
THE MURAL PAINTINGS OF PROTATON CHURCH FROM MOUNT ATHOS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the study of the Church of the Protaton in Karyes, the most representative monument of Holy Mount Athos. Its mural paintings, which show examples of Byzantine Art and date back to the Paleologan period (the 19th century), have been preserved until today. They were attributed to Manuel Panselinos, the founder of the Macedonian School of painting, who also frescoed numerous churches in Macedonia and Medieval Serbia. The analysis of the stylistic elements, iconographic themes and their theological significance has surely given us the opportunity to take a deeper insight into the artistic background of this amazing painter who mastered the monumental compositions of the Church of the Protaton. The study aims at highlighting both the similarities and the differences in Panselinos' masterpieces and the monuments decorated by the proud disciples of this top master in Thessaloniki, who remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration for future generations of artists.

Keywords: Protaton, Karyes, Paleologan period, Panselinos

1. Introduction - brief history of the Protaton Church

Near the centre of Athos Peninsula, it is located city of Karyes, which is the capital of Mount Athos. Founded in the 9th century, its name derives from the walnut trees (karyai), which abound in this region even from Antiquity, where the sanctuary of goddess Artemis is also located [1]. Aside from the one hundred hermit cells, the monastic complex from Karyes also includes the Protaton Church and the Holy Community building, as well as the seats of all the main monasteries, where their representatives resided - except those from the Koutloumousi monastery, situated 500 hundred meters from Karyes. The Protaton church (Figure 1a) is situated in the centre of the small city, within the main square, with its bell tower dating back in 1781. The old tower of Saint Sava and the Holy Community building are placed around this architectural core Protaton (Figure 1). The church from Kayres, in front of the Holy Community building, is the oldest church from Mount Athos, being erected in the 10th century, after the Great Lavra.

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Figure 1. Protaton Church, 10th century: (a) North-East part view; (b) view from the Eastern part, the prominent apse of the altar and on the right the bell tower, built in 1781.

A first organization of the monasticism in Athos occurred in the 9th century. The monasteries representatives and their protos had a residential place called *Kathédra Gerénton* in Pirgudia, near the city of Ierissos [2]. This city was officially mentioned in a document written by Leon the 6th in 908 and later was located outside the territorial jurisdiction of Mount Athos, in the Northern part of Peninsula, where the athonite monasticism initially flourished. Later, due to the arrival of other monks, more communities were established in the Southern part and as a result, they decided to establish a less eccentric place of meeting. Then, starting with the 10th century, they built a city in the centre of the Peninsula, called Messos ('middle') and a new lavra, later called 'The Middle Lavra'.

Starting with the 11th century it began to be known as the ‘Karyes Lavra’ (*The Walnuts Lavra*), probably from the numerous walnuts trees in the area. Later, this place was called, simply, just ‘Karyes’. The city had a church called Protaton, meaning *of the Mount Ahtos protos*, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (15th of August), being one of the oldest buildings on Mount Athos, after the Great Lavra. A few years after it was inaugurated it proved to be too small and the Athanasius Protos, Saint Athanasius the Great received funds from the Emperor Leon Focas to enlarge the church in 965. Between 1275 and 1280 a fire damaged the church and it was started by those championing the unity of the two churches (the Eastern Orthodox and the Latins), supported by the Emperor Michael the VIIIth Palaiologos. The church was repaired by its successor, Andronikos II (1282-1328). If the first meetings of the monks took place at Kareya (synaxis), we can state that the name Protaton symbolizes the centre of monks’ community.

Protaton Church was built during the period when the seat was transferred from Zigos to Kareya and its architectural shape was modified by Athanasius when he enlarged the original building. The Zigos Monastery was abandoned in the 12th century and donated to Hilandar Monastery by the Emperor Alexios the IIIrd Angelos. The ruins can still be seen near Uranopolis, the seaport from where one departs for Karyes. In this building the seat of protos was located, before it was moved to Kareya. The Protos was the supreme authority on the Holy Mountain and he was elected by the abbots of the other monasteries. In reality, its powers were superficial, as the common problems couldn’t be solved without the abbots’ approval meeting [3].

