



The most significant values  
of the cultural and natural heritage

# MONASTERY OF ZRZE



**Darko Nikolovski**

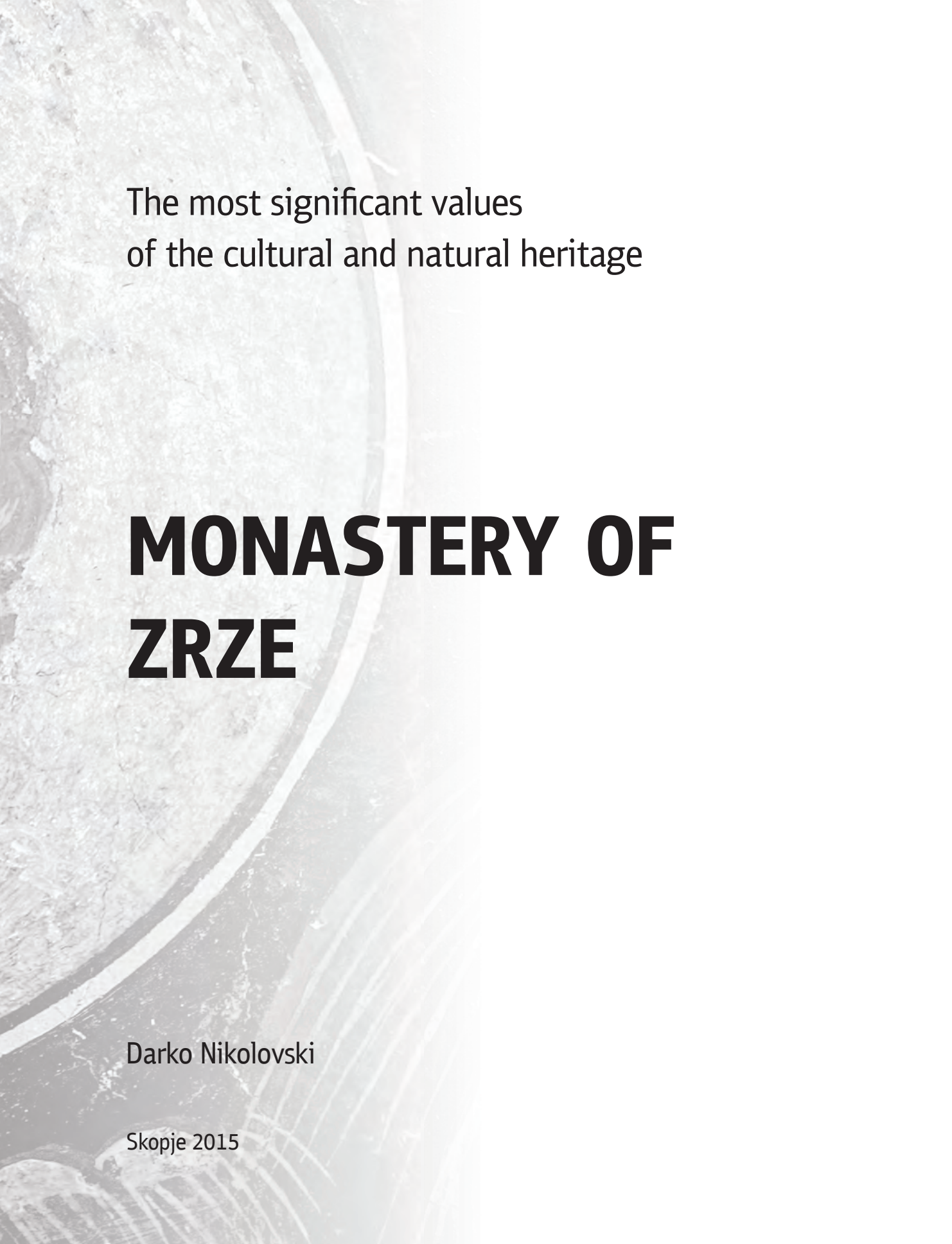
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# FOREWORD

## 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.



# MONASTERY OF ZRZE

The Zrze monastery is one of the most significant cult spaces in the wider area of the Pelagonian Plain. As a proof stand many cultural layers, starting from ancient finds discovered in the nearby village of Zrze - stelas, capitals, columns, traces of the basilica "Latin Church". Near the monastery church St. Transfiguration were discovered the remains of an Early Christian basilica from the 5<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> century. During the conservation research of the church in the period 1963/64 was discovered the copper cross enkolpion dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. In the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the monastery grew into a powerful monastic centre. Foundations of the former sketes (the ascetic cells St. Constantine and Helena, the Holy Archangels and St. Athanasius) discovered near the monastery confirm the existence of significant monastic activity. Established onto a flattened plateau of limestone rock, this monastery served as a silent witness of the ascetic acts of the eremites - the ascetics who sought the path to God through complete solitude. They chose the monastic cells carved into the east side of the vertically cut limestone rock as their dwellings.



