

THE MURAL DECORATION OF ACHEIROPOIETOS BASILICA REVISITED

Acheiropoietos basilica¹ (fig. 1-2), originally founded during the 2nd half of the 5th century, fits more than any of the Thessalonican monuments to the standardized Early Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture, since it comprises a typical example of the three-aisled timber-roofed basilica with narthex and galleries. Apart from its architectural purity, Acheiropoietos is known for its homogenous architectural sculptures and mural decorative mosaics that seem to proclaim the Late Antique aesthetic conception of the monument. The Acheiropoietos mural mosaics have been recently discussed in a series of studies² that despite their varied conclusions as far as the conceptual interpretation and the dating of the mosaic decoration are concerned, premise that the fragmentary maintained mosaics comprise parts of a synchronously constructed decorative program that followed the original foundation of the basilica.

The structural analysis of the monument, documented during a consolidation project³, provides evidence witnessing that apart from the 5th century struc-

¹ For a recent summary of the history of the monument see Ch. Papakyriakou, "Acheiropoietos", in: *Impressions. Byzantine Thessalonike through the photographs and drawings of the British School at Athens (1888-1910)*, Thessaloniki 2012, 65-81, wherein the precedent bibliography.

² E. Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, "Acheiropoietos", in: *Mosaics of Thessaloniki. 4th-14th century* (Ch. Bakirtzis ed.), Athens 2012, 196-237. B. Fourlas, *Die Mosaiken der Acheiropoietos-Basilika in Thessaloniki. Eine vergleichende Analyse dekorativer Mosaiken des 5. Und 6. Jahrhunderts* [Millenium-Studien 35], Berlin 2012. A. Taddei, "Il mosaico parietale aniconico da Tessalonica a Costantinopoli", in: *La Sapienza bizantina. Un secolo di ricerche sulla civiltà di Bizanzio all'Università di Roma* (A. A. Longo, G. Cavallo, A. Guiglia and A. Iacobini eds), Roma 2012, 153-182; idem, "I mosaici della chiesa della Panagia Acheiropoietos in due acquerelli inediti di Walter Sykes George", in: *Alle gentili arti ammaestra. Studi in onore di Alkistis Proiou* (A. Armati, M. Cerasoli and Cr. Luciani eds) [Testi e Studi Bizantino-Neoellenici 18], Roma 2010, 59-95; idem, "Eclettismo e sintesi nella decorazione musiva dell'Acheiropoietos di Tessalonica", in: *Rivista on line di Storia dell'Arte* 12 (2009), 33-52.

³ K. T. Raptis and A. Zombou-Asimi, "Αχειροποίητος Θεσσαλονίκης: στερέωση και αποκατάσταση της παλαιοχριστιανικής βασιλικής", in: *Το Αρχαιολογικό Έργο στη Μακεδονία και τη Θράκη* 22 (2008), 307-314; eidem, "The consolidation and restoration project of Acheiropoietos basilica in Thessaloniki", in: *Proceedings of the 8th International Symposium on the Conservation of Monuments in the Mediterranean Basin "Monument Damage Haz-*

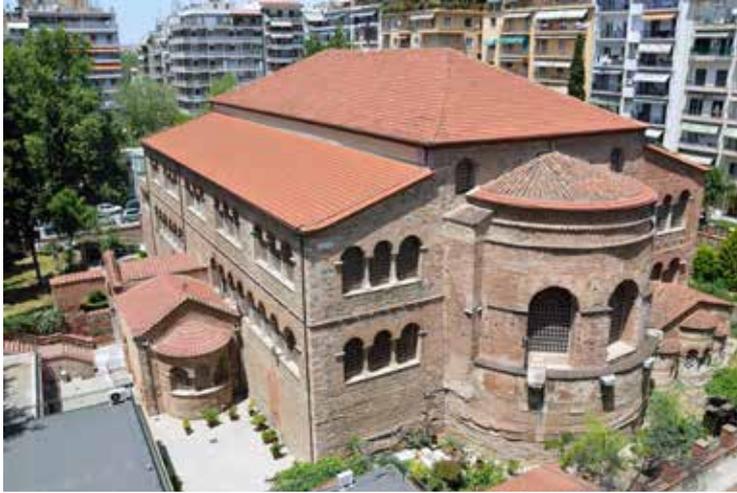


Fig. 1. Acheiropoietos basilica: view from SE

Сл. 1. Базилика Ахиропитос: поглед са југо-истока

ture, preserved mainly in the ground floor level of the basilica, Acheiropoietos sustained several major byzantine and ottoman restorations⁴ that affected not only its architectural morphology, but the sculptural and mural, either mosaic or painted, decoration as well⁵.

