



# Images and Texts across Time: The Three Layers of Mural Paintings in the Church of St George in Sofia

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**Abstract.** With a history stretching back about sixteen centuries, the church of St George in Sofia is one of the most emblematic landmarks of the city. The three mural layers represent the leading trends in the Byzantine art of the period when they were created: from the eleventh to the fourteenth century. This study offers a new interpretation of the epigraphic data from the scrolls of the saints, which are depicted in the second layer. By analyzing the relevant literary sources – wherever possible – the study reveals the importance of these texts for the spiritual aspirations of their reading publics.

**Key words:** Byzantine art, wall painting, Byzantine epigraphy, Greek inscriptions.

The church of St George in Sofia is one of the oldest structures with a central plan in the territory of Bulgaria. The church is a monumental brick building on a square foundation with four semi-circular

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Fig. 1. The Church of St George, general view

niches at the corners of the square and a large rectangular niche on the eastern wall; when it was converted into a church, the niche became an altar apse. The upper part of the building is shaped as a cylinder (the actual rotunda) with a diameter of 9.5 m; it is completed with a semi-spherical dome. The total height of the church is about 14 m (Fig. 1).

The initial function and the dating of the building is still under discussion. According to some scholars, it was constructed as a Roman bathhouse between the second to the beginning of the fourth century. They regard the remains of a hypocaust system found in the course of excavations as evidence in support of their theory. Others believe that the building was originally a cult structure – a *martyrion* or a *baptisterion*, – dating from the first half of the fourth century, and that the system of the rectangular pools were not a hypocaust but there for ventilation and drainage purposes. The earliest pub-

lication on the subject is by Bogdan Filov<sup>3</sup>, but he mainly focuses on the architecture and the architectural context of the monument. André Grabar accepted Filov's conclusion that the original function of the Rotunda was as a bathhouse. He noted that the dedication to St George could have been influenced by the round church with the same dedication in Thessalonica, although the original function of the two differed, making the similarity of the architectural design purely accidental<sup>4</sup>.

The exact time when the building started to be used as a church is unknown. The first two layers were discovered during restoration work completed in 1971. Until then, only the third layer of the mural paintings and a few older fragments, previously published by B. Filov, were known. Following this stage of restoration, several further studies were published, revealing data about the newly found mural paintings<sup>5</sup>.

The most recent study on the church of St George was carried out by Asen Kirin. His opinion was that the Rotunda of St George is the oldest standing structure in the city of Sofia (ancient Serdica). Built in the early 300<sup>s</sup> C.E., the structure has been in nearly continuous use for sixteen centuries. Originally a part of a Roman bath, by the second half of the fifth century it was converted into a church. This church served Serdica as its cathedral between the fifth and the sixteenth century, when it was converted into a mosque. The Rotunda became a church again in 1878.

At the time of its construction in the early fourth century, the Rotunda was part of a large architectural complex that comprised the imperial palace in Serdica. In all likelihood, this was the residence of Emperor Constantine the Great during his lengthy stays in Serdica

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3 Filov, Bogdan. Софийската църква „Св. Георги“ [Sofiyskatsa tsarkva “Sv. Georgi”]. – Материали за историята на София [Materiali za istoriyata na Sofiya], 1933, No. 7, 103.

4 Grabar, André. La peinture religieuse en Bulgarie. Paris, 1928, 86-88.

5 Prashkov, Lyuben. Нови данни за стенописите в църквата „Св. Георги“ в София [Novi dannii za stenopisite v tsarkvata “Sv. Georgi” v Sofiya]. – Изкуство [Izkustvo], 1966, No. 10, 32-35; Krasovska-Raynova, Lyuba. Нови проучвания и консервация на стенописите в църквата „Св. Георги“ в София [Novi prouchvaniya i konservatsiya na stenopisite v tsarkvata “Sv. Georgi” v Sofiya]. – Музеи и паметници на културата [Muzei i pametnitsi na kulturalata], 1971, No. 4, 38-40; Prashkov, Lyuben. За средновековната живопис в църквата „Св. Георги“ в София [Za srednovekovnata zhivopis v tsarkvata “Sv. Georgi” v Sofiya]. – Изкуство [Izkustvo], 1971, No. 4, 12-13; Kandarasheva, Irina. Стенописите от първия живописен слой в църквата „Св. Георги“ в София [Stenopisite ot parviya zhivopisen sloy v tsarkvata “Sv. Georgi” v Sofiya]. – Palaeobulgarica, 1995, No. 4, 94-113.



