amos and Prophet Malachi are not included in the iconographic frieze, some texts have almost verbatim repeated errors, and only one is different. It is important to note that the entire prophet order on the north wall literally follows the recommendations of priest Daniel, along with the texts on the scrolls of the Old Testament characters.

The second register of frescoes on the north wall of the church "St. Stephen" returns the viewer to Christology. The first scene in it is the *Ascension of Christ*, where a restrained Cretan model is followed, in which the angels do not carry scrolls, but the poses of the disciples are extremely realistic and vivid. Then follows the scene entitled "The feast of Mid-Pentecost", i.e. the feast between Pentecost and Easter, which illustrates the events according to John 7: 14-30. In practice, in later iconography, i.e. in the tradition recorded by Dionysius of Fourni, this episode is called *Christ Reads in the Synagogue* and illustrates Luke 4: 15-29; Matt. 13:54; Mark 1:21, etc. A scene with the same title, but depicting *Christ Emmanuel in the temple*, is included in the program of altar frescoes in the church of the Albanian village of Divri. It is in such a space and in combination with "Baptism", "Candlemass", etc. that it can be perceived as part of the Color Triodion (Pendikostara). An interesting version of the *Crucifixion of Christ* follows, which has also been restored with many conventions in the controversial tradition of the National Institute of Immovable Cultural Heritage as not to leave empty spaces in the restoration of mural ensembles. According to the surviving fragments in "St. Stephen", however, it can be assumed that in the village of Divri the *Crucifixion* has a completely different scheme: there are no images of Christ; the cave is below the characters, not behind them. It is noteworthy that in Nessebar there are no fragments of the images of the good and the bad robber, presented, for example, in the monastery Divrovuni or in the monastery Pateron. In "St. Stephen" missing also is the moment with the separation of the chiton of Jesus, in which the prophet David participates with a text from Psalm 21:19; lacking is also the moment with the spear on which a soldier hands Christ a sponge soaked in vinegar. Despite the provisory nature of the description of the *Crucifixion* in Nessebar proposed here due to the damage to the mural, it can be said that the icon painters' interpretation is quite unusual - it combines the scenes *Carrying the Cross* (ὁ Ἐλκόμενος) and *Crucifixion*, but fail to depict the two robbers, the sharing of Jesus' garments by the soldiers, the quenching of thirst with the sponge. The *Betrayal of Judas* in "St. Stephen" rather follows the northern Greek model of the 16th century (Dilio Monastery, Varlaam, Rasiotissa in Kostur, Zavorda, Makrialexi, etc.) rather than being influenced by Cretan

art. On the north wall comes the scene of the Prayer in the *Garden of Gethsemane*. It is divided into two narrative horizontal levels. The first presents the sleeping apostles, whom Christ blesses, and in the background in three episodes - the actual prayer in the Mount of Olives. It is divided into two narrative horizontal levels. The first presents the sleeping apostles, whom Christ blesses, and in the background in three episodes - the actual prayer in the Mount of Olives. It is important to mention that this second plan with the actual prayer of Christ on Mount of Olives, at the foot of which is the Garden of Gethsemane, is very reminiscent of the already described scenes on the west wall of the church, namely the *Mother of God Prays in the mountains* and *Mother of God learns that she will die*.

The third register of the iconographic program on the north wall consists entirely of holy martyrs. All except St. Alexius the man of God, depicted in a niche, are standing with the attributes of martyrdom - a cross and a diadem. Even saints perceived as warriors are not depicted in armor here. Some of the images are damaged by the weather on the north wall of the building and cannot be identified accurately. Probably the presented characters here are: St. Artemis, St. Procopius, the righteous Eudocimus, St. Stratonicus, St. Jacob the Persian, St. Tryphon, St. Phanourios, St. Christopher, St. Gury, St. Samon, St. Aviv, St. Cosmas, St. Damian, St. Panteleimon. Most probably some of the damaged images belonged to St. Cyrus and St. John. Most of the saints presented here are healers or patrons of certain guilds, crafts (St. Procopius is the protector of beekeepers, St. Tryphon of gardeners and growers, St. Panteleimon of healers, etc.) and apparently have to do with the spread of specific cults in Nessebar in the 16th century. Of course, the saint carrying the name of the main ktetor of the church is also pictured here. Particularly interesting is the presence of St. Phanourios, who in "St. Stephen" is presented as a great martyr, not as a warrior.

The first register of the prothesis decoration begins with images of the prophets and the righteous in medallions, with which continue their order from the north wall. The inscriptions on the scrolls of the prophets and in the prothesis also follow the recommendations of priest Daniel. The prophets from west to east are as follows: Prophet Zephaniah, Prophet Elisha, Prophet. Elijah, Prophet Enoch, Prophet Moses, Prophet Solomon, Prophet David, Prophet Daniel (?), Patriarch Noah, as well as those related to Prophet Daniel - St. Ananias, St. Azarias and St. Misael. The space around the medallions is filled with a floral motif, reminiscent of the decorative solution in the village of Divri.

The second register of frescoes in the prothesis begins with the *Raising of Lazarus*. However, the scene was damaged but survived as a fragment of the removed frescoes of the Nessebar church "St. George Mali". It is similar to the same composition from Nessebar church "St. Spas". In the village of Divri, the *Raising of Lazarus* has a mirror-

like composition - Christ is on the left and the Jews on the right. Then follows the scene *Christ meets Martha*, which is sometimes part of the *Raising of Lazarus*, as this is the case, for example, in the monastery of Pateron. The scene with this episode can also be found in the frescoes of the Novo Hopovo monastery. In the 17th century in Bulgaria, this scene survived only on the fifth bay of the gallery in the "Church of the Nativity" in Arbanassi, where the translated inscription reads: *The Anointing Christ Mary, Lazarus' sister*. The scene which is found at the zenith of the apse of the prothesis has also faded, but the main composition and the personalities in the episode are visible. It is about the *Adoration of the Magi*.

The third register consists of standing straight saints, whose images are badly damaged and the surviving inscriptions are fragmentary. The certain presence of St. Deacon Euplius, as well as the traces of letters around the halos of the other saints in full length of the prothesis give me reason to assume that here too are followed the instructions for decoration of priest Daniel, who recommends in this space of the altar to be painted the following deacons: St. Stephen, St. Roman Sladkopevets, St. Eupliud, St. Lawrence, St. Rufinus, St. Parmenas, St. Aitalas. However, the prothesis also depicts St. Cosmas the Melodist, apparently by analogy with St. Roman.

The iconographic program on the south wall of the north nave begins with the scene *Jesus healing an infirm woman* (Luke 13:10). It is a continuation of the scenes with Christ's healings. This healing scene is again pictured in a similar but non-identical way in the frescoes of the Novo Hopovo monastery. There, however, the infirm woman does not lean on a cane (her left hand is in a different position). There are no Jews and no high priest, and the disciples immediately behind Christ are in a different configuration. In the Pateron monastery, the scene is also simplified and there is no high priest, Jews or Pharisees, and the infirm woman does not rest on a cane. The scene of the same healing is similar to the one depicted on the north wall of the "Assumption" in the Cherepish Monastery and in the porch of "St. George" church in Veliko Tarnovo. The *Nativity of the Mother of God* is painted next to the miracle with the infirm one. The episode is described in the Proto-Gospel of Jacob 5: 1-9, with which the icon painters return to the cycle *Childhood of the Mother of God*.

The eastern facade of the middle nave is dominated by the *Annunciation* scene. In the triangular space of the northern arch of the facade of the Nessebar church archangel Gabriel blesses with his right hand, and in his left he holds a scepter or spear (κοντάρι), while in other monuments a blossoming twig (άνθισμένον κλαδίον) is painted in the place of the scepter. The blossoming twigs (of liliun) in the hand of archangel Gabriel first appeared in handwritten illustration, and then passed into iconography, but the element remained very rare in monumental painting until the seventeenth century. The image of

archangel Gabriel in the village of Divri is very reminiscent of this in Nessebar's "St. Stephen" church.

