



The most significant values
of the cultural and natural heritage

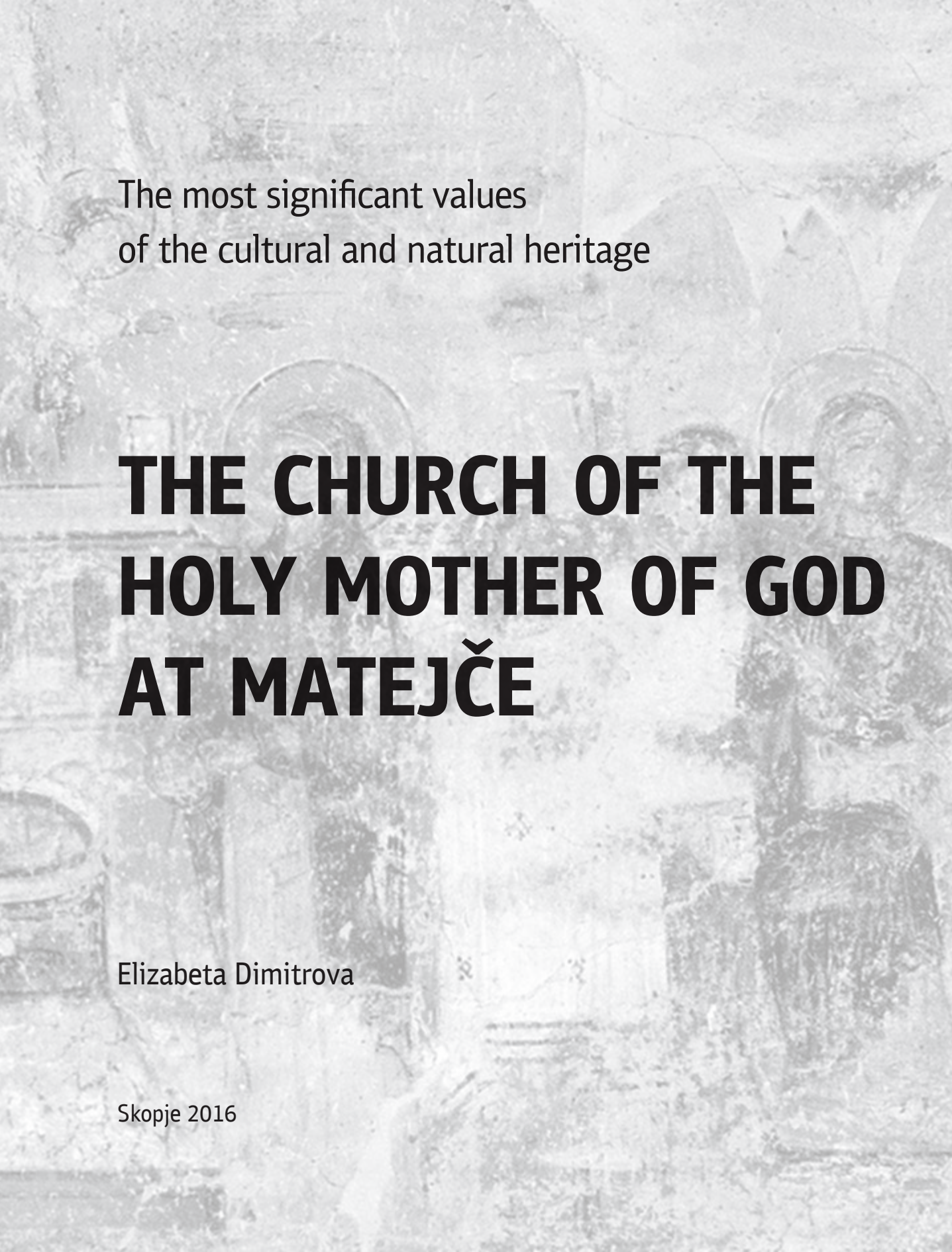
THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD AT MATEJČE



Elizabeta Dimitrova

This work has been published
with the financial support of the
Government of the Republic of Macedonia





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Elizabeta Dimitrova

Skopje 2016

FOREWORD

MACEDONIAN CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

Over the past 4.5 million years since the creation of Earth, the ancestor of the modern man, “the wise man - Homo sapiens”, appearing on the African continent 150,000 years before this day, quickly settled throughout the territories of the Middle East, Asia and Europe.