Fig. 2. The first layer of the mural paintings

at different times between 316 and 321 C.E. The late antique imperial palace in Serdica is virtually unknown and has never received sufficient attention from scholars<sup>6</sup>.

In her latest book, Ani Dancheva-Vasileva presents key data on the early history of Serdica. Based on an analysis of all source data, as well as of scholarly views, the author made the following assumption: "A number of historians believe that the Episcopal church of Serdica Triaditsa that initially contained St John of Rila's relics was indeed the church of St George, the Rotunda..." And further on: "... after four centuries, upon their return to Sofia, the holy relics will be deposited in the Church of St George. One could assume

<sup>6</sup> *Kirin*, Asen. The Rotunda of St George and Late Antique Serdica: From Imperial Palace to Episcopal Complex. Ph.D. Dissertation directed by Prof. Slobodan Curcic. Princeton University, 2000.



**Fig. 3.** An angel's face, first layer

that the temple where the relics were deposited the first time would be used again to house them for seven days before their delivery to Rila Monastery”<sup>7</sup>.

A general description of the murals in the church can be found in L. Mavrodinova and M. Tsoncheva's publications<sup>8</sup>.

The first layer of the mural paintings consists of the images in the drum and in the large semi-spherical dome (**Fig. 2**). These represent six angels as a part of a composition of heavenly forces adoring Christ, whose figure was probably at the top of the dome (the exist-

<sup>7</sup> *Dancheva-Vasileva, Ani*. История на средновековна София IV–XIV век [Istoriya na srednovekovna Sofiya IV–XIV vek]. Sofia, 2017, 433–434.

<sup>8</sup> *Tsoncheva, Mara*. Църквата „Св. Георги“ в София [Tsarkvata “Sv. Georgi” v Sofiya]. Sofia, 1979; *Mavrodinova, Lilyana*. Стенната живопис в България до края на XIV век [Stennata zhivopis v Balgariya do kraya na XIV vek]. Sofia, 1995, 21–22, 35.

ing image belongs to the third layer and dates back to the fourteenth century).

For five of the angels' images, only the lower part survives; on the last image, the face is preserved and it is exquisitely painted (**Fig. 3**). Insofar as we can judge from the present state of the wall painting, the color range was generally light and pastel – light blue, light brown, light grey, light pink.

The faded images of four prophets adorn the wall between the windows. Three of them are better preserved: Jonah (judging by Filov's photograph), John the Forerunner and a third prophet that remains unidentified. Modern scholars unanimously attribute these figures to the eleventh century, but their opinions differ regarding the more precise dating within the eleventh century. We strongly believe that the imposing monumental features of the figures; the marked relief of the forms; the heavy folds of the drapery that enhance the bodies' stereometric element, and above all the archangel's face, with its exquisite beauty and modeling, all correspond to the classicizing style in Byzantine Art such as can be found in the eleventh-century mosaics in Daphne near Athens, Greece.

The wall paintings from the second layer include images of church feasts and several figures in full length. Above all, there are eight figures of prophets, depicted two by two between the windows of the drum. L. Mavrodinova has published a study focusing on the prophets' images from the first and second painting layers of the church<sup>9</sup>.

Below the figures of the monks on the western wall, fragments of a donor's composition are preserved; its upper part consists of a figure in bishop's garments holding the model the church and is of particular interest. The donor in this layer of the mural painting could be the Bishop of Serdica. The large circular inscription in Greek at the base of the drum also belongs to this layer. It is very likely that the name of the Bishop of Serdica was also mentioned in it, but this does not survive in the present state of preservation.

E. Pezopoulos and K. Konstantopoulos have provided a more complete reading of the inscription, revealing that in reality it is a piece

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<sup>9</sup> *Mavrodinova*, Liliana. Les prophètes des deux premières couches de peinture à l'église St. Georges à Sofia. In: *Αφιέρωμα στη μνήμη του Σωτήρη Κίτσα*. Θεσσαλονίκη, 2001, 283-290.



Fig. 4. The full-length images of the five monks, western wall

of poetry composed in the iambic meter. The poetic *topoi* identified by Pezopoulos indicate that the author of the epigram was well acquainted with the works of Middle Byzantine Constantinopolitan literature<sup>10</sup>.

