The wall-paintings of the Protaton Church revisited

Konstantinos M. Vapheiades*

Ecclesiastical Academy of Athens, Athens

During the course of conservation work on the wall-paintings in the Protaton Church on Mount Athos a number of letters were found that can form the name ‘Eutychios’ or ‘Eutychiou’, the name of one of the two painters who decorated the Peribleptos Church in Ohrid. This discovery has overturned the findings of previous research and also poses new questions. The answers to these questions constitute the aim of the present article. More specifically, the wall-paintings in the Protaton are attributed to two painters, Michael Astrapas and the painter of the Chapel of St. Euthymios in Thessalonica, and are dated to between 1309 and 1311/1312. Since there are many problematic points in Astrapas’ artistic development, this article reexamines certain ensembles of wall-paintings, and particularly that of the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church, as a key to interpreting and solving the problem of ‘Michael Astrapas’.

Keywords: Mount Athos, Protaton, Bogorodica Ljeviška, Michael Astrapas, Byzantine painting

I. The research tradition regarding the wall-paintings in the Protaton Church

The wall-paintings in the Church of the Protaton in Karyes on Mount Athos represent a landmark in the history of Byzantine art. Numerous studies have been and continue to be devoted to them, and notable researchers have grappled with the diverse issues raised by this magnificent work.1 It should be noted, however, that, since the 1960’s and the movement to revive the Orthodox tradition in Greece, most researchers have accepted both the dating of the wall-paintings to circa 1290 and their attribution to the legendary painter ‘Michael Panselinos’, despite the fact that there is no reliable source mentioning the date of their creation, the name of the individual who commissioned them or the identity of the artists who worked in the Protaton.

This has happened because these two views/positions were to serve not the interests of historical research but the creation of stereotypes that would give the Athonite ensemble a symbolic value. Thus, the painting of ‘Manuel Panselinos’ was to be considered a supreme and model expression of Athonite spirituality and the church’s iconographic programme an illustration of hesychastic ideas and the ecclesiastical policy of Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos.2

In particular, the dating of the Protaton’s wall-paintings to 1290 is mainly due to the arbitrary claim that these paintings are superior in quality to those executed by the two painters who decorated the Peribleptos Church in Ohrid – Eutychios and Michael Astrapas – and that they must therefore be of earlier date. According to the same theory, the painter of the Protaton, ‘Panselinos’, was the leading figure of the so-called ‘Macedonian School’, whose art was copied not only by the Ohrid painters but also all other painters at that time.3 It is no accident, then, that Greek researchers have never been able to accept the view of their Serbian colleagues (S. Radojčić, Đ. Bošković and P. Miljković-Pepek) that the Protaton frescoes are the work of Eutychios and Michael Astrapas. Because if they were to accept it, the symbolic figure of ‘Manuel Panselinos’ would be lost, as would the symbolic value of the wall-paintings in the monument at Karyes. Furthermore, the centre of gravity with regard to the formation and character of the ‘Macedonian School’ would no longer be in Byzantine territory.

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* konstantinvaf@gmail.com


2 Svetirop, H Македонска Школа, 20.


* konstantinvaf@gmail.com

but in the Serbian dominions. However, let us examine the actual facts, in other words what the architecture and painting of the Protaton monument tell us, seeing as we have no reliable historical evidence at our disposal.

There is a well-known tradition that holds that the Protaton Church (Protaton II) was set on fire by the Unionists of Michael II Palaiologos in the second half of the thirteenth century. The view has also been expressed – and accepted by almost all researchers – that the Church was subsequently renovated by Andronikos II Palaiologos (Protaton III). P. Mylonas, however, has a different opinion: ‘It seems, though, that much of the destruction blamed on the Unionists was in fact caused by the Catalans, whose rule on Athos lasted from 1307–1309’. If, therefore, the Protaton Church was renovated in the early fourteenth century, it follows that the wall-paintings by ‘Panselinos’ must have been executed at that time, a view which has also been accepted by A. Xyngopoulos. It should be noted that the view shared by A. Xyngopoulos and P. Mylonas regarding the dating of the renovation of the Protaton and therefore its wall-paintings has not yet been refuted, despite the fact that it does not concur with recent opinions. It is indicative that P. Fountas, in his thesis on the Protaton, rejects the view held by the two abovementioned scholars with the argument that the late dating of the renovation of the monument ‘lies outside the accepted limits set by more recent substantiated opinions regarding the dating of the wall-paintings to circa 1290’.

