



The most significant values
of the cultural and natural heritage

THE CHURCH OF SAINT PANTELEIMON AT NEREZI



Elizabeta Dimitrova

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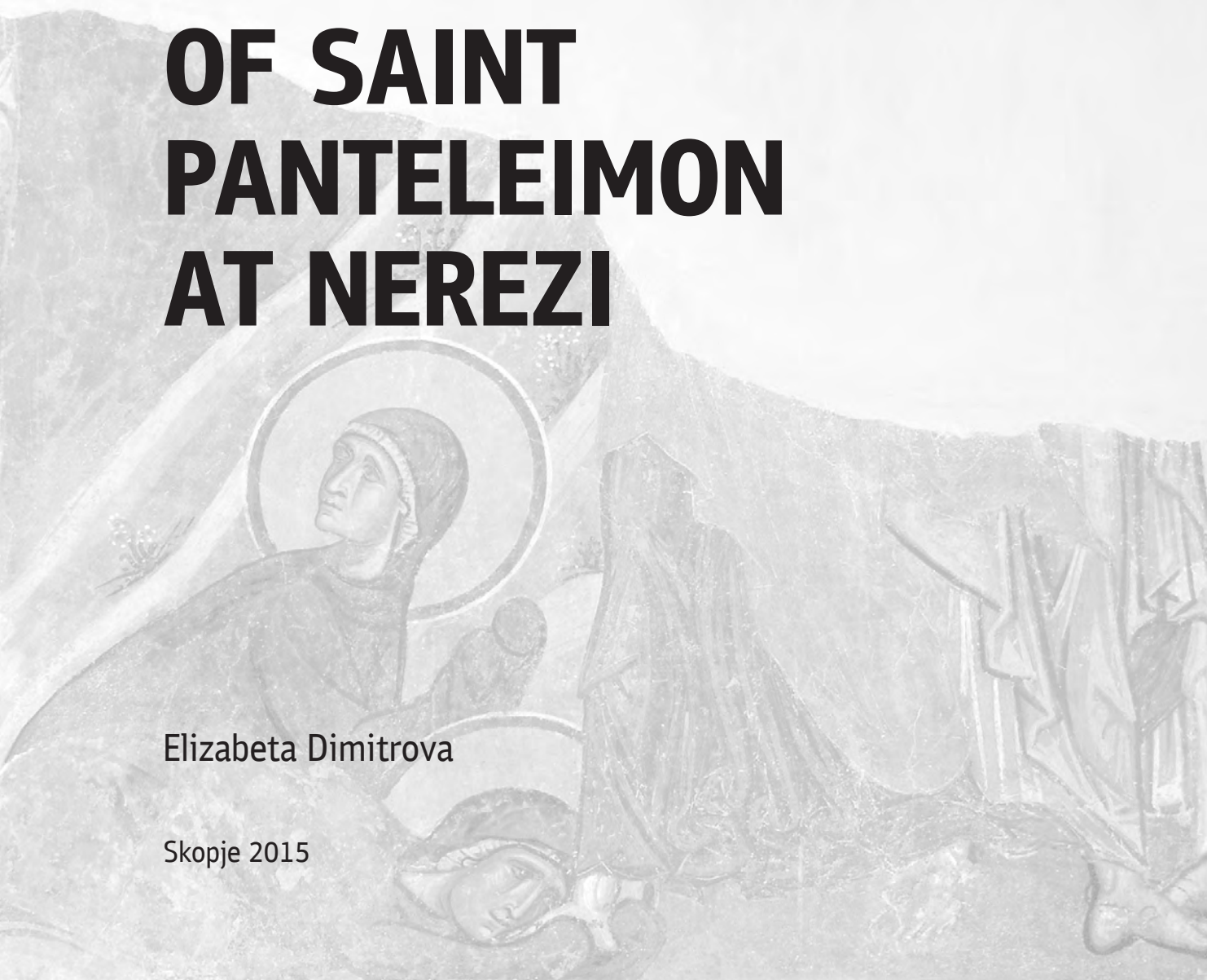


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Elizabeta Dimitrova

Skopje 2015



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 SAINT PANTELEIMON AT NEREZI

