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**OBSERVATIONS ON THE WALL-PAINTINGS AND  
ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAMME OF THE OLD KATHOLIKON  
OF THE GREAT METEORON MONASTERY (1483)**

*Abstract:* The original phase of the katholikon of the Great Meteoron Monastery (pre-1366) possessed wall-paintings, which were destroyed when the church was rebuilt by St. Joasaph Palaiologos in 1387. The St. Joasaph's katholikon was decorated sixty years after his death i.e. in 1483. However, the wall-paintings of the dome belong to a slightly earlier phase. Many parts of the church were overpainted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The diakonikon was never painted, while the decoration in the prothesis belongs to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The wall-paintings in the west bays and on the west wall of the katholikon have been completely lost. So, the present study attempts to answer certain questions concerning the construction history of the old katholikon of the Great Meteoron Monastery, its wall-paintings, its iconographic programme and the workshop that executed it in 1483 by re-examining those paintings that have been destroyed or overpainted.

*Key words:* Thessaly, Great Meteoron Monastery, Symeon Uroš Palaiologos, 'Kastoria Workshop', Post-Byzantine art

*The construction history of the old katholikon of the Great Meteoron<sup>1</sup>*

Precisely when the inaccessible rock pillars of the Meteora became a place of spiritual asceticism is unknown. In the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Skete of the Theotokos at Doupiane, the earliest reference to which can be found in the *Praktikon* of the *anagrapheus* Manasses (late 12<sup>th</sup>-early 13<sup>th</sup> cent.)<sup>2</sup>, came to

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<sup>1</sup> For the katholikon see A. G. Soteriou, *Βυζαντινά μνημεία της Θεσσαλίας ΙΓ' και ΙΔ' αιώνας. Συμβολή εις την Βυζαντινήν αρχιτεκτονικήν της τελευταίας περιόδου*, Επετηρίς Εταιρείας Βυζαντινών Σπουδών 6 (Αθήνα 1929), 291-315; E. N. Georgitsoyanni, *Les peintures murales du vieux catholicon du monastère de la Transfiguration aux Météores (1483)*, Athens 1993, 41-59; Σ. Γ. Γουλούλης, *Ο όσιος Αθανάσιος ο Μετεωρίτης. Το κίνημα του Ησυχασμού και το "κράτος" της Δυτικής Θεσσαλίας (Μια νέα ανάγνωση του Βίου του Νείλου Σταυρά)*, Τρικαλινά 29 (Τρίκαλα 2009), 153-168.

<sup>2</sup> Δ. Ζ. Σοφιανός, *Acta Stagorum. Τα υπέρ της θεσσαλικής επισκοπής Σταγών παλαιά*



Fig. 1. The Great Meteoron Monastery. Old katholikon.

Сл. 1. Велики Метеори, стари католикон

include the original core settlements of Meteoran monasticism. In addition, the monastic community of the Meteora was to be revitalised in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by the activities of St. Athanasios of Meteora<sup>3</sup>.

According to his Vita – a reliable text written ca. 1390 by the Meteoran monk Neilos Stavras (for whom we have written references from the period 1385-1407/8) – St. Athanasios settled as a monk in the Stagoi region after his second stay on Mount Athos. In the year 1340, together with the hieromonk Iakovos and the monk Ignatios, he settled on the rock known as Platys Lithos or Platylishos. On this rock St. Athanasios was to establish a monastic community and erect a church dedicated to the Panaghia Meteoritissa of Petra<sup>4</sup>.

However, very soon the increase in the number of ascetics created the need for a new katholikon, which was constructed in the period 1359-1366. It was dedicated to the Transfiguration of Christ and was financed by ‘a noble

βυζαντινά έγγραφα (των ετών 1163, 1336 και 1393). Συμβολή στην ιστορία της επισκοπής, Τρικαλινά 13 (1993), 7-66.

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed information about the Great Meteoron see the bibliography in K. M. Βαφειάδης, *Η μονή του Αγίου και Μεγάλου Μετεώρου (Μεταμορφώσεως). Ιστορία - Προσωπογραφία - Βίος πνευματικός επί τη βάσει των γραπτών και αρχαιολογικών μαρτυριών (12ος – 20ος αι.)*, Άγια Μετέωρα 2019.