A decisive element for the iconographic type of the moment, described by Luke 1: 26-38, is the pose of the Blessed Virgin. The iconographic model from "St. Stephen" church can be found in Athonite monuments such as the dining room of the Great Lavra; in the katholicons of Molivdoeklisia, in Dionysius; in the narthex of Docheiariou monastery; in the katholicon of the monastery Philanthropenon; in "The Transfiguration of the Lord" in Veltsista; in "St. Athanasius Polydrosos" in Arta and others. The frontal presentation of the figure of the Mother of God, as in "St. Stephen" is preferred by Cretans. There is another variant of representing the Holy Mother of God as half-seated with her body turned in $\frac{3}{4}$ towards the archangel, and her hand covered with her omophorion. It is interesting to mention that in the Annunciation from the village of Divri, a vase with red flowers was painted in front of the Mother of God, while in Nessebar there are no such. In order to observe the iconographic tradition of presenting archangels at the entrances, in the lower register of the approaches to the nave are depicted archangel Michael and archangel Gabriel as guardians. In order to reconstruct the texts on their scrolls we compare them with those in "St. George Mali" and the church in the village of Divri. In the lowest register of the columns from the western façade painted respectively are St. John the Forerunner and St. John the Theologian. Their presence and especially that of St. John the Theologian with the text from John 1: 1 - *In the beginning was the Word...* on the west facade of the middle nave have a semantic connection with the incarnation of the Logos and specifically with the moment of the *Annunciation*. In fact, the northern column at the entrance to the nave depicts a life scene of *St. John the Forerunner the Angel in the desert*. The lower part of the mural is badly damaged, but it is certain from the fragments that this is exactly the story. The iconography of the scene is considered Cretan and originates from the work of Angelos Akotantos whose works are the earliest surviving examples from the first half of the 15th century. On the scroll painted on the icon the following text can be seen: *O Word of God, those who do not condemn the mistakes of the abominable and therefore unable to accept my condemnation Herod, who cut off and (served on a dish - b.m.) my head, Savior? (E.M.)*. The choice of this rare for the Balkan art of the 16th century Cretan plot should be related to the image of St. John the Apostle on the opposite side.

The decoration of the north wall of the middle nave begins with images of prophets in medallions, around which a floral decorative motif similar to that in the village of Divri is painted. The prophets from west to east are: prophet Zechariah, prophet Gideon and prophet Ezekiel, and their identification is made here on the basis of the texts of scrolls that they are holding, since their signification is not preserved. All quotations from their

scrolls are from the chant "The Prophets from on high", following, and in places supplementing the recommendations from a protograph of the type of the priest Daniel's iconographic manual. The absence of a dome in the "St. Stephen" hinders the unfolding of the plot, but there is at least an attempt to illustrate also one of the most important hymns of the Theotokos, such as "The Prophets from on high", which together with "In Thee Rejoiceth" is almost obligatory for the iconographic program of late medieval churches dedicated to the Theotokos. In this regard, it is puzzling that in the frescoes of "St. Stephen" in the cycle of the Virgin's akathist is not present, while the hymn "The prophets from on high" is only implied by the presence of three prophets in the composition illustrating the chant. In the monastery of Divrovuni "The prophets from on high" is represented in the north arch of the middle nave again by prophets in medallions, and the Virgin of the Platytera type, also in medallion, is depicted in the middle. Next in the decoration of the north wall of the middle nave is the scene of *Christ healing those suffering from various diseases*. The scene is rare for Palaiologos art, appearing in only four monuments that we know (Chora, Dechani, the Bishopric of Mystras, "St. Elias" in Thessalonica). In Philanthropinon and in Pateron this healing scene is interpreted differently: the disciples and the sick are more numerous. Rather, the model of Philanthropinon is interpreted by the New Hope icon painters, where also Christ is followed by all his disciples, the action takes place in front of a city, and the sick are only two, which is why the scene is titled *Christ heals the lame and lepers*.

The Sources

From the above commentaries and parallels it becomes obvious that in the iconographic program of the New Metropolis ("St Stephen") in Nessebar during the 16th century an iconographic guide of the type presented by Daniel was used. I have already stated that Daniel copied in Jerusalem an older hermeneia, which had been in circulation in the Balkans since the end of the 16th century, as this type of work is historical and a compilation. The protograph of this manual must have been created on the island of Crete towards the end of the 15th century, as it describes how to work "Cretan manner", "like Theophanes", "naturale" and "in Moscow style". The other written source for the icon painters in "St. Stephen" is the Protoevangelium by Jacob used for the rare scenes in the Mariology cycle. And the third more specific source is the *Ancient Extensive Vita of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Aeiparthenos* by Pseudo Maximus the Confessor, translated into Greek by St. Euthymius Iversky in the 10th century. This vita was used to create the extremely rare scene preceding the Assumption, *The Mother of God prays on the Mount of Olives*, which is found only in the Ohrid Perivlepta from 1295. There also exists a version according to which apocryphal narratives of Pseudo Meletios and of Joseph of Arimathea from the Western tradition, as well as the relevant Greek texts of Pseudo John

the Theologian and John of Thessalonica from the 7th century, were used as sources of the extended assumption cycle in Ohrid.

Of course, for the creation of the iconographic program in "St. Stephen" liturgical books were also used, among which the titles of certain scenes were from the Sunday Gospels and the Color Triodion (*Pentecostarion*). It is worth noting here that for the practicing Christian of that era, all the chants often sung during the service were familiar, and often memorized with the appropriate melody. Therefore, the titles of hymns, which became titles of the scenes in "St. Stephen" are an attempt to better communicate with the spectator, who probably had musical sensitivity in reading the texts, thus providing the modern concept of synesthesia by activating the visual and auditory reception of the liturgical time together with that of the sense of smell through the smell of incense and myrrh in the temple.

The use of a wide and serious range of sources leads to the most impressive fact that the inscriptions in "St. Stephen" church from the 16th century are surprisingly well written. And this can be seen from the unprecedented - at least for my practice of epigraph - rare appearance of sic! in their presentation above. This is certainly due to the high level of literacy of the icon painters and/or apprentices, who are undoubtedly of Greek origin, well educated (probably at least the leading icon painter was also a clergyman), but also to the obvious control of the guarantor personified by the local bishop and his subordinate priests. The Logos is presented here in all its splendor, but also with keen attention to its correctness. Knowledge of the texts in combination with drawing talent allows freedom in handling the plots, their sometimes unusual combination, betting on intrigue in the popular story with interesting details, but also in picturing often invisible to the ignorant parallels and relationships between images. And all of the above is one of the characteristics of the so-called "high" art.

Function and dedication (inscriptions)

Although the program of "St. Stephen" is very reminiscent of famous monastic katholicons on Mount Athos and Meteora, the monastic images here are only in the deaconicon, which for Gerov was the place provided for the personal prayer of the ktetor Christophoros in the 16th century, which I do not accept unreservedly. The images of apostles, unmercenaries and martyrs were intended as patrons for the citizens of Nessebar.

The original dedication of the church to the Mother of God of the Life-giving Spring is confirmed by the many scenes of Christ's healings in the iconographic program. The sick there are almost realistically and especially expressively drawn, such as in the scene *Christ heals the daughter of the Canaanite woman, Christ heals the man with the*

withered hand and others. As it was mentioned above, at least since the 16th century the church has been dedicated to the Holy Mother of God Ζωοδόχος πηγή, and in the 19th century - to St. Stephen, in order to be spared by the Bulgarians during the church struggles. In Nessebar with its numerous temples there are examples of second or double initiation. The new metropolis is called "St. Stephen", receiving the patron saint of the church of the same name, flooded by the sea, as well as sheltering his relics. Indicative of the dedication, however, is the icon that we have examined on the pages dedicated to the iconostasis with images of St. Euplius, St. Modestus and St. Stephen with scenes from their vita. It is two-sided, as specified above, and stands on the iconostasis. However, when it was installed after the restoration, a wooden stopper was preserved on the back of the altar partition, which certainly means that the icon had holes in the top and bottom of the board, on the one hand to rotate according to the holidays, on the other - so that a carrying stick can be placed in the lower hole. In other words, the icon was used in litya (festal cross processions).

In any case, "St. Stephen" with an original dedication to the Mother of God is a typical metropolitan church, which has the ambition to gather as many cults and respectively sacred things (relics), which reflect diachronically the preferences of the clergy, highly educated hierarchs with and even more impressive intentions for career, as well as the peculiarities of the spiritual life of the rich Greek-speaking parish.

For me, the space that is most clearly associated with the figure of Metropolitan Christophoros is the south nave of the church. Not only because his image is pictured on the south wall, but also because of his obvious connection to the opposite unique scene "The Revelation of St. John the Theologian on the island of Patmos." Most probably Christophoros was connected with the monastery of John the Theologian of the island of Patmos, as this can be seen by the image of a monk in the upper left corner of the scene. We cannot rule out the fact that after his voluntary resignation in 1607 from the metropolitan throne of Mesembria, Christophoros intended to return to the island of Patmos to wait for the end of his days as an ordinary monk, as depicted in "Revelation". So such an important topos for church history as the island of Patmos is, connects with other images on the south wall of "St. Stephen", for which I noted a connection with other shrines of Christianity such as Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria (through St. Catherine) and Constantinople.

