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## Byzantine Wall Paintings and Icons at Meteora

The region of the inaccessible rock pillars of Meteora is not only one of the most important centres of Christian spirituality, but a preeminent ark of medieval art. However, it should be noted in advance that speaking about Meteora, we do not refer only to the central cluster of rocks, where the most of the monasteries are found, but also to other groups of rock pillars, with a physical connection to Meteora, on which Byzantine monasteries were erected as well. Besides, when we mention Meteora, we have to bear in mind the surrounding area as well — the so-called Stagoi — in which the most of the dependencies of the Meteora monasteries were established. In addition, certain Byzantine monasteries, which are located far from the Meteora rocks, were always under the spiritual tutelage of the Holy and Great Meteoron Monastery especially. For example, the Monastery of St. Nikanor near the village Zaborda, to the north of Meteora, the Monastery of St. Vissarion near the Pindos mountain, the Monastery of Korbovo located to the east of Trikala, and the Tatarna monastery found to the southwest of Meteora. So, the number of artistic works at Meteora is actually much larger than we think. Thus, this paper provides just an outline of the visual production of Meteora and the surrounding area throughout the Byzantine period.

### I. The earliest monuments: end of the 11<sup>th</sup> – end of the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries

It is unknown when the rocks of Meteora became a place of spiritual asceticism. But, from the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, there are continuous references to the Bishopric of Stagoi [4, pp. 158–161; 13, pp. 7–67; 14; 9, pp. 79–80; 1]. The earliest reliable reference to the Bishopric is preserved in the *Diatyposis* (Testament) (901–907) of Byzantine Emperor Leo VI the Wise (886–912) [5, p. 284, no. 574; 7, p. 537; 16, p. 15].

However, the earliest artistic ensemble preserved at the foot of the Meteora rocks is the Middle-Byzantine wall paintings in the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God, the former Cathedral of Kalambaka, where certain figures of Holy Hierarchs are depicted in the south part of the bema (Diakonikon) and the crypt (Ill. 67–68) [19, pp. 304–305].

We know almost nothing about this fragmentary mural decoration. It is also a question of whether the church was decorated fully or partially. On the other hand, there is no consensus among the scholars for the successive phases of the construction of the church, although the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup>-century phase of the construction is not controversial [2; 25]. This constructing stage seems to be related with the chrysobulls of the Emperors Nikiphoros III Votaniates (1078–1081), and Alexius I Komnenos (1081–1118) concerning the boundaries and property of the bishopric. These two documents have not survived. However, they are mentioned in the *Diagnosis* of Ioannis Athanasopoulos and Theodoros, a detailed inventory of the year 1163 compiled at the request of the bishop of Stagoi at the time and at the behest of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180) [3; 13, pp. 12–27].

From the artistic point of view, these wall paintings are of vital importance, because they are the only surviving example in Middle-Byzantine Thessaly. However, it is difficult to date these wall paintings provided that their style is so typical for the period and that it has a great regional dissemination. Yet, given that there is no accurate artistic parallel, we can date it after the wall paintings of St. Sophia of Ohrid (before 1056) and before those of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi (1164), most probably in the first decades of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

We have no other artistic examples from this early period. But some illuminated manuscripts reveal the influx of artistic works from the capital of Byzantium, such as the codex of the Meteoron Monastery no. 552 (last quarter of 11<sup>th</sup> century) with the full-page miniature of St. Arsenios the Great (vol. 2v) [17, vol. I, pp. 115–119].

Furthermore, the Bishopric of Stagoi is mentioned in an official document which defines and establishes its boundaries, the villages and minor monastic communities under its jurisdiction and its estates in general. It is about the *Praktikon* (inventory) of the *Anagrapheus* Manasses, dated to between 1163 and 1180, or the early 13<sup>th</sup> century at the latest. It mentions three monasteries dedicated to the Mother of God: the Monastery at Libochovo, the Monastery at Aspropotamos, and the Monastery at Doupiane [13, pp. 27–32, 41–42, 47–54; 14, pp. 28–33, 93–100; 16, pp. 17–19]. The last one was initially the focal point of the monastic life at Meteora, before the formation of a monastic community on the towering rock peaks of Thessaly. The small Church of the Skete of the Theotokos Doupiane preserves a few wall paintings, the style of which is also typical for the period, i.e. the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 13<sup>th</sup> century. Probably, the first layer of wall paintings in the Church of the Virgin near the village of Asproekklisia belongs to the same period.