<sup>4</sup> St. Athanasios himself testifies to this while addressing his disciples and fellow ascetics before being taken up into heaven: ‘Καί πρώτον μὲν παρατίθημι ὑμᾶς ἐν τῇ σκέπῃ τῆς ὑπερευλογημένης Θεοτόκου καὶ ἀειπαρθένου Μαρίας, καθά καὶ ἡ μονὴ κεκλήρωται, εἰς ἣν καὶ γὰρ πεποιθώς ἕως τοῦ νῦν τῆς ἀναγκαίας χρείας οὐκ ἔστερήθην’ (Δ. Ζ. Σοφιανός, *Ο ὁσῖος Ἀθανάσιος ὁ Μετεωρίτης. Βίος, Ακολουθία, Συναξάρια*, Μετέωρα 1990, 148-149).

Fig. 2. Head of an unknown saint (1359-1366)

Сл. 2. Глава непознатог светитеља (1359-1366)



of the race of the Triballi (Serbs)<sup>5</sup>, most likely during the reign of the ruler of Thessaly, Symeon Uroš Palaiologos (Nemanja), half-brother of Stefan Dušan (1359 - †circa 1370) (fig. 1).

Fragments of the painted decoration of St. Athanasios's katholikon still survive at the Great Meteoron Monastery. These depict figures of saints in roundels with a diameter of approx. 45 cm. (height of heads = 18 cm.) (fig. 2)<sup>6</sup>. The style of these fragments is closely connected with the artistic idiom of the painter who decorated the Meteoran Hypapante Monastery (1366/7). Consequently, it may be reasonably assumed that the painter of the Hypapante also worked at the Great Meteoron, most likely shortly before 1366. It should be noted that the Hypapante Monastery was built at the initiative and expense of the hieromonk Neilos, *protos* of the Skete of Stagoi. However, the church's painted decoration, or part of it, was funded by the 'most illustrious' Constantine, who was probably of Serbian origin and later became a monk under the name Kyprianos<sup>7</sup>.

The fact that the abovementioned fragments belong to the first construction phase of the old katholikon of the Great Meteoron Monastery is confirmed by two more facts. First, the decoration of the Hypapante Monastery is intact and so the fragments cannot come from it. Second, St. Athanasios's katholikon was completely rebuilt by his disciple, King Symeon's son Joasaph Palaiologos, in 1387/8 and decorated in 1483. No layer dating from before this phase exists.

<sup>5</sup> Σοφιανός, *Ο όσιος Αθανάσιος*, 144.

<sup>6</sup> See Γέρων Συμεών Διονυσιάτης, Κ. Μ. Βαφειάδης, *Σέρβοι χορηγοί και καλλιτέχνες στην ιερά μονή Χιλανδαρίου και στην μονή του Αγίου και Μεγάλου Μετεώρου κατά το β' μισό του 14ου αιώνα*, *Chilandarski Zbornik* 15 (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> For the Monastery of Hypapante and its wall-paintings see Α. Ξυγκόποθλος, *Σχεδιάσμα Ιστορίας της θρησκευτικής ζωγραφικής μετά την Αλωσιν*, Αθήνα 1957, 48-49; Γ. Суботић, *Почети монашког живота и црква манастира Сретења у Метеорима*, *Зборник Матице српске за ликовне уметности* 2 (Нови Сад 1966), 143-176; Idem, *Η τέχνη των βυζαντινοσέρβων ευγενών στην Ελλάδα κατά τις τελευταίες δεκαετίες του 14' αιώνα*, *Βυζάντιο και Σερβία κατά τον 14' αιώνα*, *Διεθνές Συμπόσιο* 3, E.I.E., 12-14 Νοεμβρίου 1993, edd. Ν. Οικονομίδης et al., Αθήνα 1996, 173-174; Δ. Ζ. Σοφιανός, Λ. Δεριζιώτης, *Η ιερά μονή της Υπαπαντής Μετεώρων*, *Δεύτερο μισό 14ου αιώνα*, Αθήνα 2011; Κ. Μ. Βαφειάδης, *Ύστερη βυζαντινή ζωγραφική. Χώρος και μορφή στην τέχνη της Κωνσταντινουπόλεως, 1150-1450*, Αθήνα 2015 [= repr. 2021], 268-269.



Fig. 3. The Deesis, 1387.

Сл. 3. Деизис, 1387.

Therefore, when the church was built in 1387/8 it contained no wall-paintings in its interior and so the fragments mentioned here can only come from the decoration of St. Athanasios's church, which was demolished when St. Joasaph undertook to rebuild it<sup>8</sup>.