For the reconstruction of the functions of the church "St. Stephen" of help might be the long inscriptions outside the iconographic program, which are quite characteristic of this monument. The text of the monk Anatoly is from the evening service before the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross together with III Kingdoms 8: 29-31, which was painted together with the frescoes in the late 16th century, is an essential part of the iconographic

program. Such texts, which combine two quotations, are rarely found before the 18th century outside today's Greek territories. The first part of the text marks the moment of the restoration of the temple of the Holy Sepulcher by St. Modestus, Patriarch of Jerusalem, whose relics were preserved in "St. Stephen". Most likely, this part not only makes a connection with the famous saint, but also presents the intentions of the parish to make the connection with Jerusalem and Christ's burial, as all Nessebar temples were also used for burials. It is worth emphasizing the address προαιώνιε Λόγε - Eternal Word - to Christ as an incarnation of the Logos. For G. Gerov, the inscribing of the text of King Solomon's prayer at the consecration of the Jerusalem temple (I Kingdoms 8: 29-30) on the "decorative border" on the north wall of the north nave is a sign of the use of Constantinople and Mount Athos practice for the consecration of the temple "in the course of the sun." However, my observations on the development of the iconographic program are different: it starts from the altar niche, rotates west - east on the inner side of the middle nave, continues through the diaconicon, passes along the south wall, west, north wall to reach the prothesis, and finally turned on the outer walls of the middle nave from east to west to return to the diaconicon. In other words, in each of the space it follows the clockwise movement.

It is important to note that the inscription with the text of the *Creed* is written on a board nailed to the beam between the two middle arches of the middle nave, facing the porch of the church before the current exonarthex was built in the first half of the 18th century. There have been kept during the service in the 16th – 17th c. those serving penances, foreign language speakers (Bulgarians), children and women and probably the quoted text has contributed to their catechization, and facilitated recitation during the service by all believers. "The Creed" took part in the sequels of the Midnight Mass and the compline (apodeipnon), while in the gallery of the catholicon of the Rila Monastery is depicted a whole composition based on it in 1844. Similar inscriptions on the beams between the arches supporting the dome, can be found in the church of Divri which probably contributes to their dating along with the frescoes, i.e. in the specific case of "St. Stephen" in the 16th century.

The text situated north and south regarding the "Creed", i.e. on the two beams to the left and right of the middle nave, is from the Greek service for the Feast of the Cross, i.e. on the 13th of September, as well as the long inscription A, quoted above, beginning from the west wall and ending at the altar. On this day, the renovation of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is celebrated, and here the allusion to the rotunda "Resurrection" in Jerusalem is obvious. The renovation of the Jerusalem shrines is associated with the construction work of Patriarch Modestus. The second inscription on planks on the side beams probably originally stood on the back of the central beam to be seen by priests when

preaching or blessing the flock. Here especially interesting is the choice of a passage from the service marking the restoration of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The selection is hardly accidental, given that the New Metropolis and its adjacent territory are also used for burials, and also due to the presence of St. Modestus, Patriarch of Jerusalem, in the two-sided icon of the iconostasis.

The serious presence of long texts in "St. Stephen" speaks of the enlightening role that the metropolis assumed at the end of the 16th century, since I do not question the fact that their inscriptions were intended to be read and memorized by the worshipers who actively participated in liturgical practices. This catechetical role continues through the impressive presence of long gospel inscriptions in the outer narthex of the layer of frescoes dating from the 18th century. And when I talk about catechization, I mean mostly the few Bulgarian-speaking worshipers who attend services in "St. Stephen", as well as the category of the Hellenizing Bulgarians during the epoch.

The artistic circle of monuments of the New Metropolis in Nessebar and its surroundings

There are four churches in Nessebar, built or rebuilt during the Ottoman period: "Ascension", "St. Spyridon", "St. George Stari" and "St. George Novi (Mali)". The last two churches were destroyed in the 1950s due to aging of their construction, but mostly due to the application of new regulations in Nessebar by the authorities of atheistic Bulgaria. All four churches have a similar architectural plan - single-nave, without a narthex and with one apse, built of ordinary stone masonry and "rickety" span roofs. "St. George Stari" and "St. Spyridon" were built on the site of older temples, and parts of the eastern walls and apses of the previous churches were built into their construction. This gives researchers reason to believe that the old buildings were dedicated to the same saints. Departing from the period I have envisioned for this study, but with the desire to provide the most complete body of inscriptions, I will offer my normalized reading of the ktetor inscription from the church "St. George Stari" by M. Konstantinidis, which to a great extent is repeated by A. Vasiliev:

Ἱστορίθη ὁ θεῖος οὗτος καὶ πάνσεπτος ναὸς τοῦ ἁγίου μεγαλομάρτυρος Γεωργίου διὰ συνδρομῆς κόπου καὶ ἐξόδου τοῦ εὐλαβεστάτου ἐν ἱερεῦσιν κὺρ Κωσταντίνου σακελαρίου μετὰ τῆς συμβίας Ἀναστασίας, ἀρχιερατεῦοντος τοῦ Πανιερωτάτου μητροπολίτου κυρίου κυρίου Χριστοφόρου καὶ μερικῶν χριστιανῶν ἐν ἔτει α ψ δ. I offer this inscription to draw also attention to the fact that already in the beginning of the 18th century the leading role is assigned to the parish priest and his wife, and finally the hierarch is mentioned, during whose time the church was rebuilt.

To the direct artistic circle of the murals of the New Metropolis ("St. Stephen") certainly belong the iconographic programs on the walls of the churches "St. George Mali" and

"Ascension of Christ" ("St Spas") dated to the 16th – 17th centuries. Most likely, this circle extends to the frescoes in the church on the island of "St. Anastasia". In this chapter, I examine them in more detail and arranged in order of their preservation so as to create a clearer picture of their iconographic repertoire and the style of the murals, which undoubtedly belong to the workshop that existed in the New Metropolis.

"St. Spas"

The "Church of the Ascension" ("St. Spas") in Nessebar is a one-nave, one-apse church with a wooden ceiling and no narthex. It is built of crushed stone, welded with mortar, wooden santrachi, and has no plastic decoration. The time of construction of the church is unknown. Initially, there was a narthex along the entire length of the north wall, and the wall between it and the nave was very thin. The western wall was rebuilt after 1609. It is not clear when the porch was destroyed and the north wall was fortified. Restoration interventions were carried out in the 40s and 60s of the twentieth century. Architect D. Sasselov decided to lower the ceiling so that the roof structure became visible, the walled door on the south wall was opened and the one on the west wall was walled up. In 1967–1971 D. Zaberski carried out an emergency restoration. Yakov Verani removed the frescoes from the north wall in 1984. From 1985 to 1990 the restoration was carried out by a team led by K. Atanasov. The frescoes removed from the north wall were fortified and returned to the wall. The last restoration, carried out by S. Zabunov and K. Kolev, lasted until 1991.

The main part of the mural decoration of the church "St. Spas" dates from the 17th century, but on the front of the apse there is a pictorial layer under it - a fragment of an inscription. The frescoes cover the east, south and north walls of the temple. The western wall, certainly built later, was not painted and was demolished in 1968 to be rebuilt again. It is not known whether there were frescoes in the removed narthex.

Illustrated in "St. Spas" are the cycles of the Great Feasts and part of the Mother of God cycle. It is also clear that the masters have an affinity for non-standard solutions: the placement of St. St. Constantine and Helena on the south wall and the *Dormition of the Mother of God* on the north. Their interest in letters is also emphasized - two long inscriptions, one in measured speech - although they do not reach the impressive amount of written texts found in "St. Stephen", since "St. Spas" is just one of the Nessebar's parish churches. The frescoes are dated in 1608/9 in the ktetor's inscription, which I discuss in detail below. At least two icon painters took part in the painting of the church. We find their style in the inscriptions and frescoes of the church "St. Stephen" (1599), and the style of the main master is also found in the church of "St. George Mali" in Nessebar. Probably, one of the masters also painted the frescoes in the church on the

island of "St. Anastasia" in the Burgas Bay, according to D. Popova. From the iconostasis of "St. Spas" only the sacral doors are preserved, now we also know which icons stood there. Only M. Constantinidis mentions an inscription from the sacral doors of the church, which read: ἀμὴν ἔτους Ζ'Ξ'Θ' (7096 = 1561). From this it becomes clear that the construction of the iconostasis already existed when the church was painted in 1609. It is also important to clarify that the comparisons between "St. Stephen" and "St. Spas" are based on almost exact concurrence in the compositions, the treatment of the faces, the color and the creation of spaces.

