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**ВИЗАНТИЙСКО  
И ПОСТВИЗАНТИЙСКО ИЗКУСТВО:  
ПРЕСИЧАНЕ НА ГРАНИЦИ**



**BYZANTINE  
AND POST-BYZANTINE ART:  
CROSSING BORDERS**

ART READINGS

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# Panagia Eleousa in Great Prespa Lake: A symbolic artistic language at the Beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century

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**Abstract:** The text concerns the cave church of Panagia Eleousa on the shore of the Great Prespa Lake near the contemporary Greek borders, which was decorated in 1409–10. The study focuses on two parameters: A. the written epigraphic material, which is connected to the history of the monument and to its patrons, and B. the unusual external and internal mural decoration with symbolic themes and motifs with protective and apotropaic connotations. Both reveal metaphysical semiology linked to the political ideology and to theological beliefs of an unstable period.

**Key words:** Prespa, 15<sup>th</sup> century, inscriptions, donors, apotropaic messages, cryptograms.

The isolated rock cut monastery of Panagia Eleousa in the Lake Great Prespa in Greece constitutes an important cave church among a group of eight situated between the modern states of Greece and Albania<sup>2</sup>. It was erected as part of a small monastic community, whose one enclosure and cells still exist in traces. The donor's inscription bears the date 1409/10. This was a turbulent period for the

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2 Paissidou. Melina. The hermitage "Panagia Eleousa" (Virgin Merciful) Great Prespa: an artistic expression of time and space limit between two eras and two nationalities. In: Cyril and Methodius: Byzantium and the world of Slavs. Thessaloniki, 2015, 302-303.

remnants of the Byzantine Empire, and especially for the already subjugated region of Macedonia. Yet it is also the period subsequent to the defeat of the sultan Bayezid I in Ankara and the reign of Manuel Palaiologos (1391–1425), who never gave up the idea of the renovation of the Empire<sup>3</sup>. Due to this new Geopolitical situation, the conditions of the subjugated Christian population under the Ottomans were relaxed, and hopes for the overturning of the political order had appeared. As a consequence, an augmentation in the erection and renovation of churches in the broader area of Prespa, Kastoria and Ochrid could be observed during the first decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>.

The area belonged to the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Archbishopric of Achris (Ochrid), which maintained a harmonious relationship with the Patriarchate of Constantinople<sup>5</sup>. The officially Greek-speaking Archbishopric, which administrated both Greek and Slavic bishoprics, as a factor of unification of the area, had undertaken to protect Christian populations under the Ottomans. The conditions are reflected in an epistle of Patriarch Neilos in 1384: “Πάσχομεν γὰρ ὑπὸ τῶν Τούρκων ... πλήν ἔχομεν πᾶσαν ἐλευθερίαν, ὥστε καὶ γράμματα δέχεσθαι καὶ ἀντιγράφειν καὶ ἐπιστέλλειν καὶ χειροτονεῖν καὶ πέμπειν ἐπισκόπους, ὅπου βουλόμεθα καὶ πάντα καὶ ἀκωλύτως τὰ ἐκκλησιαστικὰ καὶ ἐν μέσῳ τῷ τόπῳ τῶν ἀσεβῶν”<sup>6</sup>.

The painted inscription on the roof beam of the Panagia Eleousa is also illustrative of political conditions. It occupies two rows, though

3 For the reign of Manuel II see Nicol, Donald. M. Οι τελευταίοι αιώνες του Βυζαντίου, 1261–1453 (translation S. Komninos). Athens, 1996, 464–529. Dennis, George. The Reign of Manuel II Palaeologus in Thessalonica, 1382–1387. Rome, 1960.

4 Tsigaridas, Euthymios. Monumental Painting in Greek Macedonia during the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. In: M. Acheimastou-Potamianou (ed.). Holy Image, Holy Space, Icons and Frescoes from Greece. Greek Ministry of Culture – Byzantine Museum of Athens, 1988, 54–60.

5 Gelzer, Heinrich. Ungedruckte und wenig bekannte Bistumerverzeichnisse der Orientalischen Kirche. – Byzantinische Zeitschrift, 1893, No. 2, 42. Konstantinou, Evanthia or Tegou-Stergiadou. Τα σχετικά με την Αρχιεπισκοπή Αχρίδας σιγίλλια του Βασιλείου Β'. Thessaloniki, 1988; Darrouzès, Jean, A. A. Notitiae episcopatum ecclesiae constantinopolitanae. Paris, 1981, 136, 371; Delikari, Angeliki. Η Αρχιεπισκοπή Αχριδών κατά τον Μεσαίωνα. Ο ρόλος της ως ενωτικού παράγοντα στην πολιτική και εκκλησιαστική ιστορία των Σλάβων των Βαλκανίων και του Βυζαντίου. Thessaloniki, 2014, 107–154.