It is clear, then, that the building does not provide any reliable information either on the rumoured renovation caused by the destruction of the Unionists or any other groups, or on course of the dating of its wall-paintings. Even the church’s iconographic programme, which in any case does not survive in its entirety, does not provide any relevant evidence, despite the opposite views of certain researchers and notably D. Kalomoirakis. I must admit that the view held by the latter scholar, which has been expressed in a series of articles by the same author, has been widely accepted, despite the fact that it is based on a claim which lacks any objective basis, namely that the Protaton’s wall-paintings date from the first reign of Patriarch Athanasius I (1289–1293). Based on this assumption, D. Kalomoirakis claims that: ‘The church’s programme is the fruit of a liturgical experience gained by the clergymen and monks of his day’.

It should be noted that the view shared by A. Xyngopoulos and P. Mylonas regarding the dating of the renovation of the Protaton Church is poorly structured, leaving the decoration of the Protaton in a limbo. For how long did this lofty, ambitious, complete and unprecedented art last? If, therefore, the Protaton murals represented a model of the clergymen and monks of his day? Moreover, the texts which the mentioned scholar refers to, particularly those of D. Kalomoirakis, I to the clergymen and monks can be connected with the iconographic programme of the Protaton when these letters are concerned with correcting errors in the lives of the clergymen and monks of his day? Moreover, the texts that the mentioned scholar refers to, particularly those of Theoleptos of Philadelphia, are of later date, having been written after the year 1300.

The inaccuracy of D. Kalomoirakis’s observations is clear. However, this does not mean that the iconographic programme of the Protaton Church is poorly structured, without a central unifying idea. On the contrary, the references to the Divine Economy through the typological union of the Old and New Testaments, expressed here by the host of Propatores (Ancestors of Christ) and prophets above the scenes from the Gospels, betray a theological design. There is also good reason for depicting scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary, the head and protectress of Mount Athos, and portraying the Athonite saints in the south-west bay of the church, where the old entrance is situated. It is clear that the person who designed the iconographic programme of the Protaton Church had no intention of expressing anything other than those things that the decoration of a monastic foundation, and especially the central church of the Athos state, ought to show. Another indisputable fact is that the iconographic programme under examination here provides inadequate evidence for its dating.

It is worth noting, moreover, that numerous respected researchers (Đurić, Chatzidakis, Todić, Tsigardas, etc.) have confirmed the circa 1290 dating after making in-depth studies of the monumental output of the second half of the thirteenth century. The painter of the Protaton is believed to have made a radical departure in the development of Byzantine painting, between the conservative and ‘transitional’ nature of thirteenth-century art and post-1290 art, which displayed the new classicism of the reign of Andronikos II Palaiologos. However, this leaves the decoration of the Protaton in a limbo. For how did this lofty, ambitious, complete and unprecedented art come about, and in Thessalonica at that? Other questions also arise: if the Protaton murals represented a model worthy of imitation in 1290, how is it that the only painter to fully adopt the Protaton idiom was Michael Astral?

9 Καλομοιράκης, Ερμηνευτικές, 215.
pas a full twenty-five years or so later (Staro Nagoričino 1312/13–1317/18), and none of the contemporaries of ‘Panselinos’? How is it that Eutychios at Ohrid copies or is influenced by the ‘earlier’ painter when at Ohrid we may observe a host of newer features that are unknown at the Protaton? Finally, how is it that monumental works by metropolitan workshops with a programme and artistic idiom similar to those of the Protaton date to the second decade of the fourteenth century (e.g. the mosaics in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Thessalonica)?