View of the monastery of Zrze from the east side



View of the Church of the Transfiguration from the north - west side

The monastery with the church Holy Transfiguration or Holy Saviour, as mentioned in certain inscriptions, as well as the metochion of St. Nicholas in the village of Zrze, even today, are active monastic centres. The history of the monastery of Zrze from the mid - 14<sup>th</sup> until the 19<sup>th</sup> century consisted of a number of additions and restorations of the architecture and frescoes. This can easily be observed from the information contained in the donor inscriptions or other records noting each significant building event related to the monastery.

Founder of the oldest single-nave church of the present-day complex is the monk German. According to an inscription above the south door on the outside (written around the year 1400), we learn that German's church was built in the time of Tsar (emperor) Dusan (around 1346-1355).



View of the Church of the Transfiguration south - west side



The fragments of the original fresco, preserved in the lowest area of the altar apse, attest to the creative activity at the time of its founding. Furthermore, according to other information from the same inscription that contained records from its foundation until the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, we can observe the transfer of the monastery Zrze to its new patron, the kmet (village headman) Constantine and his sons Jacob, Kaloyan and Dimitar. The donor right was willingly handed over by the two brothers – the Metropolitan John and the monk Macarius who, at the time following the death of King Marko, were no longer able to maintain the monastery and as a result they voluntarily decided to transfer the management over to their kmet Constantine and his children.

Next to German's single - nave church from the west side was built a porch sometime before 1368/69, and we learn of its frescoing from the inscription above the west door which mentions the donors deserving of this venture - Hajko's sons Pribil and Priezda with their mother. Namely, in 1368/69, in memory of their father who died in the monastery as a monk, they arranged for the frescoing of the built porch. The further comparison of the data from these two inscriptions allows for some assumptions. The inscription dated from around the year 1400 provides information of the mon-



Church of the Transfiguration, overlooking the east side



Church of the Transfiguration, overlooking the west side



astery administrators as well, the brothers - Metropolitan John and the monk Macarius, who managed the monastery at the time of King Volkasin (1366-1371) and King Marko (1371-1395). Relying on the rules of the donor right in Byzantium, scientists have accepted the thesis that the brothers - Metropolitan John and monk Macarius, whose secular names are actually the aforementioned Pribil and Priezda are practically grandchildren of the monk German, and hence their father Hajko (the monk Hariton) is son of the founder of the monastery.

The artwork of the porch, despite its artistic qualities, stands out by the choice of themes and iconographic solutions uncharacteristic for this part of the church. The monastic character of the church is emphasized already in the first zone where through the selection of saints dressed in schemamonk clothes, are presented the most significant representatives of the monastic order and liturgists.



Church of the Transfiguration, fresco painting, west wall, year 1368/69



Church of the Transfiguration, fresco painting, north - western wall, 1368/69





Church of the Transfiguration, fresco painting, south wall, 1368/69

On the south wall, from east to west, St. Peter, St. Nicholas, St. Pimen, St. Theodosius and two unknown saints are painted in full size. South of the door on the west wall is the scene *Angel Offering Schemam Monk Clothing to St. Pachomius*, and to the north is *The Communion of Mary the Egyptian* by the cleric Zosimus. On the north wall the gallery of saints continues with the holy hermits St. Euthymius and the archpriests St. Anthony and St. Gregory the Wonder-



Church of the Transfiguration, The Angel Offers his schemam Monk Clothing to St. Pachomius, north wall, 1368/69



worker and St. Basil the Great. Above the first zone, where the saints are painted in full size, is depicted a frieze with busts in medallions. The third zone contains scenes from the cycle of Christ's Suffering. On the south wall are preserved the scenes *Meeting of Jacob of the Old Testament and his son Joseph*, *The Unsleeping Eye* and *Christ before Pilate*, while on the north wall are depicted the compositions *Christ before Anna and Caiaphas*, *The Mockery of Christ* and the *Setting of the Cross at Golgotha*. On the west wall are portrayed Eucharistic themes - *The Communion of the Apostles* and above is *Abraham's Hospitality*. The author of the frescoes in the western part of the church is presumed to be the painter Dragoslav, who signed himself on the border of a drapery of the plinth on the northern wall. The same painter was also attributed the fresco in the semicircle niche above the entrance to the church on the west facade, where the central composition *Transfiguration* is paint-