Unfortunately, there is no information concerning the Bishopric of Stagoi and Meteora monasteries from the mid-13<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. A miracle-working icon of the Virgin Eleousa — the so-called icon of ‘Panagia Loxadiotissa’ — is situated in the katholikon of the Great Meteoron Monastery [29].

Certain scholars have already claimed that the icon in question originated from the Byzantine Monastery of the Virgin Lykousada, which was erected by the nun Hypomone, the widow of John I Komnenos Doukas, the ruler of Thessaly, between 1282 and 1289 [15, no. 1–5, pp. 500–513]. However, this view is not fully documented. On the other hand, the bad situation of the icon does not allow a detailed artistic analysis, although certain stylistic features imply the influence of the art of the Late Komnenian period (end of the 12<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century). However, a question arises: if the icon of the Virgin Loxadiotissa dates back to the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century or some years later, does this indicate that it was not painted on the occasion of the foundation of the Virgin Lykousada Monastery, but comes from an older foundation in Western Thessaly. Consequently, the pre-1289 provenance of the icon remains unknown.

## II. 14<sup>th</sup>-century wall paintings and icons

In the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Skete of the Theotokos Doupiane included the hermits’ cave cells and other small places of prayer in the surrounding area. The rights of this ascetic community were safeguarded in a decree issued by King Symeon Uroš Palaiologos, half-brother of Stefan Dušan († ca. 1370). In addition, the monastic community of the Meteora was to be revitalised by the activities of St. Athanasios of Meteora. According to his Vita [12], St. Athanasios settled as a monk in the Stagoi region after his second stay on Mount

Athos. In the year 1340, he settled on the rock known as *Platys Lithos*. On this rock St. Athanasios was to establish a *coenobium*, as it attested by his coenobitic Typikon, the *Canonical Rule*, and erect a church dedicated to the Panagia Meteoritissa of Petra. However, very soon the increase in the number of monks created the need for a new church, which was constructed in the period of 1359-1366. It was dedicated to the Transfiguration of Christ [8, pp. 41-59; 19, pp. 291-315].

Fragments of the painted decoration of St. Athanasios's church depicting figures of saints in roundels still survive at the Great Meteoron Monastery (Ill. 69). The style of these wall painting fragments is closely connected with the artistic idiom of the painter who decorated the Monastery of Hypapante in 1366/7. Consequently, it may be reasonably assumed that the painter of the Hypapante also worked at the Great Meteoron, most likely shortly before 1366 [24, p. 94; 32, pp. 187-188].

In addition, the stylistic idiom of the mentioned two wall painting decorations can be seen in four icons, particularly in the icons of Christ Evergetis, the Virgin Hodegetria, St. Nicholas, and the Archangel Michael, which were part of the iconostasis of the first katholikon of the Great Meteoron Monastery erected by St. Athanasios. It is our belief, therefore, that these icons were painted by the artist who painted the main churches of the Hypapante and Great Meteoron monasteries, and should therefore be dated to immediately after 1359 or *circa* 1366 [24, pp. 87-100].

We have no information about this painter. However, his art reveals a great affinity with the frescoes of the church of Panagia Olympiotissa in Ellassona, Thessaly (1332-1355) and with those of the katholikon of the Monastery of Archangel Michael near Lesnovo (1341-1346/7, 1349). So, it is very possible that this "School of Art", to which other decorations of the Prespa region and southern Serbia belong as well, — and of course these of the Great Meteoron and Hypapante monasteries — is linked to middle 14<sup>th</sup>-century Serbian patronage.