After the completion of the general restoration of the church and its wall paintings, it became clear that the iconographic program of the second wall-painting layer was not changed much in comparison with the first one, as the fragments of images and haloes respectively of prophets and monks from the first layer can be distinguished beneath the frieze with the prophets on the drum and the monks above the western entrance. Restoration provided evidence that the first layer was removed before applying the decoration of the sec-

10 Konstantopoulos, Konstantinos. Επιγραφή δυσανάγνωστος. – Επετηρίς Εταιρείας Βυζαντινών Σπουδών, 1935, Έτος ΙΑ', 416-420; Pezopoulos, Emmanouil. Επιγραφής δυσανάγνωστου ανάγνωσις. – Επετηρίς Εταιρείας Βυζαντινών Σπουδών, 1936, Έτος ΙΒ', 433-438. For the updated edition of the epigram, see: Rhoby, Andreas. Byzantinische Epigramme auf Fresken und Mosaiken (= Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung, eds. Wolfram Hörandner, Andreas Rhoby, Anneliese Paul, Vol. 1). Vienna, 2009, Nr. 5.

ond layer. However, the dome base with the angel-painted frieze was not decorated anew at that period of time, as the wall paintings of the third layer from the fourteenth century cover the angels' figures directly. Apparently, the dome was partially destroyed and rebuilt in the period between the first and the third painting of the church.

The images of the Holy Virgin and of Archangel Gabriel that constitute the composition of the *Annunciation* were depicted on both sides of the altar apse, while the remaining feast scenes are situated, two by two, in the four niches of the church. The *Dormition of the Virgin* scene is situated on the southern wall, and the scene of the *Crucifixion* on the northern one.

The images of the four Evangelists belong to the same layer, as well as the full-length images of five holy monks that occupy the entire area above the entrance on the western wall. Four of the monks hold scrolls with inscriptions; the latter have still not been deciphered properly in scientific publications (**Fig. 4**). At present these images lack identifying inscriptions; it has not been established with certainty whether such inscriptions were written at all and the subject is still debatable, as the upper section of almost all the images is damaged.

The first attempt to read the four inscriptions on the scrolls of the full-length images of the monks was made at the beginning of the twentieth century (1901) by Eftim Sprostranov<sup>11</sup>. In his comments on E. Sprostranov's readings about 30 years later, Bogdan Filov concluded that Sprostranov was wrong, and that the inscriptions were unreadable<sup>12</sup>.

The third attempt to decipher the inscriptions was made by Ivan Dujčev, who identified the second monk from south to north as St Arsenius the Great; however, he could not identify with certainty the monk displayed to the north of Arsenius. He suggested that it could be St Euthymius the Great<sup>13</sup>.

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11 *Sprostranov*, Eftim. Вести и оценки: Старовизантийски надписи в черквата св. Георги в София [Vesti i otsenki: Starovizantiyski nadpisi v cherkvata sv. Georgi v Sofiya]. – Периодическо списание на Българското книжовно дружество в София [Periodichesko spisanie na Balgarskoto knizhovno druzhestvo v Sofiya], 1901, No. 62, 410-413.

12 *Filov*, Bogdan. Софийската църква Св. Георги [Sofiyskata tsarkva Sv. Georgi]. Sofia, 1933, 56.

13 *Tsoncheva*. Църквата „Св. Георги“ в София, 188-190.



Irina Kandarasheva has published the most recent publication regarding the monks' identity that also contains some observations about the inscriptions; her contribution is the discovery of the text of the inscription on St Anthony the Great's scroll in the famous *Painter's Manual of Dionysius of Fournà*<sup>14</sup>. Accordingly, Kandarasheva has suggested that the first figure in the row is St Sabbas the Sanctified, and that the fifth belongs to St John Kalybites. However, her assumptions have been based on stylistic parallels with the Bachkovo Ossuary and Boyana Church, and not on a detailed analysis of the epigraphic data, which lay outside the scope of her study.

After these, there have been no further publications of the four inscriptions nor have their literary sources been identified, in spite of the vital significance that such an investigation would have for a proper interpretation of this epigraphic material. The present contribution aims to fill the gap in this regard.