Church of the Transfiguration,  
St. Euthymius and St. Anthony, north wall, 1368/69



Church of the Transfiguration, St. Gregory the Wonderworker and St. Basil the Great, the north wall, 1368/69





Church of the Transfiguration, the Communion of the Apostles, west wall, 1368/69, detail



Church of the Transfiguration, The Meeting of the Old Testament Jacob and his son Joseph, The Unsleeping Eye and Christ before Pilate, south wall, 1368/69



Church of the Transfiguration, The Unsleeping Eye, south wall, 1368/69

ed and surrounded by *The Virgin Mary of Pantanhara with Christ among the Prophets* and *John the Baptist*. Dragoslav's name was observed once again, along with the name Dobroslav, in a small cave church at the foot of the limestone rock where the monastery lies and where the monks from the surrounding cells practiced the joint service.

The painter Dragoslav, according to his Slavic name, suggests the possibility that this painting workshop was of a domestic provenance. The painter Dragoslav, judging by the quality of the produced frescoes in the monastery Zrze, proved to be one of the leading painters of his time. On the other hand, Dragoslav was also recognized as an experienced expert in theological mysteries, creating iconographic themes characteristic of the altar area (*the*



Church of the Transfiguration, Transfiguration, and around it the Virgin Pantanhara with Christ among the Prophets and John the Baptist, west façade, 1368/69





Church of the Transfiguration, Iconostasis, view toward east



Church of the Transfiguration, Throne Icon Jesus Christ Saviour and Life - Giver, author John Metropolitan, 1393/4

*Presence of the Four Bishops, Abraham's Hospitality, The Communion of the Apostles*) in the porch, while within the cycle of Christ's Sufferings are included *The Meeting of Jacob of the Old Testament and his son Joseph and the Unsleeping Eye*. As another work of the painter Dragoslav, some scientists attribute the fresco-icon dedicated to the Virgin Hodegetria painted in a semi - circular niche in the north wall of the outer side of the naos of the church St. Nicholas in the village of Zrze.

Two notable names, the brothers Metropolitan John and the monk Macarius, grandsons of the founder of the monastery – the monk German, were in charge the monastery during the reign of King Volkasin and his son King Mark. They executed the monumental icons for the iconostasis with great mastery. The Metropolitan John painted the icon of *Christ the Saviour*



and *Life Giver* in 1393/94, and as a proof of his high artistic qualities stand his works performed outside the monastery Zrze - the part of the frescoes in the church St. Demetrius in Marko's Monastery and the church of the monastery St. Andreas in Skopje. Along with his fellow-monk Gregory, he painted the frescoes in St. Andreas for Andrea, the brother of King Marko in 1388/89. The Monk Macarius later painted another throne icon of the iconostasis of the monastery Zrze - the beautiful *Mother of God Pelagonitissa* in 1421/22, and the expanded *Deesis with the Apostles*.

Around the mid- 16<sup>th</sup> century the wall painting of the old German's church and the church St. Nicholas in the village of Zrze was restored by the famous painter Onuphrius Argitis. Onuphrius of Argos was a leading painter in his time who was hired by the church dignitaries and worked throughout the Ohrid Archbishopric (Greece, Albania and Macedonia). Namely, seven fresco ensembles were attributed to Onuphrius Argitis thus far. Two fresco ensembles which have been partially stored are in Kastoria (Greece) where Onuphrius painted the temple St. Apostles in 1547, and later, probably around 1554 as we learn from the inscription, he painted the church St. Anargyroi of the Gymnasium (undated), where he is mentioned as the protopriest of Neokastro (Elbasan).

Albanian experts have assigned the work of Onuphrius to three temples, owing to the inscription in the church St. Nicholas in Shelcan (not dated) and in St. Petka in Vales from 1553/4, while according to the stylistic analysis of the eight preserved frescoes in the church St. Theodore Berat, they are considered his early work. The iconographic work of Onuphrius in Albania is generally attributed to three centres - the Archaeological Museum in Tirana, as well as the museums in Berat and Korca.