6 Though suffering from the Turks... we have all freedom in receiving and copying and dispatching epistles and consecrating and sending bishops, wherever we wish and every ecclesiastical duty without obstacles within the land of the impious. Snegarov, Ivan. История на Охридската архиепископия – патриаршия [Istorija na Ohridskata arhiepiskopija – Patriaršija], 2, Sofia, 1932 (1995), n. 1.

it is actually articulated in four iambic dodecasyllabic verses<sup>7</sup>. Its content is based on the Paracletical Canon of the Bread Fraction<sup>8</sup>, yet certain alterations made to the text can be explained with reference to historical circumstances at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Macedonia.

+Υψωσον τὸ κέρασ Χριστιανῶν κρατούντ(ων)/  
τὰ σκῆπτρα, βασιλέων τῶν εὐσεβῶν καὶ/  
σῶσον, ἐλέησον τὸν οἶκον μέχρι τέλους/  
διὰ τῆς [σῆς] εὐσπλαχ(νία)ς, Κ(ύρι)ε<sup>9</sup>.

It is about a clear invocation calling for divine help and support for Christian rulers. The emperor Manuel Palaiologos was representing the crumbling Byzantine Empire and the Serbian rulers the remains of the kingdom of Serbia. In addition to these figures, we might also infer a local maintenance of the memory of the previous ruler of the area Kral (king) Vukašin. His name is anachronistically referenced in the donor inscription of the church in the hellenized form “*afthentis Vlukasinos*”, thirty-eight years after the battle of Maritza (Tzernomiano) and his consequent death<sup>10</sup>. Especially, the phrase “*+Υψωσον τὸ κέρασ Χριστιανῶν... βασιλέων*” finds a visual parallel in the figure of Kral Marko with imperial insignia, and a horn in his right hand, in Markov Monastery. Here he is presented together with a posthumous depiction of his father Kral Vukašin<sup>11</sup>.

7 The inscription was first transliterated by N. Moutsopoulos (*Moutsopoulos*, Nikolaos. Βυζαντινά μνημεία της Μεγάλης Πιρέσπας. In: Χαριστήριον εις Αναστάσιον Κ. Ορλάνδου, Β. 2, Athens, 1964, 152) and then by G. Subotić (*Subotić*, Gojko. Ohridska slikarska škola XV veka. Beograd 1980, 37, n. 35), though with faults and omissions. For a new transcription and approach see: Paissidou, *The hermitage*, 305-306, fig. 3.

8 The original text of the Canon is: “*+Υψωσον κέρασ Χριστιανῶν ὀρθοδόξων καὶ κατέπεμψον ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς τὰ ἐλέη σου τὰ πλοῦσια / τὸ μέγα σου ἔλεος*” (Rise up the horn of the orthodox Christians and consign to us your abundant mercies/ your abundant compassion).

9 “*Rise up the horn of the pious Christian kings who hold the scepters save and show mercy for the House until the End through Thy compassion*”.

10 For Kral Vukašin see *Jireček*, Constantin-Josef. *Geschichte der Serben I*. Gotha, 1911, 430, 433-434, 437-438. *Soulis*, Georgios Chr. *The Serbs and Byzantium during the Reign of Tsar Stephen Dušan (1331–1355) and his successors* (eds. J. S. Allen and S. Vryonis Jr.). *Dumbarton Oaks Library and Collection*, Washington D.C., 1984, 92-98.

11 *Kotso*, Dimtché. *La peinture murale en Macédoine jusqu’à la fin du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*. In: *Le trésor artistique de la Macédoine*. Skopje, 1984, 171. For the date of the Markov Monastery see *Djurić*,

The rich inner mural decoration of the church will not concern us here. What makes the wall paintings of the building as exceptional is the external painted imitation of brick masonry. A plethora of motifs with apotropaic connotations integrate the conventional function of the holy place with a more personal mode of protection against evil powers and any kind of threat. This type of decoration is therefore examined together with the rich epigraphic material.

In the present case the quality of the depicted subjects depends on the visibility and accessibility of each surface. Thus, the more sophisticated execution of the western façade is obvious (Fig. 1). The painted imitation of cloisonné brick masonry recalls similar practices at the churches of Kurbinovo and in Serbia, or the original ceramic motifs at Kastoria and Ochrid<sup>12</sup>. A six-rayed star or a schematized Christogram dominates the summit of the pediment. On a lower zone, near the northwestern corner, a human mask with well-depicted details suggests a strong apotropaic connotation<sup>13</sup>. Human masks in mural decoration are unknown from the broader area, though sculpted human masks are found in the churches of Prespes, Apollonia and Serbia<sup>14</sup>.