The southernmost monk (or the first figure from left to right when looking in west direction) is depicted holding a scroll (Fig. 5), which reads as follows:

1	+ ΚΑΛὸΝ ΦΑΓΙΝ ΚΡΑΪ
	ΑΚΕ ΠΥΗΝΥΝ ὈΝΚΕ
	ΜΗΕΝΚΑΤΑΛΛΑ/ΗΕ
	ΣΣΑΡΚΑΣΑΔΕΛ
5	ΦΩΝ :-

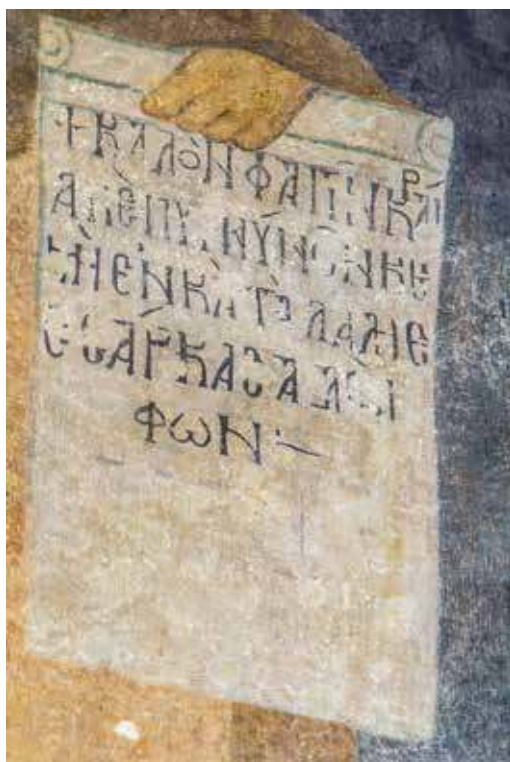


Fig. 5 The scroll of the first monk (scroll Nr. 1)

Diplomatic transcription: +  
καλὸν φαγῖν κραΐα κέ πυῆν

14 Kandarasheva, Irina. Некоторые иконографические проблемы второй росписи церкви Св. Георгия в Софии [Nekotoryye ikonograficheskiye problemy vtoroy rospisi tserkvi Sv. Georgiya v Sofii]. In: Древнерусское искусство, Русь и страны византийского мира XII век [Drevnerusskoye izkustvo, Rus' i strany vizantiyskogo mira XII vek]. Sanct-Petersburg, 2002, 78-80.

ὕνον κὲ ἢ μὴ ἐν καταλαλήῃς σάρκας ἀδελφῶν.

Edited text: Καλὸν φαγεῖν κρέα καὶ πιεῖν οἶνον, καὶ μὴ ἐν καταλαλιαῖς σάρκας ἀδελφῶν.

Translation: *It is better to eat meat and drink wine and not to eat the flesh of one's brethren through slander*<sup>15</sup>.

The source of the text is the well-known work, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* or *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, more specifically – the section listing the sayings of St Hyperechius<sup>16</sup>.

Such an attribution could lead to the conclusion that the depicted monk is St Hyperechius.

Here, an important note should be made concerning all similar cases of problematic identification associated with images of prophets and saints: in the case of missing or obliterated identifying inscriptions, the process of identification is possible only through the interpretation of the texts on the scrolls or in the open books that the figures hold. Even if the sources of these texts are properly identified – a difficult task in itself – the saints' identity could still remain uncertain, as the same source-text could be displayed on the scrolls of different saints. Such discrepancies between image and inscription have been observed in Byzantine art, yet they grow significantly in number during the Post-Byzantine period<sup>17</sup>.

For instance, although rarely used in inscriptions, the above-mentioned text is written in Old Church Slavonic on St Mark of Thrace's scroll on the façade of the church *Resurrection of God* in the Monastery of Sucevița<sup>18</sup>.

15 According to the edition by Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Cistercian Publications, 1975, 238.

16 Περί τοῦ ἀββᾶ Ὑπερεχίου, De abbate Hyperechio, PG 65, col. 429 C: Εἶπε πάλιν· Καλὸν φαγεῖν κρέα καὶ πιεῖν οἶνον, καὶ μὴ φαγεῖν ἐν καταλαλιαῖς σάρκας ἀδελφῶν.