The ktetor's inscription in "St. Spas" which is partially commented above, is located above the door of the south wall and states in normalized form: ἀρχιερατεῦοντος τοῦ πανιερωτάτου Μητροπολίτου τῆς ἀγιωτάτης Μητροπόλεως Μεσημβρίας κυρίου Κυπριανοῦ καὶ ιερατεῦοντος τοῦ εὐλαβεστάτου ἐν ἱερεύσιν κὺρ Ἀγαπίου, ἱερέως καὶ σακελαρίου Μεσημβρίας ἀνιστορίθη ὁ θεῖος οὗτος καὶ πάνσεπτος ναὸς τῆς ὑπεραγίας δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου καὶ ἀειπαρθένου Μαρίας τῆς ἐπονομαζομένης Ἀναλήψεως, δι' ἐξόδου τοῦ τιμιωτάτου καὶ εὐγενεστάτου ἄρχοντος κὺρ Θεοτόκη τοῦ Καππάδουκα εἰς ὠφέλειαν καὶ ψυχικὴν περιποίησιν τῆς ἑαυτοῦ καὶ εἰς εὐλογίαν καὶ παραμύθιον τῶν θεοσεβῶν τε καὶ φιλοχρίστων τῶν συνδρομησάντων ἀνδρῶν τε καὶ γυναικῶν, τῶν εἰσιόντων ἐν αὐτῷ μετὰ φόβου Θεοῦ καὶ εὐλαβείας, ἔξουσι δὲ καὶ αὐτοὶ τὴν πανυπέραγνον καὶ ἀειπάρθενον καὶ μητέρα τοῦ φωτὸς ἄγριπνον ἀεὶ τῆς ψυχῆς φύλακα, πρέσβιν εὐπρόσωπον πρὸς τὸν γεννηθέντα ἐξ αὐτῆς υἱὸν καὶ Λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐν κυνδίνοις ἀντιλήπτωρα καὶ βοηθὸν ἐν τῷ ἐνεστάτῳ βίῳ καὶ ᾧ τῷ μέλλοντι αἰῶνι, δοξάζειν Πατέρα, υἱὸν καὶ ἅγιον πνεῦμα, τὴν μίαν Θεότητα καὶ βασιλείαν εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας ἀμὴν + ἔτους 7117 = 1609 ἰν (δικτιώνος) Ζ ... ΝΠΠΛΟΘΛΩ = Νικόλαος + - *At the time of hierarchy of the Holy Metropolitan of holy Mesembria metropolis Mr. Kipriyan and clerical service of most blissful among the priests sir Agapius, priest and sakellarios of Mesembria, was painted this holy and pure temple of the Most Holy Our Lady and Blessed Virgin Mary, called the Ascension, with the help of the most honest and noble archon sir Theotokis Cappadocas and as a blessing and stimulus for the God-fearing and Christ-loving ktetors - men and women, for those who enter it with fear of God and reverence, so that they too may have eternal spiritual protection of the Most Holy and Immaculate, Mother of Light unquenchable, before her begotten Son and the Word of God, Savior in affliction and helper in the present life and in the age to come, glorifying the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the one God and his kingdom forever. Amen + 1609, indictment 7... Nikolaos + (E.M.).* From a careful reading it becomes clear that this temple was painted during the time of the Metropolitan of Nessebar Cyprian and the priest sakellarius Agapius with the funds of the archon Theotokis Kapadukas. The name of the latter had hitherto been read as Theotokis Kapa Dukas. The correct reading of this name as Cappadukas (Cappadocas) allowed G. Gerov to connect this ktetor with

the noble Nessebar family of Cappadocian Greeks, of which the most famous is Archon Theodoros Cappadocas (from Cappadocia). His name is also found in an inscription from the sacral doors of the iconostasis in the church "St. Stephen", today in NHM: Δέησις τοῦ δούλου τοῦ Θεοῦ Θεοτόκη Καππαδόκα| ἅμα συμβίου καὶ τέκνων αὐτοῦ| αἴτους sic! ἔτους ΑΨΣΤ΄.

The inscription impresses not only with its literacy and its length, but also for the use of many hymnographic kalki, which is due to the fact that it was written by a clergyman - priest Nikolaos. But was Nikolaos an icon painter? The earliest reading of the end of the inscription from "St. Spas" belongs to M. Konstantinidis, who wrote: year 7117, indiction seventh + ΝΥ ΠΛΟΘΛΩ (= Νικόλαος Χ.). In other words, as early as 1945, it was clear that the cryptography at the end of the commemorative text read "Nikolaos", but nothing else was pointed out as a hypothesis for the preceding words. A. Vasiliev deciphers the year 7117 (= 1609), but sees the indiction as the 7th, which is not true, but leaves its end without any assumption of reading, emphasizing "the last words of the inscription, probably containing the name of the writer of the inscription, are not clear and difficult to decipher". Neither of the two authors mentions the existence of the words "August-September", which appear only in Zhdrakov's publication. The names of the months are not written in the inscription itself after the restoration of the church. Careful reading of the end of the inscription reads: ἘΨΤΟΥΣ ΖΠΙΖΩ, Ἰν (δικτιῶν) ος, Ζ (ης) * Ἱερεύς · ΝΥΠΛΪΘΘΛΩ + - year seven thousand one hundred and seventeen, indiction seventh, priest Nicholas + (E.M.) The first "cryptography" is the spelling of the word ἱερεύς of the "monocondylia" type, characteristic of some types of documents. The word ἱερομόναχος is encrypted in a similar way in the calligraphic signature of Antim, which I mention in the chapter on the Mesembrian Chronicle. In this connection, for the first time, there is talk of an "enigmatic function" of inscriptions.

Returning again to the contents of the ktetor's inscription from "St. Spas", I must note that apparently the church had a double consecration – to the Virgin and the Ascension of the Lord, as it uses the formula *temple of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Ever-Virgin, called the Ascension* (with a double dedication is the church of "St. Spyridon", also known as "Holy Mother of God Panolithria"). Another characteristic feature of its content is that the mention of names follows a hierarchical order: starting with Metropolitan Cyprian, mentioned is the main priest Agapius, who is also the sakellarios of Mesembria, followed by the rich citizen who donated money for the decoration of the temple, and finally - the priest Nikolaos. Considering the fact that the same icon painter and his assistants do not sign the far more skillfully executed iconographic program in the more important for Nessebar Metropolitan Church, it seems to me more probable that priest Nikolaos was the parish priest of "St. Spas", not the icon painter of the church, decorated

in 1609. Parish priests were important figures in Greek cities on the Black Sea coast during the Ottoman period. In Ahtopol in the 16th century, for example, there were 13 neighborhoods, most of which were named after local priests: the neighborhood of priest Jorgi (from Γιώργος), Slav, of priest Vlade, priest Konstantin, priest Todor, priest Mikhail, priest Yani, priest Yani hierarch, etc. Parish priests were probably the authors as well as the writers of the ktetor inscriptions, since they express the will of donors. They have no experience with writing inscriptions on a wall, so priest Nikolaos signed at the end of the document. On the other hand, the handwriting style of the donor's inscription in "St. Spas" is not identical with the handwriting of the donor inscriptions from the 16th century in "St. Stephen". Based on the above, I believe that the restriction to look for a studio in which priest Nikolaos participated in order to identify the masters who worked in the churches of Nessebar for about a decade on the threshold of two centuries, can be dismissed.

"St George Mali"

The church was located on the south coast of the old town. It performed as "St. Spas" the functions of a parish church until 1946. It was also single-nave, single-apse, without a narthex and with a wooden ceiling, built of crushed stone and wooden santrachi, small in size (length - 13.55 m, width - 6 m). There is no information about when the church was built, but judging by the size and architectural plan, it is unlikely that the original building was built earlier than the end of the 15th century. As "St. Spas" and "St. George Mali" also has no connection with the older church architecture in Nessebar, which is Byzantine. Before the church was destroyed, the frescoes covering the eastern, large parts of the southern and northern walls were removed by Karl Yordanov and transferred to the National Archaeological Museum, where by the end of 1948 the fragments were transferred on a new foundation. Some of these mural fragments are currently stored in the Crypt of "St. Alexander Nevsky" cathedral, but are owned by NAIM-BAS.