Also forming part of the decoration of the western façade are four ex-voto painted inscriptions, in which the three donors of the church are commemorated. Written in a bold red, they express prophylactic and eschatological rhetoric. The letter forms allude to Byzantine brick inscriptions. The inscription on the pediment refers to an anonymous *panypertimos* donor (Fig. 1):

Δέησης τοῦ δούλου τοῦ Θ(ε)οῦ πανηπερτίμου κτήτορος<sup>15</sup>.

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Vojislav J. Le monastère de Marko – Ohrid. – Zbornik za Likovne Umetnosti, 1972, No. 8, 160-162. For the combination of the horn of Kral Marko with the Psalm 88 (89).21-44 see *Velmans*, Tania. Le portrait dans l'art des Paléologues. In: *Art et société à Byzance sous les Paléologues*. Venise, 1971, 113-114, n. 99 and for further analysis see *Gavrilović*, Zaga. The Portrait of King Marko at Markov Manastir (1376-1381). In: *Zaga Gavrilović* (ed.). *Studies in Byzantine and Medieval Art*. London, 2001, 152-162.

12 *Paissidou*. The hermitage, 307-308 (with relative bibliography).

13 For the motif of the human mask see *Mouriki*, Doula. The Mask Motif in the Wall Paintings of Mistra. Cultural Implication of a Classical Feature in Late Byzantine Painting. – *ΔΧΑΕ*, 1980-1981, No. 10, 307-338.

14 *Bitrakova-Grozdanova*, Vera. Golem Grad Prespa I. Skopje, 2011, 74-78, fig. 51. *Maksimović*, Jovanka. *Srpska srednjovekovna skulptura*. Novi Sad, 1971, 159, 164, fig. 33, 61, 62, 71. *Koch*, Guntram. *Albanien. Kunst und Kultur im Land der Skipetaren*. Köln, 1989, 227-228, fig. 53-56.

15 "The prayer of the servant of God *panyhypertimos* ktetor": The inscription has been faulty transliterated by *Miljukov* (*Miljukov*, Pavel N. *Hristianskija drevnosti Zapadnoi Makedonii*. – Iz-