17 Byzantine inscriptional epigrams can offer some vivid cases pointing out the discrepancy between text and image. For further investigation on this matter, see: Maguire, Henry. *Image and Imagination: the Byzantine Epigram as Evidence for Viewer Response*. Toronto, 1996; Hörandner, Wolfram. *Customs and Beliefs as Reflected in Occasional Poetry. Some considerations*. *Byzantinische Forschungen* 12, 1987, 235-247; Rhoby, Andreas. *On the Interaction of Word and Image in Byzantium: The Case of the Epigrams on the Florence Reliquary*. In: P.L. Grotowski, Sł. Skrzyniarz (eds.). *Towards Rewriting? New Approaches to Byzantine Archaeology and Art*. Proceedings of the Symposium on Byzantine Art and Archaeology, Cracow, September 8 – 10, 2008. Warsaw, 2010 (= *Series Byzantina. Studies on Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art*, Vol. 8), 101-115.

18 Ciobanu, Constantin. *Les sources des Citations peintes sur les phylactères des Saints de la rangée inférieure de la façade de l'Église de La Résurrection de Dieu du Monastère de Sucevița*.

In general, this phenomenon is an element of a more complex issue; namely, the accurate attribution of a text to an author and the significance of this attribution in the particular church, the particular region and/or the particular period. In essence, such research questions are inevitably associated with two other important aspects of medieval culture: anonymity and literacy<sup>19</sup>.

However, the names of the second and the third monk from south to north are written precisely on the scrolls that they hold: on them, we read the names Ἀρσένηε (in the Vocative case) and Εὐθύμιος (in the Nominative case) respectively.

The name Ἀρσένηε has led I. Dujčev to conclude that this scroll belonged to the figure of St Arsenius the Great. The monk holds a scroll with the following text (Fig. 6):

1	+ ἈΡΣΕ[Ν]ΗΕΔΙΟΝ
	ἘΞΗΛΘΕΣΕΚᾶ
	ΒΕΙΟΥΦΕΥΓΕΣΙΟ
	ΠΑΗΣΙΧΑΖΑ[Ι]
5	ΚΕΣΟΖΟΥ

Diplomatic transcription: + Ἀρσέ[ν]ηε δι ὄν | ἐξήλθες ἐκ τοῦ | βείου φεύγε σιώ|πα ήσίχαζα[ι] | κὲ σόζου.

Edited text: Ἀρσένιε, δι ὄν ἐξήλθες ἐκ τοῦ βίου· φεύγε, σιώπα, ήσύχαζε καὶ σόζου.

Translation: *Arsenius, why have*

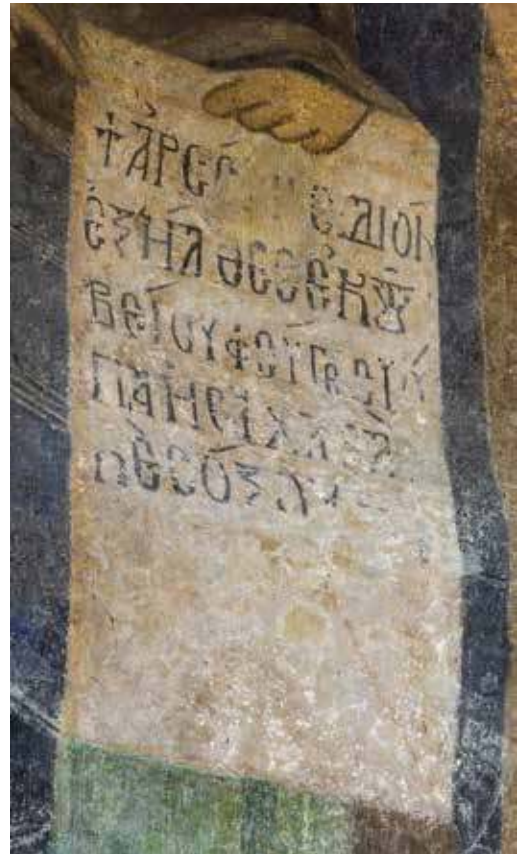


Fig. 6. The scroll of St Arsenius the Great (scroll Nr. 2)

In: Ivanka Gergova, Emmanuel Moutafov (eds.). *Heroes. Cults. Saints / Art Readings* I.2015. Sofia, 2015, 173.

19 Similar topics are discussed by Henry Maguire: cf. *Maguire, Henry. Eufrasius and Friends: On Names and Their Absence in Byzantine Art*. In: Liz James (ed.). *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture*. Cambridge University Press, 2007, 139-160.

you left the world? Flee, be silent, be at peace and save yourself! (TsV<sup>20</sup>).