Church of the Transfiguration, Throne Icon the Virgin Pelagonitissa, author Macarius painter, year 1421/22



Church of the Transfiguration, Large Iconostasis Cross and the Deesis with Apostles, view toward east



Church of the Transfiguration, Evangelist Mark and Apostle Andrew, the Deesis with Apostles (re - painted in the 16th century), detail

In Macedonia, the undated wall painting of Onuphrius was recorded, as previously mentioned, in the church St. Transfiguration - St. Saviour and in the village church St. Nicholas - in the village of Zrze. As for the iconographic art in Macedonia attributed to the hand of Onuphrius, it is presumed to have occurred in the period after his return from Venice in 1543, until 1564, when the last information for his possible engaging in the collapsed church The Holy Mother of God Immaculate - Kicevo was recorded. With a great deal of certainty, he is attributed the two crosses from Slepce: the first - a smaller iconostasis cross, located today in the Metropolis of Bitola, associated with an icon depicting *The Holy Mother of God* of the Museum of Macedonia, as well as a larger iconostasis cross, today at the Museum of Macedonia, associated with the icons *The Holy Mother of God* and *St. John the Theologian* of the Metropolis of Bitola. The crosses of the iconostasis date from the 1550s. They are linked to the carrier of the iconostasis cross with the accompanying icons of the church Nativity of the Holy Mother of God in Gorni Manastirec, Porece, then the royal doors of the church The Holy Mother of God Immaculate - Kicevo painted in 1564, when, according to the inscription, were painted the frescoes in the old church The Holy Mother of God Immaculate by the painter Sir Onufri, the royal doors of the church Nativity of the Holy Mother of God in the village of Kanino and the royal doors of the National Museum of Sofia, which are linked to the iconographic works in the monastery Slepce, Demir Hisar. Onuphrius's studio is also attributed a throne icon of the Virgin (Hodegetria) with Christ from the monastery of St. John the Prodrome, Slepce - Demir Hisar, today in the Museum of Macedonia. In this collection of the iconographic work of Onuphrius are included the royal gates of the church St. Nicholas in the village of Zrze and the re - painted saints of the Deesis act in the monastery church. The three apostles - Simeon, Mark and Andrew were fully re-painted by him because of the damage incurred on the old Deesis act, painted around 1422 by the monk Macarius Painter at St. Transfiguration (St. Saviour). Onuphrius's frescoes from the old German's church have been preserved today only on the east, north and south wall. The west wall of the old church was demolished during a later recon-



Church of the Transfiguration, Angels of the Composition Service of the Archpriests, altar apse, mid-16th century, detail





Church of the Transfiguration, Service of the Archpriests, altar apse, mid -16th century, detail

struction, probably due to the need to acquire a more compact space. Onuphrius retained the iconographic conception of the older painting from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, laying saints in full size in the first zone, then above them a frieze of painted busts of saints in medallions, in the third zone were scenes from the cycle of the *Great Feasts* and the *Sufferings of Christ*, and in the fourth zone were painted full size figures of prophets. The frescoes suffered significant damage with exception to the east side where they were fully preserved. In the altar apse, in the first zone, is painted the usual composition - *The Service of the Bishops*. *The Holy Table* is placed in the centre bearing a chalice, a paten and a star. To the *Holy Table* from both sides approach the liturgists wearing vestments (polistavron, omophorion and stole) and holding open scrolls in



Church of the Transfiguration, St. Gregory, St. John Merciful and St. James, diaconicon, mid- 16th century, detail





Church of the Transfiguration, Virgin Platitera and the Service of the Archpriests, altar apse, mid - 16th century

their hands. From the north side approaches St. John Chrysostom, while from the south St. Basil the Great. Behind them stand two unknown bishops. Behind the *Holy Table* is painted *The Cross where Christ was Crucified* and the instruments that were used to torture him and two angels in white albs holding ripidas. In the conch of the apse is presented the bust figure of the *Virgin - Wider Than the Heavens*, with a medallion on her chest bearing Christ Emanuel. In the niche of the prothesis is painted the scene *Dead Christ in the Tomb (Imago pietatis)*, and above it are the representations of St. Laurent and St. Stephen the Protomartyr. In the niche of the diaconicon is painted St. Jacob Brother of God, and above him is St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. John Merciful. On the south wall of the apse is preserved St. Gregory the Theologian, and on the south wall of the sanctuary there are small fragments of the Holy Fathers. The north wall



Church of the Transfiguration, St. Gregory the Theologian and the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria (I zone), north wall in the altar, mid- 16th century, detail