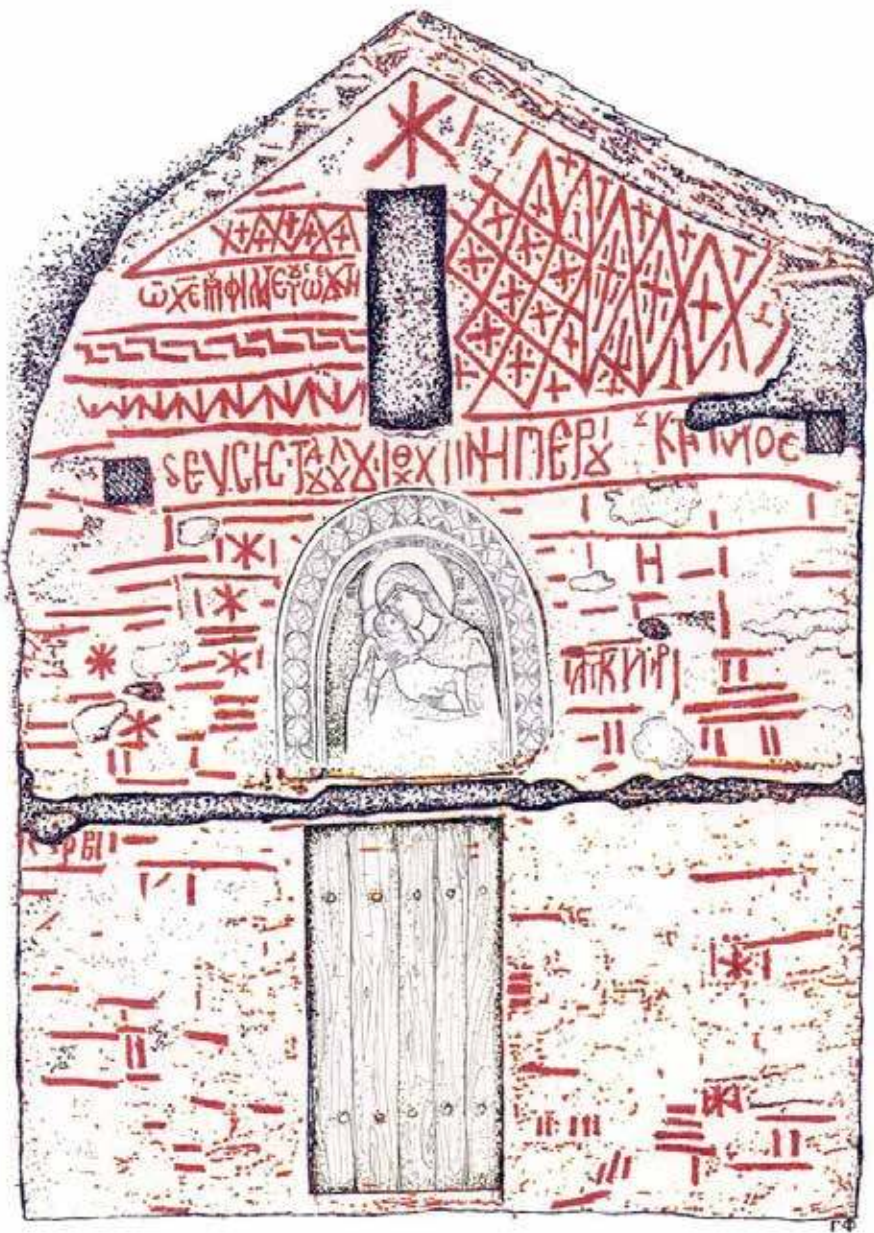


Fig. 1. The western façade with commemorative donor inscriptions and painted motives imitating ceramic fabric (drawing by George Fousteris)

The ktetor can be identified as “kyr Savvas the most honorable among the priest-monks” (“τιμιώτατο ἐν ἱερομονάχοις”). He is the

vestija *Russkago Arheologitsheskago Instituta v Konstantinopol*, 1899, No. IV.1, 60) and by Pelekanidis (*Pelekanidis*, Stylianos. Βυζαντινά και μεταβυζαντινά μνημεία της Πρέσπας. Thessaloniki, 1960, 127-128) and correctly by Moutsopoulos (*Moutsopoulos*. Μεγάλη Πρέσπα, 148-150).



first patron to be mentioned in the inner donor inscription<sup>16</sup>, and he is also depicted in the donor representation as the elderly figure to the right of the Virgin<sup>17</sup>. The title “panhypertimos” refers to a monk who holds the dignity of *dikaiophylax* and *anagrapheus*<sup>18</sup>.

The second supplication in iambic dodecasyllabic verse (though with metric irregularities very common for the Byzantine epigram of the late period<sup>19</sup>), refers anonymously to all the donors of the hermitage (**Fig. 2**):

Ω Χ(ριστ)ὲ μου φίλατε τοὺς ὧδε κτήτ[ορας]<sup>20</sup>

Two other fragments of inscriptions refer nominally to the two other donors, Varlaam and Iakovos, who are also both mentioned to the inner donor inscription (**Fig. 3-4**):

[Βαρλ]αὰμ κτήτορ or [Βαρλ]λὰμ κτήτορ<sup>21</sup>

and () Ι[α]κὸ β<sup>22</sup>

All four inscriptions-supplications occupy places near openings or corners<sup>23</sup>. Their contexts and locations reveal invocative and protective purposes.

On the south surface, the morphological and aesthetic features are simpler and their rendering rougher (**Fig. 5**). Yet, there are many motifs likewise painted in red that imitate brick work. These include eight-rayed stars and suns connected to magic, apocalyptic and eschatological texts<sup>24</sup>, crosses and the Greek letter X symboliz-

16 For the inner donor inscription see *Miljukov*. Hristianskija drevnosti, 62. *Pelekanidis*. Μνημεία της Πρέσπας, 125-126. *Moutsopoulos*. Μεγάλη Πρέσπα, 150-152. *Subotić*. Ohridska, 35-36.

17 See also *Paissidou*. The hermitage, 303-304, 311.

18 Actes de Lavra, I, Dès origines à 1204 (eds. P. Lemerle, A. Guillou, N. Svoronos in collaboration of D. Papachryssanthou). Paris, 1970, 273-274.

19 For relevant irregularities see *Kominis*, Athanasios. Το βυζαντινόν ιερόν περίγραμμα και οι επιγραφματοποιοί. Athens, 1966, 55, 162.

20 “O my God preserve the hereupon ktetores”: For previous transliterations see *Pelekanidis*. Μνημεία της Πρέσπας, 127. *Moutsopoulos*. Μεγάλη Πρέσπα, 150.

21 Moutsopoulos transliterated the inscription as AMKHTHTOP or ΠAMKHTHTOP without comments (*Moutsopoulos*. Μεγάλη Πρέσπα, 145, fig. 5, 4).

