

R E V I E W

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On the dissertation

THE METROPOLITAN CHURCH

ST. STEPHEN IN NESSEBAR AND ITS ART CIRCLE:

CULTURAL CONTEXT, INTERTEXTUALITY AND INTERVISUALITY

For acquiring the academic degree Doctor of Science

Academic field 8 – Art Studies and Visual Arts,

Academic specialty: 8.1 – Theory of Art

To Prof. Dr. Emmanuel Stefanov Moutafov

The contemporary approach of interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary research which has proved particularly fruitful in recent decades, has found its place in the humanities, and, used in the right way, has the potential to lead scholars to outstanding results, giving them the freedom to formulate new questions, pose new research problems, build new hypotheses, and prove them successfully.

Boldly building on the foundation of M. Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva and its correspondent theory of intervisuality of R. C. Nelson and M. Kemil, the dissertation of Prof. Dr. Emmanuel Stefanov Moutafov offers a new comprehensive reading of the New Metropolitan Church in Nessebar and its artistic range of local monuments. The main aim of the study is to place intertextuality and intervisuality in the context of the theological notion of the Logos (the Word) as the center of interaction of the divine, words and images, in their historical and cultural contextualization and their relationship with the recipient. Moutafov defends the thesis that text is an equal component of image in ecclesiastical art, and that the decipherment of inscriptions can serve both as a

tool for the reconstruction of artistic life and for learning more details about addressee and recipient.

The dissertation has 407 pages of text and appendices. It is structured with a title page, a table of contents, a preface, an exposition in five chapters and a concluding part, a list of illustrations, appendices, an iconographic index, a summary in English and a bibliography.

In the preface Prof. Emmanuel Moutafov formulates the four main problems on which his research is focused. It is dedicated to the Metropolitan Church of "St. Stephen" in Nessebar, considering it not only as an important monument of high art in the Bulgarian lands at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries, but raising the question of the intertextual and intervisual relations of the image and the word with their addressees and their respective environment, inscribed in a broad Balkan context. Furthermore, the thesis explores the cultural history of Nessebar during the Ottoman period, contributing to a better reconstruction of the past of the Bulgarian Southern Black Sea coast through new, unpublished inscriptions and sources. The collected data allow the author to assume and prove the existence and use of Hermeneia of Daniil's type in the Balkans as early as the 16th century. In addition to all this, the dissertation also sets out to create a complete corpus of inscriptions of the four main churches under consideration, with commentaries and translations, which would serve a wider scholarly audience.

The author points out here that the work aims to fill the lack of an overview publication about the temple, to correct some inaccuracies in the published data about it, as well as to introduce structure in the presented information about the monument, both in scientific and public order. In this context, Moutafov explains his personal experience of fieldwork and shares the motives that led him to define the subject of the research, to set the aims and objectives, and to formulate the corresponding expected results. The point of departure is the seemingly very broad, but in fact quite specific question of the relationship of image and word, whose constant flowing into each other is well explained by contemporary theories of intertextuality and intervisuality. Adding to these relationships the constants of context (medium) and recipient (user), Moutafov formulates his conception of the Logos as a field of meaning and function, as the center of meaning, and speaks of the very "understanding of the word through which the image is understood" (p. 11). From this starting point, the author enters the study of the New Metropolitan church in Nessebar in historical, artistic and theological contexts.

The first chapter of the thesis outlines in detail the cultural environment in which the monument functions. The data on the demographic picture, political events, economic development, educational development and the history of the Mesembria diocese give a clear picture of the circumstances. An important contribution here is the examination of the Mesembria Chronicle, which is the first new reading of its contents in over a hundred years and which leads to interesting conclusions outlining its importance in revealing the history of the southern Black Sea coast during the Ottoman period. The new information shows that the first writer in the chronicle was Metropolitan Nikephoros of Mesembria, that Nessebar was the birthplace of the Ecumenical Patriarch Constantius II, that the relics of St. Theodore were his and were donated after his death to the local metropolitanate, etc.