There is also information about the presence of an inscription above the north door of "St. George Mali", which also did not survive. As I have already mentioned, in trying to reconstruct the text from the scroll of archangel Gabriel on the west facade of the middle nave of the church "St. Stephen", from the preserved notes about "St. George Mali" of A. Vasiliev it is understood that on the northern wall of this church, painted by the same icon painters, there was an inscription, which I have already identified as the following epigram: Εἰ μὲν φίλος πέφυκας εἰσελθε χαίρων. Εἰ δ' ἐχθρὸς καὶ βάσκανος καὶ δόλου γέμων πόρρω ἄπελθε τὴν πύλην τῆς εἰσόδου, ἵνα μὴν κληρονομεῖς ὄργην Κυρίου. Such a verse is found, for example, in the church "Assumption" from the year 1431/32 in the village of Zevgostasi, Kostur region, as well as elsewhere in present-day Greece. The fragment certainly confirms the affinity of the masters who worked in "St. George Mali",

for the Word, for measured speech, as could be seen from the verses of the dialogue between St. Peter of Alexandria and Christ, written above the door in "St. Spas" and in "St. Stephen", where the abundance of the Logos is at its apogee.

From the surviving fragments of frescoes of the destroyed church "St. George Mali" it is clear, however, that here the iconographic program deals not only with the scenes illustrating the Great Feasts, but also with the Post-Resurrection cycle, widely represented in "St. Stephen". The fragments belong to an icon painter, who is also the leading one in "St. Spas". The military saints are presented here as martyrs, there are also female images, as already found in "St. Spas" and the New Metropolis. There are also stable preferences of the studio to depict the same stylites or hermits in the thickness of the doors, but there is hesitation, for example, how to call St. Demetrius – St Demetrius of Thessaloniki or Myroblyte, which shows that his cult is still being established among the Greeks on the southern Black Sea coast.

Having in mind that the patron icon of the church "St. George Mali" is dated in 1610 (NIM, inv. № 29047), and the sacral doors, now in Byala, and those intended for "St. Stephen", which were made by the same masters, are from 1606, it is must be true that the church was painted in the first decade of the 17th century. I. Vanev believes that the iconostasis was placed before the painting of the church. It had two entrances and space for three icons and a nuptial, which was out of place in the early 20th century. G. Gerov writes about two icons from "St. George Mali", which were transferred to Sofia in 1926 and are now in the NHM. Later, the same colleague accepted that two other icons from 1606 and 1603 (now in NAIM) originate from this church in Nessebar, which is refuted by I. Vanev, as the latter proves that these icons were taken from the church "St. John the Baptist". Another assumption was not confirmed that the icon of St. Demetrius on horseback (NAIM, inv. № 3600) was on the iconostasis of "St. George Mali", as the archives published by Vanev show that it was in "St. George the Elder". Only the sacral doors, which are currently in NAIM, inv. № 3606, belonged to the church "St. George Mali" and were transferred to Sofia by Karl Yordanov in 1947.

The known dates related to the atelier, which operated in the circle of Nessebar monuments around the New Metropolis, are: 1599 ("St. Stephen") and 1609 ("St. Spas"). And since I do not question the fact that the two sets of sacral doors - from Byala and from "St. Stephen" - are the work of the same artists from 1606, probably along with parts of the iconostasis of the New Metropolis, and are not works of Y. Daronas, then the attested activity of the studio around this date gives me reason to assume that the frescoes of the church "St. George Mali" were also executed in 1606. The small parish church did not require a very long period for painting and the team of masters, which was probably

visiting, filled its time in Nessebar with work on the iconostasis of the New Metropolis and for some of the other local churches.

About the existence of an art atelier or school in Nessebar at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century

In its almost uninterrupted cultural history, Nessebar enjoys relative political, economic, religious and cultural independence, creating especially during the 11th - 14th century exquisite examples of architecture and art. There is evidence that by the middle of the 16th century the ties between Genoa and Nessebar were strengthened, which was mainly expressed in trade. It is believed that the 16th and 17th centuries were favorable for the development of art in the diocese of the Mesembrian metropolis. D. Sokolova was the first to suggest in her writings of the existence of a workshop that functioned in the city, studying icons and comparing them with the frescoes of the New Metropolis ("St. Stephen"). Later Diana Popova, comparing the frescoes of "St. Stephen" and "St. Spas" and using the icons as an "additional argument", tries to prove that within 10-15 years in Nessebar there was not only a studio, but also a local school of painting. It was Popova who mentioned, reading the reports of the restorers, that the frescoes of "St. Stephen" are the work of three icon painters, two of whom work in the eastern and the third – in the western part of the church, while in "St. Spas" sees the painting style of two artists who worked separately: one in the north, another in the south part of the church. One of them is defined as "decorative" and the other as "plastic". The so-called plastic icon painter for the researcher worked on the south wall of the church "St. Spas" and on the eastern part of "St. Stephen". As a basis for comparison, she uses the scenes of the *Baptism of Christ* and the *Ascension of the Lord* in the two churches, but we should not miss the fact that from this plot also in 1985 in "St. Spas" were preserved only the feet of Christ, the Jordan River, the personifications in it and the group of angels, while at the site of the *Ascension* in "St. Stephen" there was a window. In any case, the statement that the differences in the two painting styles are not stylistic, but can be found in some of the iconographic details, which is why they can be attributed to the same hand. D. Popova's observations about the scene of *Doubting Thomas* in the two monuments are also accurate: she attributes them to the "decorative" artist of the team; notes that drawing figures in $\frac{3}{4}$ leads to excessive torso enlargement; there is a strong reduction of the architectural space to the foreground in the multi-figure scenes made by the "decorative" icon painter.

To the circle of monuments related to "St. Stephen" and "St. Spas" in Nessebar, Popova also includes the church of "St. Anastasia" on the island of Bolshevik (today St. Anastasia Island) near Bourgas. The church actually celebrated its patron saint's day on the Dormition of the Mother of God, but it is most probably dedicated to St. Anastasia Pharmacolithria, whence the name of the island. According to Evliya Celebi, who visited

Nessebar in 1656, the monastery was under the jurisdiction of the Mesembria metropolis. This is the only information about the affiliation of the island to the Nessebar episcopate and it seems to me that it is more likely that the monastery complex there was rather under the jurisdiction of Sozopol. Despite the severely damaged frescoes of the church "St. Anastasia" on the island of Bolshevik/"St. Anastasia" the author finds that the fragments from the scene of the *Baptism of Christ* there are very similar to the same scenes in Nessebar's churches "St. Stephen" and "St Sava"; finds similarities in the characters and painting of the faces in the temple of the island and the military saints in the Mesembria churches, attributing this monument also to the studio that worked in Nessebar in the late 16th and early 17th c. This thesis is mentioned also by I. Gergova, but so far no serious study of the frescoes from the island church has been done. As an exception one can point out several publications by I. Karayotov, which are rather popular science.

There are obvious similarities between the surviving fragments of frescoes from the church on the island of "St. Anastasia" and the Nessebar churches "St. Stephen", "St. George Mali" and "St. Spas". However, the painting in the monastery church is more primitive, as if made quickly and without much inspiration. Therefore, it seems to me as prime hypothesis that the monument can be connected with the team of painters who worked in the late 16th and early 17th centuries in Nessebar, but towards the end of their activities on our southern Black Sea coast, i.e. shortly after 1609, and it should be attributed to one of the students, perhaps a local, who simply imitated what he saw, especially in "St. Stephen" and in "St. George Mali", but does not have the finesse of his teachers. The not so high quality of the paintings in this island monastery shows that the recipient was not particularly demanding, i.e. educated. In other words, the creation of high art necessarily requires an educated user, a suitable environment for the full functioning of the Logos. The surviving fragments of frescoes in the church on the island must have appeared certainly as a terminus post quem after 1574, from when dates an inscription at the entrance of the monastery complex and which was discovered during the restoration in 2013. This inscription in the original reads: ἡ ἀνακαίνησις τῆς ἁγίας Ἀναστασίας ἐγένετο ἐν ἔτει ζ'ο'β'. Apparently, the renovation of the monastery complex was carried out in the second half of the 16th century, and the church was painted in the early 17th century. And as a terminus antequem I accept the Cossack attacks on Mesembria and the Southern Black Sea coast, including the island of "St. Anastasia", in 1611, 1613 and 1615. It is worth noting that the last quoted inscription was built barbarically in the frame of the entrance of today's hotel part of the monastery "St. Anastasia" and its letters are turned down...

