

THE PRESENTATION OF ANNUNCIATION IN THE CHURCH
OF SAINT ALYPIOS IN KASTORIA

The outside of the church of no importance, but the inside of extraordinary one, only one nave, wooden roof basilica, tiny in dimensions, having a semi-cycling arch, that is the church of Saint Alypios or Stylianos, which has been extended to the west after the original west wall had been demolished.¹ Of great cultural worth are the frescos in the Altar and on the southern wall of the church, though their preservation could not be described as good enough, what makes the work of the scholar rather difficult. Nevertheless, the technique and iconography lead us to the dating of the church in the turning point from the 12th to the 13th century.²

A relatively better picture of preservation shows the presentation of Annunciation on the northern and southern part of the spherical part of the Eastern wall of the church, which follows the tradition of the painters of the 12th century, as we can see it in the icons of that period, for example in Saint George in Kurbinovo, and in the churches of Saint Anargyri and Saint Nikolaos Kasnitzi in Kastoria.³

Particularly, the Virgin Mary is presented seated⁴ in a low, elaborate throne, framed by small architectural ornaments and wearing a head cover and a purple embroidered veil reaching almost the middle of her shoulders. This specific characteristic, the embroidered veil, as Ms Drakopoulou mentions, can be seen in depictions of Virgin Mary in portable cypriot icons of the 13th and 14th centuries and in murals of the early 14th century (1313/15) in the church of Saint George and Konstantinos in Pyrgos of Monofatsi in Creta.⁵ Out of the rich in plaits head cover of the Virgin Mary only her hands can be seen, her

¹ *Makedonika*, Book 25, Tsigaridas E. N., *Researches in churches of Kastoria*, Salonika 1986, 381.

² Tsigaridas E., *The murals of Latomou Monastery in Salonica and Byzantine painting of the 12th century*, Salonica 1986, page 40.

³ Drakopoulou E., *The city of Kastoria during the Byzantine and Afterbyzantine years (12th - 14th century)*, 35-37.

⁴ *Makedonika*, Book 21, Gounaris G., *The murals of Saint Theologos of Mavriotissa*, Salonica 1981, 12.

⁵ Drakopoulou E., same as earlier, 39.



Сл. 1 Богородица, Благовести, Црква Св. Алимпија, Касторија

Fig. 1 The Theotokos, the Annunciation, Church of St Alypius, Katoria

right palm open, as in praying and her left one holding the spindle, whereas her body has been turned towards the Archangel, her head follows the position of her body up 3/4. The almost eyes, the small forehead, where the wrinkles of expression have been clearly depicted, her calm, stern and impressive look are the particular details the painter depicts, so that her praying desire and her modesty and absolute obedience to the representative of Authority, the Archangel Gabriel, can be successfully expressed.

The presentation of Annunciation, which is placed in the Altar with aim to emphasize the symbolic meaning, that is the Incarnation, always in reference with Liturgy held in this place,⁶ is fulfilled with the depiction of the Angel, rapidly moving towards the Virgin Mary,⁷ in the northern spherical part of the Eastern wall. Representative of the divine authority, he is holding a scepter, splendidly dressed in a garment and a richly pleated tunic with a characteristic abundance of cloth, which interrupts the unity of his garment and functions against the distinction of the bodily volume of the figure. The artist paints an earnest but simultaneously sweet face, thus wishing to express the particular role of the divine mandatory.

⁶ *Makedonika*, Book 21, same as earlier, 13.

⁷ *Makedonika*, Book 21, same as earlier, 12

After a more thorough study of the style and illustrative characteristics of the presentation, we can conclude that the painter who worked in the church of Saint Alypios paints the figures by using a dynamic movement, breaking the frontal depiction and the stiffness of the posture, they turn to the left and right, carried away by the rhythmical opposite movement of the body.⁸ The hagiographer uses the bright levels and the lines in a very free mannerism so that he can interrupt the unity bodily volume.⁹

What gave the scholar the motive for further and more specific research on the presentation and the drawing of some first conclusions are the inscriptions on the presentation of the Annunciation in the church of Saint Alypios, which show particularities of major importance. A serious obstacle for thorough study and observation of these inscriptions is their bad condition of preservation, hence it is almost impossible to read them in some places.