The complete reconstruction of the church is attested by Neilos Stavras in his Vita of St. Athanasios: 'Εἶτα... ἀνεγείρεται ναὸς τῷ Σωτῆρι Χριστῷ ὡραιότατος, οὐτινος μέρος καθελὼν ὕστερον ὁ ἀναδεξάμενος παρ' αὐτοῦ τὸ κελλίον κλεινὸς Ἰωάσαφ εἰς μῆκος καὶ ὕψος καθὼς νῦν ὁράται ἀνήγειρεν'<sup>9</sup>. The date of the reconstruction is recorded in a date inscription on the window of the sanctuary apse (on the capital): ΕΤ(ΟΥΣ) ς ω/ζς' [6896 = 1387/8]. Another inscription beneath this reads: ΑΝΟΙΚΟ/ΔΟΜΗΘΗ / Ο ΠΑΝΣΕ/ΠΤΟΣ ΟΥΤΟΣ / ΝΑΟΣ ΤΟΥ / Κ(ΥΡΙΟΥ) ΥΜΩΝ / Ι(ΗΣΟΥ) Χ(ΡΙΣΤΟΥ) ΔΙ/Α ΣΗΝΑΡΟΜ(ΗΣ) / ΤΟΥ ΤΙΜΙΩΤ(Α)ΤΑ(ΟΥ) / ΕΝ ΜΟΝΑΧΟΙΣ / ΙΩΑΣΑΦ<sup>10</sup>.

It is worth noting that the Vita is very accurate in its recording of the part played by St. Joasaph in the creation of the final form of the katholikon. As a matter of fact, the second founder of the Great Meteoron erected a higher and longer building than St. Athanasios's church, a fact that is attested by the masonry. Yet that is not all. Instead of using the same roof design as that of

<sup>8</sup> In fact, the same stylistic idiom can also be seen in three despotic icons: see G. Subotić, Simonopetrites Justinos, *L'icononostase et les fresques de la fin du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle dans la monastère de la Transfiguration aux Météores*, *Actes du XV<sup>e</sup> Congrès International d'Études byzantines*, Athènes 1976, II, *Art et Archéologique*, Athens 1981, 751-758.

<sup>9</sup> Σοφριανός, *Ο όσιος Αθανάσιος*, 144-145.

<sup>10</sup> Ν. Α. Βέης, *Σύνταγμα επιγραφικών μνημείων Μετεώρων και της περίξ χώρας, μετά σχετικών αρχαιολογημάτων*, Βυζαντίς 1 (Αθήνα 1909), 584-585.



the previous church, which was probably cross-vaulted, Joasaph opted to use the superstructure of a distyle cross-in-square church. In addition, St. Joasaph's katholikon had a narthex or portico on the north side. It is certain that the katholikon also had a lite-narthex on the west side, given that during the Palaiologan era a narthex was essential for the celebration of certain services, as is attested by 14<sup>th</sup>-century *typika*. Also, on the south side of the katholikon there was very probably a sacristy, which was later – at an unknown date – converted into a chapel dedicated to St. John the Baptist, which itself was completely renovated in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>11</sup>. Access to the Palaiologan sacristy was gained from the diakonikon. This area, unlike the prothesis, is a separate



Fig. 4. The Deesis, detail.

Сл. 4. Деизис, детаљ

bay that communicates with the sanctuary via a wooden door. This door is enclosed within a marble frame and lies beneath a relief arch bearing a wall painting dating from 1483.

St. Joasaph's katholikon was in turn to undergo alterations during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during the abbacy of hieromonk Symeon. According to an unpublished Ottoman hüccet, the old katholikon was repaired in 1526 following a recent bandit raid. In 1543/4 the katholikon appears to have been damaged by a severe earthquake. This information is provided by an embedded inscription in the antechamber of the crypt which reads: + εσίστη ι γης / ημερα Πε/πη μὴν Α/πρίλης ΚΔ / ετους ,ζνβ' [7052 = 1543/4]<sup>12</sup>. Eventually, it was decided to construct a new katholikon, the work on which was begun a few months after the earthquake and completed in 1544/5.

Architecturally, the new katholikon of the Great Meteoron Monastery can be defined as a complex, four-columned cross-in-square church with contracted north and south cross arms. It can also be said to belong to the 'Athonite type' as it has choirs and a spacious columned lite. It should be noted that this new, majestic katholikon incorporated part of the old one (i.e. that built in 1387), converting it into a sanctuary. The narthex and a part of the west section of the naos were demolished. The west section of the dome was incorporated into

<sup>11</sup> Π. Θεοχαρίδης, *Τὸ παρεκκλήσι τοῦ Προδρόμου στὸ Μεγάλο Μετέωρο*, Εκκλησίες στην Ελλάδα μετά την Άλωση 1 (Αθήνα 1979), 121.