22 The word corresponds to the full name Iakovos, one of the three donors referenced on the inner donor inscription.

23 For relevant practices see *Gabelić*, Smilica. Prophylactic and Other Inscriptions in Late Byzantine Fresco Painting. In: Guntram Koch (ed.). Byzantinische Malerei, Bildprogramme – Ikonographie – Stil. Wiesbaden, 2000, 67-71.

24 *Lampakis*, Georgios. Υπόμνημα περί των χριστιανικών αρχαιοτήτων της Ελλάδος. –



Fig. 2. Inscription referring to all donators



Fig. 3. Inscription with the name (Var)laam



Fig. 4. Inscription with the name Iakov(os)

ing Jesus, and many schematized human masks. Most impressive and rare is a pair of eyes with a nose protecting against the envious and malign eyes<sup>25</sup> (Fig. 6) and also a cross crowned by a human

Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας, 1904, No. 4, 91-101. For the eight-rayed star see: *Russel*, James. The Archaeological Content of Magic in the Early Byzantine Period. In: Henry Maguire (ed.). *Byzantine Magic*. Dumbarton Oaks Trustees for Harvard University. Washington D.C., 1995, 42, fig. 8.

<sup>25</sup> For the apotropaic eye see *Deonna*, Waldemar. Le symbolisme de l'œil. Paris. 1965, 179-196. *Vikan*, Gary. Art, Medicine and Magic in Early Byzantium. – *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 1984, No. 38, 66-67, fig. 1. *Dickie*, Matthew M. The Fathers of the Church and the Evil Eye. In: Kral. Magu-



Fig. 5. The southern façade with painted motives

mask. Circles divided into four or eight triangular dotted portions refer to schematic depiction of the liturgical bread, the Eucharistic symbol par excellence<sup>26</sup>. The Greek letter “Ψ” either in vertical or in overturned position refers to a trident, an apotropaic object, as all the pointed implements used for repelling the evil power<sup>27</sup>.

The letter “Ψ” simple or double, as an end of the cross, as a trident or an anchor, constitutes the principal decorative subject of the eastern façade and of the conch of the Bema (Fig. 7). On the same façade, circles with a dot at the center can be interpreted as schematized eyes<sup>28</sup>. Their apotropaic symbolism is strengthened by their placement on the walls of the sanctuary.

ire (ed.). *Byzantine Magic*. Dumbarton Oaks Trustees for Harvard University. Washington D.C., 1995, 9-34.

26 *Galavaris*, George. *Bread and the Liturgy. The symbolism of early Christian and Byzantine bread stamps*. The University of Wisconsin Press. Madison – Milwaukee – London, 1970, 26-39, 70-74, 86-87, 120, 122, 169-170.

27 *Deonna*. *Le symbolisme*, 180-182.

28 The motif of the simple or multiple homocentric circles with a dot is known from the early Christian period used on many materials and especially near the entrances of the buildings with apotropaic connotation (*Dauterman-Maguire*, E. *Maguire*, K., *Duncan-Flowers*, M. J. *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House*. University of Illinois, 1989, 5-7).



Fig. 6. Apotropaic eyes and nose

On the north façade, whose visibility is restricted, six painted motifs in irregular positions are depicted in red. A red serpent moves westwards with an open mouth, where five circles decorated with cross and dots can be interpreted either as liturgical loaves or masks (Fig. 8). Their placement near the northwest corner can be explained through their apotropaic function<sup>29</sup>.

Inside the cave church, secular themes are depicted on the surface of the built altar, such as bird-like masks, snakes, a demon mask with snake-like horns and a double-headed eagle. These recall textile and ceramic decoration with monstrous fantastic creatures (Fig. 9). They are depicted in free sketch by the use of red and black colours on a white board. Their unusual abundance on the holiest place of the church emphasizes their apotropaic function while simultaneously alluding to the textile that conventionally covers the altar. This practice can be attributed to the preference of the donators and the painter. Teratomorphic motifs and their magical power inherited from ancient tradition were not rejected in medieval ecclesiastical art, in which they played a secondary role. In fact, the medieval

<sup>29</sup> See above footnote n. 25.