According to this text, on the southern spherical part of the eastern wall, where the hagiographer painted the figure of the angel moving rapidly, is written: „ΧΑΙΡΕ ΣΥΗ ΤΕΡΑΣΤΙΟΝ ΤΟ ΠΗΜΑ ΣΥΖΥΓΟΥ ΔΙΧΑ”. These are the words the archangel Gabriel uses addressing to Virgin Mary, who then responds by saying: „ΝΑΙ, ΤΩ ΘΕΩ ΓΑΡ ΔΥΝΑΤΑ ΑΠΑΝΤΑ ΠΕΛΕΙ”.

So, the hagiographer presents the archangel Gabriel uses addressing to Virgin Mary, who in response confirms the divine order he had carried over. It is really very seldom for an artist to use dialog, as that cannot be seen in the icon presentations of the Annunciation not only during the time in which Saint Alypios was painted but also in the previous centuries as well. The inscriptions which were written on the presentations of Annunciation were mostly taken from the Holy Texts, referring to Virgin Mary. The exceptional phenomenon of this particular dialog used by this artist of Saint Alypios gains a special value because these words are not mentioned in any Holy Text referring to Virgin Mary. Only professor Kalokyris, in his work “The Virgin Mary in the hagiography of East and West” mentions the existence of dialogs on presentation



Сл. 2 Арханђео Гаврило, Благовести,
Црква Св. Алимпија.
Fig. 2 Archangel Gabriel, the Annunciation,
Church of St Alypios

⁸ Tsigaridas E., same as earlier, 113.

⁹ Tsigaridas E., same as earlier, 124.



Сл. 3 Св. Кузма, Црква Св. Алимпија.

Fig. 3 St Kosmas, Church of St Alypios

of the Annunciation between the archangel and the Virgin Mary and her absolute free consent and obedience to the angel's words, that is according to "ΓΕΝΟΙΤΟ ΜΟΙ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΟ ΡΗΜΑ ΣΟΥ". So, a small part of the inscription of Saint Alypios is mentioned by Mr. Kalokyris but without explaining its origin.¹⁰

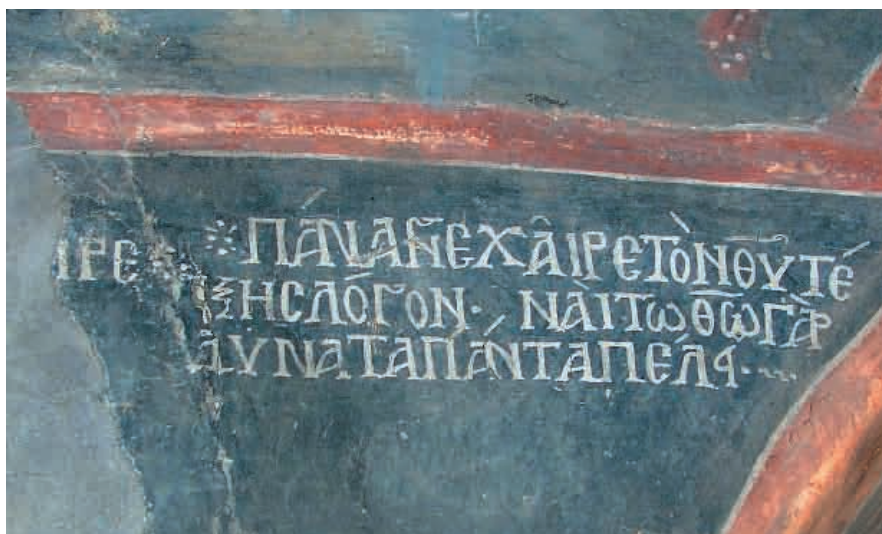
Well, after having studied all the partial elements of the inscriptions of the presentation, and after having looked up information in theological texts referring to the Virgin Mary, it is unavoidable to ask questions about the hagiographer himself, his habits, his quest, the influences upon him. The conclusions lead directly to the artist and his personality, and these characteristics in the case of Saint Alypios are inseparably connected with the acceptance of the principles and rules of the Orthodox Tradition.

