

BYZANTINE MONUMENTS IN GREEK MACEDONIA

RESEARCH WORK AND RESTORATION 1912 - 1962

After the liberation of Macedonia, one of the first concerns of the Greek Government was the discovery, restoration and preservation of Byzantine monuments in the area which had been disfigured or concealed by the passage of time or by enemy action.

The Government Archaeological Service turned its timely attention to the medieval monuments found within the present borders of Greek Macedonia, and did not confine its activity to the big towns only, but extended it to more remote and inaccessible regions as well.

It is difficult to give a complete account of present achievements in this field, not to mention all the new finds of the last fifty years. Here we shall confine our remarks to a few items, noting the most important only. The excavations for the early Christian antiquities will be dealt with in another article.

I. Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki, the second capital of Byzantium, has preserved a series of monuments dating from the beginning of the fourth century of our era down to the second half of the fourteenth century, inspite of a number of invasions by Saracens, Normans and Turks, civil wars and fires. These monuments give a fuller picture of the evolution of Byzantine art from the early Christian period than even the numerous monuments still preserved at Constantinople.

Early Christian tombs, which are continually being unearthed inside the old city walls on the eastern and western sides of Thessaloniki, have provided a wealth of hitherto unknown material that throws light on the painting of this period. These discoveries demonstrate the continuity of the classical tradition at Thessaloniki, and show that the city was one of the most important art centres at the time of Constantine the Great. The paintings in the Thessaloniki tombs, which have oriental affinities, bear resemblances to the wall paintings in some of the Roman catacombs, and tombs at Pec in Hungary, Nish, Trier and the church at Akyleia. It may

also be remarked that the paintings in Tomb A in Nigdis Street are very similar to Egyptian portraits from the Fayium Province (fig. 1).

The Archaeological Service has either preserved these discoveries, so important for the history of European painting, *in situ*, or has removed them from the walls to a museum. Accurate copies have been made of most of the wall paintings which will be exhibited eventually in a special room in the new Archaeological and Byzantine Museum now under construction.

At the end of the fourth century the great art of mosaics superseded the art of the tomb paintings. St George, the Roman Rotonda of the time of Theodosius the Great (379 - 395), was reconstructed as the famous church of the Asomatoi, and after the addition of a conch and cloisters round the building, the vault and arches were ornamented with exquisite mosaics (figs. 2 - 3). All this decoration, which came originally from one artist's studio, has now regained its full pristine splendour, after restoration carried out in 1952 and 1953, and still in some way being carried on today.

After the mosaics and the ninth century fresco of the Ascension of Our Lord in one quarter of the conch had been cleaned, and after other excavations with relevant publications, the Rotonda of St George assumed a special place of interest in the history of Byzantine art.

Another important task has been the restoration of the Basilica of St Demetrius, which was destroyed in the fire of 1917. It was completely destroyed at that time, but some parts of the building and some mosaics and sculptures were salvaged, as well as various inscriptions and vases. The work of reconstruction began soon after the monument's destruction and was continued until 1938.

The second and final stage in the restoration of the monument began almost immediately after the second World War. The zeal of certain scholars aroused the interest of the Government, which in spite of the general devastation of the country at the time, managed to find the means for the continuation of the work which began in 1945 and went on until the complete restoration of the monument in 1948. On October 26th of that year the inauguration of this time-honoured House of Prayer took place (fig. 4 - 5). At about the same time the Basilica of Acheropietos (Vth century) was recovered from the alluvia surrounding it, and a number of ancient buildings of unknown use were unearthed on the eastern, north-eastern and northern side of it.

Most important for the study of Byzantine art, and especially of early Byzantine painting has been the discovery in 1921 of a mosaic of the "Likeness of the Glory of the Lord" in the small church of Hosios David (fig. 6). This church was previously the Catholikon of the Moni Latomou (Vth century) and was subsequently used by the Turks as a mosque under the name of Sulitse or Keramendin Tzami. The mosaic covers one quarter of the conche of the chapel and is characterized by admirable compositions and colour schemes. The high quality of its art has become more manifest through the work of restoration and cleaning which was carried out in 1953. Many details both of the picture itself and its colours have become clearer and more vivid, as its original splendour had been lost during the many years of the Turkish occupation that it remained covered in whitewash. This mosaic (end of Vth and beginning of VIth century) together with the later mosaics of the Basilica of St Demetrius (middle of VIIth century) constitute the turning point or the intermediate stage of Byzantine art of the main period.