From the foregoing it is clear that the dating of the wall-paintings in the Protaton Church to the 1290’s lacks a solid foundation. The lack of historical and architectural evidence and the conventional character of the iconographic programme controvert the established view which, as I have shown, is based not on historical fact but on groundless theories devised over the course of the last few decades. Let us see, then, what information we can draw from the actual characteristics of the decoration of the Protaton Church.

1. The wall-paintings of the Church of the Protaton at Karyes on Mount Athos

As is well known, during the recent conservation work on the wall-paintings of the Protaton Church five capital letters were discovered (two of which are partially preserved) beneath the figure of St. Merkourios. Together they form the name ΕΥΤΥΧΙΟΣ (fig. 1). It should be noted that, in terms of the style of the handwriting, these letters are exactly the same as those which exist by the figure of St. Theodore of Tyre at the Staro Nagoričino monastery.12 A second inscription fragment that lay beneath another wall-painting and no longer survives is believed to have formed part of the phrase ισε Μιχαήλ (‘by the hand of Michael’). These two inscriptions therefore give us the names of the two painters that decorated the Peribleptos Church at Ohrid (1294/1295): Eutychios and Michael Astrapas, a fact that ultimately confirms the view held by P. Milić-Pepek.13

According to the well-documented opinion of Prof. Miodrag Marković,13 if the name in the inscription between St. Merkourios’ thighs is restored in the genitive form, it constitutes a patronym, given that Michael Astrapas liked to sign his works Μητροπολιτος Πανοραμος (Michael son of Eutychios). This view is reinforced by the fact that the Protaton wall-paintings are connected with Michael’s artistic idiom and not that of his father, as I have already claimed in two earlier studies and a recent paper.14 Nevertheless, the discovery of the inscription and its use in identifying one of the painters who decorated the Protaton Church does not resolve all of the issues relating to the monument. For example, should the wall-paintings be dated to before or after the year 1300? Who might have commissioned these wall-paintings, given Michael Astrapas’ relationship with the Byzantine aristocracy and the Serbian King Stefan Uros II Miliutin (Nemanjić)? Which painter should be credited with executing the works formerly attributed to ‘Manuel Panselinos’? Which other artists contributed to the painted decoration of both the Protaton and Michael Astrapas’ other ensembles, and what were the effects of each of this workshop’s compositions?

The Palaiologan wall-paintings in the Protaton Church have mostly survived, while a few sections of the mural decoration – those on the east wall of the sanctuary, on the façade of the prothesis, in the narthex and the whole of the gallery – were executed at a later period.15 Although the technique, the compositional conception, the drawing and generally the rendering of form are uniform, it is obvious that the decoration was executed by more than one painter.16 More specifically, four of the full-length figures of prophets in the soffits of the two main arches can be attributed to Michael Astrapas. The half-length figures of saints at the springing of the arches, including the figures of the Apostles Peter and Paul, though not St. Eugenios, can also be ascribed to the same painter, as can the figures of the four Evangelists, almost

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13 Ibid., 9–33.
16 Cf. Todić, Protaton, 24.
all of the lowest register of the naos, with the full-length figures of the saints, and the sanctuary, with the full-length figures of the hierarchs.

Michael Astrapas’ figures have a monumental character and exuberance in the way they ‘open out’ through the extension of their arms and the folds of their garments. This feature is a product of metropolis elegance, a characteristic that has already been expressed at the Sopočani Monastery and at the Peribleptos in Ohrid. Another feature of Astrapas’ art is the ‘naturalness’ and refinement in the rendering of the figures. The youthful faces, such as that of the prophet Daniel (fig. 2), are luscious, with smooth chubby cheeks, large roundish eyes and luxurious hair. In the faces of middle-aged and elderly saints, on the other hand, Michael concentrates on accentuating the anatomical volumes and on the rendering of the beards. A red spot or line is placed in the inner corner of each eye. The transition from the light/flesh tones to the darkness/underpainting is gentle, assisted by the use of warm and cool undershades.