The second chapter examines the intertextuality of the epigraphic material under study in order to delineate the artistic processes of the period under consideration. The reading of Greek inscriptions on frescoes is justified as a tool for the reconstruction of the visual language of the 16th – 17th centuries in the monuments of the Bulgarian lands. E. Moutafov makes the first attempt of this kind in our literature to mediate the corpus of inscriptions with the corpus of frescoes of a monument. The aim is an attempt to recover the "visual language" of the scribes, which includes the written and pictorial prototypes formulating the iconographic program intended for communication with a specific audience, in a specific place, under specific historical circumstances. The author articulates the benefits of this experience not only in the direction of elucidating the artistic processes of the period, but also in the direction of unlocking the mysteries of the creative process itself as performed by the icon painters (pp. 46-47). Moutafov addresses the questions of who were the personalities involved in writing inscriptions and to what extent the interference of donors, clerics and lay persons in the work of the artists can be assumed, what was the level of their literacy and what were the errors in the epigraphy of Orthodox monuments so far. Applying N. Economidis methodology for measuring the level of literacy, Emmanuel Moutafov analyses the inscriptions of the 16th-17th centuries in our country, compiling a ranking of the masters according to their literacy and proximity to the Greek-speaking tradition. The first three places in this ranking are occupied by icon painters of the three Nessebar churches "St. Stephen", "St. George Mali" and "St. Spas" (p. 62), and there is a certain parallelism with the aesthetic level of the iconographic programs of these churches, which speaks of a direct and diachronic correlation between the education, talent and demandingness of the masters. An important contribution of this part of the study is the fact that Moutafov presents evidence confirming his already stated

thesis that a text of the type of Pope Daniel's Hermeneia was in use in the Balkans as early as the sixteenth century (c. 63-66).

The third chapter of the dissertation focuses on intervisuality, commenting on key aspects of the development of Orthodox Christian art in the 16th -17th centuries through the prism of faith, language and nationality. It outlines the spheres of influence, the degree of preservation of local linguistic and liturgical traditions, identifies the dominant artistic centers and analyses the processes in the development of temple construction and decoration. Emphasis is placed on the importance of the influence of Mount Athos from the 16th century onwards, and the thesis of D. Pallas and J. Velenis that artistic workshops existed in Constantinople to produce icons for the needs of Christians throughout the Ottoman Empire. Starting from religion as the main distinguishing mark in the Balkan lands under Ottoman rule, the author uses the New Metropolitan church of Nessebar and its artistic circle of local monuments as a *case study* through which to explain his concept of the Logos (the Word) as the center of the interactions of the divine, words and images in their historical and cultural contextualization and their relationship with the recipient.

Accordingly, the fourth chapter of the study is devoted to the intervisuality, intertextuality and reception of the Nessebar temple "St. Stephen" and its art circle. Moutafov presents the state of research to date, describes the building and concentrates his attention on the murals, especially as regards the fresco layers of the 16th and 18th centuries, whose iconographic program is presented in registers and illustrated with diagrams of the layout. The description of the frescoes follows two basic principles: from top to bottom and from left to right. The material is arranged by parts (spaces) of the temple, following the logic of the iconographic program. The inscriptions in Greek are presented as close to the original as possible, in a normalized form and in a translation into New Bulgarian with reference to their sources, which increases the scientific and applied significance of the work. When necessary, the author's New Bulgarian translation is also offered, and the descriptions of the images contain a more detailed extensive iconographic interpretation. Iconographic parallels are drawn with several temples that have visual similarities and a similar monolingual confessional setting - most often with the frescoes from the first phase of the painting of the catholicon of the Meteora monastery of "St. Stephen", and with the temples of the monasteries of Divrovuni, southern Albania, and Novo Hopovo, Serbia, among others. The pulpit, the bishop's throne and the iconostasis are also examined in detail, the starting point of the analyses being the author's conviction that the iconographic program of the Metropolitan Church of "St. Stephen" has its own semantic center (the Logos, in its three-

position text-inscription-image), intended to be read and understood beyond the purely decorative role of the frescoes. This program goes far beyond the aesthetic impact on the viewer and presupposes the active participation of a literate recipient in decoding the messages hidden therein, of different origins but with the common aim of literacy, education and catechesis with the whole toolkit of the Logos.

