

Mural Paintings of the Monastery Church of Ss. Apostles Peter and Paul in Vithkuqi**Archaeology**

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Abstract

Vithkuqi is one of the areas of Southeastern Albania, which experienced a rapid economic and social development during the second half of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century. Vithkuqi was an important center of the Albanian-Macedonian-Thessal zone, known for their special history during the mentioned centuries, under the ottoman invasion. Because of this special development happening in Vithkuqi, many churches were built there in the 18th century. The most important religious buildings, during this period, were the monastery of SS. Apostles Peter and Paul. Parts of this monastery were the churches SS. Peter and Paul and the mortuary chapel of SS. Kosmas and Damian. Both religion buildings inside the monastery territory were decorated in the 18th century with mural paintings by the famous painters Constantine and Athanas Zografi. The religious themes of these paintings inside the church of SS. Peter and Paul, the iconographic and artistic features of these mural paintings made by the Zografi brothers, are the main themes that will be discussed in this work.

Mural Painting of the SS. Apostles Peter and Paul Church in Vithkuqi

The monastery SS. Apostles Peter and Paul is the most important religious building in Vithkuqi. The same named church, SS. Apostles Peter and Paul, is the main building in that monastery, in matters of size and of ornamental treatment as well.

The nap of this basilica has sizes of 14, 70 x 8, 0 m. It consists of three longitudinal naves, where the center nave is the taller and wider than the side naves. The church space is described by a transverse nave too, which is intersected by the long, centered nave and therefore creates a squared core, which is raised by a high tumbler and is covered by a dome.

The side naves are small, covered by domes, cones created. The central nave is covered with cylindrical lattice, and creating a fluent space, which rises while going to the domes direction in the central part. The altar's environment is separated from the other nave's part by a wood carved iconostasis. In the altar's zone are three apses noticed, which are taken outside. The church of SS. Peter and Paul is painted in 1764 by the brothers Athanas and Constantine Zografi².

² The history, structure and architecture of the monastery is written by A. Papakozma, *Manastiri i Shën Pjetrit dhe Pavlit në Vithkuq, datimi, urbanistika, arkitektura, mjeshtrit e ndërtimit*, in: Monumentet 25,1 (1983), f. 77-85 si dhe P. Thomo, *Kishat Pasbizantine në Shqipërinë e Jugut*, Tiranë 1998, f. 50-54.

The mural painting of the Zografi brother is written by Th. Popa, *Piktorët Kostandin dhe Athanas Zografi dhe freskat e tyre me skenat e apokalipsit*, në: Bulletin i Universitetit Shtetëror të Tiranës, Seria Shkencat Shoqërore 1 (1959) 44. A general presentation of the Zografi brothers work is given by T. Vinjau Caca, *Some Data about the Activity of Kostandin and Athanas Zografi from Korca and the Characteristics of their Art in the 18th Century*, in: E. Drakopoulou, Topics in Post-Byzantine Painting in Memory of Manolis Chatzidakis. Conference Proceedings 28-29 May 1999, Athen 2002, f. 203-216; The mural painting of the Zografi brothers in the church of Cosmas and Damian in the Monastery of Saint Pjeter and Pavel in Vithkuq is written by K. Kirzhainer, *Das Ossuarium des Petrus- und Paulus-Klosters in Vithkuq (Südalbanien) und seine Freskendekoration (1750)*, in: Makedonika, 34(2003/04), pp. 149-208 and about the iconographic elements of the mural painting of the church of Saint Peter and Paul in Vithkuqi, in relation with other churches in Vithkuqi and the ones of Voskopoja is written by R. Rousseva, *Iconographic characteristics of the churches in Moschopolis and Vithkuqi (Albania)*, in: Makedonika, 35(2005-2006), f. 141-161.

Above the northern door inside the church of the monastery of SS. Peter and Paul, is writing, which is very faded and partly readable:

„U ndërtua prej themeli, ky tempull hyjnor dhe i gjithnderuar i Apostujve të Shenjte dhe u pikturua....me dorën e Kostandin dhe Athanasit nga Korça, në vitin 1764“³.