His cultural evolution is recorded in the Republic of Macedonia, as well.

While travelling through the prehistoric era of the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, as well as the historical epochs of the Antiquity and the Middle Ages, man created civilizations on the soil of the Republic of Macedonia by introducing and using the natural resources. He established the magnificent kingdoms of the Agrianians, Paeonia, Pelagonia, Lyncestis, Macedonia, and the principalities of Deuriopus, Dessaretia and the Penestae.

The Roman Empire, Byzantine, the medieval states - all left a powerful civilizational imprint.

The belief in the natural phenomena, followed by the belief in the many gods, to finally worship our only God - all left indelible cultural traces.

All this enormous cultural and natural heritage of the Republic of Macedonia was subject of the capital project of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, “Publications of the most significant values of the cultural and natural heritage,” carried out by the Cultural Heritage Protection Office.

130 monographs featuring the Archaeological Heritage, Sacral heritage, the Treasures of the churches and monasteries in Macedonia and the Natural heritage were created.

Macedonia - the high forest land in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula, as the name suggests, furrowed by the deep valleys of the Vardar tributaries and the river Drim, adorned with the blue - green waters of Lake Ohrid, Prespa and Dojran, with the proud giants Kozuv, Shar Mountain, Korab and Jablanica, Selecka Mountain and other mountain ranges, today lights 130 torches of its own, as well as the world's, cultural and natural heritage; a legacy to preserve, use wisely and pass on to future generations of the Macedonian road to eternity.

Prof. Viktor Lilchikj Adams, Ph.D.

THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD AT MATEJČE

Located on the ancient road that leads from Skopje to Kumanovo, on the green slopes of the Skopska Crna Gora Mountain, the church dedicated to the Holy Mother of God near the village of Matejče is one of the most remarkable mediaeval sacral edifices created on the territory of present-day Macedonia. Situated in the barely accessible and harsh areas of the montane massif, far away from the mediaeval urban centers, the church of the Matejče monastery is enumerated among the monuments featured by extraordinary artistic attainments that reflect the highlights of mediaeval painterly production in the territory of the Republic of Macedonia. With the harmony of the architectural masses, the wealth of thematic components of the painted ensemble, as well as the refined stylistic handwriting of the masters, the church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče deserves a prominent place on the pages of the great encyclopaedia dedicated to the mediaeval cultural heritage of Macedonia. Center of a prolific literary creation, precious library of old books and manuscripts eternally lost in the merciless whirlpool of time, as well as dwelling place of renowned intellectuals and writers, the monastery of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče flourished as a powerful religious location until the beginning of the 20th century when it was deserted and left alone in the mountain elegy, north-west of Kumanovo.

In the ecological peacefulness of the Skopska Crna Gora Mountain, amidst the untouched nature of the montane horizon, the church of the Matejče monastery, defiant towards

Western facade



the harshness of time and resistant in its existence throughout the centuries, still keeps the most noble echoes of the artistic traditions from the mid-14th century after having outlived great historic tragedies, natural disasters, as well as human destruction. Devastated by military conflicts, demolished by the merciless walk of time and left in ruins as an abandoned fortress of oblivion, the temple dedicated to the Holy Mother of God at the village of Matejče maintained to outlast the dramatic periods and outmatch bitter temptations, enduring as a magnificent monument of victory over historical evanescence. However, the disturbing nightmare of bygone centuries has devastated the connective tissue of the architectural corpus and caused serious wounds to the sensitive facture of the fresco painting in the church; due to the demolition of the dome structures and the damage done to the vaulting, the fresco painting of the upper zones of the decorative programme has been irretrievably lost, as well as its noble messages, eternally scattered through the severe winds of time.