Chapter Five of the study is devoted to the interpretation of the monument and its context. Here E. Moutafov interprets the iconographic program according to his observations about it, according to its development in the temple space of the New Metropolia and beyond the description and epigraphy of each scene and character. A detailed reading of the epigraphic material is conducive to elucidating the basic principles of the composition of the iconographic program and to finding parallels with Constantinopolitan Palaiologos models reworked through the styles relevant to the period. The comparative analysis allows Moutafov to confirm his earlier assumptions about the existence in the 16th century of an iconographic manual of the type of that of the Book of Daniel, which was used in the iconographic program of the New Metropolia of Nessebar, alongside the other sources mentioned by the author. The function and dedication of the temple are commented upon, and the artistic range of monuments associated with the New Metropolia in Nessebar and its environs is outlined. It is important to note that to the overall presentation of the epigraphic data related to the Nessebar church "St. Stefan", here are added those from the church on the island of "St. Anastasia", in addition with clarifications and new readings of inscriptions in the churches of "St. Spas" and "St. George Mali" in Nessebar. Attention is paid to the thesis of the existence of an artistic studio or school in Nessebar in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and the question of the identity of the New Metropolitan's icon painters is interpreted. The conclusions of the conducted research enable E. Moutafov to point to the Ecumenical Patriarchate as a probable center of distribution of important orders for decoration of important temples in that era, which would explain the described peculiarities in the iconographic program of St. Stephen".

The concluding part of the dissertation summarizes the results of the research and defines the New Metropolitan church in Nessebar as an important but atypical monument compared to its contemporary monuments in the Bulgarian lands. The key location of the town leaves its mark on the temples in it, E. Moutafov points to them as one of the signs of its openness, and defines their decoration as an example of intertextuality and intervisuality. He believes that it is difficult to determine the origin and affiliation of the icon painters who worked on the frescoes of the churches of "St. Stephen", "St. George Mali" and

"St. Spas" in Nessebar, but it is most likely that they used an iconographic manual of the type of the later Daniel's Hermeneia. Because of the similarities found, Moutafov suggests that they were from Epirus and of Greek origin, and that at least the leading icon painter was also a cleric. The author defines the New Metropolitan church as a typical metropolitan temple for a cosmopolitan seaside town, whose iconographic program enlightened and satisfied the tastes of a wealthy and literate parish, appearing as a kind of culmination of the "Greek" Late Middle Ages, and he calls the "Greek" art in Nessebar of that era synonymous with "high" stylistics (p. 362).

At the end of the dissertation there is a list of illustrations - 118, three appendices, an iconographic index in which the names of the scenes are presented with their different variants, a summary in English and a bibliographic list of 335 titles.

The abstract has 56 pp. and presents the contents, main points and contributions of the study with sufficient clarity. I consider the thirteen contributions formulated to be truly significant, and I stress as particularly valuable the fact that this is the first comprehensive presentation of the epigraphic data relating to the Church of "St. Stephen" in Nessebar and the monuments of its circle. The presentation of all the epigraphic elements in the original, in normalized form and with translation into New Bulgarian, offering the original names of the scenes and compositions as they appear in the iconographic manuals current for the period, is a significant scholarly contribution that will assist a wide range of subsequent research. The creation of a complete corpus of the inscriptions of the four main churches with commentaries and translations, which is lacking in Bulgarian publishing practice, is an important solution to a scientific and applied problem. The contribution of the study is also of a scientific and applied nature, as it presents for the first time since 1906 a new reading of the contents of the so-called Mesembrian Chronicle, together with the resulting introduction of new empirical facts into circulation. An important achievement is also the introduction of new evidence to the author's thesis that a text of the type of Daniel's Hermeneia was in use in the Balkans as early as the 16th century, as well as all the other evidence related to the specification of temple dating and details of personalities, which categorically reject the currently accepted as valid theses.

In the abstract only some of the author's publications on the topic of the dissertation are mentioned, but the reference for the publication activity of Prof. Dr. Emmanuel Moutafov clearly demonstrates the scale and depth of his academic activity, and the reference for the citations unambiguously shows the impact and importance of his research. In this context, the only recommendation

I can make, which I am sure will not remain mine alone, is that the present work be published, because in this way it will contribute an outstanding and undeniable benefit to the development of art history and art studies not only in Bulgaria but also in other Orthodox countries.

In conclusion, I would like to state that I highly appreciate the fundamental and scientifically applied contribution of the presented dissertation and I vote with a confident "yes" for the awarding of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" to the candidate Prof. Dr. Emmanuel Stefanov Moutafov. I suggest that the other members of the esteemed jury also vote in the affirmative.

17 February 2022

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