So, the artist of the frescos of this particular church and of the presentation of Annunciation could not have been a mere artist. The inscription of the presentation lead us to the conclusion that he was a deeply religious person, who while painting, would actually participate in the Sacraments of the Church.

There were a lot of hagiographers, who did not only content themselves in their role as artists but they did not believe that in order to succeed in their work of art they had to adapt their personality to the principles or, even vice versa, a big number of active members of the Christian community found a way of expressing themselves by painting icons. Thus, the hagiographers were spiritually led by priests and their whole life was tightly linked with the principles and values of the spiritual life.

So, it can be concluded that the hagiographer of the presentation of Annunciation of Saint Alypios, either consulted his spiritual leader and depicted the inscriptions of the dialog between the Archangel and the Virgin Mary, or influenced by some hymns to the Virgin Mary and aspired to depict the theme of the Annunciation as well as possible, he was inspired to write the dialog between the Virgin Mary and the Archangel at that very moment. The fact that a

¹⁰ Kalokyris K., *The Virgin Mary in the hagiography of East and West*, Salonika 1972, 115.



Сл. 4 Натпис поред Богородице, Благовести, Црква Богородица Мавриотиса, Касторија

Fig. 4 Inscription beside the Theotokos, the Annunciation, Church of Panayia Mavriotissa, Kastoria



Сл. 5 Богородица, Благовести, Црква Богородица Мавриотиса, детаљ

Fig. 5 The Theotokos, the Annunciation, a detail, Church of Panayia Mavriotissa, Kastoria

great many hagiographers were active members of the Church made the people of that time believe that they were „enlightened“, possessing extraordinary gifts and abilities.

What makes those inscriptions particularly important is also the fact that something similar, but not exactly the same can be seen on the eastern wall of the nave in the monastery of Mavriotissa, in the presentation of the Annunciation dated back to the second half of the 12th century. In Mavriotissa the Archangel is talking with the Virgin Mary and says: „ΠΑΝΑΓΝΕ ΧΑΙΡΕ ΤΟΝ ΘΕΟΥ ΤΕΞΗΣ ΛΟΓΟΝ. ΝΑΙ ΤΩ ΘΕΩ ΓΑΡ ΔΥΝΑΤΑ ΠΑΝΤΑ ΠΕΛΕΙ.“ And the Virgin Mary responds: „ΤΕΡΑΣΤΙΟΝ ΤΟ ΡΗΜΑ ΣΥΖΗΓΟΥ ΔΙΧΑ. ΥΠΕΡΦΙΣΗΝ ΜΕΝ ΑΛΛΟΜΩΣ ΓΕΝΗΤΟ ΜΟΙ.”¹¹

After a close observation of the two inscriptions it can be seen that there are similarities but differences too between them, but, nevertheless, there is a close connections between the artist of Saint Alypius and the one of Mavriotissa. The obvious spelling mistakes in Mavriotissa make the speculation clear that the hagiographer did not copy from any Holy Text. To that leads also the fact that the hagiographer of Saint Alypius uses a different sequence of words and, because of lack of enough room he possibly uses only part of them.

A proof for the close similarity of the two churches, in connection with the fact that the two presentations are dated from the same century, leads to the conclusion that the two artists were really influenced by each other, but that can in no way degrade the particular importance his choice has to depict the meaning of the presentation of the Annunciation, following his inspiration or developing the consultation of his spiritual leader.

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СЛИКАРСТВО ОКО 1200. ГОДИНЕ И СЦЕНА БЛАГОВЕСТИ
У ДВЕМА ЦРКВАМА У КАСТОРИЈИ

Тенденције Комнинског стила после украшавања цркве Светих Врачи у Касторији и Светог Ђорђа у Курбинову и даље трају у уметничком простору Касторије. Међутим, нису само стилска истраживања него и иконографска. Сцена Благовести у цркви Светог Алимпија и Богородице Мавриотисе представља посебно интересовање због текста који прати Арханђела Гаврила и Богородицу. То је једна врста дијалога (εὐκόμιον) Благовести.

¹¹ Gounaris G., *The Monastery of Mavriotissa in Kastoria*, Salonica 1993, 19.