Another important monument of this period both on account of its architectural plan and its mosaic decoration is St Sophia, which belongs to the early years of the iconoclastic controversy (728 A.D.). During 400 years of Turkish occupation (1525 - 1913) it was used as a mosque and the addition of necessary annexes had disfigured the building and rendered it graceless. The mosaic decoration of the interior was wholly concealed, but fortunately it was found to be wholly undamaged when it was uncovered. This mosaic decoration belongs to three different periods. The ornaments of the arch and the innermost shrine as well as the inscriptions belong to the time of the church's construction. The painting of the Virgin the Platytera belongs to the VIIIth century, while the representation of the Ascension on the cupola belongs to the end of the IXth century (fig. 7). In the narthex and in the vaulted openings, which now are windows, some interesting frescoes of the 11th century have been recently uncovered. The Archaeological Service has worked very conscientiously from the time of the liberation of the country down to the present. It cleared the mosaics, restored part of the eastern side of the monument and cleared its surroundings. As a result of this work it became evident that under the «pericentros» temple of the VIIIth century there was an earlier Basilica of the Vth century. When this basilica was destroyed a more or less temporary monoclitos Basilica was built. This one was discovered on the northern side of St Sophia. It must, therefore, be assumed that the existing temple is the third one chronologically. The work that is now in progress will, it is

hoped, yield more material and it will throw more light on the monument's history and on the general topography of Thessaloniki.

A series of architectural monuments and paintings which record almost the entire development of Byzantine art till the capture of the city by the Turks in 1430, belong to the first half of the second millennium. Our Lady of Coppersmiths (*Panagia Chalkeon*) which got its name from its vicinity, which included the quarters of this trade, is a church belonging to the first half of the XIth century (1028 A.D.). It was considerably disfigured when it was transformed into a Turkish mosque under the name of *Kazantzilar Tzami*. Later it was abandoned by the Turks and was taken back by the Greeks in a dilapidated state. By the work of restoration and cleaning the monument regained its former splendour. Some very important wall paintings were also uncovered (fig. 8). These were recently cleaned and they form an important addition to the remains for a fuller appreciation of Byzantine painting in the period of the Macedonian dynasty.

Nearly all the Byzantine churches of Thessaloniki followed the same history as that of our Lady of Coppersmiths. The conquerors transformed them into mosques and after the liberation they remained for some time abandoned but finally they returned to their first use through a temporary rearrangement of the interior.

Although the tasks of the Archaeological Service were enormous in many parts of the country it did not neglect the monuments of Thessaloniki. A lot of hard work and considerable expenses were devoted to their maintenance and restoration.

Besides the work outlined above, the church of St Aikaterine was reconstructed immediately after the second World War. All Turkish buildings around it were removed and the old architectural features of the church were restored. The old Turkish *Yakup Pasa* mosque which was dark and whitewashed outside and on which were added high roofs which concealed its elegant vaults in order to function as an Islamic temple, was also mutilated and disfigured with *mihrab* and *minbar*. It did however regain its Byzantine form, its former elegance both as a whole and in detail and it proved to be one of the greatest monuments of Palaeologue architecture (fig. 9 - 10). This restoration was brought about after a comparatively short period of hard work which lasted four years (1947 - 1951). Unfortunately the internal changes of the Turkish occupation had destroyed the greatest part of the wonderful frescoes of the church. But even the few that have been preserved still betray the high standard of the Palaeologue

art and they give a complete picture of the artistic and technical possibilities of the age, in spite of the traces of the axe.

Equally elegant is another church of the same period, that of St. Panteleimon which was known as Isakie Tzami during the Turkish occupation. This church has been restored in part. The Turkish whitewash was removed from the outer part and from the additional constructions inside. Some noteworthy frescoes were thus revealed in both the prothesis and the diaconicon. The complete restoration of the monument i.e. the reconstruction of the vaulted cloisters of which we are fortunate in possessing accurate pictures and a plan drawn by R. Schultz and S. Barnsley, is a work of the future.

The well-known church of the Apostles, the old Catholicon of the Monastery of St Mary, which was founded by Patriarch Niphon (1313-1315), were fortunate enough not to have been changed into mosque, at least on the outside. It was probably the elegance of the outer part of the walls that saved it from the conquerors, who walled up only the beautiful continuous two-lobed openings which adorned the three-sided stoa that went round the western and southern side of the church. They also covered up a part of the upper building from which they had removed the gold of the mosaics, and they also covered up the paintings of the rest of the church.

After the liberation, when the church was again used for divine worship, the Archaeological Service restored the northern and the eastern side and it cleared the frescoes and the mosaics from plasters and roughcast, so that now that they have been fastened into position they give us an approximate idea of their old splendour (Fig. 11-12).

