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SAINT MARY VLACHERNA IN BERAT IN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND NEW OBSERVATIONS¹

Already it is a known fact in historiography that the city of Berat possesses stratigraphic traces from Ancient to the Post Byzantine period. Nevertheless, it played a key role during the Despotate of Epirus. Special significance in the history of Berat belongs to the despot Michael I Angel who determined that Berat would be an important center and focal point of building activities.²

The church of Virgin Mary Vlacherna was built in the 13th century and represents the oldest church of the city for that period.³ (Fig.1) It is located in the old neighborhood of Kala and most especially because of its dedication to Vlacherna it corresponds to the Constantinopolitan cult and generally speaking the Byzantine Empire and protectors of specific rulers.⁴

In nowadays Albania this is the only preserved medieval church dedicated to this epithet of the Virgin Mary and it is believed that possibly this name was taken from Constantinople.⁵ However in 1980s in the masonry of the north façade, on the left side of the entrance in the naos was found carved in the lower part a stone in the shape of a paleochristian. Thus, it is believed that the Saint Mary Vlacherna is built above the ruins of an earlier church.⁶

It is also to be mentioned that Vlacherna in Arta is relatively close to Vlacherna in Berat, so it is possible to assume that specific ties existed between the two churches. Another common point of the two churches is the fact

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Jasmina S. Ćirić since without her help and advices this topic wouldn't have been possible.

² P. Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët tek Muzakajt: Berati dhe Vlora në shek. XII-XV*, Tiranë 2009, 26-27.

³ A. Meksi, *Kishat byzantine të Beratit*, Monumentet 40, (Tiranë 1990), 37.

⁴ K. Gjata, M.Demaj (Plyku), R. Çuku, *Arkitektura, identiteti dhe fazat e ndërtimit të kishës bizantine Shën Mëri Vllaherna, Berat*, Monumentet 52, (Tiranë 2011-2014), 35.

⁵ K. Gjata, M.Demaj (Plyku), R. Çuku, *Arkitektura, identiteti dhe fazat e ndërtimit të kishës bizantine Shën Mëri Vllaherna, Berat*, Monumentet 52, (Tiranë 2011-2014), 35.

⁶ K. Gjata, M.Demaj (Plyku), R. Çuku, *Arkitektura, identiteti dhe fazat e ndërtimit të kishës bizantine Shën Mëri Vllaherna, Berat*, Monumentet 52, (Tiranë 2011-2014), 45.



Fig. 1 . East façade Saint Mary Vlacherna, Berat. Photo E. Kodheli

Сл. 1 Источна фасада Св. Богородице Влахерне у Берату

that the Despote of Epirus Michael Komnen Doukas lived for some time in Berat.⁷ These facts provide important data that the church dates to the XIII century, which makes Saint Mary Vlacherna the oldest church in Berat. Its dedication and the architectural features and typology of construction provide certain possibilities for dating the Virgin Mary Vlacherna in Berat. These two churches built in the same period not very far from one another provide furthermore possibilities for interpretation and analysis of specific cultural trends and ties between Constantinople, Arta and Berat.⁸ (Fig. 2)

About its construction technique in its initial form, Virgin

Mary Vlacherna was a cross-in-square with a dome constructed with four pilars. Nowadays only the two East pilasters are preserved, and part of the altar as well as the east façade with the three sided apse.⁹ The exterior façade is articulated with the cloisonné technique. The north and south façades are almost the same.¹⁰ And also, on the north façade can be found traces of a door, nowadays filled in, which are noticeable from both outside and inside.¹¹ (Fig.3)

From its initial construction, is possible to notice that only the east façade is preserved and that the other parts belong to more recent repairs and reconstructions.¹² Typical of Middle Byzantine construction, the central part of the apse is strongly accentuated with a double window. The window is encircled with two rows of scalable bricks.¹³ (Fig.4) The same executing and placing of the bricks is noticeable above the windows that belong to the other compartments of the church. Above every window between the bricks are cross-shaped motives.¹⁴ The whole east façade is constructed in the cloisonné technique. The lower part is mainly composed of stones and between the rows of stones is

⁷ A. Meksi, *Kishat bizantine të Beratit*, Monumentet 40, (Tiranë 1990), 38.

⁸ A. Meksi, *Historia e arkitekturës në Shqipëri*, ed. Apollon Baçe, Emin Riza, Gjerrak Karauskaj, Pirro Thomo (Tiranë 2011), 88.

⁹ K. Gjata, M.Demaj (Plyku), R. Çuku, *Arkitektura, identiteti dhe fazat e ndërtimit të kishës bizantine Shën Mëri Vllaherna, Berat*, Monumentet 52, (Tiranë 2011-2014), 46.

¹⁰ A. Meksi, *Arkitektura e kishave të Shqipërisë*, Tiranë 2004, 215.

¹¹ K. Gjata, M.Demaj (Plyku), R. Çuku, *Arkitektura, identiteti dhe fazat e ndërtimit të kishës bizantine Shën Mëri Vllaherna, Berat*, Monumentet 52, (Tiranë 2011-2014), 46.