The restoration works made by Emperor Andronikos the IInd Palaiologos at the beginning of 14th century didn’t alter significantly the original shape; the repairing works had to be done due to the fire set by the supporters of Church unity with the Church of Rome. In 1082, along with the erection of the nave’s roof, some changes were made, namely by adding new windows for improving the lighting in the nave.

2. Architecture and wall painting of Protaton Church

The architecture of the building differs from that of churches from Athos as well as from the Byzantine churches. On the outside a basilica with three semicircle apses was built. At the base, the church has a rectangular plan made from West to East as follows: a narthex, an almost square shaped nave with a Greek cross where four rooms are clearly visible - including those from North-East and South-East - namely the prothesis and diakonikon, and the three apses. The narthex was added later, dating from 1507. The atrium from the Northern side and the Eastern tower were also built later by the protos Seraphim in 1534.

The original roof was made from wood with double slope. The nave’s roof was slightly higher than that of the lateral apses. Inside, the walls were decorated with frescoes by the famous painter from Thessaloniki and representative of the Macedonian painting school Manuel Panselinos.

The presence of these frescoes at Mount Athos is the result of the special relationships Thessaloniki established during the Middle Age with the great monasteries from the Holy Mountain [4]. Assigning the painting from Protaton to Manuel Panselinos was possible through the analogy made by many specialists with the style of frescoes from Saint Euthymius chapel (1302–1303) from Saint Demetrius Cathedral in Thessaloniki [5]. Among the studies that tried to identify Panselinos as the main artist that painted Protaton, those by Professor Xyngopoulos are decisive, with its indisputable archaeological evidences dating the painting between 1282-1328 [6]. Talbot Rice states that the frescoes from Protaton, regardless of their belonging to Panselinos or not provide a great insight into the realism and vivacity typical for the Macedonian school and the difference between this commission and those realized by the Constantinople school as illustrated at Chora (Kariye Camii) are crystal clear [7]. Other similarities were made by E. Tsigaridas with the frescoes from the Vatoped katholikos dating from 1312 [8].

The paintings date from the last decade of 13th century or from the first two decades of the 14th century. The main compositions are arranged in the upper range of the nave as follows: the 12 Feasts (Dodekaorton) of the liturgical year in the nave, the Passions of Christ in the transepts and the Miracles Cycle in the four lateral chapels. The frescoes in the nave are divided in four upper layers, depicting up to down, Christ ancestors (from Adam to Joseph), the Church Feasts (the Birth, Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, the Baptism, the Transfiguration of Christ, the Crucifixion, the Entombment, the Resurrection and the Pentecost), the four Evangelists and a gallery dedicated to hermits and military saints. On the Western wall above the door that leads into the narthex, Panselinos painted a great composition dedicated to the Assumption of Mary, Mother of Christ, which is also the dedication of the church; there are the Apostles and a groups of grieving women assisting at the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The image of Christ standing at his mother side, holding in his hands her soul (depicted as a new born child) is no longer visible. Below this frescoes the *Anapesson* is depicted (Figure 2) meaning *the Recumbent one*, baby Jesus lying down on a cloth in a melancholic mood, a prophetic reference to the Passions, being also flanked by the protective figures of Archangels Michael and Gabriel. Jesus's sleep is a less known iconographic theme [9]. Lately this composition was almost totally forgotten. Few of the new erected churches and monasteries depict this scene; in the old Moldavian monasteries it is very rarely seen. At Dragomirna monastery, on the edge of the window on the right side of the nave, just under the right lectern one can see this theme – Virgin Mother sitting down with baby Jesus holding his head on her lap. The composition has its roots in a book from the Old Testament. In the Book of Genesis one can read: „*And Jacob called unto his sons, and said, Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you that which shall befall you in the last days. Gather yourselves together, and hear, ye sons of Jacob; and hearken unto Israel your father. Judah is a lion's whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from*

between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.” (Genesis 49.1-2, 9-10) These words represent Jacob’s Messianic prophecy. Messiah is seen as a recumbent, sleeping lion. When the scene is represented above the doors, the word from Psalm 121 can be seen: „My help cometh from the LORD, which made Heaven and Earth. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.” (Psalm 121.4-8)



Figure 2. *Anapesson* – Western wall of the nave, Protaton church.