Probably one of the most important works that the Archaeological and Restoration Service has carried out, is the work of restoration and maintenance on the Church of the Prophet Elias, the ancient Catholicon of Nea Moni, which was built over the ruins of a Byzantine Palace by Makarios Choumnos at about 1360, and was later transformed by the Turks into a mosque. This monument which had been disfigured by Turkish counterprops and other additions has been restored to its former splendid form (Fig. 13-14). Its chapels at the four corners of the triconch have been reconstructed on the basis of the architectural remains existing *in situ*. The outer colonnade which surrounds the church on three sides has also been restored. The Government Archaeological Service can rightly be proud of achieving this restoration which presented great technical difficulties and also cost a lot of money.

An important addition to Byzantine painting have been the frescoes of St. Nicholas the Orphanos which were of course known before but whose fine technique no one could have guessed before their cleaning in 1960. Many other works of maintenance were carried out on this church, a triclitos basilica with a wooden roof belonging to the end or the beginning of the 14th century.

The constant efforts of the Government since the liberation of Macedonia towards the saving and preservation of the Byzantine monuments of Thessaloniki were also extended to those parts of the city walls that time, the conquerors and the ignorance of the people left undamaged, or still standing. A plan has been worked out for their maintenance and for removal of the small houses and the huts that were erected on or near them, especially during the long years of foreign rule. The plan makes provision for the restoration of those parts that have been preserved in good condition. Work on the plan has already started and goes on quickly and methodically. Part of the restoration has already been accomplished, i. e. alongside the Acropolis Street up to the Tower of the Triangle Section, while the parts that needed immediate attention have been repaired.

II. Veroia

Besides the copious work of maintenance carried out in the richly decorated Byzantine churches of the town, the restoration of the small, wood-covered basilica with a peristoon called "of Christ's Resurrection" or simply *Tou Christou*, is of special importance.

Both as a building but especially for its wall paintings which are wholly preserved, forms a noteworthy monument of the beginning of the XIVth century. The historical importance of the building has been enhanced by the inscription over the doorway which names the founders of the monument, the date of the paintings and their artist and his company. Thus we learn that the founders were Xenos Psalidas and his wife, and that the painter was Kalliergis (who describes himself as the "best painter all over Thessaly") and his brothers. The date of the paintings is 1315. The frescoes are of excellent quality, (fig. 15), their art is admirable, the blending of the colours well-balanced and the unity of plan well-rounded in all representations. Common iconographic and technical details lead to the identification of the painter of St Nicholas the Orphanos in Thessaloniki with Kalliergis, a painter coming from Thessaloniki or at least established in the town.



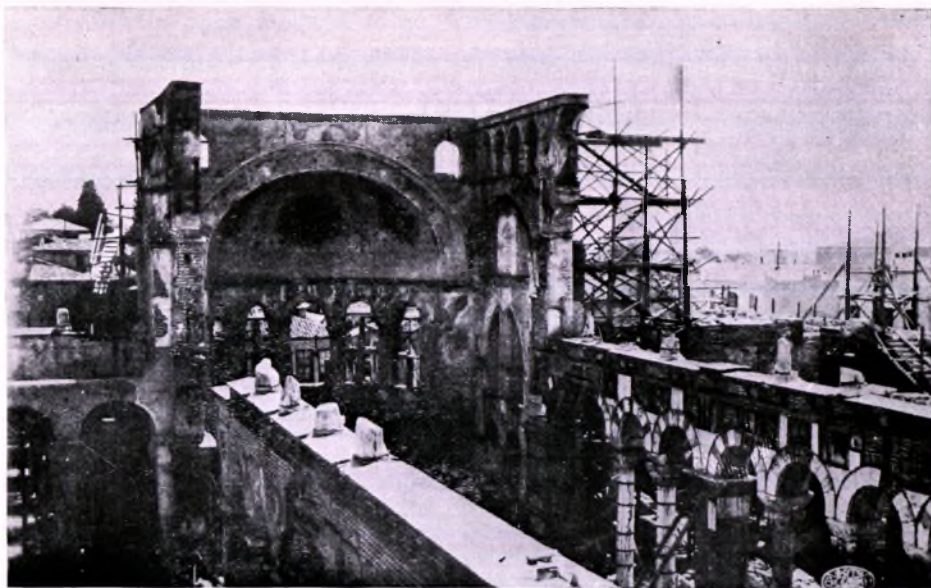
1. Thessaloniki. Fresco in the early Christian tomb of Nigdis street.