During the period which represents the climax of social progress, intellectual evolution and remarkable cultural achievements of the Komnenian Age, the Macedonian territory became the cradle of the church dedicated to Saint Panteleimon in the village of Gorno Nerezi at Skopje as one of the most representative artistic monuments from the medieval cultural production. Created by some of the most talented Byzantine artists from the period of the second half of the 12th century and produced by a member of the highest court nobility and the mainstream political elite at that time, the church of Saint Panteleimon stands as a precious reflection of the overall rise of the Empire in the refined medium of supreme artistic creation.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, view from south-west

Positioned on the high plateau of the mountain ridge which offered a lavish panoramic view of the medieval Skopje, the temple of Nerezi with its harmonious architectural forms adorned this high geographical position until the year 1555 when a strong earthquake caused cracks in the sensible structure of the central dome, as well as in the conchal segment of the apse. With the commitments of the local master builders and some of the skillful painters from the mid-16th century, the church was repaired, i.e., the central dome positioned above the nave was consolidated, the apsidal conch was strengthened, and the painting which had been devastated due to the damage of the upper parts of the building, was replaced with a new fresco decoration created by post-Byzantine painters. Thus, with a span of four centuries, ever since its creation, the church has turned into a visual monument of two eras since its lower zones shimmered with the stylish qualities authentic to Byzantine frescoes whereas the paintings in the dome, the area under the dome and partly in the alter apse, emanate the modest features of the artists of the late medieval era.

In the 19th century, during the cultural revival of the newly created Macedonian aristocracy whose sponsors' obligations were more a matter of social prestige rather than aesthetic orientation, the interior of the temple was equipped with a new decoration which covered the medieval frescoes with its modest artistic range until the twenties of the last century. After the removal of this last layer, created by local painters with unexceptional talent and moderate artistic abilities, the painted decoration of the church received its final visual exposure which was admired by visitors and travelers, researchers and wanderers, as well as writers and itinerant poets for almost a century: quite a solid opus of the late medieval painters exhibited in the upper zones and the exceptional artistic creation of the Byzantine masters that adorns the lower zones of the temple interior. Creating a new paradigm for the exceptional aesthetic achievements of the medieval painting, the authentic fresco painting of Nerezi has become synonymous with the unique artistic imagination embodied in a superb painterly product unrivalled in the entire cultural production of the Byzantine era.

THE KHTETOR OF NEREZI - FROM AN IDEA FOR A CAPITAL MONUMENT TO A CREATION OF SUPREME ARTISTIC ACHIEVEMENT

Proud of his endeavour as a khtetor, which resulted in a lavish five-domed church edifice, the producer of the Nerezi temple left us a written confirmation of his donor engagement in the form of a stone lintel with precious data placed on the doorway leading from the narthex to the nave. Devoting his endowment to Saint Panteleimon, the noble healer and tireless advocate of health, the martyr of the times of the great persecution of Crypto-Christians, Prince Alexios, son of Theodora, “the one born in the porphyry” and grandson of Emperor Alexios, the founder of the Komnenian Dynasty, “initialed” the successfully realized donor project, whose architectural phase ended in 1164, in the stone lintel. Successor to Komnenian court elite, born in a harmonious marriage of his mother with the handsome Constantine Angelos, Prince Alexios, the donor of Nerezi, exhibits not only an extravagant education and social realization in his portfolio but also an important historical and political reference; he is the genetic link that connects two consecutive ruling houses: the Komnenian Dynasty which ambitiously and sovereignly ruled for a century with the help of the successfully managed military and administrative system with that of the Angeloi - a family that bore the heavy burden of the imperial collapse at the beginning of the 13th century. Born and bred in the urban spirit of the court circles of Constantinople, accompanying the imperial authorities in their diplomatic missions and participating in delicate dogmatic debates initiated by the intellectual elite in mid-12th century, Prince Alexios owned a professional portfolio which encompasses a representative collection of his skills, talents and accomplishments as an influential, reputable, respected and well - established political individual. As a Constantinopolitan native, and as a member of the powerful social circles that created the political, spiritual and cultural climate of the Empire by favouring the metropolitan matrices, Alexios Komnenos is a typical promoter of the imperial strategies to spread the range of influence of Constantinople to remote geographic zones extended far inland on the territory of the Byzantine provinces.