I. Mosaics

What survives in situ of the Acheiropoietos mosaics is a series of decorative syntheses in arch intradoses. Those of the narthex, the tribelon and the nave (fig. 3), form a uniform aesthetic composition, tailored with a varied but not random decorative repertory⁶. The symbol of the faith is mainly projected on the narthex and the tribelon arches that reflect a eucharistic substance, while the organized in pairs decorative syntheses of the nave arcades are characterized by symbols of paradisiacal character.

Golden Christograms predominate in the transverse arches of the narthex; the Christian *logotypes* are flanked by interlacing fruitful and floral garlands that grow from kantharoi and frame eucaristic symbols, as Gospel codexes, birds and fishes.

ards and Rehabilitation Technologies” (M. Kouli, F. Zezza and P. Koutsoukos eds), I, Athens 2013, 411-428.

⁴ K. T. Raptis and A. Zombou-Asimi, “Αχειροποίητος Θεσσαλονίκης: παρατηρήσεις και σκέψεις σχετικά με την οικοδομική ιστορία και την αποκατάσταση της παλαιοχριστιανικής βασιλικής”, in: *Εν Χώρῳ Τεχνήσασα. Αφιέρωμα στην καθηγήτρια Ξανθίππη Σκαρπιά-Χόϊπελ*, Thessaloniki 2011, 449-63.

⁵ K. T. Raptis, “The 7th-8th c. restoration of Acheiropoietos basilica and its significance for the urban continuity of Thessaloniki during the Dark Age”, in: *46th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies “Byzantine Greece: microcosm of empire?”* (Birmingham, 23-25 March 2023), forthcoming.

⁶ Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, *op. cit.*, 206ff., with exquisite photo-documentation. Fourlas, *op. cit.*, 226.

Fig. 2
Acheiropoietos
basilica: interior
view
Сл. 2 Базилика
Ахиропитос:
унутрашњи
изглед



Radiant golden crosses with teardrops, arranged in blue medallions, are centered in the tribelon intradoses, on the frame of which the mosaic dedicatory inscription of the “humble” Andreas⁷ is tessellated in *tabulae ansatae*. The cross-medallions are surrounded with nymphaeas in the central arch and grapevines in the lateral ones that emanate from hydriae and set the scenery for various, standing or fluttering birds. Corresponding to those of the tribelon, with minor differences due to their restricted width, are the mosaics in the intradoses of the three light window of the narthex.

The organized in pairs, decorative syntheses of the nave arcades (fig. 3) are adorned with (a) elaborate geometrical patterns, like interlacing polychrome bands, meanders, and fish-scale patterns with peacock-feather eyelets, (b) variable vegetative syntheses with vines, ears, nymphaeas, lilies, floral or fruitful

⁷ Andreas mentioned in the mosaic dedicatory inscription has been so far identified with two representatives of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy; the clergyman who signed the transactions of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (Ch. Bakirtzis, “Sur le donateur et la date des mosaïques d’Acheiropoietos à Thessalonique”, in: *Atti del IX Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana*, II, Roma 1978, 37-44), and the homonymous bishop of the Thessalonican See (ca. 491- 497) (R.S. Cormack, “The mosaic decoration of St Demetrios, Thessaloniki. A reexamination in the light of the drawings of W. S. George, in: *Annual of the British School at Athens* 64 (1969), 51. D. Feissel and J.-M. Spieser, “Inventaire en vue d’un recueil des inscriptions historiques de Byzance, II: Les inscriptions de Thessalonique. Supplément”, in: *Travaux et Mémoires* 7 (1979), 312). W. S. George, being the first to document the mosaic inscription, was also in favor of the theory that Andreas was a bishop, since in the frame of its corresponding watercolor drawing noted: “Q Oriens Christainus V. Lequien /Liste des eveques de Thessal[onique] par L. Petit” (BRF/01/01/07/19. Taddei 2010, *op. cit.*, 85. Papakyriakou, *op. cit.*, fig. 40). E. Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou and A. Taddei seem to accept the identification suggested by Ch. Bakirtzis (Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, *op. cit.*, 237; Taddei 2010, *op. cit.*, 84; *idem* 2012, *op. cit.*, 158-9), while B. Furlas accepts the one by R.S. Cormack (Furlas, *op. cit.*, 228-9). According to W.E. Kleinbauer the dedicatory inscription refers to a secular individual than a bishop or priest (W.E. Kleinbauer, “Remarks on the Building History of the Acheiropoietos Church at Thessaloniki”, in: *Actes du Xe Congrès International d’Archeologie Chretienne*, II, Thessaloniki – Città del Vaticano 1984, 248), as P.-A. Février has also stated in his discussion of the paper by Ch. Bakirtzis (*op. cit.*, 45-46).