Fig. 7. The eastern façade with the Greek letter Ψ in various applications

world was familiar with them<sup>30</sup>. The theme of the double-headed eagle and its presence on the altar is connected to the political ideology of the period that represented the hope for the revival of Byzantium. In this specific case, it is related to the desired victory of the Christians, in the manner that is vividly expressed on the roof beam inscription. The famous emblem of the double-headed eagle used by the Komnenian and the Palaiologan dynasty gradually became equivalent to the existence of the emperors and of the Empire itself<sup>31</sup>. It was also used by local rulers such as Cesar Novakos, despot Liveros, by the royal Serbian family and by the Lazarević<sup>32</sup>. In the broader area it is found in the Panagia of Tzertzikon (Cer-

30 Vikan, Gary. Μαγεία και εικαστική έκφραση στην ύστερη Αρχαιότητα. – Αρχαιολογία, 1999, No. 71, 17-20. Troianos, Spyros. Μαγεία και διάβολος. Από την Παλαιά στη Νέα Ρώμη. – Αρχαιολογία, 1999, No. 71, 9-16. For the use of pagan motifs see Maguire, Henry. The Profane Aesthetic in Byzantine Art and Literature. – *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 1999, No. 53, 89-205. For the use of fantastic creatures in the wall painting see Garidis, Miltos. Το φανταστικό στοιχείο στη βυζαντινή ζωγραφική του 16<sup>ου</sup> αιώνα. – ΔΧΑΕ, 1991-1992, No. 16, 239-252.

31 Spyridakis, Georgios. Ο Δικέφαλος αετός, ιδία ως σύμβολον ή θέμα κοσμήσεως κατά την βυζαντινήν και μεταβυζαντινήν μέχρι των νεωτέρων χρόνων περίοδον. In: *Actes du XVI<sup>e</sup> Congrès International des Études Byzantines*. T. III. Bucarest, 1976, 427-433. Muthesius, Anna. Studies in Byzantine and Islamic silk weaving. London, 1995, 27-28, 227-236. Fourlas, Benjamin. Adler und Doppeladler. Kunstgeschichtliche Zeugnisse zum palaiologischen Doppeladler. In: *Θίασος των Μουσών, Studien zu Antike und Christentum, Festschrift für Josef Fink zum 70. Geburtstag*. Wien, 1984, 179-190. Babuin, Andrea. Standards and insignia of Byzantium. – *Byzantion*, 2001, No. 71.1, 36-38. Androudis, Pascal. Origines et symbolique de l'aigle bicéphale des Turcs Seldjoukides et Artuqides de l'Asie Mineure (Anatolie). *Βυζαντιακά*, 1999, No. 19, 311-345.

32 For relevant bibliography see Paissidou. The hermitage, 306.



Fig. 8. The northern façade with a serpent and human masks



Fig. 9. The altar of the sanctuary with zoomorphic masks, snakes and a double-headed eagle

ske)<sup>33</sup>, in Golem Grad<sup>34</sup> and in the church of St George at Godivje<sup>35</sup> during the early period of the Turkish occupation. The depiction of the double-headed eagle in the hermitage may also be seen on a minuscule rendering on the sheath of St Demetrius' sword, the

33 *Kirchhainer*, Karin. Die Fresken der Marienkirche in Cerskë bei Leskovik (Südalbanien). Ein Beitrag zur spätbyzantinischen Monumentalmalerei im nördlichen Epirus. – *ΔΧΑΕ*, 2004, No. 25, des. 5-6.

34 *Bitrakova-Grozdanova*. Golem Grad, 120, fig. 93.

35 *Subotić*. Ohridska, 29, fig. 4.

protector saint of the byzantine army par excellence.

The strongest apotropaic symbol of all was the cross<sup>36</sup>. Two flourishing crosses symbolizing the tree of life with cryptograms and the symbols of the Passion decorate the door posts of the Panagia Eleousa<sup>37</sup>. The cross to the south is decorated with the lance, the reed, the sponge and the crown of thorns alluding to soteriological connotation of the cross of Golgotha (**Fig. 10**). A rich variety of cryptograms surround it; Ἰ(ησοῦς) – Χ(ριστὸς)/ Ν(τ) – Κ(ᾶ), Φ(ῶς) – Χ(ριστοῦ)/ Φ(αίνει) – Π(ᾶσι) Χ(ριστὸς) Χ(αρίζει) Χ(άριον) Χ(ριστιανοίς), Ἐ(λένη) Ἐ(κ Θεοῦ) – Ε(ύρημα) Ἐ(δόθη). [Στῦλος] Στ(αυρός) Δ(αιμόνων) Πτ(ῶσις)<sup>38</sup>, Τ(όπος) Κ(ρανίου) – Π(αράδεισος) Γ(έγονε). For the acronyms ξ ζ – [...] ΘΥ, we propose the completion as ξ(ύλον) στ(αυροῦ) – [υῖοῦ] Θ(εοῦ).