Collaborating with his close family members, who with high probability, in the sixties of the 12th century held offices in medieval Skopje, Prince Alexios received a gift of substantial property situated on the upper posts above the city, where he had a church erected following the metropolitan models with its representative forms and execution. Built in 1164, with a complex cruciform plan, five-domed vaulting, subsidiary chapels and harmoniously designed façade walls, the church dedicated to Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi has grown up as a noble offshoot of Constantinopolitan architectural tradition, beyond the current horizons of the existing metropolitan artistic influence. Without any greater doubt, designed by a leading mason from Constantinople and painted a few seasons later by an undeniably mega-talented painter with an obvious artistic education obtained in the capital, the Nerezi church is a product of the Metropolitan artistic parameters, replicated on the Macedonian territory. With its high-quality spatial congruence, the innovative solution of the architectural ground plan and the articulation of the building components, Nerezi captures the omnipotent spirit of the Byzantine master masons disciplined in the elite schools of the imperial capital. Moreover, owing to the inventive constellation of the iconographic programme in the painted decoration and the mastermind

of extrapolated imagination in the depicted themes, as well as the emotional resonance of the passionate artistic expression of the masters, the Nerezi church deserves the epithet of the best Constantinopolitan artistic achievement of 12th century, if not, of the entire development of Byzantine visual culture.

ON THE ARCHITECTURAL QUALITIES OF THE CHURCH BUILDING

The architectural design of the church of Saint Panteleimon has the features of an inventively composed, rationally configured and harmoniously accomplished building solution. The main attribute concerning the visual complex of the building components could be summarized by the catchphrase 'Constantinopolitan modulate' due to the impressive synergy between the metropolitan and the local architectural features which constitute the structure of the Nerezi temple. The inventively assembled ground plan, the well-schemed unity of the spatial elements, as well as the proportionately handled design in the execution of the decorative components mark the Nerezi church as an artistic product permeated by the elite parameters of the leading architectural schools which were moderately propulsive to the architectural opportunities of the local building ateliers. Skillfully composed in terms of its designed ground plan, flawlessly articulated in terms of its spatial configuration and tactfully refined with its rationally organized decorative components, the church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi reflects the creative evolution in all areas of the ideologically inventive, artistically powerful and intellectually potent Komnenian era. Representing a visual creation of the architecture potentials of the prolific and dynamic 12th century, the Nerezi church emanates the picturesque energy of Constantinopolitan architectural mastery, materialized by some of the most talented masons in the region of Macedonia.

THE COMPILED CROSS-SHAPED GROUND PLAN

The way in which the ground plan of the church edifice was drafted points to a process of attentively selected customary architectural plans created for buildings with a representative social function in the Byzantine metropolis, as well as in the areas which acted as administrative seats of the provinces. In addition, the cross-shaped design of the plan, favoured by the highest secular and ecclesiastical authorities of the Empire, was chosen as the starting point in creating an architectural solution which was innovative as an artistic form and consistent as a spatial configuration. Namely, by choosing a typological variant of a cruciform ground plan in the form of a free armed cross, the designer of the church courageously stepped into a new pursuit to create a building with majestic and impeccably proportionate, as well as visually captivating spatial configuration free of the limitations of rectangular projections. However, considering the moderate size of the building (measuring 16.90 x 9.60 meters), which is largely dependent on the chosen location, the chief architect of Nerezi reasoned his ambitious idea in order to create a coherent and sustainable architectural solution. In this context, he combined the free-cross internal ground plan of the building with four



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, *Eastern exterior*

cubical chapels occupying the angles between the arms of the spatial design. Thus, the ground plan designed as a free cross pattern became inscribed in a square, shaped with an impeccable ratio of spatial dimensions and features. On the eastern side of the base, the architect arranged the altar with a monumental five-sided apse and two relatively modest three-sided side apses, while on the west side he added a rectangular narthex; hence, the plan of the building resulted in a cruciform core entering a rectangle.

Although the overall dimensions of the church deviate from the proper orthogonal projection, mainly due to the remains of the older sacral structures discovered at the site, the Nerezi temple reflects an artful amalgamation of a free-cross ground plan inscribed in a square, obtained by combining the cruciform pattern with four subsidiary compartments which are perfectly incorporated into the rectangular frame of the edifice. Thus, the designer created a binary typological architectural model, embodied in a unique structural and spatial organism which, with the coherence of its structural components, generated opportunities for a five-domed solution. Hence, the church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi has become a specimen of an authentically conceived, inventively designed and successfully implemented ecclesiastical foundation which united the two existing cross-like matrices in a new and original multi-domed sacred edifice.