The hermits portraits are strikingly realistic: David from Thessaloniki and Paul Latros in the North-Western chapel; Athanasius from Athos, Peter from Athos and Paul of Xiropotamos in the South-Western chapel; John Climacus, Teoctist, Sava and Euthymius in the Northern transept, John the Baptist, Saint Anthony the Great, Paul of Thebes, Nil and Ephraim in the Southern transept, Ignatius and Dionysius the Areopagite in the *bema* (southern wall); Gregory Thaumaturgus in the diakonikos and Nil Casabila, Archbishop of Thessaloniki in the Saint John the Baptist chapel, above the narthex.

Manuel Panselinos, the famous painter from Thessaloniki is mentioned also by Dionysius of Fourni in his *Interpretation of Byzantine painting*, who is declaring himself as his apprentice and successor in this particular style of painting and even trying to set a direction for the entire subsequent church painting along these lines [10]. Broadly speaking, Panselinos style will be adopted by his disciples, Michael Astrapas, Ethius and George Kallierges that together decorated churches from Serbia and Macedonia and Ohrid (Saint Clement and Saint Virgin Mary Peribleptos from Ohrid, Saint Nicholas Orfanos from Thessaloniki (1321-1322), the katholikon painting from *Hilandar* monastery

(1318-1320), the Gračanica church (1321-1322), Saint George the Younger from Staro Nagoričane, in Northern Macedonia (1316-1318). His style presents, among other features, a monumental pattern, massive stature of characters in contrapposto, providing dynamism - also enhanced by the clothes, which even if they are sketched closely follow the anatomy of the body. The faces are masterfully realized, being singled out as portrait studies while the volume of the bodies is realized through the use of red-green (proplastic and red-blush) and white blics that contrast with the verdaccio proplasm.

The marble iconostasis, decorated with geometric motives dates from the 10th century. In the *bema* the most famous and also one of the most venerated icons from Athos is kept: Axion Estin. Holy Mother is depicted holding the Child in her arms inside a silver encasement; the faces are hardly discernible from the candle smoke. Tradition holds that Archangel Gabriel sang in the 10th century before this icon the hymn Axion Estin (It is truly due) composed by Cosmas the Hymnographer in the 8th century. Since then on it was introduced in the Liturgy. Every year, after Easter, the icon is paraded in a solemn procession on the streets of Kareya.

3. The iconographic program of Protaton church

The 12 Feasts of the liturgical year in the nave are presented in Figure 3: 1) Birth of Jesus, 2) Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, 3) Baptism of Jesus and the Sermon of Saint John the Baptist, 4) Transfiguration, 5) Crucifixion, 6) Descent into Hell, 7) Ascension of the Lord, 8) Descent of the Holy Ghost, 9) Presentation of Mary at the Temple, 10) Zechariah prophet blesses Virgin Mary, 11) Annunciation, 12) Assumption of Holy Mother.

The other compositions continue on the walls of the church and are further numbered in Figure 3: the Archangels - 13) Anapesson, 14) Saint Archangel Michael, 15) Saint Archangel Gabriel, 16) Holy Mother between the Archangels Michael and Gabriel; the Evangelists - 17) Saint Mark, 18) Saint John, 19) Saint Luke, 20) Saint Matthew; Passions of Christ - 21) Jesus washes Peter's feet, 22) Jesus explains the meaning of washing the Apostles feet, 23) Jesus in the Gethsemane, 24) Judas betrayal, 25) Judgment of Annas and Caiaphas, 26) Judgment of Pilate, 27) Jesus is led to the cross, 28) Jesus is being crucified, 29) Joseph of Arimathea demands the body from Pilate, 30) Christ is taken down from the Cross by the Apostles and the Holy Women; the Saints layer - 31) Saint Mercurius and Saint Artemius, 32) Saint John Damascene, 33) Saint Eustatius, 34) Saint Cosmas, 35) Saint Procopius, 36) Saint Theodorus Tiron and Saint Theodorus Stratilatus, 37) Saint Vlas, 38) Saint George, 39) Sain John Climacus, Saint Teoctist, Saint Sava and Saint Euthymius, 40) Saint Peter, 41) Saint Paul, 42) Saint Sergius, 43) Saint Anthony, Saint Paul of Thebes, Saint Nil and Saint Ephrem the Syrian, 44) Saint Demetrius, 45) Saint Paul Latros, 46) Saint David of Thessaloniki, 47) Saint Paul of Xiropotamos, 48) Saint Athanasius from Athos, 49) Saint Peter from Athos and finally 50) Christ ancestors, 51) Holy Mother with Child, 52) Christ Emperor.