Fig. 3. Ground floor (nave) arcades: mosaics in arch intradoses

Сл. 3. Аркаде у приземљу (брод): мозаици на унутрашњој површини лукова



Fig. 4. S gallery arcade: mosaics in arch intradoses

Сл. 4. Аркада галерије: мозаици на унутрашњој површини лукова

leafy garlands, and (c) acanthus shaped candelabras as well; fluttering and pecking birds animate both the geometrical and the vegetal syntheses, except the acanthus-structured ones. Crosses are projected only on the axes of the south entrance and the bema area. All form a gracefully animated impressionistic synthesis that, being close to the Hellenistic and Greco-roman tradition, combines a sense of idyllic naturalism with Christian paradisiacal symbolism.

The mosaic intradoses maintained in the south gallery (fig. 4) seem to constitute a counterpoint to those in the central arches of the nave arcades⁸, with which they resemble in the way the ornamental synthesis is delimited by narrow blue bands. Red bands, adorned with pattern imitating chain with precious-stones, frame the blue ones. The symbol of the cross, formed with golden *tesserae* in blue medallions, is dominant in the middle of each synthesis; substituted in one only example with a star with eight rays. The medallions bearing the symbols of the faith are flanked by either acanthus candelabras or thick fruitful foliage that emanate from hydrias and baskets. Unlike the nave arcades, no birds or other form of life is depicted.

Beyond a superficial, though intended, similarity, the gallery mosaics differentiate to the ground floor ones as far as the decorative patterns and the

⁸ Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, *op. cit.*, 230.

Fig. 5. Mosaic crosses: nave (left), gallery (right)

Сл. 5. Крстови мозаика: брод (лево), галерија (десно)



solid arrangement of the exclusively vegetal and without animated features syntheses are concerned. More decorative and mainly focused on the symbol of the cross, they are outdistanced from the paradisiacal character of the nave mosaics. At the same time their compositional similarities with the latter equal the morphological, stylistic and constructional differences, which seem enough to witness two discernible phases⁹.



Fig. 6. Acanthus details: nave (left), gallery (right)

Сл. 6. Детаљи акантуса: брод (лево), галерија (десно)

More characteristic are the differences at the crosses (fig. 5); compared to those of the ground floor mosaics, the gallery ones are smaller without teardrops and usually with a certain lack of symmetry. Analogous differences are evident in the schematic formation of the acanthus cantelabras (fig. 6). Those depicted in the gallery lack the richness and the variety of forms that characterize the smooth acanthus leaves that adorn the nave intradoses. The vegetal motifs are not projected freely on the golden background, as in the lower level. On the contrary they are inserted in dark green and greenish blue foliages that narrow the extent of the golden background in a restricted zone between the festive wreath and the blue frame. Additionally while the hydriae of the paradisiacal syntheses of the nave float in the immaterial golden background, the baskets and the vases, wherefrom the foliages of the gallery mosaics grow, are posed on a

⁹ E. Kleinbauer has queried whether the gallery mosaics are coeval with the nave ones (*op. cit.*, 249).



Fig. 7. N aisle.
Preliminary drawing
of a portrait

Сл. 7. Север
брода.
Прелиминарни
цртеж портрета



Fig. 8. S gallery: rough sketch of a pecking bird

Сл. 8. Југ галерија: груба скица детлића

surface made with pale yellowish - brown tesserae that insert space information in the panel.

Beyond their morphological divergence, the nave and the gallery mosaic intradoses present differences concerning the construction of their mortar beds, the colors, and the shapes of their tesserae, as well as the quality of the tessellation¹⁰. It is characteristic that the mosaic surface of the ground floor intradoses is smoothly finished, whereas the gallery mosaics are irregularly tessellated and roughly finished.

The tessellated frame of the mosaic intradoses on both levels

curves in order to be completed on the front of the arcades towards the central aisle, where the mosaic decoration used to continue¹¹. A large mosaic fragment, depicting the fountain of life flanked by at least one deer and a duck and surrounded by rich acanthus rinceaux, survives from the paradisiacal synthesis of unknown extent that adorned the front of the gallery arcade towards the nave.

¹⁰ D. Makropoulou, G. Gousias, E. Karagiannidou and E. Mimis, "Παναγία Αχειροποίητος. Θεώρηση και αντίληψη του μνημείου μέσα από τις τώρα εργασίες συντήρησης των ψηφιδωτών και αρχιτεκτονικών γλυπτών", in: *Το Αρχαιολογικό Έργο στη Μακεδονία και τη Θράκη* 26 (2012, forthcoming).

¹¹ P. Mastora and K. T. Raptis, "The re-discovery of painted mortar frames of wall-mosaics: presentation, examination and evaluation as integral parts of the mosaic decoration", in: *Proceedings of the 10th Conference of the International Committee for the Conservation of Mosaics "Conservation. An act of discovery"* (Palermo 20-26 October 2008), forthcoming.

