

## OPINION

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On the dissertation of Prof. PhD Emmanuel Stefanov Moutafov

"The Metropolitan Church St Stephen in Nessebar and its Art Circle: Cultural Context, Intertextuality and Intervisuality

Prof. Dr. Emmanuel Stefanov Moutafov' dissertation is dedicated to the New Metropolitan Church in Nessebar, which is an outstanding monument of post-Byzantine art in Bulgaria. The study has 407 pages and contains five chapters with a preface, a conclusion, a list of illustrations, appendices, an iconographic index, a bibliography and a summary in English. Extensive illustrative material is also provided.

Professor Moutafov's work on the New Metropolitan Church began in 2019, but his research on monuments of church art from Nessebar has a long history. In 2004 he published the inscriptions from the Church of St. George Mali<sup>1</sup>, consulted the Greek texts for the publications on Nessebar by Prof. Georgi Gerov, participated in the publication of the "Corpus of the 17<sup>th</sup> century frescoes in Bulgaria", which included the Nessebar Church "Ascension of Christ" ("St. Spas")<sup>2</sup>. Important for its connection with the Nessebar monuments is also his work on the publication "Greek Icon Painters in Bulgaria after 1453"<sup>3</sup>. In this context it seems natural that the basis of the dissertation is a huge array of diverse epigraphic material. The detailed analysis of the inscriptions of frescoes, icons, architectural elements, tombstones and lapidary monuments from the New Metropolis created over centuries is an outstanding contribution of the dissertation. All epigraphic elements in the study are presented in the original, in normalized form and with translation into Bulgarian. This peculiar "corpus of inscriptions" in the study is placed in a broad historical, artistic and theological context. In this regard, sources for the history of the church and of the Nessebar Metropolis have been researched and a description of the iconographic program of the frescoes has been made, looking for parallels outside the modern territory of Bulgaria in Greece, Albania and Serbia.

Along with the epigraphic material from the New Metropolis, Prof. Moutafov makes clarifications and new readings of inscriptions from the frescoes in the "Church of the Ascension", "St. George Mali" and "St. Anastasia" on the island of the same name near Burgas, indicating their specific sources. In the study of these churches, attention is paid to historical information and to their architectural features. A new reading and

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<sup>1</sup> Гергова, И., Е. Мутафов. Стенописите от църквата „Св. Георги Мали“ в Несебър. – Проблеми на изкуството, 1, 2004, 43-55.

<sup>2</sup> Корпус на стенописите от XVII век в България. С., 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Мутафов, Е., И. Гергова, А. Куюмджиев, Е. Попова, Е. Генова, Д. Гонис. Гръцки зографи в България след 1453 г. С., 2008.

commentary of inscriptions from the iconography associated with the churches is presented. Important for future research is also the specific "revision" of the published works of Prof. Ivan Karayotov's inscriptions from the church of "St. Anastasia", which are read and interpreted in a new way<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the reading of the inscriptions in this dissertation gives a completely new insight on the existing view of the history of the island monastery.

A very important contribution of this dissertation is the analysis of the so-called Mesembrian Chronicle presented in Chapter One. The manuscript is known from a publication by P. Chilev from 1908, but in the present text it is analyzed in detail for the first time<sup>5</sup>. Professor Moutafov's research presents the manuscript as an extremely important document for the history of the Southern Black Sea coast and the towns of Nessebar, Pomorie and Sozopol. He has managed to identify the authors of the individual texts, among whom is the Metropolitan of Nessebar, Nicephorus. The work with the manuscript also provides new information about the life of the Mesembrian Margarit Constantinides, who is one of the authors of the chronicle, and also of the first local history study of Nessebar, published in 1945<sup>6</sup>. Moutafov also introduces a lot of information about the ecclesiastical and cultural life of late medieval Nessebar. The origin of the relics of St Theodore of Tiron and St Theodore Stratelates, which came to Nessebar in 1859 after the death of the city-born former Ecumenical Patriarch Constantius II greatly contributes to further research.

Here is the place to mention the contribution of Prof. Moutafov in the analysis and popularization of the five relics, which today are preserved in the Church of the Assumption of the Theotokos in the village of Nea Mesimvria in Greece. The relics were removed from Nessebar in 1925 by Greek expatriates and for the first time photographs of them are published with an attempt at identification and dating.

The epigraphic material presented in the appendices with commentaries and translation into Bulgarian is also important for future research on the New Metropolis and Nessebar. Inscriptions published by Margarit Constantinides, which have long been in obscurity or no longer extant, are also analyzed here.

The scientific contributions and new points in the text of the dissertation make it relevant and a suitable form for its publication should be found. I therefore take the liberty to make some recommendations. One of them is in the direction of reconsidering the hypotheses and conclusions drawn in connection with the change of the dedication of the New Metropolis from "St. Our Lady of Life-giving Source" to "St. Stephen". According to old publications, this happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after another Nessebar church, dedicated to St. Stephen, sank into the sea. Thus, the

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<sup>4</sup> Карайотов, И. Остров Света Анастасия. Бургас, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Чилев, П. Месемврийска кондика (codex). – Периодическо списание на Българското книжовно дружество, LXIX, свезка 9-10, 1908, 608-620.

<sup>6</sup> Κωνσταντινίδης, Μ. Η Μεσημβρία του Ευξείνου. Αθήνα, 1945.

dissertation focuses on the idea of the double dedication of the church, and in connection with the relics of St. Stephen that were carried over, special attention is paid to the double-sided icon of Christ the Great Archpriest and the figures of St Euplius, St Modestus and St Stephen with hagiographic scenes (Archaeological Museum - Nessebar, inv. No. 13, 125x87). However, the double dedication is controversial, as the New Metropolis was renamed "St. Stephen" only in 1906, after it had been given to the Bulgarian church council.

The study of only the icons preserved in the church also needs reconsideration, as most of them have been placed on the iconostasis in recent years. It is known that most of the icons from the New Metropolitan Cathedral were collected in the 1920s and are now part of the collections of the National History Museum, the National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the City Art Gallery in Plovdiv. In this regard, I believe that it is also necessary to analyze the epigraphic material of the remaining iconographic works related to the New Metropolis. Of course, the iconographic heritage of Nessebar from the post-Byzantine period is considerable and the study of the preserved epigraphic material is only a wish directed to the future research of Prof. Moutafov.

Due to its exceptional universal value Nessebar was included in the World Heritage List almost four decades ago (1983). It is surprising that for this long period the scientific studies and publications dedicated to the church art of Nessebar are few in number, which is a serious omission of contemporary Bulgarian science<sup>7</sup>. The dissertation of Prof. Moutafov is the beginning of a new stage in the understanding and research of the rich epigraphic and artistic heritage of this exceptional city. I am convinced that expanding the frontiers of knowledge is an integral part of the preservation of Nessebar. I therefore vote in favor of awarding the academic degree "Doctor of Sciences" to Emmanuel Stefanov Moutafov.

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<sup>7</sup> Here is the place to support Prof. Moutafov in the regret expressed in the introduction that the monograph of Prof. Georgi Gerov on the New Metropolis has not yet been published.