This text also comes from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, but here the inscription is a combination of two sentences that cannot be found together *verbatim* in the literary source. The first sentence quotes the words of St Arsenius talking to himself toward the end of his life<sup>21</sup>, and the second is a command given to him by God at the beginning of his ascetic deeds<sup>22</sup>.

The text on the scroll held by the third monk in the row begins with the name Εὐθύμιος. This should be regarded as a direct invitation to the reader to properly identify the saint's image. The saint's name is not syntactically connected to the rest of the inscription, as is the case with St Arsenius the Great's scroll. The text reads as follows (Fig. 7):

Diplomatic transcription:

1	ΕΥΘΥΜΙΟΣ ΕΥ
	ΘΥΗΤΕ ΔΑΚΡΥ
	ΧΑΙΡΕΤΕ ΔΕ ΕΝ
	ΚΩΙΕΛΠΗΣΑ[Υ]
5	ΤΟΥ : -

+ Εὐθύμιος· εὐθὺς στήτε  
δακρύ(ειν) | χαιρέτε δὲ



Fig. 7. The scroll of St Euthymius the Great (scroll Nr. 3)

20 Translations with the initials 'TsV' throughout the article are done by Tsvetan Vasilev.

21 Note: The underlined words are present both in the inscription and in the sources. Οὗτος δὲ ὁ λόγος τοῦ γέροντος ἦν· Ἀρσένιε, διὸ ἐξηλθες; λαλήσας, πολλάκις μετεμελήθην, σιωπήσας δὲ οὐδέποτε. PG 65, col. 105 C. Translation: *The old man used to say to himself: 'Arsenius, why have you left the world? I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having been silent.'* (Ward. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 18).

22 Κύριε, ὁδήγησόν με πῶς σωθῶ. Καὶ ἦλθεν αὐτῷ φωνὴ λέγουσα· φεῦγε, σιώπα, ἡσύχαζε, αὐταὶ γὰρ εἰσιν αἱ ῥίζαι τῆς ἀναμαρτησίας. PG 65, col. 88 B. Translation: *'Lord, lead me in the way of salvation.'* And a voice came saying to him, *'Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the source of sinlessness.'* (Ward. *The sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 9.)

ἐ(ν) | κ(υρί)ω ἰ ἐλπής αὐ | τοῦ.

Edited text: + Εὐθύμιος· εὐθὺ στήτε δακρῦ(ειν), χαίρετε δὲ ἐ(ν) κ(υρί)ω ἢ ἐλπὶς αὐτοῦ.

Translation: *Euthymius: Stop crying immediately, but be happy instead, as his hope lies in the Lord (TsV).*

In the story of St Euthymius's life, compiled by hagiographer Symeon Metaphrastes, St Euthymius gathered his disciples and followers when he was about to die; he prophesied the day of his own death, consoled them and appointed a new abbot. At his funeral "the suffering because of the loss of Euthymius was the cause of much lamentation<sup>23</sup>". Thus, the inscription could be regarded as advice towards the lamenting crowd, and an allusion to the saint's salvation – the 'hope' in the Lord.

It is tempting to assume that this particular inscription could allude to another saint's salvation – namely, the most highly revered Bulgarian saint, St John of Rila, whose wonderworking relics were initially brought to the town of Sredets, and may have been placed in the church of St George for some time during the reign of Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes (1067–1071). This, of course, is only a speculation based on the fact that, to our best knowledge, the text on St Euthymius' scroll has not ever been recorded in any other church either in this period or at any time later, as well as on the influential content of the message, which may have been directed toward the Christian crowds that sought consolation, guidance, healing and help from St John of Rila<sup>24</sup>.

If the above assumptions are not true, the admonition on St Euthymius' scroll could be regarded as a source of inspiration for the faithful in their hope of salvation, conveying a universal message resonating strongly even today. The fourth monk to the north holds a scroll with the following text (Fig. 8):

23 Πᾶσι μὲν οὖν τὸ πάθος τῆς Εὐθυμίου στερήσεως, πολλῶν δακρῶν αἴτιον ἦν. PG 114, col. 692 A.