¹² A. Meksi, *Kishat bizantine të Beratit*, Monumentet 40, (Tiranë 1990), 37.

¹³ A. Meksi, *Historia e arkitekturës në Shqipëri*, ed. Apollon Baçe, Emin Riza, Gjerrak Karauskaj, Pirro Thomo (Tiranë 2011), 87.

¹⁴ A. Meksi, *Kishat bizantine të Beratit*, Monumentet 40, (Tiranë 1990), 38.

placed a row of bricks. Meanwhile between each of the stones, in most cases there are two vertical bricks.¹⁵ The masonry is not particularly exact but it is possible to conclude that Vlacherna represents the only preserved church in this territory executed in the mentioned technique by local master-builders.¹⁶ According to Aleksander Meksi, the church of Saint Mary Vlacherna is the first example of cloisonné technique being used in nowadays Albania.



Fig. 2 . East façade Vlacherna, Arta. Photo V. Papadopoulou

Сл. 2 Источна фасада цркве Влахерне, Арта

But in the comparison of the photos of the southern façade from the archive of the Institute of Monuments of Culture with the ones taken nowadays, it can easily be noticed that during the restoration works in 1980s this façade went through changes. In the old pictures, in the southern façade the cloisonné technique could be seen only in the upper part, at the part with the double window. (Fig 5) Meanwhile the bottom of the church has been through some noticeable changes, since in those days it could be seen just a flat surface, not a masonry built with stones and bricks like in other façades. On the other hand, the cross shape decoration in the upper part of the three sided apse has still remained the same. That part of the church has not been through changes.

On the inside of the church, in the apse is presented the Virgin Blachernetissa, type of Platytera,¹⁷ a Virgin with the bust of Christ Emmanuel on a medallion on her chest. (Fig.6) The same type of Virgin Platytera is found even in the church of Saint Mary in *Apollonia*, which is located in Fier, Albania.¹⁸

But the difference between the two churches is the fact that the church in Berat was named after its patron. The portrait of Saint Mary Platytera is the only portrait from the first layer of the mural painting that is still preserved in the church in *Apollonia*. The second layer of the mural painting in this church dates

¹⁵ A. Meksi, *Arkitektura e kishave të Shqipërisë*, Tiranë 2004, 216.

¹⁶ A. Meksi, *Historia e arkitekturës në Shqipëri*, ed. Apollon Baçe, Emin Riza, Gjerak Karaiskaj, Pirro Thomo (Tiranë 2011), 87.

¹⁷ The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium volume 3, New York, Oxford 1991, 2177.

¹⁸ Dh. Dhamo, *Të dhëna për datimin e afreskëve në Berat*, Monumentet 40 (Tiranë 1990), 51.



Fig. 3 . North façade Saint Mary Vlacherna, Berat. Photo E. Kodheli

Сл. 3 Северна фасада Св. Богородице Влахерне у Берату.



Fig. 4 . Central part of the apse Saint Mary Vlacherna, Berat. Photo E. Kodheli

Сл. 4 Апсида Св. Богородице Влахерне у Берату

to 1292 at the time of Andronik Paleolog and his wife Irena and this is testified by the note written in the church.¹⁹

Mainly when it's about the datation the mural paintings of Saint Mary Vlacherna are said to belong to the XVI century. It is documented that the whole inner space was painted by Nikolla Onufër in 1578.²⁰

"I am the son of Onufër", is what Nikolla has written in Greek above the door that connects the inner part of the church with the narthex.²¹ Also, studies made in this part of the church have arrived at the conclusion that at the moment of painting the church was covered with a wooden roof.²²

According to restoration documents made by Fatmir Thaci and Adrian Devolli in 1990 in the church it is possible to find traces of the first layer of the fresco in the church. This layer belongs to middle or the end of the XIII century. The fragments of the first phase are found on the niche of the left side of the apse. According to iconographic characteristics of the painted figures and compositions it is possible to date the first layer to the XIII century.²³

Also, the Christ portrait in the north façade is dated to the same period. This means that the decoration made by Nikolla Onufër is actually the last phase.²⁴ In the period when Nikolla Onufër painted, there was a tendency for going back to the early Byzantine tradi-

tion. However the realization of the frescoes going back to the old tradition is also accompanied by contemporary elements.²⁵ (Fig. 7)

¹⁹ Dh. Dhamo, *Të dhëna për datimin e afreskëve në Berat*, Monumentet 40 (Tiranë 1990), 52.

²⁰ F.Thaçi, A.Devolli, *Restaurimi dhe vlerat e pikturës murete të kishës Shën Mëri Vllaherna në Berat*, Monumentet 40, (Tiranë 1990), 143.

²¹ M. Arapi, *Nikolla, i biri i Onufrit dhe jo i Onufër Qipriotit*, Monumentet 47, (Tiranë 2005), 87.