THE SPATIAL STRUCTURE OF THE BUILDING

The perfect integration of the spatial components in the design of the plan of the church at Nerezi is distinctively reflected in the structure of the interior solution which depended on the functional significance of the constructive elements. Namely, the altar, the nave and the narthex of the church are perfectly connected along the longitudinal axis of the building, but their full spatial integration is disabled due to the functional needs of different architectural segments of the edifice. In other words, the altar is separated from the nave by an altar screen which "isolated" the eastern arm of the cruciform plan from the visual unity of the spatial perspective. For all these reasons, the nave of the church is T-shaped, composed of four bays (one central and three representing the arms of the cross), while the eastern section of the cruciform base "entered" the altar and "is hidden" behind the "blind" of the altar screen .

Furthermore, the integration of the eastern side chapels is extrapolated into the spatial organism of the edifice through their bi-lateral interactive communication with the main altar and the nave; they are not only accessible from the central altar space but also through the entrances on the western side leading directly to the nave. In contrast, the western side chapels, although located in the corners of the western arms of the cross, and thus belonging to the spatial structure of the nave, do not communicate with this part of the building; they can be entered only from the narthex of the church, thus and so becoming functional elements of the western part of the temple, formally disintegrated from the nave of the church. This "deconstruction" of the spatial integrity of the church is basically due to the specific role of the subsidiary compartments which had to meet the functional requirements of their spatial location. Hence, the full integration of the eastern side chapels, which functioned as a prothesis and diakonikon, is due to the need to be accessible from both the altar and nave in the interest of the particulars of the liturgical service. The western subsidiary chapels, on the other hand, are spatially disintegrated from the naos due to their functional role in certain rites that were taking place in the narthex of the edifice. Finding an arcosolium in the northwest compartment and the discovery of a pithos dug into the floor of the southwest chapel, are sufficient as evidence of the funerary purpose of the western part of the church, which is substantially confirmed by the five-domed arrangement, which crowns the architectural structure of the temple.

THE DECORATIVE DESIGN OF THE FAÇADES

The façade registers of the church of Saint Panteleimon are structured according to a building model which is consistent and coherent and reflects the proportionality of decorative components and harmony of visual expression. Both austere and harmonious in the selection of the applied elements and elegant and noble in their spatial arrangement, the decorative matrix of the façades possesses the charm of an unimposing exterior solution unladen with “flawless regularity” of the architectural consensus, yet refined with a picturesque symmetry of the selected components.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, south façade of the church

The horizontal modulation of the dome register with the elegant window perforations of the central octagonal and lateral cubical domes, the monumental brick-work niches of the nave and the narthex, the elegant triphoras in the lower zone of the north and south walls, the biphoras placed in the semicircular segment under the monumental niches and the decorated monophoras are the principal ornamental elements of the picturesque façade arrangement of the edifice. The carved stone, the ceramic “armature” executed in horizontal rows, the brick-work motives shaped in the form of letters and incorporated into the wall structure of the building or in the renovated drum of the central dome, are the constituents of the façade decoration which enriches the external view of the temple. By being notably renowned for their dimensions and rationally integrated into the architectural organism of the building, they represent the climax of an architectural structure which was inventive by its design, advanced in terms of its constitution, dynamic regarding its spatial solutions and elegant on the subject of its decorative components.

The absence of pillars, the inconsistency of the building opus, the disintegration of interior elements, the lack of pre-apsidal space and other “shortcomings” of the architectural design of the church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi listed by some senior researchers should certainly be considered in any studious, academic approach to the analysis of the architectural qualities of the Nerezi temple. Given the Constantinopolitan origin of the producers and the indisputable innovation in the design of the plan, as well as the structural elements of the building, these remarks would represent an excellent rectification to the achievement of Nerezi in regard to the articulation of the interior space. Nevertheless, the qualities of the architectural imagination as the perfect background of the superb sense of the compilation approach to the “modelation” of the building exceed the need for any adjustments attributed to the architectural concept of the Nerezi church. Last but not least, one should also keep in mind that this “imperfect” interior was decorated by the greatest master painter of the Komnenian era.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, *north façade of the church*

ON THE UNIQUE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAMME OF THE PAINTED ENSEMBLE