D. Popova is certain that for a period of 10-15 years in Nessebar there was a studio at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, and apart from the comparisons between the churches "St. Stephen", "St. Spas" and the church on the island of "St. Anastasia", points out a dozen icons that belong to the same masters, taking into account the unity of style and quality. She also notes that by the middle of the 17th century, this style and quality were fading, which probably meant "decline or lack of school". The author also notes that there are problems in determining the origin and place of training of icon painters, noting certain similarities with murals and icons from Mount Athos (Stavronikita Monastery), Meteora and Patmos (?). However, Popova does not think that those masters were just visiting, and does not actively compare them with monuments outside Bulgaria. Research on Christian art from the Ottoman period has greatly advanced since 1985, and scholars' access to literature published in other Balkan countries has multiplied. In co-authorship with I. Gergova we established in 2004 that it is not clear whether the masters are local or invited from elsewhere in Nessebar, as their activity is within the dated frescoes - between 1598/99 and 1609, being aware of Cretan as well as Athos models and/or manuscripts.

The icon painters

The artists who worked on the wall paintings of "St. Stephen" in 1599, according to the restorers, used paints prepared with an organic water-based binder, i.e. generally speaking use the technique of tempera, applying the pigments on a wet, smoothed just before painting, the last layer being of lime primer.

Academic literature has already stated the thesis that three icon painters worked in the church "St. Stephen" in 1598/99, while ten years later the frescoes in "Ascension" ("St. Spas") were executed by two of them. For example, according to the restorer P. Popov, the leading icon painter in "St. Stephen" painted the full-length image of St. Anempodist on the west arch (east to west) between the central nave and the south nave of the church. My observations also point out that the inscriptions in the New Metropolis show that there are at least two styles of painting in the frescoes from the 16th century. The name of the leading icon painter in the church "St. Spas" (1609), signed in secret at the end of the dedication inscription - Nikolaos, was probably a priest. However, in the previous chapters, I have proven that it is not certain that Priest Nikolaos was an icon painter, as there is not in the inscription the set phrase "with my hand". It is claimed that this studio worked in Nessebar at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century. Probably it also fulfilled the frescoes in the church of the monastery on the island of "St. Anastasia", which was subordinated to the same Metropolitan of Nessebar, as well as a number of icons for the iconostasis of the church "St. Stephen" and for other Nessebar temples. It should be added here that the graphics of the inscriptions in the churches "St.

Stephen", "St. Spas" and "St. George Mali" are identical. The similarities in the drawing of the letters K, Λ, Σ, O and A are especially characteristic. In my opinion, the order for the painting of the murals in "St. George Mali" belongs to Metropolitan Christophoros, who, satisfied with the work of the masters in "St. Stephen", invited them again in 1606 for "St. George Mali", when they paint the altar doors, which are now in the town of Byala. Three years later they painted the frescoes in "St. Spas". Only then could one of the apprentices who remained in Nessebar be invited to resemble the Nessebar frescoes in "St. Anastasia" on the island of the same name in the Bourgas Bay. The fragmentary nature of the preserved frescoes there, as well as the nature of the restoration interventions on them do not allow definiteness in this conclusion, so the frescoes in this island church generally date between 1557 and 1611. (It is worth noting here that according to the last dating of I. Karayotov the frescoes are from the 18th century!) In Balkan art of the Ottoman period we know a dozen painters named Nikolaos/Nikola, who worked in the late 16th and early 17th c. The peculiarities of the drawing style of the "icon painter" Nikolaos, who worked in Nessebar, have so far allowed us to claim that he is not one of the three eponymous icon painters from Linotopi (one of them - Nikolaos II - in 1599 worked in the monastery Makrialexi in Epirus). The research of I. Vitaliotis's is focused on the question of whether the "Nessebar icon painter" priest Nikolaos is identical with the one who painted the second layer of frescoes in the old church "St. Stephen" of the monastery of the same name in Meteora at the beginning of the 17th century, where the painter signed: "κικόλαος ἐκ χώρας Σταγῶν". However, the colleague Vitaliotis does not rule out the possibility that the later ensemble in Meteora may be the work of the icon painter Mikhail from Linotopi. A careful reading of the colleague's dissertation shows that "St. Stephen" in Nessebar is mentioned only as one of the examples of Balkan art from the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, and the parallels with the monument in Meteora are very distant: there is a similar selection of some scenes which I mentioned above, the morphology is close, but the style is different; unlike in Meteora, for example, the extensive cycle of the "Akathist to the Mother of God" is missing, and at that in the Church of the Mother of God; the scenes are often of different compositions. However, Vitaliotis imposes the tendency to look for a connection between the Nessebar "St. Stephen" church and Epirus art of that era and more specifically connections related to Linotopi. All propositions mentioned so far are speculating with the reading of the name of a leading icon painter like Nikola. The search for parallels between the decoration of the Pateron Monastery, seriously analyzed by A. Karaberidi, and other monuments from the Balkan era, including the New Metropolis of Nessebar, has been moving in this direction. She notices some similarities, for example in the scenes *Jesus throws the money changers from the temple* in the two monuments. In 2013, however, colleague T. Tsamburas drew the attention of experts to two other Epirus

artists - Michael and Constantine of Gramosta. Tsamburas finds stylistic similarities between the frescoes from the Divrovuni Monastery from 1603 with some of the Nessebar monuments "St. George Mali", "St. Stephen" and "St. Spas". For him the similarities are in decorative motifs such as flowers between the medallions, folds of clothes and draperies, ways of painting halos; stripes of different colors in the background of the scenes and generally an identical sense of picturesqueness. He suggests that after Nessebar Michael and Constantine left for today's Albanian lands, and in 1608 probably only Constantine painted the frescoes in the church "St. Nikola" in Novo Hopovo, Serbia. Prior to that, V. Djuric believed that the icon artists who painted the nave and narthex in Hopovo were Greeks associated with the Mount Athos tradition, and also worked in the catholicon of the Piva Monastery. For Tsamburas, the art of Michael and Constantine is of high "urban" quality, but due to the decline of the urban economy in the Ottoman Empire on the threshold of the 16th and 17th c., skilled craftsmen like them moved far from their hometowns to small agricultural communities where they tried to make a living. The same colleague explains the fact that the two icon painters signed only with the Church of the Assumption in Divrovuni, because the monastery is rich, and it is connected with the Ecumenical Patriarchate through stauropagia and that it has rich donors. Of course, such an interpretation is interesting, but it does not take into account the fact that Nessebar, as a metropolitan city, is in constant contact with Phanar, at least because of its proximity to Constantinople, and the diocesan population is rich because of trade, the Metropolis and salt-pans in Anhialos and its connections with the hinterland. In other words, if the icon painters held on to their prestige, because of the authority of the parish in which they work, they would sign also in "St. Stephen". A monastery in southern Albania, even a stauropagial one, is no more prestigious place than Nessebar. The same applies to the Fruška Gora monastery of Novo Hopovo, where icon painters were forced to write in Church Slavonic and would hardly fail to note that they belong to the Greek tradition, especially if it is associated with Mount Athos. Another argument that can be pointed out is the more incorrectly written donor's inscription with the names of the painters in Divrovuni compared to the donor's inscription Γ) in the Nessebar Metropolitan Church. There are some stylistic parallels between "St. Stephen" and "Assumption" in Southern Albania, as well as with the catholicon "St. Nikola" in Novo Hopovo, but it seems to me that they are not enough to be attributed at least to the brush of the same artists, even in a different composition of the group and in the development of style, even if this was in the direction of regress. For example, the composition of the Holy Mother of God on the throne in the apse of "St. Stephen" and in the village of Divri is similar, but the artist in Nessebar used more details in the throne and the clothes; the archangels are more refined; the co-serving angels in the Heavenly Liturgy are more ethereal, and the colors less contrasting. The robes of all hierarchs in the

altar of "St. Stephen" are decorated with crosses, while in the southern Albanian monument with a chess like decoration to distinguish it from their oraria. Even more significant are the differences in scenes such as "The Nativity of the Virgin", "The Nativity of St. John the Forerunner" - a different number of characters; opposite postures of lying-in women; incomparable architectural landscape. In the last scene from Divri, the moment when Prophet Zacharias talks to an angel and then writes down the name of the newborn, is divided, while in Nessebar everything is gathered in one composition. The most important difference, however, is in the treatment of the scene "Dormition of the Mother of God". Contrary to expectations, the scene in the eponymous catholicon of the monastery in Divrovuni is more primitive and even more laconic, hymn writers do not hold scrolls with texts, and the participating characters are far fewer than in the "Dormition" in Nessebar. Even the mistake in the drawing of the scene "Entering Jerusalem" Η ΒΑΪΟΦΩΡΟΣ and Η ΒΑΪΩΦΟΡΟΣ does not repeat itself in the two monuments. From the iconographic point of view in Nessebar, for example, there are many scenes from the life of the Mother of God of apocryphal origin, while in the village of Divri those are missing, but there is the scene "Joseph of Arimathea asks for the body of Christ" or the "*Plea of Joseph of Arimathea*". The artists in Nessebar and in the monastery in the village of Divri are representatives of the high art style from the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, probably using the same iconographic manuals, conform with the requirements of the different donors and congregations but by no means are they identical to me. The Logos with its three dimensions - text, inscriptions, images - in "St. Stephen" and its artistic circle is at a higher level, and the monument is earlier, so it is not acceptable to believe that literacy, both verbal and visual, regresses five years later in the village of Divri.