This divine temple and appreciated of Holy Apostles is build from foundation and painted...with the hand of Constantine and Athanas from Korça, in 1764.

Iconographic Program

The inside of the church, offers a very beautiful and clear view for a decorative mural. The inside surface is completely painted and shows the whole decoration program. Even though, a lot of the inside decorations are very damaged, it still gives an impression of the it's miraculous view that it had during those times.

The painted surface decorates the cover with the central dome, the cylindrical cover of the central nave, the domes of the side naves and the part of the altar.

The specialty of the display of this basilica is that it misses the row of presentations of dodekaorton. The scenes of dodekaorton are presented with the cylindrical cover of the central

On the walls of the side naves, under the domes, are martyrdoms scenes displayed. Underneath them, around the nave, you can see the medallion row with martyrs. Underneath this row, are saints and martyrs figured.

Altar Program

In the center of the apse, is The Holy Virgin in half figure, with opened arms like in a praying gesture, with Jesus Emanuel on her lap. On both sides of The Virgin are angels in whole figures with opened parchments and writings praising The Holy Mother.

Underneath The Holy Virgin's display, is the row with the scene of Communion of Apostles. In this scene is a special element noticed. On the left half is the figure of Jude noticed with the devil talking to his ear and with his index finger which directs to the mouth which spoke and betrayed Jesus. The Jude figure is the only figure of an apostle, which has the name of the person displayed above the figure.

This is a rare byzantine iconography. This iconographic element is found in other churches in Vithkuqi and Voskopoje (near Vithkuqi), like a special local feature.

³ Th. Popa, 1998, 367, p. 181.

A window separates Communion of Apostles in two pieces, where are two saints liter found: Saint Methodius and Saint Ambrosias.

In the lower row of the central ape are the Liturgical Saints: Saint Spiridon, with a covered head; Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, Saint Gregorian Theologian, Saint Basileos in one side and Saint Jacob, Saint Joan Crysostomos, Saint Gregorian Dialogues with a new view and at last a liturgy without a name.

Program of the Dome

In the center of the church, where the long naves cut the transversal ones, is the church's dome raised by a long tumbler. In the center of the dome, is Jesus Pantocrator. Jesus keeps the big, golden aura on his head, which creates a clear contrast with his dark hair. His big eyes are focused towards a beyond orientation, beyond the real time and space limits.

Based on a light and uniform way of painting of the face, this figure creates a perfect balance upon naturalism and mysticism.

Jesus' left hand holds the gospel's golden, thick book near his heart. The right blessing hand with the touching fingers create the shortcut of Jesus' Monogram: IC XC

On both sides of Jesus, are the letters of the writing separated "O Pantocrator". Over them, on two red spheres, is written again with gold: IC left and XC right.

This figure is surrounded by a circle with unsalable colored rhombuses, which reminds you of the rainbow colors⁴. This circle is kept by busts of angels with their wings opened and up towards the colorful archery. The angels with wide shoulders, and their heads turns to the angel next to them, create coupled heavenly figures.

The wideness of his opened arms, their bending, creates the so called "Linea Serpentinata", with the movement of the upper body to one side and the release of the lower half of the body to the other side, remembers the Italian painting of the 16th century. Wide movements of twisted bodies, wrinkled clothes which support the energy of the limbs, are known since the Italian Renaissance at Michelangelo, in his latest mannerist painting and the Italian baroque painting, with many styles based on the counter-reformers politic artistic requests⁵.

Even if the impacts of the free and voluminous Italian baroque paintings are seen on the angel figures, still there is a "byzantine" impact on those elements. The figures, through the graphic schematization, are reformatted according to conservative byzantine profile.

⁴ In the suggestions of Dionysius of Fournia is written,:" surround the Pantocrator by an circled arch with different colors, like a rainbow,...".
Dionysius of Fournia, p. 178.

⁵ For example the figure of Mary in "Tondo Doni" by Michelangelo or figures in the Baroque painting Pietro da Cortona.