The impressive fresco panorama embellishing the walls of the church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi is considered one of the greatest, as well as an unprecedented artistic masterpiece of the era of Byzantine artistic production, impeccable as a visual creation even for the most ambitious and harshest critics of painterly production of the historical past. Preserved in the lower zones of the altar and the nave, on the walls of the subsidiary compartments and partially in the narthex, the authentically painted decoration of the Nerezi church captures the eye with the delicate refinement of the vistas, the proportionate optical balance of the compositional structures, the flawless spatial interaction between the depicted scenes and the architectural features of the edifice, as well as with the lush saturation of the colours and the emotional depth of the sights radiating with remarkable energy of passionate events. Designed as a dramatically exciting and extravagant visual narrative of the soteriological mission of Christ, that is, his suffering and sacrifice, and his voluntary death on the cross, the Nerezi fresco painting summarizes the daring iconographic innovations in interrelating the compositional matrices with the captivating artistic expression of the masters never performed as such later in the history of medieval art. Although much of the original iconographic programme is missing due to the damage and the repainting of the dome and its interior in the 16th century, the preserved portions of the Byzantine megamasters of circa 1166 represent the greatest wealth in the rich treasury of medieval visual culture.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, Programme of the fresco painting in the naos



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, Fresco painting in the diaconicon

THE INTERRELATION OF THE SACRAL SPACE AND THE PAINTERLY PROGRAMME

The synergy of the Nerezi interior and the selected constituents of the iconographic concept emanate with a perfect match between the spatial characteristics of the building and the visual context of the depicted scenes and saintly characters. Arranged on the broad wall surfaces of the nave and in the U-shaped altar area, they exist in the sacred space of the church in a smooth inter-communicative equilibrium due to the absence of any supporting construction elements, which could obstruct the process of their ideological coherence. Hence, it provided constant visual coexistence between the themes of the Eucharistic subjects and liturgical themes in the altar area, the Christological scenes in the nave and particularly the selected saintly figures whose presence adorns the lowermost zone of the painted decoration.

In this context, the Communion of the Apostles and the scene representing the Church Fathers Officiating, displayed in the apse, were developed in a form of visual counterpoint to the two scenes from the mini-cycle of the Virgin (the Birth of the Mother of God and the



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, view of the iconographic programme of the altar



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The mini-cycle of the Virgin

Presentation in the Temple) forasmuch as the Birth of the Virgin and her devotion herald the Incarnation, so does the Communion of the Apostles - a symbolic sublimation of the Last Supper, conceptually exploiting the death of Jesus on the cross.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The Transfiguration

In this interspatial visual symbolism, the scenes depicted on the eastern wall of the nave, "correlate" with the themes depicting the Transfiguration and the Descent from the Cross, represented on the western wall of the northern and southern arms of the cruciform edifice, owing to their ideological relation to the nature of the Saviour: the Annunciation foreshadow the incarnation of Christ whose divine metamorphosis anticipates his future sufferings for the salvation of mankind, The Raising of Lazarus (depicted on the northern wall of the western arm of the cross) as sublimation of Christ's miraculous powers, is "mirrored" in its artistic counterpart shown on the opposite wall - the Entry into Jerusalem, which marks the beginning of the Passion as a precondition for the redeeming function of Christ's death by resurrection.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The Entry into Jerusalem

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, painted on the south wall of the nave, visually speaking, “shares” a common space with the Lamentation scene, depicted on the northern wall, associating the prophecy of Christ’s suffering with the tragic grandeur of his terrible realization. The dualistic model of the visual interaction between the scenes represented on the opposing wall surfaces that integrate the story of the divine origin of the Messiah with his sensible human nature confirmed by corporal death, remains the primary programmatic principle of the Nerezi fresco painting and a quintessential feature of its avant-garde artistic constellation. By accompanying the scenes that visualize the dramatic story of the role of Christ’s suffering with an impressive gallery of twenty-six individual saintly representations, namely, holy warriors and martyrs in the western part of the nave, monks in the south and hymnographies in the north, the Nerezi masters framed the majestic depiction of soteriological Passion of Christ with figures of the martyrs and Jesus’ disciples and his spiritual followers.