<sup>12</sup> Βέης, *Σύνταγμα*, 599.



Fig. 5. Archangel Michael.  
Сл. 5. Арханђел Михаило



Fig. 6. Prophet Jeremiah (shortly before 1483).  
Сл. 6. Пророк Јеремија (непосредно пре 1483)

the east wall of the new katholikon, while flat sloping roofs covered the north and south cross arms of the old katholikon and the corresponding corner bays. Finally, the north entrance of the old katholikon was bricked up.

#### *The wall-paintings of the old katholikon of the Great Meteoron*

As was mentioned earlier, the katholikon of the Great Meteoron that resulted from the complete reconstruction of the church in 1387/8 was decorated in 1483. No layer of painting from before this phase exists. Only one painting can be dated to 1387/8: the scene of the Second Coming, which is preserved on the outer face of the church's north wall (fig. 3), where the church's original main entrance once lay<sup>13</sup>. The composition was originally much larger (over 4 m.) as it occupied the entire width of the north wall of the old katholikon. The end sections have been lost as a result of the alterations carried out in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 4)<sup>14</sup>. The bottom section of the depiction of the enthroned Christ-Judge, which includes the figures of seated patriarchs in Paradise, is the work of a post-Byzantine artist.

The presence of the painting on the external wall of the katholikon raises a few questions. Why did St. Joasaph have the façade of the (north) entrance of the katholikon painted but not its interior, especially given the fact that he

<sup>13</sup> For this painting see Βαφειάδης, *Υστερη βυζαντινή ζωγραφική*, 269-270.

<sup>14</sup> However, some fragments survive to the left of the wall that supports the wooden roof of the portico (fig. 4).



Fig. 7. Prophet Joel, detail (shortly before 1483)

Сл. 7. Пророк Јоил, детаљ (непосредно пре 1483)



Fig. 8. Prophet Jonah, detail (shortly before 1483)

Сл. 8. Пророк Јона, детаљ (непосредно пре 1483)

was an active patron between 1387 and 1422? Is this due to the Ottoman conquest of the area, which began in 1395/6 and was completed between 1423 and 1470? This is very likely as the church was finally decorated with wall paintings in 1483. The founder's inscription attests to the traditional account of the church's construction history: † *ΑΝΗΓΕΡΘΗ ΕΚ ΒΑΘΡΩΝ ΘΕΜΕΛΙΟΝ Κ(ΑΙ) ΑΝΙΚΟΔΟΜΗΘ(Η) / Ο ΘΕΙΟΣ Κ(ΑΙ) Π(ΑΝ)ΣΕΠΤΟΣ ΝΑΟΣ ΟΥΤΟ[Σ] ΤΟΥ Κ(ΥΡΙΟΥ) Υ Κ(ΑΙ) Θ(ΕΟ) Υ Κ(ΑΙ) Σ(ΩΤΗ) Ρ(Ο) Σ ΗΜ(ΩΝ) / Ι(ΗΣΟΥ) Χ(ΡΙΣΤΟ) Υ ΔΙΑ ΚΟΠ(ΟΥ) Κ(ΑΙ) ΕΞΟΔ[ΟΥ] ΤΩΝ ΟΣΙ(ΩΝ) Π(ΑΤΕ) ΡΩΝ ΗΜΩΝ ΑΘΑΝΑΣΙΟΥ Κ(ΑΙ) ΙΩΑΣΑΦ / ΕΝ ΕΤ(ΕΙ) ς ω λ ζ' [6896 = 1387/8] Ο Κ(ΑΙ) ΚΤΙΤΩΡ(ΕΣ)· ΑΝΙΣΤΟΡΙΘ(Η) ΔΙΔΑ Σ(ΥΝ)ΔΡΟΜ(ΗΣ) Κ(ΑΙ) / ΚΟΠ(ΟΥ) Τ(ΩΝ) ΕΛΛΑΧΙΣΤ(ΩΝ) ΑΔΕΛΦ(ΩΝ) ΕΤ(ΟΥΣ) ς ς λ β' [6992 = 1483] ΙΝ(ΔΙΚΤΙΩΝΟΣ) Β' ΜΗΝΗ ΝΟΕμβρ(ι)ω ΚΑ' <sup>15</sup>.*

The church's iconographic programme contains a complete hagiographical, doctrinal and Gospel cycle. In the dome there is a depiction of Christ Pantokrator, accompanied by full-length figures of angels and prophets. Gospel scenes extend over the vaults and the upper surfaces of the side walls. The apex of the sanctuary apse is adorned with a depiction of the Virgin Enthroned. Beneath this are depictions of the Communion of Apostles and full-length figures of the Concelebrating Hierarchs. In the lowest zone of the walls are depictions of military saints, such as the Saints Theodore, St. George the Cappadocian

<sup>15</sup> Βέης, *Σύνταγμα*, 585-586. Beneath the inscription survives part of another inscription which unfortunately has not yet proved possible to read.