The central dome of the SS. Peter and Paul church is supported on a tall tumbler. Again, according to the guidance of Dionysius from the Saint Mountain Athos, the tumbler is surrounded from figures of prophets, who are separated in couples of figures, through the dome's windows. Those prophets were distinguished: Zaharias, Nahum, Ezekiel, Micah, Jeremiahs, Isaiah, Jonas, Abdias, Joel, Amos, David, Moses, Abraham, Samuel, Malachi and Sophonias.

Under the tumbler's zone, on the 4 surfaces of the dome, is the appearance of the four evangelic distinguished: Mark, Mateo, Lukas and Joan (which is much damaged). The apostles are displayed on the writing desks close to their symbolic animal. The architecture of the buildings which are put close to the apostles figures, is the same in every case, and appears a compelling an architectural contemporary building.

All the decoration schemes of the central dome of this basilica, together with the scene of Pantocrator in the central, angels surrounding, prophets on the tumbler and the apostles in the pendentive zone, coincides with the guidance of the painting of central domes in the Post Byzantine Period⁶.

The cover of the central nave, on the west side of the dome, contains these themes:

1. Jesus' Irony
2. The Way to Gethsemane.
3. The Awakening Lazarus
4. The entry of Jesus in Jerusalem is the last scene of this segment of the dome. Here is also found the basic compositional elements, just how they are treated in the Guidance of Dionysius from Fourn⁷.
5. The Kiss of Jude.
6. Jesus before Pilate.
7. The Last Supper.
8. The Wash of the Apostles Feet.

The dome of the central nave on the east part.

1. The Distrust of Saint Thomas.
2. The Healing of the Mad.
3. The Birth of Jesus.
4. The Taking of Jesus in the Temple.
5. The Raising of Jesus to the Sky.
6. Pentecost.
7. The Birth of Mary.
8. Mary's Presentation in the Temple.

⁶ For figurative programs of byzantine churches, look: B.Schellewald, *Die Ordnung einer Bilderwelt. Bilder und Bildprogramme in Byzanz, Ausstellungskatalog Kaiserin Thophanu. Begegnung des Ostens und des Westens um die Wende des ersten Jahrtausends II*, Köln 1991, pp. 41-61.

⁷ Dionysius of Fourn, p. 93.

The scenes respond to all the orientations that are read in the Handbook of Dionysius from Fournas⁸.

The cover of the side naves

The South Nave. Domes from east to west.

1. Jesus Emanuel
2. Saint Joan Theologies
3. Crucifixion of Jesus
4. The Deduction of Jesus in Hell
5. The Eye of Godfather

The south nave from west to east:

1. Jesus the Savior.
2. The dome next to it is damaged and it's not understood what is displayed.
3. Christ Sabbaoth
4. Saint Joan Baptist Angel
5. Jesus Archangel

Diakonikon and Prothesis:

In the Diakonikon zone, in the church SS. Peter and Paul is The Mourning of Jesus found in the lower section and over it The Raising of Jesus to the Sky.

In the liturgical zone of the Prothesis are shown two scenes with the prophet Abraham in the center. Underneath it is the Hospitality of Abraham, where the three angels between Abraham and Sara symbolize The Saint Trinity. Above this scene is The Offering of Abraham, where the famous scene of The Sacrifice of Isaac and the savior angel near him is distinguished.

Over the scenes of Abraham, is The Wedding of Kan presented in the altar's zone, a biblical feast which is connected with the liturgical rituals. The specialty of this figuration is the presentation of a contemporary couple on Jesus' left. The bride in the end of the table is wearing a local costume from the Opar zone (near Vithkuqi). She puts her right hand on her heart, maybe as a gesture of blessing and the left hand she lends it to the husband. The husband, wearing the clothes of a contemporary tradesman, holds with love the wife's hand. In this way, there is the religious presentation of a very important position in the altar updated.

⁸ Dionysius of Fournas, p. 95.

West Wall

The presentations on the west wall contain as a main scene The Koimesis: The Sleep of Saint Mary.

The specialty of the west wall of the SS. Peter and Paul church is over the “Sleeping” scene. There are three other scenes displayed:

- Jesus in Mountain Tabor and
- Jesus before the Jew priest Kaipas, on the right.