In the subsidiary compartments, they displayed a whole gallery of different categories of saints, while the narthex is painted with the Deisis composition and the Cycle of vistas dedicated to the patron saint, which have been only partially preserved.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The holy warriors guarding the entrance



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The holy hymnographers depicted on the north wall



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The image of Saint Tryphon in the north-west comartment

THE ICONOGRAPHIC NOVELTIES

The quantity of the iconographic innovations embedded in the existing, standard compositional matrices of the time, reaches a remarkable range of inventively designed and well-defined integration of thematic elements, whose frequency corresponds proportionately to each of the displayed views of the decorative fresco programme. Moreover, their artistic quality surpasses the most ambitious expectations for the representative visual innovation in the evolutionary development of the Byzantine iconography of the 12th century. The emergence of the allusion to the “closed garden” according to the verse from the “minstrellic” Song of Solomon (4:12) as the prefiguration of the Virgin Mary’s Immaculate Conception in the Annunciation scene, and the display of the open book in the hands of Anna the Prophetess with the announcement of the messianic sacrifice of Jesus in the “genderly” arranged mise-en-scène of the protagonists in the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, stand as the most remarkable innovations in the iconographic structure of the Christological cycle “motivated” by the Gospel.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi,
The Annunciation with the image of the Virgin



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The Presentation in the Temple

The picturesque dynamics of the participants in the illustration of the Resurrection of Lazarus and fashionably stylized genre elements in the iconographic structure of the scene of the Entry into Jerusalem, on the other hand, radiate with the immediacy of structural components, supplemented by spontaneously emerging visual attributes: the servant who succumbs under the weight of the lid of the sarcophagus of Lazarus and the naughty children riding a palm in order to see the “rabbi” who visited Jerusalem, are captivating with their unpretentious, witty imaginative iconography.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The Raising of Lazarus

The intimacy of the family drama depicted in the scene of the Deposition from the cross and the condensed iconographic format of the parental tragedy depicted in the scene of the Lamentation, represent the earliest and visually the most impressive sights inspired by the medieval romanticized apocryphal narratives. The active eucharistic engagement of Christ in the scene of the Communion where He bends to “serve” the archapostles Peter and Paul, as well as the kiss of Andrew and Luke in the northern apostolic procession as a symbolic allusion to the unity and harmony existing among the members of the church of Christ, indicate a desire to illuminate the ceremonial rhythm of the ongoing church rituals.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, Communion of the apostles, north procession



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi,
The image of St. John the Baptist in the
diaconicon

In that context, the adjustment of the liturgical processions depicted in the lowermost register of the altar space with the apostolic procession in the Eucharist ritual suggests an iconographic tendency to establish formal and thematic links between the biblical event of the Last Supper, depicted in the scene of the Communion and the existing liturgical rite established for its commemoration, represented in the scene of The Officiating Bishops. The thematic grouping and the distinctive typological specification of the saintly figures depicted in the first zone, the ultra-feminized character of Saint Panteleimon, the patron saint - the healer and martyr depicted on the eastern wall, as well as the pastoral portrait of tender Saint Tryphon in the northwest compartment are only some examples of the inventive iconographic illumination of the Nerezi masters in the depiction of saintly images.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The image of the patron saint



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, Officiating Church Fathers

ON THE PAINTING BRAVURA OF THE MASTERS

A descendant of the representative artistic trends of the Metropolitan painterly ateliers, the Nerezi master, the author of the artistic concept, the leader of the artistic studio and by default a close associate of the founder Alexios, created a work of art radiating with consistent assemblage of programme components, glowing with inventive iconographic vividness and branded with unsurpassed skill of execution. All the elements of his authorial procedures, consistent with the idea of creating an artistic ensemble worthy of the sophisticated taste of the court donors, spring from his abundant creative potential, and his outstanding artistic education. With his gracious drawing style which generated forms with spontaneous dynamics of elegant lines, with a consistent modeling of the painterly elements rationally inserted in an almost mathematically computed spatial constellation of the scenes along with the energetic emotional resonance in the scenes, the Nerezi master deserves to be put on the pedestal of the pioneers of medieval art. Having a keen eye for artistic calligraphy, this inventive and innovative painter constructed his compositions by configuring their visual matrix with a monumental breadth of the views and an impeccable spatial arrangement of structural components. By using triangular and pyramidal optical models for creation of the compositional matrices, he achieved clear and transparent illustrations of the textual synopsis, inter-wined with a coherent structure of basic iconographic elements and a precise projection of proportional census of the additional visual details. By creating monumental compositions for which an entire wall of the temple interior was designated, the master of Nerezi achieved the conclusive goal of the production team – a dominance of the painting programme over the clear and thus, unified architectural interior space of the church edifice.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi,
View of the west wall of the northern arm of the cross and the north wall of the naos



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi,
View of the fresco painting in the altar