Church of the Transfiguration, St. Constantine and Helena, (I zone), south wall, mid- 16th century





Church of the Transfiguration, St. Mercurius, St. Demetrius and St. George, north wall, mid- 16th century

bears the composition *The Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria*. In the naos, on the south wall, in the first zone of standing figures, starting from the iconostasis partition to the west, are painted St. Constantine and Helena with the Holy Cross between them, followed by St. Theodore the Tyron and Theodore Stratelates holding hands. On the north wall, from west to east, follows a sequence of holy warriors - St. Mercurius, St. Demetrius, St. George bearing full battle gear. Beside the iconostasis is usually painted the composition Deesis whose central figure is Jesus



Church of the Transfiguration, Deesis, north wall, mid- 16th century





Church of the Transfiguration, Holy Trinity, east wall, mid - 16th century

Christ on a throne, titled as the King of Kings and a Great Archpriest. To his right approaches in supplication Mary Queen of Heaven, and to his left St. John the Baptist holding a cross and the severed head as a sign of his martyrdom. In the second zone, above the life-size figures, is the frieze of the painted bust figures of saints in medallions. On the south wall in the sanctuary, from east to west, are depicted two unknown saints and St. Hermolaus, and the sequence of St.



Church of the Transfiguration, Archangel Gabriel of the Composition Annunciation, east wall, mid - 16th century

Panteleimon, St. John Kalyvia and two unidentified saints continues into the naos. On the northern wall of the naos, from west to east, follow medallions with images of St. Vincent, St. Victor and St. Mina, and in the altar are St. Athanasius the Persian, St. Alexis and Righteous Job.

On the east wall above the conch of the apse, is painted a rare scene of the Holy Trinity in the form of three angelic characters with a nimbus, and above them a bust of Christ Pantocrator in a mandorla. Around the central image of Christ are placed the four evangelists with their symbols. To the north are painted John and Luke, and to the south Matthew and Mark. In the arc under the arch is painted the Mandyion – Christ's image made without human hands. From both sides of the window, under the representation of the Mandyion are painted a cherub and a seraph.



The third zone, which bears scenes of the cycle of the Great Feasts, starts with the composition of *The Annunciation* in the sanctuary. The Annunciation is usually portrayed by a representation of the Archangel Gabriel north of the apse, and The Holy Mother of God south from it. The preserved scenes of this cycle on the south wall, from east to west, are as follows: *the Nativity*, *the Meeting of Christ*, *the Baptism of Christ*, and on the north wall are: *the Lamentation of Christ*, *the Descent into Hades* and *Noli me tangere* (Touch Me Not). The restorations in the monastery church Transfiguration and the metochion St. Nicholas in the village of Zrze were mainly simultaneous. Thus, after the restoration of the monastery church, the painter Onuphrius painted the space inside the single - nave church St. Nicholas as well as the chapel that in that time was added on the north. In the painting of this tiny church Onuphrius maintained the usual themes that he already used for the monastery temple. In the first zone of the altar, in the apse, he painted the scene *Adoration of the Victim*, including St. John Chrysostom holding an open a scroll and St. Basil the Great holding a spear in his left hand, and the infant Christ as a eucharistic sacrifice in the right. The procession of the archpriests, continues



Church of the Transfiguration, the Virgin of the Composition Annunciation and Evangelist Matthew, east wall, mid - 16th century



Church of the Transfiguration, Mourning, north wall, mid - 16th century, detail



Church of the Transfiguration, Noli Me Tangere (Touch Me Not) (II zone), north wall in the altar, mid - 16th century, detail





View of the church St. Nicholas from the south - eastern side



Church of St. Nicholas, St. Virgin Hodegetria, north facade, 1368/69





Church of St. Nicholas, Angel of the Service of the Archpriests, altar, mid- 16th century, detail

on the south wall with Athanasius of Alexandria, St. Cyril of Alexandria and St. Spiridon the Wonderworker, while on the north wall are St. Gregory the Theologian and the composition Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria. In the conch of the apse is represented a bust figure of the *Virgin Wider than Heaven* with Christ Emanuel on her chest in a medallion. In the niche of the prothesis is the Archdeacon St. Stephen the Protomartyr holding a small church building. North of the apse is depicted an unknown deacon and on the south a tetramorph.