Fig. 9. S gallery:
micrographic painted
portrait

Сл. 9. Југ галерија:
микрографски
насликан портрет



It was found during the consolidation of the basilica on the south wall of the west gallery¹², blocked by the nave's west wall that is an ottoman addition. The aforementioned evidence indicates the possible extent of the mosaic decoration; probably set up on the walls of the central part of the narthex, on the front of both the nave and gallery arcades, and in the semidome of the main apse, where in nothing survives due to its sequential Byzantine and Ottoman restorations¹³.

A small mosaic fragment, depicting a niche with peacock-feather decoration, is maintained on the western wall of the south apsidal chamber, either diaconicon or baptistery, and proves the extension of the mosaic decoration inside this prominent annex. Though, as the structural phases of the annex indicate, the mosaic architectural backdrop¹⁴ was probably tessellated synchronously with the gallery mosaics, and after the doorway of this annex towards the south proylon was closed with masonry.

II. Frescoes

The mosaic intradoses have painted mortar frames on the edge of the tessellated surface towards the side aisles, where there were wall paintings. Though, little evidence of the early byzantine frescoes of the lateral aisles, survives in situ. The rough pre-drawing of a young man's frontal portrait has been traced on the higher level of the west wall of the north aisle (fig. 7). It seems to be the preliminary drawing of a monumental wall painting, made with reddish brown pigment on the thin bed of plaster that coats the rubble stone-work.

¹² Today exhibited in the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki. See D. Nalpanitis, "Mosaic mit der Darstellung eines Springbrunnens", in: *Byzanz. Pracht und Alltag* (R. Fleck and F. Daim eds), Bonn 2010, no 450, 337-8.

¹³ Raptis and Zombou-Asimi 2011, *op. cit.*, 453. The painted cross in blue medallion in the semidome of the main apse dates from 1929, when the basilica was restituted as Christian church.

¹⁴ The resemblances with the architectural backdrop depicted in the lower dome area of the Rotunda and the representation of full figure saints inside the liturgical south annex of Acheiropoietos, suggested by B. Fourlas (*op. cit.*, 227), are totally hypothetical.



Fig. 10. S aisle: Forty Martyrs mural painting

Сл. 10. Југ бочна лађа: Четрдесет мученика слика на зиду

The small in scale, young beardless figure with short, probably curly, hair and consular uniform, that evidences the existence of Early Byzantine figurative murals in the lateral aisles, is not distant from the late 5th or 6th century mosaic representations of St. Demetrios in the homonymous basilica.

Early decoration in fresco existed also in the window intradoses, known due to a watercolor by W.S. George; a faded vine rising from a vase is outlined upon a reddish background. The only maintained among the wall paintings that were documented by W.S. George is a small scaled rough sketch of a pecking bird (fig. 8), drawn with reddish brown pigment on the west wall of the south gallery¹⁵. Also micrographic, the bust of a beardless figure¹⁶ is frescoed in abstract style on the painted frame that defines the tessellated surface of the central arch of the south gallery (fig. 9). Evidently synchronous with the gallery mosaics, the painted bust, less than 10cm tall, is almost not visible by naked eye from the gallery level.

From the wall paintings of the second Christian millenium, once existed in Acheiropoietos, only the 13th century fresco representation of the forty Martyrs¹⁷ (figs 10-11) is maintained in considerably good condition on the front of the south aisle arcade, opposite the main entrance. Full length figures alternate with busts in medallions, forming a rhythmical setting, framed by candles on elongated candlesticks painted at both ends of the available surface.

¹⁵ O. M. Dalton, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology*, Oxford 1911, 291. Taddei 2010, *op. cit.*, 92, 94, tav.3.

¹⁶ E. Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou and Ch. Mavroulou-Tsioumi, "Αχειροποίητος", in: *Αρχαιολογικόν Δελτίον* 33 (1978), B2, 238, tab. 106ε.

¹⁷ Α. Χυngopoulos, "Αι τοιχογραφίαι των Αγίων Τεσσαράκοντα εις την Αχειροποίητον της Θεσσαλονίκης", in: *Αρχαιολογική Εφημερίς* 1957, 6-30.

Fade traces of full figured saints are preserved inside the byzantine chapel annexed at the east end of the north aisle.

Some decorative patterns that adorned window intradoses are known thanks to the drawings of W. S. George. These intradoses were divided in external and internal sections; the former was decorated with a recurrent design with palmette-like patterns in white pigment upon a parti-coloured, red and olive-green, ground, while the latter had scroll designs in dark pigment upon grey or reddish brown ground¹⁸. Few traces of similar geometrical decoration survive today in the south intrados of the three-light window, opened at the east end of the north aisle (fig. 12).