Fig. 9. Mural fragment with the head of St. Zosimas

Сл. 9. Фрагмент фреске, део главе Светог Зосиме



Fig. 10. St. Theodosios the Cenobiarch

Сл. 10. Свети Теодосије Велики

and St. Demetrios ‘the great duke’, as well as local saints, such as St. Achilles of Larissa and St. Nicholas the Younger, and also St. Clement of Ohrid. Naturally, there are also depictions of the founders of the Great Meteoron: St. Athanasios, holding a scroll displaying a concise version of the monastery’s typikon and accompanied by the inscription *Ο ΟΣΙΟΣ Π(ΑΤ)ΗΡ ΗΜΩΝ ΑΘΑΝΑΣΙΟΣ Κ(ΑΙ) ΚΑΘΗΓΗΤΗΣ ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΜΕΤΕΩΡΟΥ*, and, on the north-west pier, the monastery’s second founder *Ο ΟΣΙΟΣ Π(ΑΤΗΡ) ΗΜ(ΩΝ) ΙΩΑΣΑΦ*<sup>16</sup>. On the west face of the north-east pier is a depiction of St. Nicholas ‘the Fervent Protector’. A portrayal of the Archangel Michael, with his sword raised, has been placed to the left of the old (north) entrance (fig. 5). Finally, a depiction of the Royal Deesis adorns the south and south-west sections of the katholikon<sup>17</sup>.

In our opinion, the wall-paintings constitute the first and most important work of the so-called ‘Kastoria Workshop’. A dominant element in this art is the pursuit of verisimilitude and an experiential approach to Biblical and other themes, either through the naturalistic treatment of forms or the introduction of elements from contemporary reality.

<sup>16</sup> For these inscriptions see *Ibid.*, 590-591.

<sup>17</sup> For the iconographic programme of the old katholikon see I. Bitha, *Le monastère de la Transfiguration aux Météores dit le grand Météoron (1552). Son programme iconographique et sa place parmi les programmes des églises du XVIe s. en Grèce* (unpublished doctoral thesis), Université de Paris I-Sorbonne, Paris 1984; Georgitsoyanni, *Les peintures murales*, 63-77.



The team of painters consisted of at least two charismatic artists, who were active between 1475 and 1490 in Thessaly (Great Meteoron, 1483) and Kastoria (St. Nicholas of the Nun Eupraxia, 1485/6), as well as in the Skopje region (St. Niketas, Čučer, 1484) and the Prilep area (Bogorodica Monastery, Treskavec, post-1484)<sup>18</sup>. To these artists should also be attributed a number of icons in the Kastoria Museum, such as that of the Forty Saints<sup>19</sup>. It is worth noting that these painters are not connected with the artistic tradition of Ohrid<sup>20</sup> but that of Kastoria, according to M. Marković<sup>21</sup>. The painters of the Great Meteoron can therefore be plausibly regarded as heirs of the great painters of the 'Kastoria School'<sup>22</sup>.

Given this, the choice of this particular 'workshop' to paint the katholikon rebuilt by St. Joasaph suggests there was a connection between the monastery's abbot, Joasaph II (1473 – 1490[;])<sup>23</sup>, as well as, in all likelihood, the then Metropolitan of Larissa, St. Dionysios the Merciful (ca. 1482-1489 - †1510), and the artistic tradition of Kastoria, which seems to have been the most important artistic centre of the time.