Most probably to the Crete-Athonite but more indirect and to the older Constantinople models we can refer the painting of "St. Stephen" in Nessebar from the end of the 16th century. However, there are Epirus parallels there, as mentioned above. And if in the other parts of today's Bulgarian lands one cannot claim "elitism" and "scholarship" according to the definition of B. Penkova, then in the New Metropolis, in "St. George Mali" and "St. Spas" in Nessebar, these definitions are in place. Moreover - the advantage of Nessebar to be both close to the Patriarchate, but also far enough from the Sublime Porte, allows on the walls of "St. Stephen" to experiment within the framework of the canon and the good for its time taste.

Thinking spatially, it is logical to ask the question: how can icon painters from Linotopi, who by definition are not invited to work on Mount Athos, introduce into their art as many Epirus, Mount Athos and Cretan models? Where do Linotopi, Crete, the other

Aegean islands, the Palaeologus capital art and Mount Athos meet in the case of the Nessebar monuments?

And the answer is: in Constantinople... in the Ecumenical Patriarchate, from where the orders for the bishoprics are most likely distributed and the teams of canon-compliant icon painters are formed, and their route is by sea, which is safer and faster than moving by land (just as the Greeks from Mesembria returned to their ancestral homeland in 1925). In this connection it is necessary to recall that the Cretan Dzordzis is mentioned in 1634/35 as a Constantinopolitan in the Typicon of the Dionysiou Monastery (Cod. Gr. 820), and there is an opinion that he was venturing into Constantinople around the middle of the 16th century. And if this information is of later origin, it should be pointed out that in the 16th century the list of the sponsors of the monastery of Dusikon in Thessaly mentions Dzordzis of κάστρον Κωνσταντινουπόλεως as the artist of the katholicon, which probably indicates his place of residence at that time. Dzordzis was active between 1546-1568 and the starting point for his travels was probably the Second Rome. This sounds logical, as the huge market of crowded Istanbul must have attracted all sorts of craftsmen. And there, around the Patriarchate, it is more than possible that there was also a workshop that produced icons of quality and in line with theological demands, to train in mural painting, to consult models, etc. It was there that Dzordzis most likely trained young people in the art of the Cretans, in what he saw on Mount Athos, in Meteora, that later are to be sent to temples that were significant for the Phanariot presence. This is not to say that the masters who worked in Nessebar for 10-15 years were necessarily direct disciples of Dzordzis, who was active until 1552, but it is possible that they were trained by his followers in Constantinople in particular. The hypothesis does not exclude that they originated in Epirus, and in the Ottoman capital they perfected their craftsmanship, enriching it by acquaintance with the Cretan/Athonite tradition and the Palaeologus models, by collecting carbon copies, and by copying an up-to-date iconographic manual. The question of how the local hierarchs hired icon painters to decorate the temples in their diocese remains unexplored in science. Certainly not all of them knew the artists and their works to be able to trust them, and hardly all of them relied on the occasional passing of groups of craftsmen to hire, for this depended also on the availability of funds at a particular time. It seems to me, therefore, that the hierarchs looked to their superiors for advice and recommendation in choosing contractors for a particular commission. In the case of Nessebar, questions were addressed to Phanar, whose proximity was undeniable not only spatially but culturally and spiritually. It is possible that this mediation was not gratuitous. It therefore seems to me more likely that the masters of "St. Stephen" to have received the commission at the request of Metropolitan Christophoros of Constantinople, under whose jurisdiction was the Mesembria see, and on each of their returns to the Black Sea city they travelled by sea via Constantinople. Even from

Linotopi the way by ship through Thessaloniki and through Istanbul to Nessebar in the 16th century was faster and safer. Despite the lack of definite evidence for the existence of an icon painter's studio under the guardianship of Phanar in Constantinople (due to the nature of the Ottoman presence in the city), the hypothesis of the Patriarchate's involvement in the distribution of expensive and important commissions for the decoration of temples after 1453 should not be dismissed. It is not impossible that from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century a workshop for the production of high-quality icons to have operated under the direction of Cretans attached to the Patriarchate, which also received commissions for the execution of fresco ensembles outside Istanbul, where the most serious achievements of theological thought were applied by the Patriarchate, also based on medieval tradition. This may also explain the strong presence of Constantinopolitan/Patriarchal (St. Mary of Pammakaristos) symbols in the iconographic program of "St. Stephen", as well as the fact that this team did not work elsewhere except on our Southern Black Sea coast.

Conclusion

The New Metropolitan church ("St. Stephen") in Nessebar is an important monument in the development of Balkan art in the late 16th and early 17th c., but atypical for other parts of the modern Bulgarian lands. Because of its proximity to Constantinople and, respectively, to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the parish of Nessebar was in direct connection with the development of Greek-language education in the Ottoman Empire and specifically with the development of theology as far back as it existed in the 16th century. The location of Nessebar was a kind of bridge of Greek religiosity to the hinterland, which was predominantly Slavic-speaking, but also to Wallachia, where Phanar tried to reduce the influence of Old Bulgarian language. At the dawn of the Balkan Enlightenment, the ancient Thracian city, which had grown into a Greek emporion of Mesembria, became, through the local metropolitanate, an outpost of the "Greecization" of Orthodox Christians, subjects of the sultan. Therefore, the cathedral of Nessebar is a kind of "book", containing texts as well as images to propagate the Orthodox faith in its most canonical, i.e. Greek version, to catechize the worshippers, to educate them in a vision related to the finest achievements of the art of Crete, Mount Athos, Epirus, other Aegean islands, realizing the semantic connection of the church with the shrines and symbols of Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Patmos, Bethlehem. The names of the local donors also show the connection with other Aegean islands such as Syros from the Middle Ages. In any case, despite its ancient glory and its heyday in the Middle Ages, Nessebar in the 16th century was a provincial Ottoman town, its monuments charmingly small, even intimate in size, but with traces of the education and ambition for self-assertion of its small, almost mono-ethnic and somewhat

privileged Greek-speaking parish. It is interesting that the ancient Greek colonies such as Nessebar and Anchialos continued to behave as polis in the Ottoman period, i.e. they had a sense of unity through language and nationality, but competed with each other through the splendor of their metropolitan sees as the only structures in the absence of administrative authority, probably inheriting their competitiveness from their founders - Dorians and Ionians. In the Middle Ages, the Bulgarian element with its importance and ambitions was added, especially from the time of Ivan Alexander, from when took place the demographic nuance of the Hellenized Bulgarians, inhabiting the coast of the Southern Black Sea coast and attracted by the typically urban culture that developed in these "polis", as opposed to the surroundings, which remained non-urbanized, especially during the Ottoman period. Despite being on the sea, despite being the seat of a metropolitan, Nessebar in the 16th century did not become an artistic center like Ohrid, Ioannina or Kostur, nor did it create the conditions for the activity of one or two workshops to develop over at least one or two generations of masters. And this is due to the "openness" of Nessebar, where it was easier to temporarily invite a touring icon painter than to create conditions for the work of a local workshop, as such existed in the remote mountain settlements of the Balkans as Linotopi, Tryavna, Samokov, etc. The proximity to Constantinople in this respect is significant and links with the eternal city have existed since the time of the great Greek colonization. In this connection, the possibility of the functioning of an icon-painting studio in the 16th century in Constantinople, which took orders through the Patriarchate and worked on frescoes away from the Bosphorus, should not be underestimated at all.