III. The mural decoration revisited

The several byzantine and ottoman restorations of the late antique structure have affected not only its architectural morphology, but the sculptural and mural decoration as well. The case becomes complicated, since, based on structural data, the galleries and the clerestories of the basilica were remodeled during a mid-7th century restoration caused by the notorious, according to the narration of the Miracles of St. Demetrius¹⁹, 7th century earthquakes. The aforementioned inference draws attention to the dating of the ornamental mosaics of both the nave and the gallery arcades, since it seems that the cohesion of the decoration was maintained by the imitation of the late antique motifs during an early medieval re-decoration of the basilica²⁰.

From the two morphologically, stylistically and even structurally different mosaic decorations, only the ground floor one seems to have been designed and performed synchronously with the erection of the basilica during the last probably decades of the 5th century. Both structural and sculptural data of the foundation phase point to a period between the late years of Zenon's reign (474-5, 476-491) and the early ones of Anastasius's (491-518). In this context the long debated dedicatory inscription in the prominent middle arch of the tribelon names probably the archbishop Andreas who was the head of the Thessalonican See between 491 and 497. Furthermore, the fact that the miraculous healing of the Hebrew (i.e. pagan) maiden by the Virgin Mary and St. Demetrius near the *meridian propylon* of the church, narrated in the homily that archbishop Leo the *Mathematician* delivered in Acheiropoietos in 842²¹, is dated back to the period of archbishop Andreas, suggests that during the first half of the 9th century the history of the basilica was orally connected with the certain prelate.

On the other hand, as far as the date of the gallery mosaic decoration is concerned, it seems that even though the second phase mosaic artists used as

¹⁸ BRF/01/01/07/20. Dalton, *op. cit.*, 289, 291. Taddei 2010, *op. cit.*, 92-95, tav.3.

¹⁹ P. Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de Saint Démétrius*, I, Paris 1979-81, § 218-221.

²⁰ The question, if, and in what extent the ground floor mosaics were restored during the construction of the second phase remains unanswered.

²¹ V. Laurent, "Une homélie de l'archevêque de Thessalonique, Léon le Philosophe, sur l'Annonciation (25 mars 842)", in: *Mélanges E. Tisserant* [Studi e Testi 32], II, Rome 1964, 281-302.

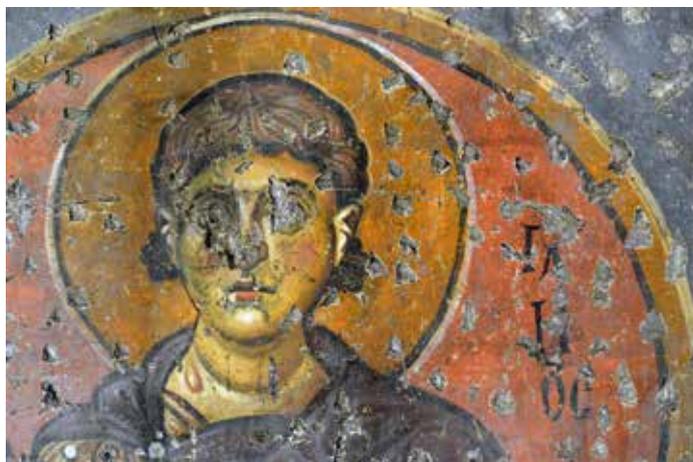


Fig. 11. S aisle:
Forty Martyrs
mural painting

Сл. 11. Југ бочна
лађа: Четрдесет
мученика слика
на зиду

templates the 5th century Thessalonican ornamental mosaics, they expressed the Hellenistic style as it had persistently survived in the Constantinopolitan imperial art in the period between the reign of Justinian and the iconoclastic crisis²². The rather manneristic and vigorously colorful depiction of their ornamental iconographic repertoire is driven away from the naturalistic syntheses in the soffits of the nave arcades. Therefore the gallery mosaics seem to pass over the ornamental details of the mid-6th century St. Vitale mosaics in Ravenna²³, or even the late 6th or 7th century acanthus rinceaux in the patriarchate rooms of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople²⁴, and find some comparisons in the ornamental details of the 7th century apse mosaic in the Angeloktisti church in Kiti²⁵, Cyprus, and the late 7th century luxuriant manneristic foliages of the Umayyad mosaics in the Dome of the Rock (691-692)²⁶ in Jerusalem. Though, the Acheiropoietos

²² E. Kitzinger, "Byzantine art in the period between Justinian and iconoclasm", in: *Berichte zum XI. Internationalen Byzantinisten-Kongress*, München 1958, 3-16.

²³ Compare with the ornamental mosaics of S. Vitalius which seem to be an intermediate between the nave and the gallery mosaics of Acheiropoietos. See F. W. Deichmann, *Ravenna Frühchristliche Bauten und Mosaiken von Ravenna*, Wiesbaden 1958, tab. 311, 342-346.