Few indiscernible figures of saints have been found in the chapel of St. Anthony at the Monastery of St. Nicholas Anapausas [18, p. 31]. These murals were dated by the scholars back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, although it cannot be absolutely confirmed. Other wall paintings of the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century were found in two small monasteries on the rock of Pixari (Ill. 70) and in a cave near the village Gavros. The first one was constructed by the monks Gregory and Theodosios around 1370 [23; 30, p. 269]. The hermitage includes a cave church with wall paintings dated back to 1374/5, according to the inscription. The style of painting is also indicative of the artistic idiom that was disseminated in South Balkans during the years of the Serbian rule. Yet, a small icon of Deesis comes from the cave monastery of Gregory and Theodosios. This icon was probably part of the decoration of the bema screen of this monastery. But its artistic style, which testifies to the influence of the art of Thessaloniki, has no connection with that of the wall paintings.

As it is well known, Maria Angelina, the Queen of Ioannina, and sister of St. Joasaph († 1422/3), the son of King Symeon Uroš Palaiologos and second kteror of the Meteoron monastery, contributed in a number of ways to this programme of patronage, later becoming a major benefactor of the Great Meteoron Monastery. This is attested by a letter of dedication written by Maria herself, dating from 1386 [34, no. 5]. This letter records her donations and many votive offerings, such as the icons, where she is depicted as a patron (Ill. 71). According to G. Fousteris, the icons donated by Maria are works of the painter of the katholikon of the Vlatades Monastery in Thessaloniki (third quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century).

Another icon of the same period, bearing a depiction of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (*Hyrapante*), comes from the Monastery of the Hyrapante [31, pp. 383–384]. This icon displays a close connection with other icons on the same theme, like that in the Byzantine Museum at Kastoria (late 14<sup>th</sup> century) [27, no 38]. However, the artistic idiom of the icon of the Hyrapante Monastery is identical to that of the oldest bema door of the Great Meteoron Monastery, which dates to the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, most probably to the year 1387 [24, p. 98; 30, pp. 269–270].

There is a small icon of St. Thomas preserved in the Great Meteoron Monastery as well. The size of the icon and the posture of the Apostle indicate that it was part of an epistyle [24, pp. 98–99]. Indeed, another unpublished icon of the same ensemble obviously is exhibited in the Walters Art Museum. It bears the figure of St. Andrew. Given that the epistyle of the bema screen of the first katholikon of the Great Meteoron Monastery was constituted by five sizeable icons (that of the Archangel Michael is preserved), it is questionable whether the icons of St. Thomas and St. Andrew were part of another epistyle from Meteora or not. On the other hand, if we examine the style of these two icons we shall find out remarkable stylistic similarities with the Byzantine wall paintings of the chapel of Holy Archangels in the Monastery of Chilandar on Mount Athos [22]. According to V. Djurić [6, p. 128], the sovereign Thomas Preljubović, husband of Maria Angelina and brother-in-law of Joasaph the ktetor of Meteoron Monastery, was probably the patron of this decoration. In this case, the architrave, of which the two icons were part, could come from a small church of another monastery of West Thessaly.

In the year 1389/90, the monk Dorotheos erected a new monastery on the rocks of Meteora, the so-called Monastery of the Virgin Hypsilotera, with the spiritual guidance and financial assistance of St. Joasaph, the ktetor of the Meteoron Monastery<sup>1</sup>. The rock monastery of the Hypsilotera does not exist today, but a few fragments of wall paintings have been preserved in a pit of the rock. The bad state of preservation of these wall paintings does not allow a detailed artistic analysis, but, judging from the historical documents, they cannot be painted after 15<sup>th</sup> century.

An inscription on a small unpublished icon with a bust of St. Nicholas reads: + *δέισης του δούλου του Θεου δροθεου μοναχου* [= prayer of the servant of God Dorotheos the monk] (Ill. 72). It is a question whether Dorotheos of the icon can be the same person with the ktetor of the Monastery of the Theotokos Hypsilotera. If so, the icon of St. Nicholas can be dated to circa 1400.