The long periods of negligence, as well as the lack of opportunities for adequate interventions on the devastated parts of the edifice, were the main causes for the merciless destruction of the fresco painting which was continuously and helplessly losing its painterly glow under the burden of atmospheric conditions. In the misty mornings melted in the coldness of the green montane horizons, the ancient temple has spent too much time waking up in the loneliness of its own melancholic desolation; despite the skilful reconstructive procedures undertaken for renovation of the architecture, as well as the efforts for conservation of the frescoes, the recent military conflicts from the beginning of the 20th century worsened the highly vulnerable situation of this extraordinary monument. Nevertheless, with the colossal dimensions of the edifice, the inventive design of the architectural matrix, the encyclopaedic scope of the painterly programme, as well as the aristocratic manner of the painterly discourse of the masters, the church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče is still one of the most remarkable monuments of mediaeval artistic creativity on the territory of Macedonia.

The khtetors

The church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče is a khtetorial endowment of the energetic Helena, the wife of the Serbian ruler Stefan Dušan, one of the most powerful women in the history of medieval Balkans. Erected around the year 1345, before the pronouncement of the Empire and fresco painted in the period 1348-1352, in the time of the greatest political rise of Tsar Dušan, the temple dedicated to the Virgin was built in the area of Žegligovo, the so called "terra sacra" of the Nemanjides family, as one of the largest sacral edifices in the territory of the Balkans. The mausoleum character of the building, accentuated by the monumental dimension of the edifice, the specific design of the architectural matrix, the five-dome arrangement of the vaulting, as well as the program concept of the fresco decoration, speaks in favour of the ambitious efforts of the donor to create a representative location for her eternal resting place, worthy of the grandeur of her historic role in earthly life. By choosing the existent remnants of an older sanctuary, by selecting a very complex architectural conception, as well as by engaging the most renowned painting atelier on the territory of her state, the mighty Helena sponsored the most remarkable sacral monument



Commissioners' scene (detail)

dated in the reign of her husband, Emperor Dušan. Representative of the progressive tendencies in the development of Paleologan architecture and, according to the dimensions, a real colossus among mediaeval edifices, a true pictorial encyclopaedia of the program diapason of Byzantine painting and a masterpiece of the courtly style from the mid-14th century, the church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče is one of the most ambitious achievements of the highest khetorial initiatives in the history of mediaeval artistic production.

The luxurious khetorial scene depicted in the eastern part of the monument, which, besides the image of Empress Helena, encompasses the members of the ruling family, as well as the portrait of the leading church authority of the Serbian state, visualizes the festal assembly of the most powerful figures of the Empire and the Church, united in a representative picture of the firm cohesion of political potency and ecclesiastical rule in mediaeval Serbia. The funereal context of the commissioners' scene, accentuated by its functional inclusion in the Deisis composition, as well as the political messages of the sanctity of the ruling dynasty, manifested through the cohabitation of the imperial court and the Orthodox Church, resulted in a specific arrangement of the depicted characters. Due to the administrative privileges of King Uroš over the territory on which his mother Helena has decided to built her mausoleum, the young ruler – as a governor of the region and his mother, Empress Helena, as a donor - cooperatively hold the replica of the newly erected temple; in the line-up of the commissioners' scene, they are accompanied by Emperor Dušan – as the one who signed the inaugural charter and as a supreme ruler of the Empire.