2. Thessaloniki, Rotonda. A panel of mosaics.



3. Thessaloniki, Rotonda. Portrait of a Saint.



4. Thessaloniki, Saint Demetrius, after the fire of 1917.



5. Thessaloniki, Saint Demetrius, after the restoration.



6. Thessaloniki, Hosios David. The mosaic.



7. Thessaloniki, Agia Sophia. Detail from the mosaic of the Dome.



8. Thessaloniki, Panagia Chalkeon. Fresco of the Last Judgement, detail.



9. Thessaloniki, Agia Aekaterini, before the restoration.



10. Thessaloniki, Agia Aekaterini, after the restoration.



11. Thessaloniki, Agioi Apostoloi.



12. Thessaloniki, Agioi Apostoloi. Mosaic, Ressurrection.



13. Thessaloniki, Profitis Elias, before the restoration.



14. Thessaloniki, Profitis Elias, after the restoration.



15. Veroia, Church of Christos. Ressurrection of Lazarus, Entry to Jerusalem, Saints.



16. Kastoria, Koumbelidiki, before the restoration.



17. Kastoria, Koumbelidiki, after the restoration.

III. Kastoria

It has been rightly said about this town of archons that had Greek Medieval monuments not survived anywhere else, the monuments of Kastoria alone would have been sufficient to convey the importance and evolution of Byzantine painting from the Xth to the XIVth centuries and also from the time of the town's capture by the Turks (1386) to the present. The above remark about Kastoria, even if it seems exaggerated, shows that the town is very rich in monuments of importance for the history of Byzantine art.

Four centuries of foreign rule as well as the ignorance and neglect of everything except the purely functional in ritual matters led to the disfigurement of the interior of many of the churches through various additions. They also led to the disappearance of some of the frescoes and to the complete change in the appearance of others. Finally the bombardment of the town during the second World War damaged many monuments severely, such as the vault and other parts of the church of Panaghia Koumbelidiki.

The restoration of the churches of Kastoria began with the church of Koumbelidiki in the summer of 1949 (fig. 16 - 17). Later on the ancient churches of St. Anargyroi, St. Nicolas Cascnitzis, the Taxiarch of the Metropolis, St Athanasius Mouzakis and Panaghia Mavriotissa were restored to their old form. At the same time maintenance work on a much smaller scale was begun on other monuments of lesser value and effective steps have been taken for the preservation of the frescoes. Some important icons and manuscripts, mainly of a liturgical nature, were also collected and placed temporarily in safe custody in the vestry of the Kastoria Metropolis.

In the village Omorphoklissia 20 km NW of Kastoria the Byzantine church of St George was restored and studied by experts.

IV. Prespa

Excavations and maintenance works were first carried out in Prespa, then the investigation of all the remains in the area has been undertaken. Impressions of them were taken, photographs made and studies prepared. During these investigations, it was realized that Prespa, although it always was a remote province, began to present active religious life, which was interwoven with the intellectual and cultural movement of the time, mainly after the Emperor Basil II, had liberated the lake area from the Bulgarian yoke. The remains of that area, dated from the first half of the 11th century up to our days, are indications of such active religious and intel-

lectual movement. These remains, their paintings, their sculpture, their wood-carvings and their inscriptions prove that for its art-life this northern province has been immediately dependent on or rather had a common source with the art currents of the whole of Hellenism through the centuries during the second millenium. Moreover, these remains contribute greatly in our knowledge of historical events, ecclesiastical matters, education and the language of the local inhabitants.

V. Serrai

One of the few remaining Byzantine monuments in this town, the Basilica of Agioi Theodoroi, or, as it is otherwise known, the Old Metropolis, was set on fire by the Bulgarians. When the occupation ended, the Archaeological Service began the five-year task of restoration. During the work, a large number of remarkable sculptures came to light. They belonged to various periods, and show that the church was first built during the Early Christian period and that it underwent several changes at the end of the XIth or the beginning of the XIIth century.

VI. Holy Mountain

The work done on the buildings of Monasteries, as well as the Catholica, the Houses of Prayer and the frescoes has been very extensive since the end of the second World War. It is perhaps sufficient to mention here first of all, the restoration work in the famous church of Protaton in Karyes. After a hard work of patience and skill which lasted for more than four years the building itself and the 14th century frescoes have been restored in their old, original form. In the monastery of Staaroniketa the tower has been strengthened and the 14th century frescoes have been cleaned and fixed. In the monastery of Pantocratoros the south wing which was destroyed by fire during the second World War has been rebuild and the library with the treasure have been moved to a safer building. Restoration work is also going on the monasteries of Xeropotamou, Esphigmenou, Dionysiou, Lavra and Chilandar.

The above is a brief outline of the work done in the last fifty years, since the liberation of Macedonia, on the Byzantine monuments of the area. Greece got back these monuments in the form either of mosques or of ruins but they are being restored (for the work of reconstruction and

improvement is going on all the time) and they are being preserved for the benefit of both their country and of the civilized world.

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