*The wall paintings in the dome and on the lost or overpainted sections of the old katholikon of the Great Meteoron*

During the alterations that were carried out in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in which the earlier church was converted into a sanctuary of the new katholikon, some

<sup>18</sup> For the 'Kastoria Workshop' see Б. Бабић, *На маргинама манастира Трескавца*, ЗЛУМС 1 (Нови Сад 1965), 21-33; С. Радојчић, *Једна сликара Школа из друге половине XV века*, ЗЛУМС 1 (Нови Сад 1965), 69-103; Г. Суботић, *Охридска цликарска Школа XV века*, Београд 1980; М. Garidis, *La peinture murale dans le monde orthodoxe après la chute de Byzance (1450-1600) et dans les pays sous domination étrangère*, Athens 1989, 77-130; Georgitsoyanni, *Les peintures murales*; Г. Суботић, *На прагу новог века. Сликаство византијског стила у нашој средин крајем XV века*, Лесковачки Зборник 33 (1993); Idem, *Костурска сликарска школа. Наслеђе и образовање домаћих радионица*, Глас САНУ 384, (Одељење историјских наука, књ. 10), Beograd 1998); G. Sp. Radojčić, Г. Суботић, *Из прошлости манастира Светог Јована Богослова*, Ниш 2002; Т. Văleva, *Sur la question sur la soit-dite "École artistique de Kastoria"*, Вуџантинá 28 (Θεσσαλονίκη 2008), 181-221; E. N. Τσιγαρίδας, *Εικόνες της «Σχολής» Καστοριάς*, ΔΧΑΕ 33 (Αθήνα 2012), 369-378; С. Смолчич-Макуљевич, *Манастир Трескавац*, Београд 2013, 137-176; М. Марковић, *Свети Никита код Скопје. Задужбина краља Милутина*, Београд 2015, 218-258; E. N. Τσιγαρίδας, *Εικόνες του Βυζαντινού Μουσείου και ναών της Καστοριάς (12ος -16ος αιώνα)*, [Βιβλιοθήκη της εν Αθήναις Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας αρ. 317], Αθήνα 2018, 316-381.

<sup>19</sup> Τσιγαρίδας, *Εικόνες*, no. 83.

<sup>20</sup> Суботић, *Костурска сликарска школа*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> Марковић, *Свети Никита код Скопје*, 243-244.

<sup>22</sup> I. Σίσσιου, *Η καλλιτεχνική Σχολή της Καστοριάς κατά τον 14ο αιώνα*, (Ph.D. Dissertation), Φλώρινα 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, little is known about Joasaph II. According to the *Syngramma Historikon*, Joasaph served as abbot of the Great Meteoron for seventeen years and then, perhaps in the year 1490, he was consecrated as Bishop of Phanarion (A. Rigo, *La "Cronaca delle Meteore". La storia dei monasteri della Tessaglia tra XIII e XVI secolo*, (Orientalia Venetiana VIII) Firenze 1999, 126. Cf. Βαφεϊάδης, *Η μονή του Αγίου και Μεγάλου Μετεώρου*, 99-101.



Fig. 11. St. Anthony and St. Euthymios.  
 Σλ. 11. Σβητι Αντονίη και Ιεφτιμιίη

of the wall-paintings were completely destroyed while others were either completely or partly overpainted. In fact, it appears that the painter responsible for the 16<sup>th</sup>-century decoration altered the original iconographic programme, at least in a few cases.

In the dome, the eight figures of the prophets have been mostly overpainted. Three of these – the prophet Jeremiah (fig. 6), the prophet Isaiah and the prophet Joel (fig. 7) – survive in a better state of preservation. The garments of the first have not been overpainted at all, while the faces and parts of the garments of the other two have also remained unaltered by any overpainting<sup>24</sup>.

These three figures reveal a painter with a high level of training and skill. The movement and draughtsmanship of the figures are impressive, as are the large billowing scrolls with

their realistic chiaroscuro (fig. 8). In addition, the painter's art displays very clear, high-quality Western influences, which are actually more substantial than those to be found in the wall-paintings executed by the 'Kastoria Workshop'. Some examples of this art are to be found on the fragment of wall-painting in Tomb G in the exonarthex of the katholikon of the Chora Monastery<sup>25</sup> and the wall-paintings from Apolpaina on Lefkas (1449/50) which are now in the Christian and Byzantine Museum in Athens<sup>26</sup>.

The stylistic characteristics of the artist who painted the prophets do not appear below the base of the dome. This means that a) the wall-paintings in the dome are earlier than those in the lower sections of the church; b) the painter who executed the wall-paintings in the dome was not a member of the team that worked on the lower sections, and c) this painter left the Great Meteoron without completing the decoration. It is not known who invited him to work at the monastery and why he stopped working at an early stage. It is likely that his presence here is connected with the presence at the monastery of someone

<sup>24</sup> In the figure of the prophet Daniel, painted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to discern the hand of the earlier figure.