Regretfully, due to the demolition caused to the frescoes which covers portions of the commissioners' scene, the centuries have erased the features of the beautiful face of Helena; however, her glamorous garment sewn of soft red fabric, ornamented with stylized embroidery and precious stones, visualizes the firm figure of the empress, her noble posture, as well as her unpretentiously elegant bodily gesture. The bright veil which can be seen under the crown covers her hair and frames the oval of the face – today heavily damaged. Similarly, King Uroš and Emperor Dušan have lost their portrait characteristics due to the destruction of the frescoes; however, they have kept their noble statures and luxurious costumes, underneath which one can notice the distinguished, corpulent figure of the father, as well as the gentle, almost childish corporeality of the son. Accompanied by the great martyr Saint Stephan, the traditional protector of the Serbian state and its rulers, associated with the portrait of the Serbian patriarch Ioanikios and followed by the modest image of the old monk Macarios, the abbot of the newly found monastery, the rulers within the khetorial arrangement in Matejče are celebrating not only the completion of their commission but the achievement of the supreme harmony of their empire as well. The image of the Virgin Hodegetria, as a patron saint of the temple, the inclusion of the figure of Saint John the Baptist and the depiction of Christ's portrait as a finishing touch to the donors' scene, are, by all means, an implication of the Deisis scheme – as a transparent allusion to the funereal function of the edifice. The architectural structure of the building components, the specific ground plan and the spatial concept of the edifice, the program context of the painted decoration, as well as the iconographic features of the frescoes – these are the main testimonies to the funerary dedication of the Matejče church.

The design of the edifice

On the replica proudly held by the donors within the commissioners' scene, one can see only traces of the one-time luxurious glow of the edifice, which, despite the damages and demolitions, has managed to keep the harmonious proportion of the exterior, as well as the perfect spatial disposition of the architectural interior. With the monumental dimensions, the remarkable outer line, the powerful silhouette, as well as the glamorous elaboration of the five-domed register, the construction of the church at Matejče is a true representative of the most remarkable traditions of architectonic legacy of the Paleologan era. According to its architectural features, the church of the Holy Mother of God is a crucifix edifice, with a narthex and five-domed vaulting. The eastern arm of the cross-in-square ground plan is elongated, thus the altar space with the two subsidiary chapels is accentuated in the base of the building. The central dome has a twelve-sided drum and is positioned on four massive pillars. The smaller domes, shaped as octagons, are located in the angles of the edifice – the eastern ones are situated over the protessis and the diaconicon while the western ones vault the western bays of the narthex. The narthex is separated from the main architectural body of the church by a tribelone placed over two pillars and two stone columns decorated with modest architectural sculpture. The narthex communicates with the eastern chapels through an ambulatory, which, together with the subsidiary chapels and the twin-domed narthex, forms an architectural enclosure around the naos as the main core of the building.



South facade



View from the south-east

The church is also vaulted with barrel vaults, as well as with cross-shaped vaults, situated on the walls, on the pillars, as well as on the pilasters in the interior of the edifice. The temple is built of pieces of semi-chopped stone, while the more representative building opus, made of stone slabs and bricks, is applied in the configuration of the altar apse and the domes. The facades are articulated with a system of lesenae, which, in the exterior of the building reflect the true picture of the inner arrangement of the constructive elements. At the same time, the lesenae frame the window perforations, while the modes brickwork is applied on the tympanums of all four facades, as well as on the surface of the drum of the central dome. The powerful system of vaults, the monumental pillars under the dome, the spacious altar, the small, intimate chapels with a role of protessis and diaconicon, as well as the unity of the interior, in which the narthex is completely integrated into the naos, determinate this church as an edifice marked by harmonious architectonic principles and almost perfect proportionality of the functional components. The harmony of the proportions and the monolithic contour of the edifice speak in favour of the concept to create an ouster yet monumental and powerful building dedicated to the sacred protector of the great and centuries-long Nemanjides family - the conquerors of Macedonia, the warriors and rivals of Byzantium, as well as the keepers of the grand orthodox traditions of artistic legacy of the Balkans. Therefore, within the eastern part of the temple, a segment of the older edifice built on the site was preserved, noticeable in the semi-circular portion of the south wall of the protessis, as well as in the originally preserved joint between the older building phase and the new layer of mortar, evident in the structure of the west wall of the prothesis. By keeping this small part of the older edifice the ancient sanctuary was actually incorporated in the new building, which, with the impressive dimensions, as well as the luxurious architectonic construction, has become one of the most representative sacral edifices dedicated to the Virgin.