Speaking about the artistic activity at Meteora around the 1400s, I have to mention two bilateral icons of that period. The first is now exhibited in the Museum of Varlaam Monastery, but it was formerly in the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Kalabaka [26]. It is decorated with the Crucifixion of Christ (end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century) and the Dormition of the Virgin (middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century) (Ill. 73). Despite the fact that this icon is inscribed, it is not sufficient for a historical documentation. However, judging by the large size and the horizontal shape of the icon, it was probably suspended on the top of the (marble) bema screen just as the large crosses were from the 16<sup>th</sup> century on. After all, we know that the icon was hung over the central entrance to the nave circa 1900. So, it seems that it was always placed in a prominent position. This fact indicates that the icon descended for worship and procession on specific days of the Church calendar. These days could not have been other than those of the feasts of

<sup>1</sup> Information about Hypsilotera monastery extract from a historical document the Πάτρια (Patria), written by the monk Neilos Stavras [33, pp. 274–276, no. 6].

the True Cross and certainly that of the Good Friday. Consequently, it was used like the veil of epitaph. It cannot be a coincidence that, even now, the icon is placed for veneration on the third Sunday of Lent (adoration of the Holy Cross), representing the Passion of Christ.

The second bilateral icon is exhibited in the Museum of Great Meteoron Monastery. The Virgin Hodegetria is depicted on its one side and the Crucifixion of Christ on the other. Given its large size and the hollow in the middle of the lower frame, it was probably used as a procession icon. However, its origin remains unknown. It is also a question of whether the two sides are painted by the same artist at the same time or not. Perhaps the figure of the Virgin was depicted earlier, circa 1380s.

### III. 15<sup>th</sup>-century wall paintings and icons

The church founded by St. Athanasios was completely rebuilt by his disciple, Joasaph Palaiologos in 1387/8, but it was decorated in 1483, when Thessaly had already passed into the hands of the Ottoman invaders. No layer of painting from before this phase exists. Only one painting can be dated to 1387/8: the scene of the Second Coming, which is depicted on the outer surface of the north wall of the church, where the original main entrance once stood. The composition was originally much larger (over 4 m.) [30, pp. 269–270; 32, pp. 190–191].

On the other hand, the iconographic programme of the Old katholikon of the Great Meteoron Monastery, rebuilt by St. Joasaph in 1387, contains a complete hagiographical, doctrinal and Gospel cycle (1483) [8]. The wall paintings constitute the first and most important work of the so-called ‘Kastoria Workshop’ [11, pp. 218–258; 20; 21; 27, pp. 316–381; 28]. The team of painters consisted of at least two charismatic artists, who were active between 1475 and 1490 in Thessaly and Kastoria, as well as in the Skopje region and the Prilep area. It is worth noting that these painters are not connected with the artistic tradition of Ohrid but with that of Kastoria i.e. the most important artistic center of the period. The painters of the Great Meteoron can therefore be plausibly regarded as heirs of the great painters of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Kastoria.

However, in the dome of the church, the eight figures of the prophets have been mostly overpainted. Three of these (Jeremiah, Ill. 74) survive in a better state of preservation. These three figures reveal a painter with a high level of training and skill. In addition, the painter’s art displays very clear Western influences, which are actually more substantial than those to be found in the wall-paintings executed by the painters of the ‘Kastoria Workshop’. It is not known who invited him to work at the monastery and why he stopped working at an early stage. In any event, the artist who painted the dome of the Old katholikon of the Great Meteoron represents a unicum in the monumental painting of mainland Greece of the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century [32, pp. 194–195], when the region of West Thessaly was a small semi-autonomous state, founded by Turahan Bey (d. 1502) and was granted to him as *mülk* (freehold land).