<sup>25</sup> P. A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, [Bollingen Series LXX, Pantheon Books], New York, 1966, vol. III, pls. 548-549.

<sup>26</sup> *The World of the Byzantine Museum*, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens 2004, figs. on pp. 19-121. Cf. 'Λευκάδα. Απόλπαινα, Μονή Παναγίας Οδηγήτριας', in Π. Βοκοτόπουλος (ed.), *Ευρετήριο βυζαντινών τοιχογραφιών της Ελλάδος. Ιόνια νησιά* [Ακαδημία Αθηνών, Κέντρο Έρευνας της Βυζαντινής και Μεταβυζαντινής τέχνης], Αθήνα 2018, 142-151.

who was familiar with Western culture, a fact that is evident in the existence of a series of Western and Western-style works from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Great Meteoron's sacristy<sup>27</sup>.

Although we are not aware of any other monumental ensemble that displays such characteristics, the art of the painter of the prophets should be connected with Westernizing works in Kastoria<sup>28</sup>, with which it shares many similarities. In any event, the artist who painted the dome of the old katholikon of the Great Meteoron represents a unicum in the monumental painting of mainland Greece of the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Like the dome, the sanctuary apse is also almost completely overpainted. In the half-dome only the faces of the Virgin Mary, Christ and the angels have been overpainted. The others belong to the earlier phase. The figures of two hierarchs – St. Achilles and St. Gregory of Nyssa – also belong to the 1483 phase.

The scenes in the Christological cycle do not present any problems, except for those in the west sections of the superstructure. Here, the surviving sections of the Christological cycle are to be found in the soffits of the west arches. In the soffit of the west arch, then, survives part of the scene of the Transfiguration of the Saviour. This extended over the entire surface of the west vault<sup>29</sup>. The whole section depicting the Apostles under the painting of Christ in glory has been lost.

As has already been mentioned, the (west) narthex and part of the west section of the church (west wall, western bays, west vault) were demolished during the alterations carried out in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. No wall-paintings at all survive from the narthex – if, that is, the narthex was decorated in the first place. However, from the no longer extant west wall of the naos survives a fragment depicting the head of St. Zosimas (fig. 9.), which attests to the existence in this part of the church of a depiction of St. Zosimas and St. Mary of Egypt.

On the faces of the west piers of the katholikon survive figures of saints from the 1483 phase, such as St. David of Thessaloniki, of which only the upper section (head, shoulders and inscription) is preserved. Opposite St. David is a depiction of Constantine the Great and St. Helen. Although most of the figure of St. Constantine was painted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, his left hand and a part of his garments belong to the earlier phase<sup>30</sup>. In addition, part of an unidentified figure survives next to the depiction of St. Theodosios the Cenobiarch (fig. 10.).

Of the west bays of the old katholikon, only sections of the south and north walls survive. Consequently, here the original arrangement of the figures and scenes has been disturbed. For example, on the north wall, to the left of the old closed-up entrance, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century painter covered a scene from the 1483 phase with the figures of a hierarch and a deacon. To the left of the Archangel Michael part of a throne is visible, along with part of the knee of the figure seated on it and part of a hexapterygon (fig. 5). On the basis of these remaining fragments, we may assume there was a depiction of Christ in glory at this point.

<sup>27</sup> A study of these works is currently being undertaken by N. Vryzidis and K. Vapheides.

<sup>28</sup> See indicatively Τσιγαρίδας, *Εικόνες Καστοριάς*, 387f.

<sup>29</sup> Georgitsoyanni, *Les peintures murales*. pls. 39-41.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* pl. 95.





Fig. 12. St. Peter of Alexandria, detail (1784)

Сл. 12. Свети Петар Александријски, детаљ (1784)

To the right of the old entrance there are now depictions of Saints Anthony and Euthymios (fig. 11.). However, it appears that there was once a third saint or hierarch here too that was covered over by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century decoration and then later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Apart from the alterations mentioned above, the prothesis was also renovated at the beginning of the abbacy of Parthenios the Melodist (1784) (fig. 12.). We do not know exactly which depictions from the 1483 phase were covered over. It appears, however, that the existing ones are copies of the originals beneath them. The painter who executed the existing depictions also painted the figure of the prophet Sophonias (Zephaniah) in the dome over that of the prophet Solomon, whose inscription survives next to that of Sophonias. The same artist is also responsible for a number of repairs and retouches. For example, he retouched the tunics of St. George and St. John the Baptist<sup>31</sup> on the south wall, which were severely damaged when the monks opened up a new entrance to St. John the Baptist's Chapel<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* pls. 89, 92-93.