The architectural ground plan and the spatial structure of the church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče are a product of building innovations from the late Byzantine era and represent one of the later examples of the type of "cluster" churches, the genesis of which should be looked for in the Metropolitan production, while the development can be acknowledged through the influences from artistic centers such as Artha, Mystra and Thessalonica. Subliming the experiences of their older colleagues who erected the churches of the Virgin Ljeviška in Prizren (1307-1308), Saint George in Staro Nagoričino (1312-1313) and the Holy Virgin at Gračanica (ca. 1315), the builders of Matejče created a representative specimen of a cluster church which, with its monumental corpus, had to surpass the earlier edifices, reflecting the luxurious grandiosity of the Emperor Dušan mausoleum, the temple of the Holy Archangels at Prizren. The large dimensions of the building, the five-dome matrix of the vaulting, the twelve-sided drum of the central dome, the five-sided apse of the altar, the specific system of constructive elements, as well as the characteristic articulation of the facades – these are the components that associate the Matejče church with the Prizren monument. The concurrent chronological references of both edifices also testify to the almost simultaneous erection of Empress Helena's mausoleum and her husband Dušan's funerary temple – both built in the spirit of the monumental concepts and progressive architectonic tendencies, related to the similar design of their constructive, as well as decorative patterns. The existence of a marble tomb, which, according to some travelogues from the beginning of the 20th century has been located in the eastern part of the Matejče church,

close to the commissioners' scene, as well as the heraldic representation of a two-headed eagle depicted on the lid of the stone sarcophagus – these are indications of the accomplished funerary function of the temple. However the narrative legends of the Empress Helena, who lived to a ripe old age and died at the church in Matejče, are still circulating among the people of the region and will further remain in the vast sphere of unsubstantiated historical speculations.

The painted programme

The grandiose panorama of the painted ensemble of the church which, by the encyclopaedic diapason of the themes has surpassed the repertoire of all previously fresco painted arrangements in the territory of Macedonia, encompasses the illustration of fourteen cycles as well as the heavily damaged fresco programme in the dome register, the luxuriously assembled liturgical motifs in the altar space and the multitude of saintly images – bishops, warriors, hymnographers, martyrs, eremites and monks. Within the program configuration of the ensemble one can notice a number of elements characteristic of the decoration of the monumental temples, yet the main accent of the frescoes is placed on the exposition of dynastic ideology, as well as the funereal context of the depicted themes. The thematic fundus of the painting is arranged in accordance to the existent canons related to the symbolic connotation of each part of the sacral edifice, thus with the perfect assemblage of the structural components within the picturesquely elaborated church interior, a painterly micro cosmos was created, impressive by its dimensions and breath-taking by its aesthetic qualities. Representing the largest painted ensemble on the territory of 14th



Painting on the south wall of the altar



Officiating Church Fathers



Painting in the altar

century Macedonia and the second largest in the territory of the entire Balkans, the fresco arrangement of the church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče is the key monument of the supreme painterly attainments of its own epoch.

Due to the wide thematic range of the painted programme and as a result of the utilization of specific iconographic schemes, the authors of the fresco ensemble in the church of the Holy Mother of God in Matejče managed to create a work of art marked not only by the picturesqueness of the abundant visual contents but moreover they have produced a colourful panorama accentuated by the authenticity and inventiveness of their unique talent and expression. In the context of the symbolic constellation of the painted arrangement and the idea of the church decoration as a visual replica of the Heavenly Kingdom, at the foot of the drum of the central dome the painters



Painting in the prothesis



have situated the busts of the Forty martyrs of Sebaste who, profoundly dedicated to the faith, should have strengthened the "sky of the church". Represented on the most vulnerable portion of the church building, they have been pictured in order to remind believers of the sacrificial martyrdoms necessary for the establishment of the church of Christ. Within the same concept, in the altar, the painters have depicted Christ who establishes the Eucharistic sacrament in the Communion of the apostles, dressed in a festive white liturgical garment as a symbol of his role as a universal patriarch of the church institution. In the lowest zone of the altar decoration Christ's Eucharistic sacrifice is being

Painting on the north wall of the prothesis



Painting in the apse of the diaconicon

commemorated by the festive processions of the Church fathers who are represented officiating in a liturgical ceremony. By participating in the most solemn ritual of the ecclesiastic institution, they contribute to the idea of Christ who, through his beneficial sacrifice, has established the liturgical service, mystically repetitive in the symbolic ritual of the church fathers.