²⁴ P.A. Underwood, "Notes on the work of the Byzantine Institute in Istanbul: 1954", in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 9-10 (1956), 292-3, figs 107-108. R. Cormack and E.J.W. Hawkins, "The mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul: the rooms above the southwest vestibule and ramp", in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 31 (1977), 202-210, figs 11-17. There are controversies among various scholars regarding their dating (a) to the reign of Justin II (Cormack and Hawkins, *op. cit.*); (b) to the last quarter of 6th century (Underwood, *op. cit.*) (c) to the late 6th or 7th century (Kitzinger, *op. cit.*, 11, fig. 10; H. Stern "Notes sur les mosaïques du Dôme du Rocher et de la Mosquée de Damas à propos d' une livre de Mme. M. G. van Berchem", in: *Cahiers Archeologiques* 22 (1972), 209), or (d) to the reign of Justinian II (D. H. Wright, "The shape of the Seventh century in Byzantine Art", in: *First Annual Byzantine Studies Conference. Abstracts of papers*, Cleveland 1975, 9ff.): the latter rejected by R. Cormack and E.J.W. Hawkins (*op. cit.*, 191).

²⁵ A.H.S. Megaw, "The mosaics in the church of Panayia Kanakaria in Cyprus", in: *Atti del VIII Congresso internazionale di Studi Bizantini* [Studi bizantini e neoellenici 8], Rome 1953, 200. See also Stern, *op. cit.* 213, figs 16-18.

²⁶ O. Grabar, "The Umayyad Dome of the Rock", in: *Ars Orientalis* 3 (1959), 33-62;

Fig. 12. N aisle:
Painting in window
intrados

Сл. 12. Север
бочна лађа: Сlike
на унутрашњој
површини лука
прозора



gallery mosaics lack the extreme mannerism of the Umayyad ones due to the vast variety of Early Byzantine decorative mosaics that Thessaloniki in general and Acheiropoietos itself had to offer as templates to the Constantinopolitan probably artists of this post mid-7th c. mosaic synthesis.

The co-existence of the, equally manneristic, decorative mosaic with the fountain of life on the front of the gallery arcade, attributed due to its placement to the second phase decoration, suggests the synchronous setting of a generated symbolic decoration throughout the nave. Based on the certain mosaic B. Fourlas justifiably suggested a different reconstruction of the west gallery, considering that the north and south clerestories continued uninterrupted up to the external west wall; in that case the west gallery would have been an open balcony looking towards the nave²⁷. However, even though the certain reconstruction seems realistic as far the mid-7th century restoration of the basilica is concerned²⁸, it is not convincing as architectural feature of the original Early Byzantine structure.

When may these mosaics be dated? The troublous sociopolitical and economical situation of the 7th century and the insecurity of Thessaloniki due to the Slavic threats would not allow the performance of neither large nor expensive decoration program in the city at least before the reign of Justinian II (685-695, 705-711), and probably not without imperial patronage; the monumental restorations of Acheiropoietos and St. Demetrius basilicas, probably during the reign of Constans II the first²⁹ and that of Justinian II the latter³⁰, seem to be a rather surprising achievement.

Considering both the conservative morphological evolution of the ornamental mosaics, and the aforementioned analogies with the mosaics of Dome

idem, *The Dome of the Rock*, Cambridge Massachusetts 2006, 78-90. For photo illustrations see S. Nuseibeh and O. Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock*, London 1996, 74ff. See also: Marg. Van Berchem, *The Mosaics of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and of the Great Mosque in Damascus*, Oxford 1970, and Stern, *op. cit.*, 203ff.

²⁷ Fourlas, *op. cit.*, 226.

²⁸ Raptis 2013, *op. cit.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ A. Mentzos, *Τα ψηφιδωτά της ανοικοδόμησης του ναού του Αγίου Δημητρίου στον 7^ο αιώνα μ.Χ.*, Thessaloniki 2010, *passim*, wherein the precedent bibliography.

of the Rock, would a dating in the late 7th or early 8th century be convincing? Even though it's daring due to the lack of synchronous works maintained in byzantine context, in sociopolitical and economical terms a likeable period for the execution of an analogous expensive decoration program under imperial patronage is that of the reign of Leo III, (717-741) and his austere iconoclastic heir Constantine V, who according to later iconophile textual sources transformed the Constantinopolitan churches into *henneries*³¹ due to the decorative and with zoomorphic patterns decoration he imposed.

The political controversy of Leo III to the Popes Gregorius II and III emerged on the occasion of the iconoclastic declaration and ended in 732, when Leo III paused the Papal jurisdictional power on the religious affairs in the Illyricum, and made official the ecclesiastical rule of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate in the Balkans³².