It is obvious that at the Protaton Michael Astrapas, having ‘renounced’ the rough, ‘unrefined’ style employed at Ohrid, attempts to imitate the classicing verisimilitude that is to be found in the manuscript miniatures of his day, such as those in the chrysobull scrolls of Andronikos II12 and Codex 1208 in the Vatican Apostolic Library, which has been thought to be connected, along with various other manuscripts, with Theodora, the niece of Michael VIII Palaiologos.18 Astrapas does this in order to adapt his style to the refined ideals of the court of Andronikos II Palaiologos, to which the patron of the Proton frescoes certainly subscribed.

Another painter, however, must have executed the full-length figures of the Propatores in the highest register of the Protaton Church, as well as four of the full-length figures of prophets in the soffits of the two large arches, all of the paintings depicting scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin Mary (and particularly the Last Supper and the Dormition).19 and the second band of full-length saints, together with the Communion of the Apostles in the sanctuary. This painter also worked in the lowest register of the naos and the sanctuary, painting figures of saints on the surfaces of the openings and also the figures of the Stylites. In the south-west bay he also painted the two saintly figures on the west wall.20 For the moment we shall refer to this painter as the ‘Propatores painter’.

This artist was an exceptionally talented individual. The twists and contrapposto poses, particularly in the frieze of the Propatores, where none of the figures displays the same pose or gestures as any of the others, the (partial) use of chiaroscuro in which the sides of the hair, beard and body that are not fully visible remain unilluminated, the use of the drapery for compositional and expressive purposes, and finally the freedom of the drawing, all attest to the experience and talents of this great artist. Another characteristic of his painting is the elongated corpulent forms of the bodies and the similarly chubby faces (fig. 3), with their usually almond-shaped eyes with flattened and diagonally drawn pupils that do not touch the upper eyelid. The painter often raises the outer edge of the eyebrow when the face is depicted from an angle. The noses, particularly in the old men, are stubby, with a swollen heart-shaped tip in the figures that are frontally portrayed. In the youthful figures that are depicted from an angle the ridge of the nose and the nostrils are set at a right angle.21


20 Ibid., figs. 140–141.

21 It should be noted that another three or four painters worked alongside the ‘Propatores painter’, given that the painter in question executed a large part of the decoration of the Protaton Church and particu...
Two things emerge from the foregoing. The first is the fact that Michael Astrapas, having already, since 1295, been recognised as an accomplished painter by his patrons, chose from the outset to paint mainly the lower and most prominent (on account of its scale) part of the decoration. The second is the fact that Michael was not present at the Protaton when the ‘Propatores painter’ painted the upper surfaces of the Athonite monument, probably because he was working elsewhere. Where exactly that was, we do not know. Nevertheless, at the Great Lavra Monastery survives a fragment of a saint’s head (fig. 4) 22 executed in the same style as the figures in the Protaton (fig. 5). This is, in my opinion, a remnant of the Palaiologan decoration of the katholikon which should be dated to before the Catalan raids. In this connection, I ought to point out that the two painters appear to have enjoyed an equally high reputation and a mutual respect. While Astrapas painted the full-length figures of the saints in the church – paintings that he signed with his own name –, the ‘Propatores painter’ decorated most of the monument, since there is no part of the church where he has not worked. It should also be noted that while at the Peribleptos in Ohrid and various other Serbian monuments painted by Michael examples of his signature and monogram abound, 23 this is not the case at the Protaton. This is indirect evidence of the nature of the collaboration that these two great artists enjoyed.

Obviously, the foregoing arguments support a revised dating for the wall-paintings in the Protaton Church. These can no longer be dated to the 1290s but should rather be dated to the first decade of the fourteenth century, and more specifically to some time after 1304. This, I believe, is supported by a considerable amount of evidence.