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi,
The image of St. Theophane Graptos



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi,
The image of St. Anthony the Great

Elegant figures radiating with devout dynamic movements and unobtrusive energy of corporal mobility, suggestive images that enchant with their individualized physiognomies of real historical portraits, as well as scenes infused with a vivid temperament resulting from a zealous interpersonal interactions, embellish the interior of the Nerezi church with the noble format of the depicted shapes and a luscious tension of saturated colour palette. The golden ochre shade which radiates from the faces of the saints, the white highlights used for the modeling of the images, the purple-violet tones and the range of dark green shades for modellation of the garments, as well as the warm auburn tones of the scenic accessories, chromatically projected with delicacy on the cobalt blue background of the walls, shine with epic resonance of colours and sacred harmonies of optical illumination. Appropriate to the deep emotional charge of the displayed compositions and the passionate artistic exposition of the thematic synopsis, the saturated pictorial palette of the master of Nerezi represents the ultimate hallmark of his vibrant, dramatic and evocative artistic creation.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The images of the monks depicted on the south wall



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The Deposition (detail)

Nevertheless, the most obvious and the most authentic artistic quality of the Nerezi master – the leader of the artistic studio which has created the painted decoration of the temple lies in his courage to indulge himself in humanizing the thematic composite, the iconographic structure, as well the saintly figures depicted in the scenes in conceptually grandiose, delicately intrusive and visually impressive way. The childlike, spontaneous and disturbingly frightened embrace of the infant Christ in the scene of the Presentation in the temple seeking protection from his mother in a dramatic moment of the prophetic announcement of his future suffering, and the warm touch of Mother of God's face onto the dead face of her son in the scene of the Deposition from the Cross, are more than a testimony to the emotional approach of the master in formatting a specific spiritus of stage moods. The touches, the embraces, the kisses, the invisible tears and



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The Deposition

the comforting views constitute the stressed “tactile” vocabulary of the Nerezi painter in his attempt to create a work of art permeated with dynamic emotions, noble sensibility and intense sensitivity.

In the climax of these trends, inspired by an apocryphal text, he created the scene of the Lamentation, located on the northern wall, which confines the illustration of the Christological cycle in the temple. Structured by means of a composite triangular which comprises the condensed set of the five protagonists in the event, the scene obtained a coherent landscape background composed of three horizons: the green section of the ground and the dead Christ lying on it, the dark blue range of celestial heights and connective stone ridge of the dark tomb. In the center of the compositional structure, the Mother of God cradles her son’s body in her lap as if to awaken him from death, but failing, she presses her face shedding bitter tears on his tranquil face of a sleeping child. She lies beside him, and as a living shroud covering the body of her dead son destined to suffer for the sins of mankind. However, the intimacy of his mother’s embrace, the proximity of the other companions who kiss Jesus’ limbs and the excruciatingly painful cry of the heavenly angels and the women beside the grave, transform this sight from a canonically defined visual illustration into an emotional imagination laden with humanistic values. The coherent group of characters occupying the central position of the scene, overwhelmed by a passionate outburst of dramatic feelings, the elegant rhythm of the drawing that intensifies the compositional assemblage of the *mise-en-scène* and the vigorous contrasts of saturated colors in the Lamentation scene, as well as the overall opus of the Nerezi master, remain unsurpassed as magnum work of the nameless-for-us artist who has succeeded to touch the sacred horizons of ultimate creation.

After the reparation of the vaulting structures of the Nerezi church in the second half of the 16th century, the altar apse was painted with an image of the Virgin, the middle zone was decorated with the bust of the saints, the festive and passionate compositions were placed in the area under the dome, while in the dome, above the evangelists and prophets, framed by the Heavenly Liturgy, the depiction of Christ the Pantocrator was located. Executed with a skillful drawing and resolute modeling, it testifies to the ambitious efforts of the post-Byzantine painters to recover the lost parts of the original medieval iconography. Nevertheless, compared to the four images of Christ depicted in the domes on the lateral compartments (Emmanuel, the Ancient of Days, Archpriest and Christ in his own age that make up the *circus viciolosus* of Christ’s messianic mission from the Incarnation to Ascension, it is only a modest retouch to the unique master-piece of the original Nerezi painter.



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The Lamentation



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, View of the fresco painting from the 16th century



The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, The Lamentation (*detail*)

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Editor
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Author
Elizabeta Dimitrova

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