In a paper examining the 7th century restoration of the Acheiropoietos basilica³³ has been stated that due to the synchronous devastation of the neighboring Episcopal basilica, Acheiropoietos hosted the services of the episcopate from the middle of the 7th century till the middle or the third quarter of the 8th century, when, after the erection of Hagia Sophia church, the cathedral returned in its original grounds, emphasizing with its Constantinopolitan cross-domed architectural form the rule of the Byzantine imperial Christianity over the ecclesiastical affairs of the Illyricum³⁴. Thereby the hypothetical re-decoration in iconoclastic imperial style of the Episcopal for more than a century church in the capital of the controverted Illyricum seems as a political action that sealed the Constantinopolitan power in the region. In this context, the "hidden" micro-graphic portrait of a beardless figure, which is frescoed on the mortar frame of the central intrados of the south gallery, evidently synchronous to the gallery mosaics, could be seen either as a saint image, solemn offering of an iconophile mosaic-craftsman, either as the portrait of the anonymous donor.

Regardless the aforementioned hypothesis, based on structural criteria, this second phase of the Acheropoietos mural decoration could not be prior to the midline of the 7th century, when both the galleries were remodeled along with the rebuilding and the transformation of the timber roofed diaconikon to a vaulted baptistery, and certainly not posterior of the first half of the 8th century, since after the erection of Hagia Sophia domed church both the imperial focus and funds turned on to the new Thessalonican cathedral.

Equally problematic is the existence and the dating of the forty Martyrs wall painting. The mural that combines archaic stylistic characteristics of the late Komnenian art and innovative elements of the subsequent artistic current,

³¹ "Vita S. Stephani junioris" in: J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae graecae cursus completus*, 100.1120.

³² M. Anastos, "The transfer of Illyricum, Calabria and Sicily to the jurisdiction of the Pararchate of Constantinople in 732-733", in: *Sylloge Bizantina in onore di Silvio Giuseppe Mercati* [Studi bizantini e neoellenici 9], Roma 1957, 14-31.

³³ Raptis 2013, *op. cit.*

³⁴ R. Cormack, "The arts during the age of iconoclasm", in: *Iconoclasm. Papers given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (A. Bryer and J. Herrin eds), Birmingham 1975, 35.

has been dated in the early decades of the 13th century; considered to be painted in Acheiropoietos either during the period of the Latin Kingdom of Thessaloniki (1204-1224)³⁵, or after the re-conquest of the city by the Byzantines in 1224³⁶.

The selection of the iconographic theme and the unconventional linear arrangement of the Martyrs constitute a rare to the tradition of Thessaloniki wall painting. As the cult of the forty Martyrs was not prevalent in Thessaloniki, their representation in the prominent south aisle of Acheiropoietos might have been the personal will of an important donor.

Could this work of art be an act of political proclamation, connected with the contemporaneous constant changes in the governance of Thessaloniki?

Theodoros Angelos Komnenos Doukas of Epirus (1215-1230), re-conquered Thessaloniki from the Latins, where he had himself crowned emperor in 1225³⁷. Willing to overcome the Nicaeans of Ioannes III, Doukas Vatatzis and be the first to conquer the Latin Empire of Constantinople, reinstating the Byzantine Empire under his rule, Theodoros Doukas made an alliance with Ivan Asen II of Bulgaria³⁸ (1218-1241), sealed with the marriage of Ivan Asen's II daughter with his brother, Manuel. In 1230 Theodoros Doukas, breaking his alliance, invaded Bulgaria, where he was defeated in the battle of Klokotnitsa on March 9³⁹. Following the defeat and capturing of Theodoros Doukas, Ivan Asen II conquered the former Epirote possessions and imposed as despot of Thessaloniki his son-in-law and brother of the imprisoned Theodoros, Manuel Komnenos Doukas (1230-1237), who, being probably a pawn of the tsar, ruled in Thessaloniki until 1237⁴⁰.

After his crucial victory over the despot of Epirus, that chanced upon the holy day of the forty Martyrs, Ivan Asen II ordered a church dedicated to them to be built in his capital, (Veliko) Tarnovo, wherein he set up a votive inscription referring to the defeat and capturing of Theodoros with the help of his new patron saints.

In the historical context of these troublous decades, the synchronous wall painting of the forty Martyrs in the prominent south aisle of Acheiropoietos could be an analogous votive offer, ordered short after 1230⁴¹ by both the

³⁵ S. Kissas, "L'art de Salonique du début du XIII^{ème} siècle et la peinture de Mileševa", in: *Mileševa dans l'histoire du peuple Serbe*, Belgrade 1987, 39. See also B.J. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, Београд 1974, 195.