<sup>32</sup> It should be noted in passing that the same painter executed the six despotic icons in the Chapel of SS Constantine and Helen at the Great Meteoron in about 1785 and that he has also been credited with the despotic icons in the old church of St. George at the village of Peristera near Kalambaka, on the basis of the identical artistic style and style of handwriting. It should be noted that the diakonikon was never decorated with wall-paintings. This is because, as has previously been mentioned, this was the site of the original entrance to the Chapel of St. John the Baptist, which may have served as a sacristy during the Palaiologan period: see Θεοχαρίδης, *op. cit.*

### *Conclusions*

Byzantine art was kept alive, even long after the Fall of Constantinople, through a variety of artistic currents that sprang from none other than Palaiologan art and the art of the great Serbian kings. One of the most notable of these currents is that represented by a team of painters from Kastoria of the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which was mainly active in the Meteora and Kastoria areas and the broader Ohrid region. As is generally accepted, the first dated work by this team is the mural decoration of the old katholikon of the Great Meteoron (1483). However, given the 'maturity' of the work carried out by these painters at the Great Meteoron, it is certain that other, earlier ensembles by this workshop must exist elsewhere.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, we may conclude that the original phase of the katholikon – that of St. Athanasios (pre-1366) – possessed wall-paintings, which were destroyed when the church was completely rebuilt by St. Joasaph Palaiologos in 1387. However, St. Joasaph's katholikon was not decorated with wall-paintings until sixty years after his death. Only one painting – that of the Second Coming – belongs to the 1387 phase, and this adorned the north narthex of the church.

The katholikon was finally decorated in 1483. It is clear, however, that the decoration in the dome most probably belongs to a phase slightly earlier than that of 1483, and that the painter who executed it is not connected with the painters who decorated the rest of the church. Many parts of the church, particularly in its east section, were overpainted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps as a result of damage. The diakonikon was never decorated with wall-paintings, while the decoration in the prothesis belongs to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as do certain sections of figures painted in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the lower zone and western sections of the church some of the depictions and many of the holy figures have also been overpainted or renovated. The wall-paintings in the groin vaults of the west bays and on the west wall of the katholikon have been completely lost, except for a fragment of the head of St. Zosimas from the alterations carried out in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Thanks to the abovementioned facts, we have some idea of the iconographic programme of the old katholikon of the Great Meteoron Monastery. However, once the conservation, photographic documentation and study of the katholikon is resumed after the end of the coronavirus pandemic, it is certain that these endeavours will bring to light new information about the activity and composition of the 'Kastoria Workshop' and its connections with the monasteries of Thessaly.

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ЗАПАЖАЊА О ЗИДНОМ СЛИКАРСТВУ И ИКОНОГРАФИЈИ СТАРОГ  
КАТОЛИКОНА ВЕЛИКИХ МЕТЕОРА (1483)

Рад има за циљ да одговори на неколико питања везаних за историју градње старог католикона, сликарства и иконографије, као и измена које су се догодиле у XVI веку. Прва фаза сликарства из око 1366. године, уништена је мало касније, будући да је католикон поново изграђен 1387. године. Ипак, католикон Светог Јоасафа није био живописан све док није прошло шездесет година од светитељевог упокојења. Само једна фреска припада фази из 1387. године и налази се на спољном северном зиду цркве. Католикон је осликан 1483. Део из куполе припада нешто ранијем периоду, док сликар који је сликао у куполи чак и нема посебних стилских веза са сликарима остатка цркве. Бројни делови цркву су пресликани у XVI веку, врло вероватно јер су били оштећени. Ђаконикон никада није живописан, док је сликарство из ђаконикона по свим приликама из XVIII века. У нижој зони и западним деловима цркве неке сцене и фигуре светитеља су пресликане или обновљене у потпуности. Сводови и западни травеј као и западни зид католикона перманентно су изгубљени, осим једног малог фрагмента главе Светог Зосиме. Ипак, могуће је имати увид идеју о иконографији старог католикона Великих Метеора. Упркос нашим сазнањима, неопходно је сачекати резултате конзервације, фотографску документацију, будући да су сви конзерваторски поступци обустављени услед пандемије корона вирусом. Сигурно је да ће нови подаци који су прикупљени дати нове резултате и сазнања о тзв. радионици из Касторије и везама те радионице са манастирима у Тесалији.