The subsidiary chapels, although compact according to their spatial volume, are decorated with quite an elaborated programme. The decoration of the protessis is thematically dedicated to Christ's incarnation illustrated by John Damascene's Christmas Hymn, as well as the Apocryphal life of the Virgin depicted through thirteen episodes. Complemented with the rare composition depicting the Rite of the Proskomide, in which Saint Basil the Great and Saint John Chrysostom prepare the Amnos for the liturgical service, as well as by the impressive portraits of 15 renowned representatives of the orthodox church sees, the painted decoration of the protessis illustrates the notion of Christ's incarnation as a prerequisite for the salvation of mankind, accomplished through the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Saviour evoked in the ecclesiastical ritual. Besides the vivid illustration of the cycle dedicated to the Holy Archangel Michael and the portraits of 15 orthodox bishops, the fresco decoration of the diaconicon also encompasses the composition of the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria, accompanied with liturgical processions. Representing a counter-part to the scene of the Rite of the Proskomide depicted in the protessis, the image of the Alexandrian bishop in the diaconicon encloses the theological idea of the sacrificial character of Christ's incarnation. In that context, within the concept of the painted decoration of the altar, the figure of Christ from bishop Peter's vision is depicted as a counter-part to the Amnos from



Portion of the painting on the north wall of the naos



Christ talking to the women of Jerusalem on his way to Golgotha

the Rite of the Proskomide, depicted in the prothesis. In that manner, within the sanctuary of the church, the traditional Eucharistic and liturgical themes were ennobled by authentically conceived and inventively illustrated program components.

The painted decoration of the naos is not completely preserved; the frescoes in the area under the dome are completely destroyed, as well as the frescoes executed in the higher registers of the side walls. Certain portions of the fresco ensemble depicted in the lower zones of the naos are also heavily damaged. Contrary to the almost complete destruction of the compositions belonging to the cycle of the Great Feasts, the elaborated conception of the cycle of Christ's Public Ministry, the thematic content and spatial arrangement of which on the walls and arches of the naos was determined by the liturgical services, is represented by 12 preserved scenes. Starting from the textual synopsis, the painters have divided the described events into two cycles – the first one refers to Christ's miraculous deeds and his healings with scenes depicted in a sequence along the side walls of the church, while the second one is dedicated to Christ's post-resurrectional appearances with episodes illustrated in the altar bay. Within the illustration of the evangelic stories that describe the Passion, besides the traditional compositions encompassed by



Martyrdom of the apostle Bartholomew



VII oikos of the Akathistos of the Virgin

the structure of the Passion cycle, some less characteristic scenes were also included, depicted according to the texts of certain apocrypha. The arrangement of the compositions of the Passion cycle is appropriate to the verses of the prayers read within the services performed on Good Friday, while the chronological sequence of the events, within the adequate liturgical order, resulted in the cyclic course of its visual conception: its illustration starts and ends in the altar – the space where the liturgical services evocating the passion of Christ have been performed.

The patron feast of the temple of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče is depicted with the illustration of the Dormition cycle, arranged in five scenes on the western wall of the naos, with an iconographical structure that sublimates the descriptions of the events found in a number of apocryphal texts. The illustration of the verses of the Akathistos of the Virgin, the exposition of which expands on the walls of the altar, as well as the southern wall of the church, follows the vertical layout of the represented cycles and is situated beneath the scenes of the Passion cycle; hence, the illustrated verses of the Akathistos hymn, in which the Virgin is celebrated as a mediator of Christ's incarnation and a dwelling place of the embodied God, are situated beneath the scenes in which Christ is shown as a Saviour sent to the people, i.e. the role of the Virgin is