The depiction of the cross with the acronyms of ecclesiastical formulae as a prophylactic sign constitutes an old practice. In monumental painting it is found from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, especially developed in the church of Perivleptos in Ochrid<sup>39</sup>. Similar examples exist in Thessaloniki, in Kastoria and in the broader Macedonia<sup>40</sup>. The origin of the motif should be attributed to the artistic milieu of the Palaiologan renaissance in Thessaloniki. The emphasis on soteriological and apotropaic qualities and the wide range of acronyms from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards should be attributed to the

36 According to St John Chrysostomos (*Koukoules*, Phedonos. Βυζαντινῶν βίος και πολιτισμός. I.2. Athens, 1948, 263).

37 For the flourishing cross see: *Talbot-Rice*, David. The Leaved Cross. *Byzantinoslavica*, 1950, No. XI.1, 72-81. *Karagianni*, Alexandra. Ο σταυρός στη βυζαντινή μνημειακή ζωγραφική. Η λειτουργία και το δογματικό του περιεχόμενο. Thessaloniki, 2010, 112-118, 161-164. 88-115. *Flemming*, Johanna. Kreuz und Pflanzenornament. *Byzantinoslavica*, 1969, No. 30.1, 88-115. For the cryptograms see *Babić*, Gordana. Les croix à cryptogrammes peintes dans les églises serbes des XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles. In: *Mélanges Ivan Dujčev*. Byzance et les Slaves, Études de Civilisation. Paris, 1979, 7-10. *Rhoby*, Andreas. Secret Messages? Byzantine Tetragrams and Their Display. In: *Art-hist*. Issue 1 – Publié en ligne le 14 Juin 2013. URL: <http://09.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/art-hist/index.php?id=72>.

38 Other interpretations: Σταυρῶ Σταυρωθεῖς Δόξα Πατρὸς (*Moutafou*, Emmanuel. Kriptogramite i bilingvizmat na Paleologovoto izkustvo. – *Patrimonium MK*, 2010, No. 3, 256) or Σταυρός τοῦ Σταυρωθέντος Δαιμόνων Πτῶσις (*Marković*, Miodrag. Ikonografski program naistarijet živopisa crkve Bogorodice Perivlepte u Ohridu. – *Zograf*, 2011, No. 35, 135). Check also: <http://09.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/art-hist/index.php?id=72>

39 *Marković*. Ikonografski program, 130-136.

40 *Tsitouridou*, Anna. Ο ζωγραφικός διάκοσμος του Αγίου Νικολάου Ορφανού στη Θεσσαλονίκη. Thessaloniki, 1986, 217-218. *Papazotos*, Thanasis. Οδοιπορικό στη Βυζαντινή και Μεταβυζαντινή Βέροια. Ναοί – Τέχνη – Ιστορία. Athens, 2003, fig. 7-8; *Marković*. Ikonografski program, 18-19.

influence of a monastic and especially hesychastic milieu. In the case of the Panagia Eleousa we should take into account that the church was to be used as a burial place for donors and for the members of the monastic community.

The painter of the church, the priest-monk Ioannikios, addresses his personal prayer by using a soteriological invocation written in two verses. The first can be divided into two iambic 7/syllable parts:

Ἄληπτε θεαρχία, ληπτὸν με ὄντα, σῶσον/  
Ἰωαννίκιος ἱερομόναχος καὶ ζωγραφῶν<sup>41</sup>.

The inscription is aligned on the same vertical axis as the depiction of St Parascevi, a saint connected to funerary themes<sup>42</sup>, and with the Rising of Lazarus, a subject that symbolizes the victory over the death.

In conclusion, in the mural decoration of Panagia Eleousa we face a rare instance of sacred symbols, such as crosses, crosses with the cryptograms, the Christogram, the liturgical bread and the eagle, in combination with magical symbols such as eyes, serpents, zoomorphic or demon like masks, and the anchor-like or trident Ψ. In the Byzantine world such intermingling of Christian beliefs and pagan magical notions knew a long course, originating in the

41 "Unconceivable divine authority, save me the conceivable. Ioannikios priest-monk and the one who painted". Previous references: *Miljukov*. Hristianskija drevnosti 62. *Pelekanidis*. Μνημεία της Πρέσπας, 127. *Moutsopoulos*. Η βασιλική, 64. *Subotić*. Ohridska, 37. *Kalopissi-Verti*, Sofia. Οι ζωγράφοι στην ύστερη βυζαντινή κοινωνία. Η μαρτυρία των επιγραφών. In: Maria Vassilaki (ed.). Το πορτραίτο του καλλιτέχνη στο Βυζάντιο. Herakleio, 1997, 131.