In the naos, in the first zone of the south wall, next to the iconostasis, is painted the church's patron St. Nicholas enthroned between the busts of Jesus Christ who brings gospel to the saint and the Holy Mother of God approaching and holding an omophrion. The row of full size saints proceeds to the west with the holy warriors St. Theodore Tyron and St. Theodore



Church of St. Nicholas, St. Athanasius of Alexandria of the Service of the Archpriests, south wall of the diaconicon, mid- 16th century, detail





Church of St. Nicholas, Virgin of the Annunciation and Tetramorph, east wall, mid - 16th century

Stratelates holding hands, and St. Paraskeva with a severed head. At the west wall, south of the entrance, Sts. Cosmas and Damian - physicians and an unknown saint on the opposite side, have been partially preserved due to the



Church of St. Nicholas, St. Mercurius, north wall, mid- 16th century, detail



Church of St. Nicholas, St. Nicholas, south wall, mid- 16th century, detail





Church St. Nicholas, St. Mercurius, St. Demetrius, St. George and the composition Deesis, north wall, mid- 16th century

extended entry. The north wall continues with a row of painted holy warriors in full battle gear. From west to east follow St. Mercurius, St. Demetrius and St. George.

The row ends with Deesis where the Saviour Jesus Christ is centrally placed, accompanied by the Holy Mother of God on his right side and St. John the Baptist on the opposite side. The second zone is filled with busts of prophets placed in medallions. On the south wall, from east to west, are presented St. Anthony, St. Paul, St. Macarius, St. Onuphrius, the venerable Mary of Egypt, St. Thecla the Protomartyr and St. Catherine. To the west are portrayed the Prophet Habakkuk and the Prophet Daniel. On the north wall follow the busts of the prophets Elisha, Elijah, Jonah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, an unknown prophet, Zechariah and Moses.



Church of St. Nicholas, Archangel Gabriel of the Annunciation, east wall, mid- 16th century





Church of St. Nicholas, Baptism and Medallions with the Evangelists Matthew and Mark, vault in the altar area, mid - 16<sup>th</sup> century



Church of St. Nicholas, Shepherd of the composition Birth of Christ, altar area, mid- 16<sup>th</sup> century, detail

The third zone is reserved for scenes dedicated to the cycle of the Great Feasts. It is comprised of 12 scenes and begins in the sanctuary with the composition of *the Annunciation* with *the Nativity* and *the Meeting* above. The cycle continues on the south wall with the *Baptism*, *Transfiguration*, *Resurrection of Lazarus* and the *Entrance in Jerusalem*. The west wall usually depicts the composition *Dormition of the Virgin*, between the figures of John of Damascus and an unknown saint. On the north wall are the scenes *Crucifixion*, *Lamentation*, *Descent into Hades* and *Noli Me Tangere* (Touch Me Not).

The centre of the dome is reserved for Jesus Christ Pantocrator painted in a medallion, surrounded by the painted busts of the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

In the added northern chapel of the church St. Nicholas, Onuphrius's work has been preserved only on the eastern wall. In the first zone and in the monastery church, The Holy Table is painted bearing a chalice, a paten and a star and is approached by John Merciful in archpriest attire from the north side, and St. Achilles Larisa from the other side. Behind the Holy Table is painted the Holy Cross with the instruments of Christ's martyrdom and both archangels - Michael and Gabriel, dressed in white albs, holding ripidas. South of the niche are painted a full size image of an unknown saint in archpriest attire and another with a bust in a medallion. North of the niche is painted St. Simeon Stylite, while in the niche of the prothesis was probably painted a representation of the *Dead Christ*. In the conch of the apse is painted a bust of the *Virgin Wider that the Heaven* with Jesus Christ Emanuel on her chest in a medallion.





Church of St. Nicholas, Medallions with the Evangelists Matthew and Mark, vault in the altar area, mid - 16th century

Due to the extensions of the western wall, the donor inscriptions were probably destroyed, thus, making it impossible to have reliable data on the authorship and date of the wall painting in the church St. Nicholas in the village of Zrze. The only preserved information is in the extended monolithic Deesis with the apostles of the iconostasis of the church St. Nicholas, where the year 1534/5 has been recorded by John the Painter, author of the frescoes in the Toplica Monastery. A rare example of the Prilep- Sepce carving - a six - sided analogion "tetrapod" from the 16<sup>th</sup> century has been preserved in the monastery of Zrze. The inscription that runs continuously on all six sides notes the signature of the carver in the upper section of the analogion - the monk Prochorus. The analogion is decorated with geometric ornaments (interlocking circles, a circle intercepted by diagonals, stylized flowers of lily, cross rosettes, ellipses and diamonds etc.), which were typical of this workshop that produced the works for the monasteries of Slepce and Treskavec.