XII oikos and XII kontakion of the Akathistos of the Virgin

glorified due to her function in the incarnation of the One who suffered for the sins of mankind and thus paid the dues for all the sufferings in the world. As a counterpart to the Akathistos hymn, on the northern wall of the naos one can see the cycle dedicated to the Acts and Martyrdom of the Apostles, which within the program arrangement of the fresco painting, was located in the register beneath the Passion cycle since it represents the deeds and sufferings of Christ's closest followers. On the surface of the pillars in the naos the cycle of the Sermons of John the Baptist was executed as well as the illustration of the Legend of King Abgar, the only known cycle illustrating this motif in the mural painting of the Byzantine cultural sphere. The first zone of the decoration of the naos was reserved for depiction of the saintly figures: holy warriors, healers, apostles and hymnographers, while the busts of the martyrs were represented in the register above the cycle of the Passion of Christ. In that manner the painted programme of the naos, in the horizontal zones of which the fresco cycles dedicated to Christ as a founder of the faith, as well as a Saviour of mankind were depicted, was complemented with the images of the saints who have acted and suffered for the faith.

The painted programme in the narthex of the temple is based upon complex theological and ideological grounds and encompasses: the compositions of the cycle dedicated to the Ecumenical councils, complemented with the scene of the "Council of Emperor Dušan (from 1347)," the



Figures of the eremites in the narthex



Cycle of the Ecumenical Councils (detail)



Tree of the Nemanjides Dynasty

episodes belonging to the Vita of Saint Anthony the Great, the scenes of the mini-cycle of the Prophet Elijah, as well as the two genealogical stems – the Tree of Jesse and the composite Tree of the Nemanjides Dynasty, while in the lowest register the saintly figures have been arranged. The ideologically and politically motivated iconographic structure of the genuinely conceived Genealogical stem with the portraits of the Serbian, Byzantine and Bulgarian rulers, depicted as a counterpart to the Tree of Jesse, explicates the legitimacy of Emperor Dušan's pretensions to the Byzantine and Bulgarian thrones and represents a true novelty in the program context of the fresco decoration. As the Tree of Jesse represents a picture of Christ's genealogy through which the idea of the incarnation of the Saviour is celebrated, so the Tree of the Nemanjides, Comneni and Aseni dynasties, within the idea of comparison of their predecessors with those of Christ, glorifies the notion of the sanctity of the Nemanjides ruling house. Accentuated by the inclusion of the members of the Byzantine family of Comneni, as well as the Bulgarian court of Aseni, which through marital relations have become a part of the genealogy of the Nemanjides, the Tree of the Serbian sovereigns in Matejče is the most authentic example of a visualized dynastical ideology in the history of mediaeval painting. The figures of the monks, eremites, martyrs, male and female martyrs, as members of the gallery of saintly images depicted in the lowest fresco register, complement and enclose the iconographic programme of the fresco painting in the narthex; hence the glorification of the true faith of Christ was completed with the images of those who have suffered for the belief with their corporal and spiritual martyrdom.



Saints Marena, Helena and Constantine



Saint Kiriaki



The Tree of Jesse



XI oikos of the Akathistos of the Virgin

The aristocratic style of the masters

The colossal panorama of the painted ensemble in the temple of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče is a work of art of the most representative artistic studio from the mid-14th century and is enumerated among the most remarkable artistic products of the atelier led by the master John Theorianos. Together with the fresco decoration of the church of Saint Nicholas in the village of Ljuboten, near Skopje (1344-1345), the painting executed on the second floor of the narthex in the cathedral of Saint Sophia in Ohrid (1345-1346) and the fresco arrangement decorating the walls of the exonarthex of Archbishop Gregory I (ca. 1350), the fresco ensemble in Matejče belongs to the so-called *courtly stylistic expression* which, as an elite painterly trend, chronologically followed the Paleologan academic manner from the opening decades of the 14th century. Bright by its visual spirit and ceremonial by its expression, rich in the represented forms and luxurious in the diapason of painterly inventions, the fresco painting of the temple of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče represents a leading artistic achievement of the painterly atelier coordinated by the great master John Theorianos. The carefully balanced compositional structure of the depicted vistas, the refined modeling of the forms captured by the unimposing plasticity of painterly expression, the sensibility of the saintly images ennobled with lyrical energy of the poetic painterly manner, the gracious dynamism of the aristocratic rhythm of the figures, as well as the bright, translucent coloristic spectrum with cold depth of chromatic harmonies – these are the synonyms for the creative approach of John Theorianos' artistic discourse, luxuriously enlivened on the walls of the Matejče church.