Nessebar is a communicative city, which is why its churches are a sign of communicativeness, and in terms of their decoration - of intertextuality and intervisuality. Its citizens travel, trade, buy and sell, transfer ideas. That is why icon painters who worked on the frescoes of "St. Stephen", "St. George Mali" and "St. Spas", are difficult to define in terms of origin and affiliation. They most likely used an iconographic guide of the type of the later Daniel's Hermeneia, which I believe was created on the island of Crete in the 15th century. Their models, therefore, bear considerable similarities to the art of the Cretans working on Mount Athos in the 16th century. Other models, however, are far more similar to some of the monuments on the territory of Epirus, which is why I assume that they are indeed from Epirus, and that they may even be from Gramosta or Linotopi. The Greek origin of these people from Epirus, especially those who worked in Nessebar, I do not question, since their works in the Mesembria bishopric are in the most correctly spelled Greek I have ever worked with as an epigrapher. It would have been famous icon painters of Greek origin that Metropolitan Christophoros would have invited to decorate the temple in which he served. In this regard, I am convinced that at least the lead icon painter was also a clergyman (most likely a monk), not only because of his

excellent education, but also because of his modesty and humility not to leave his signature anywhere. The involvement of the New Metropolitan Church and its artistic circle of commissioners in the preparation of the interesting iconographic programs should not be underestimated either. The commission, in spite of the possible origin of the Epirus icon painter, is likely to have come from Constantinople, where the Cretan Dzordzis is attested to have worked. It is also evident that the bishop had a special regard for the content of the frescoes and their inscriptions, setting directions, securing sources, and demanding that certain scenes that did not exist elsewhere be depicted. The same applied to the parish priests who supervised the work of the artists in the temples they managed. Unfortunately, for the time being we do not know where Christophoros came from in Nessebar and where he went after he voluntarily retired from the metropolitan throne. It is more than clear that he was also highly educated and that he probably served the Patriarchate for a time in Phanar, only to take over the important and wealthy chair in Mesembria, even to be declared "Proedros of the whole Black Sea".

In the development of wall painting in the Balkans from the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century the church of "St. Stephen" with its artistic circle takes its place rather as a "compromise" monument between the main attested trends and workshops. It was from the end of the 16th century to the third quarter of the 17th century that the flourishing of mural art in the Bulgarian lands was noticeable, which ended with the defeats of the Ottomans in some wars with Europe, with the Kirdzhalis attacks and the economic crisis in the empire by the end of the century. "St. Stephen" compiles in its decoration elements of the Cretan-Athonite and, more generally, of the Epirus tradition into a polyphonic, scholarly and to a great extent pretentious ensemble that evokes no particular epigones in the 17th century. On the other hand, the iconographic program is somewhat in keeping with the established earlier layers of the Middle Ages. It is a typical metropolitan church of a cosmopolitan seaside town, which set itself the difficult task of enlightening and at the same time satisfy the tastes of clergy and laity belonging to a rich, literate and itinerant parish. From this aspect, the decoration of "St. Stephen" from the 16th century is a kind of completion of the "Greek" Late Middle Ages, as well as of Byzantium itself, through the reminiscences to the Palaiologos models, to Constantinople, abundantly present here, but also with a kind of reversal of the ideological gaze to the pre-modern era, to the Neo-Greek language, whose main doctrine from the 17th century on would be the assimilation of the other Christians in the empire through the dominant of Phanar, as well as of the texts of the New Testament, i.e. the spoken Greek language.

At the end of the text there are three appendices: List of the most frequently used Balkan monuments for comparison (9); Inscriptions on stone in the Church of "St. Stephen" and

from headstones in and around it (some of which are published for the first time or a different reading is suggested from the one previously available), as well as inscriptions published by M. Constantinides, from the church of "St. Theodore" in Nessebar; Some historical information about the church of "St. Stephen" with corrections to their previous publication. The text is also provided with an Iconographic Index, where the names of the scenes are presented with their different variants - from the period and through the titles that have gained public acceptance. The main literature used is arranged on 21 pp. (in Word), while the main text of the study is 391 pp. (in Word); the illustrations are 118, of which 4 are plans of churches, and the diagrams of the frescoes in "St. Stephen" by I. Vanev are 13.

Some publications on the subject of the dissertation

1. Гергова, И., **Мутафов, Е.** (2004): Стенописите от църквата “Св. Георги Мали” в Несебър. – *Проблеми на изкуството*, 1/2004, 43-55.
2. **Мутафов, Е.** (2010): ΕΙΚΟΝΟΠΑΘΕΙΑ или Кой са античните мъдречи, изобразени в стенописите на Бачковската трапезария и църквата „Рождество Христово” в Арбанаси? – *Проблеми на изкуството*, 2/2010, 15–19.
3. **Мутафов, Е.** (2012): Разчитането на гръцките надписи върху стенописи като инструмент за реконструкция на изобразителния език от XVII в. в паметници от българските земи. (планов проект, регистриран като научно изследване в НАЦИД COBISS.BG-ID – 1560553940 и достъпен в научно-техническа и педагогическа библиотека, София)
<https://plus.bg.cobiss.net/opac7/bib/1560553940>
4. **Мутафов, Е.** (2013): Страници от хаджийския дневник: някои наблюдения върху християнското православно изкуство в Йерусалим. – *Проблеми на изкуството*, 4/2013, 3-14.
5. **Moutafov, E.** (2018): [Some Aspects of the Development of Christian Orthodox Art in the 16th and 17th Centuries: the Testimony of Church Inscriptions and Artists' Signatures.](#) – *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire de l'Art*, 2017-2018, 47-64.
6. **Moutafov, E.** (2022): The Church of Ascension in Nessebur and its Inscriptions. – In: *Studies in Byzantine Epigraphy*, vol. I, eds. A. Rhoby and I. Toth (Brepols: 2022), 39 pp. (in print).
7. **Мутафов, Е., И. Ванев** (2022): Фрагменти от стенописи и надписи на гръцки език от остров Света Анастасия и техният контекст: отново по въпроса за добрата епиграфика и опазването. – В: *Бюлетин на ЦВП „Наследство БГ“ – научни съобщения*, СУ „Св. Климент Охридски“, С. 2022, 19 стр. (под печат).

Contributions

1. For the first time in Bulgarian science, intervisuality and intertextuality are placed in the context of the theological concept of the Logos, proving that the text is an equal element of the image in church art, and that the reading of inscriptions is a tool for the reconstruction of artistic life, as well as for learning more details about the recipient.
2. For the first time epigraphic data is presented in its entirety relating to the Church of "St. Stephen" in Nessebar; the church on the island "St. Anastasia", as well as introducing clarifications and new readings of inscriptions in the churches of "St. Spas" and "St. George Mali" in Nessebar, indicating the specific sources.
3. For the first time, besides the informative and decorative role of the inscriptions (epigraphy), their enigmatic function is discussed, thus making a theoretical and terminological contribution based also on observations made in my monograph *Christian Cryptography*, Sofia, 2019.
4. Defined and proven is the hypothesis of the presence of "high" art precisely in Nessebar in the 16th – 17th c. by examining the socio-economic, demographic and religious preconditions for it.
5. Proven is the thesis, expressed in my previous publications¹, that a text of the type of Daniel's Hermeneia was used in the Balkans as early as the 16th century.
6. All the epigraphic elements in the study are presented in the original, in a normalized form and with a translation into modern Bulgarian, offering the original names of the scenes and compositions as they appear in the iconographic manuals current for the period, and not according to their acquired civic names borrowed from other languages and academic schools.
7. For the first time since 1906, a new reading of the contents of the so-called Mesembria Chronicle is presented, through which new information is revealed about the spiritual, cultural life and level of education in late medieval Nessebar, and hence the history of the southern Black Sea coast during the Ottoman period. Introduced to the public are facts such as the fact that Nessebar was the birthplace of an Ecumenical Patriarch, that the relics of St. Theodore were his own and were donated after his death to the local metropolitanate, etc.
8. A number of ktetor and dedicatory inscriptions from icons, church utensils and lapidary monuments are introduced into scientific circulation.
9. Photographs of the relics of saints removed from Mesembria in 1925 are published for the first time, and an attempt is made to identify and date them.

10. For the first time the thesis that the commission for the painting of the New Metropolitan in Nessebar in 1598/99 was carried out through the mediation of Constantinople and it is assumed that a workshop run by a Cretan icon painter was functioning there in the middle of the 16th century is expressed.
11. For the first time, the thesis that St. Nikolaos of the ktetor's inscription in the church of "St. Spas" of 1609 was an icon painter is categorically rejected.
12. The thesis that Nessebar became an artistic center in the late 16th and early 17th c. is rejected.
13. For the first time a more precise dating is proposed, for example, of the church on the island of "St. Anastasia" between 1557 and 1611, and of "St. George Mali" in Nessebar in 1606, etc.

¹ Гергова – Мутафов 2004, 45-53; Мутафов 2012, 9-10.