42 *Koukiaris*. Ο κύκλος του βίου, 35-41. *Paissidou*. Οι τοιχογραφίες του 17<sup>ου</sup> αιώνα, 247-248. *Tsvetkovski*. Malom Gradu, 111-113, des. 2-3.



Fig. 10. Apotropaic leaved cross with cryptograms



ancient world and gradually being incorporated in Christian life and art<sup>43</sup>.

The painted signs are combined with an emphatic use of votive inscriptions and bilingual symbolism of good and evil. They function not only as apotropaic signs but also as symbols of an epoch and a strength, which should resist towards the oncoming end, since the evil powers and the demons are assimilated to political enemies.

Therefore, the religious and metaphysical semiology is combined with political reality through the ecclesiastical ideology of this period of transition. Signs are used as a metaphoric language of the sinking Empire and consequently of the Church in danger. It is a dialogue between the human and the divine, where the second determines the destiny of the first. It forms a cultural dialogue that bridges the ancient, the medieval and the emerging post-medieval world. The political turmoil of the era created the necessary conditions for cultural change. The hermitage of Panagia Eleousa of the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century constitutes an authentic, unofficial and unique creation of the place and the people, who had transformed art into a visual invocation towards the “unconceivable divinity”. The protagonists of this expression are four monks, Savvas, Iakovos, Varlaam and Ioannikios, the patrons and the painter, who were responsible for the unique visual argument of the hermitage of Panagia Eleousa.

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43 *Vikan*. Art, Medicine and Magic, 65-86. *Greenfield*, Richard. A Contribution to the Study of Palaeologan Magic. In: Henry Maguire (ed.). *Byzantine Magic*. Dumbarton Oaks Trustees for Harvard University. Washington D.C., 1995, 117-153. *Psarologaki*, Natassa. Η μαγεία της αρχαιολογίας και η αρχαιολογία της μαγείας. Αντικείμενα μαγικού χαρακτήρα με χριστιανικό περιβλημά. In: Βάσκανος οφθαλμός: σύμβολα μαγείας από ιδιωτικές αρχαιολογικές συλλογές, Athens, 2010, 87-99.

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## Богородица Елеуса на Голямото Преспанско езеро: символичният художествен език от началото на XV век

Мелина Паусиду



Изолираният скален манастир на св. Богородица Елеуса на Голямото Преспанско езеро в днешна Гърция е построен като част от малка монашеска общност през 1409/10. Периодът на изграждането му съвпада с времето след поражението на султан Баязид I при Ангора (Анкара) и с управлението на Мануил Палеолог (1391–1425), романтичния мечтател за възстановяването на византийската империя на Балканите. Регионът на Преспа попада в юрисдикцията на Охридската архиепископия, която в този период се ангажира с инициативата да защитава християните, намиращи се под османска власт. В близост до Преспанските езера – в Костур и Охрид – се строят и подновяват през първите десетилетия на XV в. и други църкви, заради което манастирът „Богородица Елеуса“ се възприема като част от тази програма за обнова. Малката църквица на обителта има богата стенописна украса отвътре, но обект на това изследване е външната ѝ декорация и богатият епиграфски материал, които превръщат паметника в изключителен пример за стенна екстериорна украса.

Четирите външни стени на църквата са украсени с многобройни рисувани орнаменти, символи и надписи в ярък червен цвят, които свързват функцията на храма като свято място с индивидуалния изказ на вярващия срещу злите сили и всякакъв вид опасности. Тяхното качество зависи от видимостта и достъпността на всяка повърхност, заради което най-майсторска е украсата на западната фасада, където е изрисувана зидария, напояща църквите в Курбиново и в днешна Сърбия, както и оригиналната керамична декорация от храмове в Костур и Охрид.

В стенната декорация на „Богородица Елеуса“ се наблюдава рядко за епохата съвместяване на сакрални символи и магически знаци. Във Византия взаимодействието между християнството и езическите магически практики е разпространено и води началото си от Античността. Усещането за магия е било въплътено в християнството като конкуренция на чувството за вяра и святост. Рисуваните символи в църквата „Елеуса“ се комбинират с емфатичната употреба на вотивни надписи и биполярния символизъм на доброто и злото. Те функционират като апотропейни знаци и като символи на епохата, която се противопоставя на настъпващия злощастен край. Затова религиозната и метафизическата семиология е корелирана с политическата реалност



чрез църковната идеология на този преходен период, използвайки общ метафоричен език в разпадащата се империя. Тази корелация оформя културен диалог, който посредничи между античния, средновековния и бедствания късносредновековен светоглед.

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CROSSING BORDERS**

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