First and foremost, the indisputable fact that the artistic idiom of Michael Astrapas that may be observed in the Serbian monuments is not merely similar but identical to that in the Protaton. As will be shown below, no other painter of this period completely adopts the idiom displayed in the Athonite monument. How is it then that, years after executing the decoration of the Peribleptos, Michael Astrapas came to adopt not his father’s style, with which he had been familiar since his youth, but that of the wall-paintings in the Protaton? The only logical explanation is that the decoration of the Protaton is an independent work, executed by Michael without his father, as is indirectly attested by the inscription that has been recently uncovered. But that is not all: the Protaton (or the katholikon of the Great Lavra?) is the first surviving work by Astrapas to reveal his artistic identity. The very next work is the decoration of the Staro Nagoričino monastery (1312/13–1317/18). This fact shows that the wall-paintings of the Protaton must be close in date to the decoration of the church at Staro Nagoričino. What is more, the idiom of the Athonite wall-paintings is more consistent with the developments taking place in early fourteenth-century art than those of the late thirteenth century, and is particularly in keeping with the developments in Constantinopolitan art. Given this fact, the wall-paintings should be dated to before those at Staro Nagoričino and certainly before the wall-paintings at Vatopedi Monastery (1311/1312), which, as we shall see, presuppose the work at the Protaton.

The chronological limits for the decoration of the Protaton Church can be narrowed down even further. This is because it is generally accepted that once the pirate raids (late thirteenth–early fourteenth century) and the Catalan incursions (summer 1307–spring 1309) were over, a number of Athonite katholika and churches were renovated. This is certain at least in the case of Vatopedi Monastery, whose katholikon provides examples of the depredations that took place in the first decade of the fourteenth century. 24 We have already mentioned, however, that the Protaton Church does not preserve any evidence of the kind of depredations that took place in the katholikon of Vatopedi Monastery. The sources, for that matter, make no mention of a Catalan raid on Karyes. 25

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22 Cf. Xyngopoulos, Nouveaux temoignages, 62–64; Mouriki, Stylistic trends, 65–66; N. Toitov, Г. Фоянциан, Европейската митологическа зографска на Апостол Орсе, 10–17 в., Атина 2010, cat. no. 2. 9. It should be noted that fragments of Byzantine inscriptions are indirectly attested by the inscription that has been recently uncovered. But that is not all: the Protaton (or the katholikon of the Great Lavra?) is the first surviving work by Astrapas to reveal his artistic identity. The very next work is the decoration of the Staro Nagoričino monastery (1312/13–1317/18). This fact shows that the wall-paintings of the Protaton must be close in date to the decoration of the church at Staro Nagoričino. What is more, the idiom of the Athonite wall-paintings is more consistent with the developments taking place in early fourteenth-century art than those of the late thirteenth century, and is particularly in keeping with the developments in Constantinopolitan art. Given this fact, the wall-paintings should be dated to before those at Staro Nagoričino and certainly before the wall-paintings at Vatopedi Monastery (1311/1312), which, as we shall see, presuppose the work at the Protaton.

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24 Σ. Β. Μαμαλούκος, Το καθολικό της μονής Βατοπεδίου. Ιστορία και Αρχιτεκτονική, Αθήνα 2001, 209–211.
25 Τ. Γ. Κόλας, Η μεταβολή Καταλακών και Μεγάλου Δούκα των Αθηνών μέχρι (1311), ΕΕΒΣ 26 (1956) 360–369; Μ. Ζιούνινοβιτς, ζίτιζε αρχιεράκων Danila II και ζευγοντα Καταλακίς κομπα-
However, the hypothesis that the Protaton Church was renovated and decorated after the Catalan raids, a view supported by both P. Mylonas and S. Mamaloukos, seems very credible if it is correlated with the artistic data, which suggest that the decoration of the Protaton Church was executed towards the end of the first decade of the fourteenth century, that is to say between the spring of 1309, when the Catalans moved towards Thessaly, and the end of 1311 or 1312.

Given this revised dating for the decoration of the Protaton Church to the end of the first decade of the fourteenth century, I believe it is worth re-examining the question of the identity of the patron who commissioned the church’s iconographic programme. In our opinion, the protostrator Michael Glabas Tarchaneiotes is the likeliest candidate as his patronage, which was truly impressive, included rebuilding or renovating a considerable number of churches in Constantinople, Sozopolis in Thrace, Thessalonica and Prilep. It should be noted that Tarchaneiotes, as Hypertatos Hegemon tēs Dyseōs, had his seat in Thessalonica from 1297 to 1304. He would be called upon to deal with, and ultimately help bring about, the restoration of diplomatic relations with King Milutin, who, as is well known, was to become a patron of Michael Astrapas. Tarchaneiotes was to choose one of the two Protaton painters to decorate the Chapel of St. Euthymios in Thessalonica, as will be shown below. Therefore, there are sound reasons why the possibility cannot be ruled out that Tarchaneiotes contributed to the renovation of the Protaton building and its decoration.