Finally, I would like to introduce a Russian icon with the image of the Hagion Mandelion (ΤΟΝ ΑΓΙΩΝ ΜΑΝΔΕΙΛΙΩΝ) (Ill. 75). The icon is now exhibited in the Museum of Great Meteoron Monastery, but we know nothing about its origin. In my opinion, its stylistic features are indicative of the artistic tradition of Novgorod, especially of the artistic idiom of the Great Russian painter Dionysios (ca. 1440–1502). The stylistic similarity of the icon with the others attributed to the same master, such as the icon of Christ Redeemer (ca. 1470), is perhaps not accidental [10]. This fact does not prove that the icon in question is indeed a work of Dionysios. However, it does indicate a workshop, which has been influenced by the Russian artist of the last quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

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### **Title.** Byzantine Wall Paintings and Icons at Meteora

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**Abstract.** The region of Meteora, West Thessaly, is not only one of the most important centres of Christian spirituality, but a preeminent ark of medieval art and European culture as well. The paper provides an overview of a central aspect of this heritage: the decoration of churches with wall paintings and icons. Despite the significant ensembles and remnants surviving in the vicinity of Meteora, a comprehensive art historical assessment of these monuments remains a desideratum, especially considering our limited knowledge on workshops, exact dates and patrons. Nevertheless, these venerated works of art are of prime importance mainly because of their association with artistic tendencies which emanate from Constantinople, Thessaloniki, and in some cases even Italy. Thus, by examining the mentioned painting ensembles, this paper provides a clear outline of the succession of artistic tendencies in visual production at Meteora throughout the Byzantine period.

**Keywords:** Thessaly, Stagoi, Meteora monasteries, Great Meteoron Monastery, St. Athanasios of Meteora, Symeon Uroš Palaiologos, Byzantine wall paintings, Byzantine icons

### **Название статьи.** Византийские фрески и иконы в Метеорах

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**Аннотация.** Район Метеор в Западной Фессалии — не только один из важнейших

центров христианской духовности, но и богатейшая сокровищница средневекового искусства и европейской культуры в целом. В статье дается обзор весьма существенной части этого наследия: живописного убранства храмов фресками и иконами. Несмотря на то, что в Метеорах и окрестностях сохранились значительные ансамбли и отдельные памятники, их комплексное искусствоведческое исследование еще только предстоит осуществить, в особенности учитывая неполноту наших знаний о мастерских, датах и заказчиках. Тем не менее, эти почитаемые произведения искусства представляют значительный интерес прежде всего по причине своей связи с художественными тенденциями, исходящими из Константинополя, Салоник и в некоторых случаях даже из Италии. В статье последовательно рассматриваются эти живописные ансамбли и дается очерк развития художественных тенденций в искусстве Метеор на протяжении византийского периода.

**Ключевые слова:** Фессалия, Стаги, Метеорские монастыри, Великий Метеор, Св. Афанасий Метеорский, Симеон Урош Палеолог, византийские фрески, византийские иконы





III. 67. Kalambaka, Church of the Dormition of the Virgin. St. Gregorios the Great (The Dialogos). Photographic Archive of Academia of Theological and Historical Studies of Holy Meteora



III. 68. Kalambaka, Church of the Dormition of the Virgin. St. Polykarpos of Smyrna. Photographic Archive of Academia of Theological and Historical Studies of Holy Meteora



III. 69. Meteora, Pyxari rock. The ktetor Gregorios. Photographic Archive of Academia of Theological and Historical Studies of Holy Meteora



III. 70. Meteora, Great Meteoron Monastery. St. Niketas (probably). Photographic Archive of Great Meteoron Monastery



III. 71. Meteora, Great Meteoron Monastery. Icon-reliquary with the image of Maria Palaiologina. Photographic Archive of Great Meteoron Monastery



III. 72. Meteora, Great Meteoron Monastery. St. Nikolaos. Photographic Archive of Great Meteoron Monastery



Ill. 73. Meteora,  
Varlaam Monastery,  
The Crucifixion.  
Photographic Archive of  
Varlaam Monastery



Ill. 74. Meteora, Great Meteoron Monastery. Old  
katholikon. Prophet Jeremias, detail. Photographic  
Archive of Great Meteoron Monastery



Ill. 75. Meteora, Great Meteoron Monastery. The Hagion  
Mandylion. Photographic Archive of Great Meteoron  
Monastery