24 The author of one of the oldest stories of St John's life is Γεώργιος ὁ Σκυλίτζης, an official and governor of Sredetz in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180); according to his own account, he was miraculously cured with the help of the saint's relics. By his account the Emperor himself was cured of a disease by St John's relics with help from the local bishop. For further reading, see *Zlatarski*, Vasil. Георги Скилица и написаното от него житие на св. Иван Рилски [Georgi Skilitsa i napisanoto ot nego zhitie na sv. Ivan Rilski]. – Buletin de la société historique à Sofia, 1933, Vol. XIII, 49–80.

1            ἩΔΤΑΣΠΑ  
              ΓΗΔΑΤΟΥΔΗ  
              ἈΒΟΛΩΗΠ  
              [ΛΩ]ΜΕΝΑς  
 5            ΚΑΣΤΕΝΑΪ[ΑΣ]  
              ΤΑΡΑΔ



Fig. 8. The scroll of the fourth monk (scroll Nr. 4)

Diplomatic transcription:  
 ἦδον τὰς παλγίδα(ς) τοῦ  
 δη|αβόλου ἠπ[λω]μένας |  
 κα(ι) στενάξ(ας) | τ(ίς) ἄρα  
 δε(?)

Edited text: Εἶδον τὰς πα-  
 γίδας τοῦ διαβόλου ἠπλω-  
 μένας καὶ στενάξας· Τίς  
 ἄρα δε(?)

Translation: *I saw the snares  
 that the devil spreads out and  
 (I said) groaning: "Who...?"* (TsV).

The source of the text is a saying attributed to St Anthony the Great in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, which safely confirms the identification of the saintly figure<sup>25</sup>, especially because this text is more 'stable' and standardized, as well as being commonly attested in other churches on the scroll of the same saint<sup>26</sup>. This allows us to concur with the conclusion already been made by other researchers that

25 The words that appear in the inscription are underlined: Εἶπεν ὁ ἄββᾶς Ἀντώνιος: Εἶδον πάσας τὰς παγίδας τοῦ ἐχθροῦ ἠπλωμένας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς καὶ στενάξας εἶπον· Τίς ἄρα παρέρχεται ταῦτα; Καὶ ἤκουσα φωνῆς λεγούσης μοι· Ἡ ταπεινοφροσύνη (PG 65, 77B). Translation: 'I saw the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world and I said groaning, "What can get through from such snares?" Then I heard a voice saying to me, "Humility."' (Ward. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 2). The text, slightly changed, is mentioned in the *Painter's Manual of Dionysius of Fourna* and is attributed to St Anthony the Great, cf. DF, 162.

26 For instance, the same text rendered in Old Church Slavonic is written on St Anthony's scroll in Bulgarian churches dating from the seventeenth century, which goes a long way towards confirming this attribution. The churches are: St Theodore Tyron and St Theodore Stratelates Church, Dobarsko, cf. *Kuneva*, Tsveta. „Св. Теодор Тирон и Теодор Стратилат“, Добърско [“Sv. Teodor Tiron i Teodor Stratilat“, Dobarsko]. In: *Corpus of Seventeenth Century Wall Paintings in Bulgaria*. Sofia, 2012, 35; Seslavtsi Monastery St Nicholas, cf. *Gergova*, Ivanka. Сеславски манастир „Св. Никола“ [Seslavski manastir “Sv. Nikola“]. In: *Corpus of Seventeenth Century Wall Paintings in Bulgaria*, 51.

the monk is indeed St Anthony the Great; moreover, this leads us to propose the identity of the remaining two saints from this group as St Arsenius and St Euthymius.

St Anthony is regarded as the father of monastic life and the first monk to go to live in the desert; he was the leader of the so-called Desert Fathers, the most prominent ascetic figure of fourth-century monasticism in Egypt.

St Arsenius the Great was also an Egyptian monk from the same period, another of the Desert Fathers.

St Euthymius is regarded as the father of Palestinian monasticism, so it is no surprise that the three monks are usually depicted together. The fact that St Hyperechius is also one of the Desert Fathers from the fourth century probably justifies his inclusion within this group.

Returning to the inscription, the source-text is rendered with omissions, which prove extremely helpful in recreating the process of transferring the source-text to the inscription, or in other words – in discovering the ‘transfer’ of the literary text to the church wall, where it assumes the role of an inscription with a completely different expressive function. Despite the syntactic simplification – the omission of the adjective *πάσας*, the verb *εἶπον*, and the phrase *ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς* – the content and the main idea of the original text are entirely alive and discernible for the reading recipient<sup>27</sup>.