Even if the Protaton church does not have a narthex, the iconographic program was adapted in such a manner that the hermit saints (which are usually placed inside the narthex) could be included within this space.

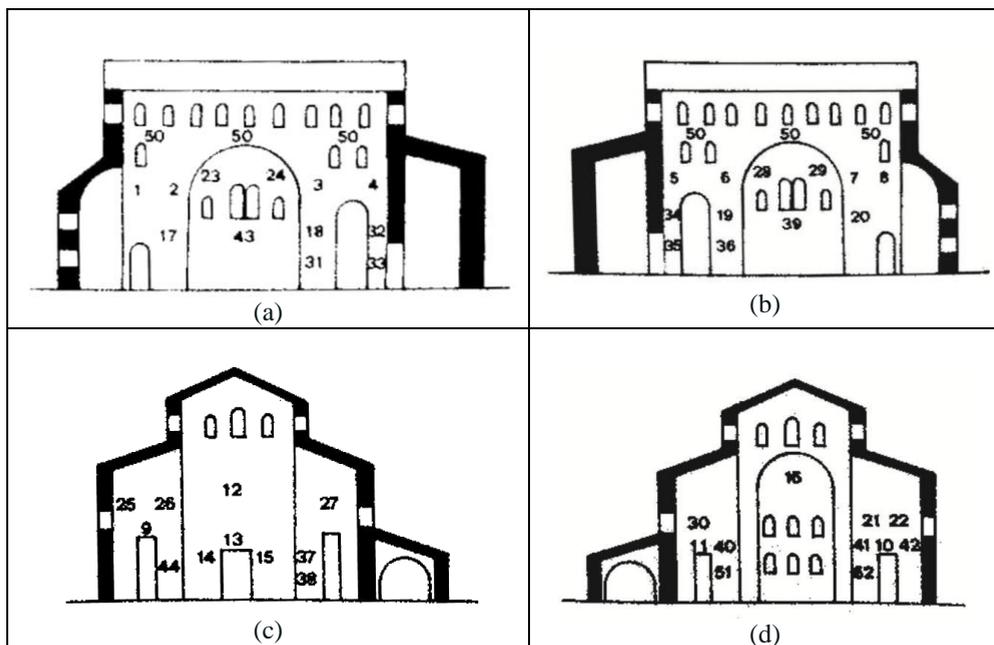


Figure 3. Protaton: (a) Southern transverse section, (b) Northern transverse section, (c) Western longitudinal section, (d) Eastern longitudinal section.

4. Conclusions

The themes of the iconographical program of the mural painting from Protaton Church are closely connected and present a theological complexity and compositional coherence with the architectural space (atypical for Mount Athos). Iconographic innovations abound, such as the *Christ Anapesson* but also original depictions both from the Old Testament (the scene with the ‘three youngsters in the fire furnace’, ‘Moses and Aaron in the Testimony Tent’) and the New Testament (The 12 Feasts of the liturgical year). The profound spiritual nature of the characters, with their unprecedented gaze will be unmatched at this high level by none of the artists of the Byzantine painting. The style of the famous painter proved to be for generations of painters from the Macedonian school but also later, for the Post-Byzantine and Neo-Byzantine art an inexhaustible source of inspiration that provided other works of great artistic value and shows once more that preserving the tradition was alive and continuous to our times.

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