³⁶ Χυngopoulos, *op. cit.*, 6-30. Kissas, *ibid.*

³⁷ Thessaloniki is widely considered to be re-conquered by the despot of Epirus in 1224. See J.J. Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium*, New York- London 1997, 307-309. About the chronology 1225-6 see A. Stavridou-Zafraka, "Συμβολή στο ζήτημα αναγόρευσης του Θεόδωρου Δούκα", in: *Αφιέρωμα στον Εμμανουήλ Κριαρά*, Thessaloniki 1988, 39-62.

³⁸ A. Vasiliev, "The role of Bulgaria in the Cristian East under Tsar John Asen II", in: *A history of the Byzantine Empire*, Madison Wiskonsin 1952.

³⁹ G. Ostrogorsky, *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates*, Munich 1963, 100-101.

⁴⁰ Ostrogorsky, *op. cit.*, 100-101. Norwich, *op. cit.*, 310-311

⁴¹ The dating of the fresco short after 1230, during the reign of Manuel Doukas, is aimed by the resemblances of the martyrs in medallions with painted portraits in two monuments in Bulgarian and Serbian territory; those of St. Samon in St. Peter and Paul church in Tarnovo, dated during the reign of Ivan Asen II, and the young Apostles in Mileševa (1235),

Bulgarian Tsar and the appointed by him new despot of Thessaloniki, Manuel Doukas, in order to proclaim this way the influence of his court in the Byzantine city⁴².

Κονσταντίνος Τ. Ραπτις
ЗИДНЕ ДЕКОРАЦИЈЕ БАЗИЛИКЕ АХИРОПИИТОС

Базилика Ахиропитос, првобитно основана у другој половини V века, више него било који од солунских споменика, припада уобичајеној рановизантијској црквеној архитектури, будући да представља типичан пример тробродне базилика са кровом од дрвета, са припратом и галеријама. Поред своје архитектонске чистоте, Ахиропитос је позната по својим хомогеним архитектонским скулптурама и зидним декоративним мозаицима који изгледа да промовишу касноантичку естетску концепцију споменика. Зидни мозаици Богородице Ахиропитос разматрани су у многим студија које, упркос њиховим различитим закључцима када се ради о концептуалној интерпретацији и датирању мозаичких украса, претпостављају да фрагментарно очувани мозаици садрже делове синхроно изграђеног декоративног програма који је пратио оригинални темељ базилике.

Структурална анализа споменика, која је документована током консолидације пројекта, пружа доказе и сведочи да поред грађевине из V века, сачуване углавном у нивоу приземља базилике, Ахиропитос је претрпела и неколико већих византијских и османлијских рестаурација које су утицале не само на њену архитектонску морфологију, већ и на вајарске и зидне декорације, било да су у форми мозаика или насликане.

У светлу ових доказа, овај рад се базира на упоредном испитивању мозаика у наосу и галерији, и по први пут узимајући у обзир структуралну анализу зграде, покушава ревизију зидне декорације солунске базилике, при чему се изван привидног тематског јединства зидне декорације, могу пратити две приметно асинхроно изграђене фазе декоративних мозаика. Истовремено, овај рад (а) су-истражује украсне мозаике са нешто трагова и украсних и фигуралних живописа, који су откривени током различитих периода обнове од почетка XX века па до данас, (б) разматра различита тумачења дата у претходној библиографији, и (в) на основу и стилских и структуралних критеријума покушава да поново процени главне фазе зидне декорације Богородице Ахиропитос.

donated by the Serbian King Vladislav, who had also be allied by marriage with the court of Asen. All probably echoing earlier, non maintained, 13th c paintings form Thessaloniki (V. J. Djurić, La plus ancienne peinture de Mileševa, in: *Mileševa dans l'histoire du peuple serbe*, Belgrade 1987, 36). The same date, after 1230, has been also proposed by L. Fundić, who has also connected the forty Martyrs fresco in Acheiropoietos basilica with the Klokotnitsa battle (L. Fundić, Η μνημειακή τέχνη του Δεσποτάτου της Ηπείρου την περίοδο της Δυναστείας των Κομνηνών Αγγέλων (1204-1318), Unpublished PhD Thesis, Thessaloniki 2013, 54-55). Though, her opinion that the fresco, echoing burial paintings, was ordered by Manuel Doukas as a memorial for the soldiers that had been killed on the name of the Orthodox dogma in their attempt to reconquer Constantinople is probably dis-focused, since in the case of the Klokotnitsa battle Epirotes and Thessalonians had been defeated by the also orthodox Bulgarians. In addition the Bulgarian Tsar appointed Manuel as ruler of Thessaloniki on the seat of his own imprisoned and blinded brother, Theodoros.

⁴² I owe thanks to the archaeologist E. Rizos, since our discussion during the 46th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies in Birmingham drove my study on the Acheiropoietos late byzantine frescoes in that direction.