Significant restorations were registered again in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1616, during the time of the abbot monk Dorotheus, the menaion for the month of February was re - written by the monk Vissarion, and in 1616/17 was painted the Great Cross for the iconostasis.

The major reconstructions were completed by 1625 the latest, when onto the old German's church were added the southern and the northern section (Shepherd's church) and to the west, on the area in front of the three churches was built an outdoor porch. The information for the fresco painting of the central part of the porch, which was painted in 1624/25 in the time of the abbot monk Damascene, is preserved in the donor inscription over the entrance to the old German's church. Priest Dimitar, the founder (donor), enabled the painting of the Last Judgment in four zones. In the highest zone, onto an open scroll, is painted the Deesis accompanied by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. The central figure of the Deesis is Jesus Christ performing a blessing with both hands in the small mandorla and flanked by two cherubs. From his right ap-



Church of the Transfiguration, the Last Judgement, central part of the frescoes in the porch, west facade, 1624/25

proaches The Virgin in supplication and on the opposite side is St. John the Forerunner. Under *Christ the Judge* is painted the *Hetoimasia*. The prepared throne which depicts the gospel on which stands the dove - the Holy Spirit and the Cross of Christ's martyrdom, is accompanied by an entourage of angels holding sceptres. Under the throne are painted our first parents - Adam and Eve.

From both sides of the niche which portrays the painted composition of the Transfiguration, the work of the painter Dragoslav from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, stand six apostles painted in full size with scrolls and books in their hands. Under the zone of apostles are painted choirs of righteous men. On the north side are presented three groups of saints – archpriests, martyrs and venerable monks. On the south side is painted the *Parable of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus*, followed by choirs of Old Testament righteous men led by Moses, prophets and venerable women and queens. In the niche above the entrance, under the donor inscription is depicted *Jesus Christ Angel of the Great Council*. In the first zone, north of the entrance, is represented the Paradise. In the interior of the Paradise, surrounded by high walls and abundant floral vegetation are placed seating figures of Jacob, Isaac and Abraham. Onto their breasts are painted the souls of the righteous men. Under their feet, from the walls, flow the four rivers of paradise – the Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris and the Euphrates. Inside the Paradise is painted the righteous bandit who has just entered. The gates of Heaven are protected by a fiery cherub holding swords in his





hands. Peter has the key to the gates of Heaven and leads the group of apostles. Underneath are the five wise girls holding lighted candles. On the opposite side, south of the entrance, is painted a monumental composition of the Deesis. Jesus Christ the King and Great Archpriest is represented seating on a lavishly adorned throne with a backrest. From the right approaches the Virgin Queen, and from the left John the Baptist, both with open scrolls in their hands.

A decade later, in 1634/35, the donor Nedelko of Debar provided funds to continue painting in the area of the northern part of the east wall and the north wall of the open porch. The painting was executed during the time of the abbot of the monastery - the monk Petronius, who along with the monks Kiril, Simeon and Gerasim embarked on this venture. In ad-

Church of the Transfiguration, Detail of Heaven of the Composition the Last Judgement, central part of the frescoes in the porch, west facade, 1624/25



Transfiguration Church, Deesis, central part of the frescoes in the porch, west facade, 1624/25





Church of the Transfiguration, Life of St. Nicholas, north section of frescoes in the porch, west facade, 1634/35



Church of the Transfiguration, Life of St. Nicholas, north section of the frescoes in the porch, west facade, 1634/35, detail



Church of the Transfiguration, Scenes from the Life of the Virgin Mary, south section of the frescoes in the porch, west facade, 1634/35

dition to the merchant Nedelko, other means were provided by Dimitar, Mary, Todor, Jofko, Dimitrie, Pejo and Nikola. The information of this event is observed on the donor inscription above the entrance in the north section of the porch. In the niche above the entrance is painted the Virgin with Christ. In the first zone, north of the entrance, are presented the apostles Peter and Paul holding a model church together. The remaining twelve scenes are devoted to the life of St. Nicholas. The unknown painter has divided the life of St. Nicholas into four zones without special care of the chronological layout of the cycle. Thus, the cycle begins with a scene *Nativity of St. Nicholas*, painted just above the central niche. In the highest zone the cycle continues with the scenes *St. Nicholas Starting School* and *Ordination of St. Nicholas for a Deacon*. In the third area, from north to south, follow the scenes *Healing the Sick*, *St. Nicholas Sets a Priest and a Deacon*, *St. Nicholas Saves Three People out of Prison*, *St. Nicholas Appears in Eulalia's Dream*. In the second zone, from north to south, the cycle continues with *St. Nicholas Breaking Idols*, then *St. Nicholas*



*Saves a Ship from a Storm, St. Nicholas Rescues Three Men from a Sword, and Three Men Bear a Gift to St. Nicholas.* The cycle ends with the *Assumption of St. Nicolas* painted in the first zone of the south entrance.