Christ preaching on the deeds of John the Baptist



John the Baptist Preaching



I oikos, I kontakion, II oikos and II kontakion of the Akathistos of the Virgin

The perfect balance of the spatial arrangement of the painterly components, the proportional disposition of the compositional masses within the coherently structured iconographic assemblage of the scenes, the inventively configured architectural coulisses in the backdrop of the skilfully conceived scenic ambient, the lyrical diapason of aristocratic mobility of the saintly figures, as well as the esoteric gamut of colourful resonances – these are the most recognizable features of the authors of the Matejče fresco ensemble. The unimposing protocol of the motion, the festive ceremony of the gestures, the sensual nobleness of the postures, as well as the refined gracefulness of the movements in the depiction of the saintly images – these are the specific features that place Matejče on the throne of the best achievements of John Theorianos' painting atelier. Managing to visualize an atmosphere of a festive serenity permeated with a parade rhythm of a vivid ceremony, the authors of the Matejče fresco ensemble created a grandiose visual poem ennobled with delicate optical effects and a subtle coloristic structure. In the lyrical world of their poetic inspiration one can see as the archbishops move gracefully in the solemn processions of the liturgical ritual, the noblemen walking ceremonially within the visual rhythm of



Christ giving the cloth to King Abgar's emissary Saint Thimon from the painting of the diaconicon



Monk Macarios

the Christmas hymn celebrating the Nativity, the Archangel Michael floating bodiless performing his miraculous deeds, the procession accompanying the tormented Christ walking slowly towards the hill of Golgotha, the apostolic missionaries arriving with the parade pacing in the cities of



The Crucifixion

the Antiquity, and the Emperors speaking triumphantly within the festive atmosphere of the Ecumenical councils.

The immaculate consistency in the spatial organization of the compositional elements, the carefully balanced structure of the scenic components, the poetic refinement of the vistas, the bright coloristic gamut and the cold nuances of the pale diapason of translucent shades – these are the basic painterly principles of John Theorianos' atelier in the creation of the aristocratic stylistic expression of his artistic idiolect. The noble radiance of the saintly portraits, the moderate diapason of unpretentious bodily gesture of the figures, as well as the inconspicuous resonance of emotional expression of the characters have reached the climax of their painterly exposition in Matejče, enumerating the fresco arrangement of the church among the masterpieces of the lyrical trends of the 14th century. An enchanting colossus among the sacral edifices of the Paleologan era, as well as a visual sonnet of the Late Byzantine mural painting, the church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče is the most representative work of art of the imperial cultural production in the territory of Macedonia.

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Published by

Cultural Heritage Protection Office
Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia

For the publisher

Prof. Viktor Lilchikj Adams, Ph.D.

Editor

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Translation from Macedonian

Elizabeta Dimitrova, PH.D.

English translation proofread by

Jason Bradford Miko

Photos

Mishko Tutkovski

Graphic design and printing

DATAPONS SKOPJE

Copies

500



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Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia
Cultural Heritage Protection Office

CIP - Каталогизација во публикација

Национална и универзитетска библиотека "Св. Климент Охридски", Скопје

726.54.033.2(497.711)

930.85(497.7)

DIMITROVA, Elizabeta

The church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče / Elizabeta
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(The most significant values of the cultural and natural heritage)

Foreword: Macedonian cultural and natural heritage / Viktor Lilchikj;
стр. 6. - Библиографија: стр. 28

ISBN 978-608-4549-36-9

а) Црква "Св. Богородица" - Матејче б) Културно наследство -
Македонија
COBISS.MK-ID 101577226