Unfortunately, the sources we have regarding the identities of the person who financed the renovation and decoration of the Protaton Church and the individual who inspired or designed the church’s iconographic programme are scant. Although we know nothing about the latter, I believe...
lieve a possible candidate is the monk Athanasios, who was the *protos* of Mount Athos from 1306 to September 1309.

Athanasios was elected and appointed as *protos* by Emperor Andronikos himself, due to the disagreement on the issue amongst the Athonite monks, and, what is more, Andronikos did so with the agreement and encouragement of the Athonite Patriarch Athanasios.28

While you in this way are negligent, my most divine emperor, weighed down though he is by so many worldly cares, has not neglected to do you and the Holy Mountain a good service by seeking to find a way to endow the Holy Mountain and the monastic state with a man of virtue and prudence, a man of distinction, recognized by the Church, who possesses self-assurance and zeal, with a knowledge of how to achieve all good things. While he was beseeching God in His divine economy to provide a person whom he could be sure was worthy of this cause, it so happened that a person known to many of you, a person who had been raised as a monk on the Holy Mountain and who distinguished himself for his piety and virtue, and gradually increased in moral stature – well, it so happened that this person, the most honourable of hieromonks, master Athanasios, had recently returned home from the Western Church to the Church of Christ to pay homage to our holy Patriarch Athanasios.28

Moreover, the *protos* Athanasios appears to have played an important role in preparing the reform of cenobitic monasticism on Mount Athos, St. Athanasios the Athonite, the namesake of the *protos* mentioned above, is perhaps no accident that on the scroll of the founder of the monastic community of Athos, then it is very likely that it was he who instigated the plan to decorate the church. It is perhaps no accident that on the scroll of the founder of cenobitic monasticism on Mount Athos, St. Athanasios the Athonite, the namesake of the *protos* mentioned above, there is a maxim about Christlike and brotherly love. Evidently, this text of unknown origin was composed or adapted by the *protos* Athanasios himself. It should be recalled that the figure of St. Athanasios the Athonite is depicted to the right of the south-west opening in the Protaton, through which the monks would enter the naos.

II. The wall-paintings in the Chapel of St. Euthymios in Thessalonica

The Chapel of St. Euthymios is attached to the Cathedral Church of St. Demetrios in Thessalonica and takes the form of a three-aisled basilica. As is well known, it was renovated and decorated in the year 1302/3 by order of the protosostor Michael Glabas Tarchaneiotes and his wife Maria Palaiologina. This took place during the reign of the great Patriarch John XII (1294–1304), former abbot of the Pammakaristos Monastery, whom Tarchaneiotes himself had promoted for the position of Patriarch of Constantinople. Unfortunately, the extensive founder’s inscription in the chapel31 does not include the name of the artist. However, E. Tsigaridas, in his monograph on the chapel, attributes the work to the painter ‘Manuel Panselinos’ by examining the close connection between the wall-paintings in the chapel and those in the Protaton Church.32

1312 which we know Patriarch Athanasios worked hard to bring about. A result of this development was that the *protos* of Mount Athos came to be under the jurisdiction not only of the emperor, from whom he received his staff, but also of the Patriarch of Constantinople, from whom he would receive his seal.30

There is no way, therefore, that the *protos* Athanasios, who was the official representative on Athos of both the emperor and particularly the Patriarch, could not have been involved in the renovation and decoration of Mount Athos’s foremost monument in the summer of 1309 or shortly afterwards. If one considers that his active involvement in the renovation and decoration of the Protaton would have served to strengthen his position and authority in the monastic community of Athos, then it is very likely that it was he who instigated the plan to decorate the church. It is perhaps no accident that on the scroll of the founder of cenobitic monasticism on Mount Athos, St. Athanasios the Athonite, the namesake of the *protos* mentioned above, there is a maxim about Christlike and brotherly love. Evidently, this text of unknown origin was composed or adapted by the *protos* Athanasios himself. It should be recalled that the figure of St. Athanasios the Athonite is depicted to the right of the south-west opening in the Protaton, through which the monks would enter the naos.