At the north wall the frescoes have been significantly damaged, due to which identification is carried out only on part of the preserved scenes. In the first zone, from west to east, are presented the scenes *St. George on a Horse Killing a Dragon with a Long Spear* and *St. Demetrius on a Horse Piercing a Dragon with a Spear*. Next, two saints in full size are depicted in the niche in which a cross is painted. In the end section, the composition *Ascension of St. Elijah into Heaven* has been partially preserved. In the upper zone are painted five scenes from a rare cycle, called the *Works of Christian Charity*. The first three stages are fully preserved as opposed to others which were significantly damaged or in fragments. The cycle begins with the scene *I was Naked- you Clothed me, I was Thirsty- you Let me Drink, I was Hungry- you Fed me*. According to the preserved fragments the other scenes are identified as *I was in Prison - you Came to me* and *I was sick- you Visited me*.

There is no chronological data of the frescoes in the southern porch in the unfinished donor inscription above the entrance. However, numerous donors who provided funds for the decoration of this part of the porch were noted in the inscription. The southern section of the porch was devoted to the life of the Virgin, except in the first zone where north of the entrance were painted in full size the holy martyrs Petka and Nedela, and across the holy physicians Cosmas and Damian. Above the donor inscription in the niche, is painted the bust representation of Jesus Christ. In the remaining space are painted scenes from the life of the Virgin. In the uppermost area, from north to south, are displayed the *Birth of the Virgin Mary, The Blessing of the*



View of the church St. Nicholas from the south - eastern side

*Virgin Mary by the Three Priests*, then in the second zone on both sides of the niche – *the Refusal of the Gifts of Joachim and Anna*, *the Annunciation of Anna* and *the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*.

Probably in the same period in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the restorations took place in the monastery church, restoration was carried out in the village church St. Nicholas in Zrze. The same theme, *The Last Judgment*, was painted on the east wall of the porch of the church St. Nicholas, but with fewer scenes. Due to the expansion of the entrance, the frescoes suffered major damage in the lower parts. In the upper triangular part is painted the *Deesis* set on an open scroll, carried by two angels in flight. The central figure of Jesus Christ who blesses with both hands is painted in the mandorla carried by two angels in full size. The Dreadful Judge is approached by the Virgin Mary and St. John the Forerunner. In the zone under the *Deesis* is painted the *Hetoimasia* with the instruments of Christ's martyrdom. The prepared throne is approached by Adam and Eve from both sides, the apostles are seated on chairs with backrests accompanied by choirs of angels. Underneath are choirs of archpriests, righteous men etc.

On the fresco of St. Nedela in the porch is recorded the event when the monastery was damaged. Namely, in 1791 the Arnaut Matlija settled in the monastery of Zrze and caused mischief in the surrounding villages. For this reason, the Sultan was forced to send an army with cannons that shattered the monastery fortress. The reconstruction of the deserted monastery did not befall before 1810, of which we learn from the records preserved on the fresco of *Deesis* in the porch.

From the monastery heirloom several significant iconographic works can be distinguished, such as the four choros icons from the second quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> - the works of the linotopian painters, then, the fully painted royal doors in the composition *Annunciation* and the prophets David and Solomon from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the monumental icon of the *Transfiguration* by the painter Nikola Mihailov from Krusevo from 1867, box for relics depicting the *Annunciation* and the *Holy Physicians* from 1817 etc.



Church of St. Nicholas, Royal Gates, iconostasis, mid - 16th century



## Explanatory note

The following are the names of churches and monasteries with their Macedonian equivalents:

Holy Transfiguration - Sv. Preobrazenie

Holy Savior - Sv. Spas

The Holy Mother of God Immaculate - Sv. Bogorodica Prescista

Nativity of the Holy Mother of God - Rozdestvo na Sv. Bogorodica

Birth of the Holy Mother of God - Ragjanje na Sv. Bogorodica

Cobanska crkva - Shepherd's church

St. Nicholas – Sv. Nikola

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