The level of the Greek language in the four inscriptions discussed here contributes to an easier comprehension by the audience. An oral pronunciation is detected on the basis of certain language characteristics such as:

### 1. Itacism

<H> = <I> in *δηαβόλου, ἐλπής*; scriptio inversa in *ι*;

<Υ> = <I> in *πυῆν*; scriptio inversa in *ήσίχαζα[ι]*;

### 2. Isochronism

<O> = <Ω> in *σόζου, σιόπα*;

### 3. Monophthongisation

<sup>27</sup> Regarding the problem of readability and visibility of the medieval inscriptions, see: *Eastmond, Antony* (ed.). *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World*. Cambridge, 2015.



<E> = <AI> in κέ; καταλαλήεις; scriptio inversa in κραιά;

<H> = <EI> in πυῆν; ἦδον;

<I> = <EI> in φαγῖν; scriptio inversa in βείου;

<Υ> = <OI> in ὕνον.

Lastly, the content of the texts written on the scrolls of the four monks reveals their powerful message and their intransigent Christian value: the true meaning of fasting and the power of words (scroll Nr. 1)<sup>28</sup>, of earnest prayer uttered in silence (scroll Nr. 2), of the future salvation (scroll Nr. 3), and of the first and foremost virtue: humility (scroll Nr. 4).

The frescoes of the second layer in the Church of St George represent the most typical features of wall painting between the twelfth and the thirteenth century with regard to both their iconography, as well as their style, and all authors are unanimous about their dating. The linear-rhythmic structure of the compositions and the psychological expression of the images – which, according to researchers, express the tragic pathos and the dramatic tension of the times, – link these wall paintings with the greatest monuments from the Late Komnenian period. This trend is visible in monuments from the second half of the twelfth century, namely on the wall paintings of churches such as St Panteleimon at Nerezi, commissioned by one of the Komnenos family, the church of the Virgin Mary at Lagoudera in Cyprus, and elsewhere.

The best-preserved wall paintings in the church can be found in the third layer of the murals. It includes the images of prophets with scrolls and the image of Christ Pantokrator, dating from the 1380s, prior to the Ottoman conquest of Serdica.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that the wall paintings in the Church of St George from the period between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries are in line with the leading trends of their time and possess high artistic qualities. Together with the influential message of the inscribed texts, discussed in this article, they contribute significantly to the status of the Rotunda of St George as a monument of culture of national significance.

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28 Cf. Jesus Christ's words in the Gospel of Matthew: *It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles* (Matt. 15:11 NRSV).



## Abbreviations

DF Διονυσίου τοῦ ἐκ Φουρνά ἐρμηνεΐα τῆς ζωγραφικῆς τέχνης, ἐκδιδομένη ὑπὸ Α. Παπαδοπούλου-Κεραμέως, ἐν Πετρουπόλει, 1909.

NRSV Coogan, M., M. Brettler, C. Newsom, Ph. Perkins (ed.) The New Oxford Annotated Bible. New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha: an Ecumenical Study Bible. Oxford, 2010.

PG Migne, J.-P. Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca, I–CLXI. Parisiis, 1857–1866.

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## Изображения и текстове във времето: трите стенописни слоя в църквата „Св. Георги“ в София

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Ротондата „Св. Георги“, една от най-старите постройки в България с центричен план, и до днес запазва положението си на важна културна средищна точка в модерна София и е автентично свидетелство за значимостта на града като епископски център през Средновековието. По някои въпроси, свързани с паметника, все още няма достатъчна яснота, като например: кога сградата започва да функционира като християнски храм, каква е точната датировка на трите запазени стенописни слоя и др.

В настоящата статия въз основа на иконографски и стилев анализ предлагаме нашата гледна точка за датиране на стенописите, представяме прочит и интерпретация на епиграфския материал в свитъците на четири монашески фигури от втория живописен слой, изобразени на западната стена на наоса, а също и нови идеи за идентификация на някои от монашеските изображения, доколкото наличните данни на средновековен език позволяват това.

Със своите езикови особености представените гръцки надписи предоставят ценна информация за нивото на образование на пишещите и посетителите на храма в рамките на конкретния хронологичен период на изписване на втория стенописен слой. Анализът на литературните източници на надписите показва връзката им със средновековни византийски аскетични съчинения, което разкрива литературните предпочитания и вкусове както на средновековните зографи, така и на поръчителите на стенописната декорация.