²² K. Gjata, M.Demaj (Plyku), R. Çuku, *Arkitektura, identiteti dhe fazat e ndërtimit të kishës bizantine Shën Mëri Vllaherna, Berat*, Monumentet 52, (Tiranë 2011-2014), 47.

²³ F.Thaçi, A.Devolli, *Restaurimi dhe vlerat e pikturës murete të kishës Shën Mëri Vllaherna në Berat*, Monumentet 40, (Tiranë 1990), 144.

²⁴ F.Thaçi, A.Devolli, *Restaurimi dhe vlerat e pikturës murete të kishës Shën Mëri Vllaherna në Berat*, Monumentet 40, (Tiranë 1990), 144.

²⁵ F.Thaçi, A.Devolli, *Restaurimi dhe vlerat e pikturës murete të kishës Shën Mëri*

As mentioned before, from observations made in the mural painting and the traces in the façade masonry, it is obvious that the filling of the door in the north wall and the opening of the nowadays door in the same wall dates before 1578.²⁶ Also, the floor made from stone is believed to date back to the same period as the mural painting. Also, part of the diakonikon was closed at that time, since inside it is found a fresco of XIII century and not of Nikolla Onufër.²⁷

So, it can be concluded that the mural in the church of Saint Mary Vlacherna was not the first depiction of the Virgin type of Platytera in the Byzantine architecture of nowadays Albania since this image in the church in Apolonia dates from before the XIII century. In my opinion the fact that this church was repainted in 1292 as happened commonly might have been an element why the church was not named after its patron. The opposite thing happens with Saint Mary Vlacherna in Berat, where the painting of the Virgin Platytera in the apse and the whole inner side date to 1568 and is the last phase of its decoration.

And, as I mentioned before the similarities in construction techniques with the Vlacherna church in Arta and the fact that Despot Michael Komnen Doukas lived in Berat for some time lead to the conclusion that this church was very important at the time it was built. As we know that in the Byzantine Empire the rulers tried to show their power and political strength by constructing magnificent buildings.

For sure it must be mentioned that during XIII century many developments happened in Berat: beginning with the year 1204, when Berat was under the rule of the Despotate of Epirus. Then in 1269 Michael II gave his daughter the territories from Durrës to Vlora as a dowry. In



Fig. 5 . South façade , Saint Mary Vlacherna, Berat. Photo E. Kodheli

Сл. 5 Јужна фасада Св. Богородице Влахерне у Берату



Fig. 6 . Mural painting on the apse, Virgin Blachernetissa, Saint Mary Vlacherna, Berat. Photo E. Kodheli

Сл. 6 Сликарство апсиде, богородица Влахернитиса, Св. Богородице Влахерне у Берату

Vllaherna në Berat, Monumentet 40, (Tiranë 1990), 143.

²⁶ N. Civici, E. Çausi, I. Carocci, S. Ridolfi, *Ekzaminimi diagnostikues me teknika jo-shkatërruese dhe portative në pikturat murale të kishës së Shën Mëri Vllaherna në Kala, Berat*, Monumentet 52, (Tiranë 2011-2014), 56.

²⁷ K. Gjata, M. Demaj (Plyku), R. Çuku, *Arkitektura, identiteti dhe fazat e ndërtimit të kishës bizantine Shën Mëri Vllaherna, Berat*, Monumentet 52, (Tiranë 2011-2014), 47.



Fig. 7 . Mural painting on the South façade, Saint Mary Vlacherna, Berat. Photo E. Kodheli

Сл. 7 Јужна фасада, Св. Богородице Влахерне у Берат

this way Berat fell under the rule of Manfred and later, in 1284²⁸ it was attacked by the Anjous but without winning the battle, since the winners were the troops of Michael VIII Paleolog.

So, despite the assaults of other empires, Berat still managed to be under the protection of the Byzantines for a long time meaning that even in architecture the Byzantine style has had an enormous influence there.

To conclude, I can say that in the XIII century we cannot speak of an architectural style unique to Berat and the cities around him, but rather we can speak of Byzantine architecture developed with some details from the local masters.

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СВЕТА БОГОРОДИЦА ВЛАХЕРНА У БЕРЕТУ У ИСТОРИОГРАФИЈИ И НОВИМ ЗАПИСИМА

Рад има за циљ да прилагоди архитектонске карактеристике и који типови конструкција су примењени при изградњи Св. Марије Влахерне у Берату. Такође, да анализира историјске чињенице које повезују ову цркву са црквом Блахерна у Арти, које имају исто име и јединствене архитектонске карактеристике које помаже у датовању свете Богородице Влахерне у Берату. Главни проблем овог истраживања је зидно сликарство. Фрагменти прве фазе налазе се у ниши са леве стране апсиде. Према иконографским карактеристикама насликаних фигура и композиција могуће је обезбедити датовање првог слоја у XIII век. Последња фаза декорације целог унутрашњег простора је из 1578. године аутора Николе Онуфрија који ради у складу са византиском традицијом.

²⁸ A. Meksi, *Arkitektura e kishave të Shqipërisë*, Tiranë 2004, 220.