In the center of the west wall is this scene distinguished: The Coronation of Mary. This iconography, which its genesis is in the west art of the 12 century, it is spread in the Post-Byzantine paintings, according to western examples. This is a known theme on the works of the Zografi brothers. Those are found in the church of Saint Athanasius in Voskopoje (1745) also in the church of SS. Kosmas and Damian (1750) before the painting in the church of SS. Peter and Paul in Vithkuqi. In all the cases above, this theme is displayed in different ways. The different iconographic features of transmitting this theme, are proves for the many picturesque models which possessed the Zografi brothers and the diversity of presentations of the mural painting’s themes in those areas of the Northern Epirus.

Saints with Medallions and Saints with Whole Figures

In the church of SS. Peter and Paul, are the two rows of the painted figures by medallions with saints. Below, there are saints ranked with whole figures. Those elements are distinguished since in the paintings of the Byzantine churches in the 13th century and later in all the Post-Byzantine churches in the Western Macedonian areas and Epirus⁹.

Medallions

The row of the medallions with the inside-written saints is relatively tight in this church, in relation to the surface of the painting that is available. This row is much damaged, yet it is understandable the way of separation and the decoration system. This row is separated by a thick black stripe, in between of two thinner white stripes, from the other parts above and below.

The medallions are framed with white circles, among them, it is clearly noticed the decorations with vine, leaves and clusters of grapes. Because according to a biblical writing, Jesus compares himself with the mystique vine: “I am the real vine and my Father is the Viniculture”.

⁹ A. Chatzinikolaou, in: Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst II, *Heilige*, pp. 1034 – 1093.

A few martyrs are noticeable in this row, for example: Agapios, Domnos, Didianos, Onufrion, Agapios and Aleranos. These persons displayed are all part of the suggested martyr group by Dionysius from Fourn¹⁰.

Saints in Whole Figures

In the last row of the decoration system are saints displayed by whole figures.

On the launches of the aside are displayed Patriarch Melchisedec and Jesus as King of Kings.

In this way for example there are two launches distinguished in the eastern area of the northern nave and in the middle of the apse.

A special presentation is the one of the Archangel Michael¹¹. He is presented over Satan's body by taking the devil out of him.

Here are also the presentations of the slave saints, for example: Saint Nahum or Saint Joan Vladimir with the heads cut. The last one is presented in the western wall, next to Constantine and Helena. And Saint Nahum, in the same western wall, but close to the apostles Peter and Paul.

Two apostles are not presented with the model of the church, but they are giving each other the Kiss of Peace, a presentation of Concordia Apostulorum, which is the same such as in the west and in the east¹².

Most of the saints with the whole figure are damaged. Other figures that are distinguished are Peter of Alexandria with Jesus, and also a row of bishops, like Germanous, Spiridon, Theodore, Sylvester and Stefano.

Partly noticeable are the saints wearing the soldier uniforms, like Minas and Mercurios.

Under the arches are also martyr figures distinguished, like Markianos, Andronikos, Leonidas, Kurinos, Viktor, Kelsios, Kalistra, Gymnasios, Auksentios and Mardarios.

Characteristics and the style of mural paintings in the church of Saint Peter and Paul

The church SS. Peter and Paul was painted by the Zografi brothers in 1764. This church was painted after 20 years of experience by painting other churches in central and south Albania

¹⁰ Schäfer, 1983, pp. 138-142.

¹¹ Sachs, Badstübner, Neumann, 2012, p.124; Tradigo, 2005, pp. 46-49.

¹² Tradigo, 2005, p.267

(Northern Epirus), in the Prespa¹³ and Athos¹⁴ area. Circa 15 years before, they painted the neighbor building in the monastery of Vithkuq, the sanctuary of SS. Cosmas and Damian.

The evolution of the work is noticeable comparing the church of SS. Peter and Paul with their picturesque style used in the sanctuary nearby. They worked with brighter colors, better drawn figures, clearer perspective tendencies and a more completed compositional organization. Yet, their paintings clearly remain the conservative post-byzantine features, by identifying the work of those masters from Korça, with an extraordinary work rhythm.

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¹³ Kirchhainer 2003/04, p. 192.

¹⁴ G.C. Tsigaras, 2003, p. 277.

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