The chapel’s decoration includes scenes from the life, teachings and miracles of Christ, as well as a large number of individual figures (fig. 6). It also includes a cycle of wall-paintings on the life of the founder of cenobitic monasticism, St. Euthymios (377–473), to whom the chapel is dedicated. Unfortunately, the frescoes do not survive to their original extent, nor are they in a satisfactory state of preservation. Very few of them are in a sufficiently good condition to permit safe conclusions to be drawn.

According to the few examples that permit close study, the main characteristics of the art of the painter who decorated the chapel are the nobility of the figures, the movement and plasticity in the rendering of the volumes, the refined modelling, and of course the slanted pupils of the eyes which do not touch the upper eyelids. It is worth noting that a comparative examination of the wall-paintings in the Chapel of St. Euthymios and those in the Protaton Church shows beyond any doubt that the technique of course the idiom of the painter of the chapel is identical to those of the ‘Propatores painter’. Moreover, it should be noted that the art of the painter of St. Euthymios’ Chapel is of superior quality in the Karyes church. This is important because it explains both the relationship between the two ensembles and the superiority of the Athonite monument. It is also worth noting that a remarkable relationship exists between the wall-paintings in the Chapel of St. Euthymios and those in the Pammakaristos Monastery, one which has already been correctly noted by T. Gouma-Peterson.33 It should be recalled that the wall-paintings of the Pammakaristos Monastery date from the reign of Patriarch John XII (1294–1304), a former abbot of the monastery.

The artist who painted the Chapel of St. Euthymios (the ‘Propatores painter’) can therefore be shown to have collaborated closely with Michael Astrapas in the decoration of the Protaton. The question therefore arises: why did Astrapas choose to collaborate with this particular painter? The most reasonable answer is because the painter of St. Euthymios’ Chapel enjoyed a good reputation and was well established in his profession, since he worked under the patronage of Michael Glabas Tarchaneiotes, and in Thessalonica at that. We may also surmise that another reason was because Michael had already worked with him in the past, very probably in projects carried out by the team of paint-

ers directed by Eutychios Astrapas, the team that fashioned and established the style of painting that predominated in the period around 1300. Another supposition that the present writer considers both reasonable and attractive is that the painter of St. Euthymios’ Chapel (the ‘Propatores painter’), a Thessalonian painter of already great repute, may well have worked on Mount Athos with Michael Astrapas at the Monastery of the Great Lavra or elsewhere.

III. The Palaiologan wall-paintings in the katholikon of Vatopedi Monastery

The Palaiologan wall-paintings in the katholikon of Vatopedi Monastery, which were funded by the hieromonk Arsenios after the Catalan raids (1311/12), are generally preserved under the layer of later interventions. If the wall-paintings which are preserved intact or only slightly modified are taken into consideration, it can be argued that these are principally the work of two painters. The first painter, whom Prof. E. Tsagaridas has conventionally called ‘the painter of the Deposition from the Cross’ (fig. 7), executed almost all of the narrative scenes in the naos as well as a large number of holy figures, perhaps with the collaboration of another painter. This painter also worked in thelite, where he painted scenes from Christ’s Passion, from the Flagellation to the Lamentation of Christ, scenes from the Morning Gospels, and also the figures of the Prophets on the upper part of the south wall. The same artist should also be credited with the figures of St. Zosimas and St. Mary of Egypt, as well as various figures in the diabatikon.

This painter was a pioneering artist, of whom no other works survive. In order to make the experience of witnessing the scenes of Christ’s Passion realistic, he had no hesitation in grotesquely exaggerating the volumes, contrapposto and movements of the bodies, in using the drapery and gestures as part of his language of expression, and in depicting distorted, convulsed faces. In the Prophets in the lite, movement is expressed both through the striding of the figures and the opening-out of their arms as well as their ruffled hair and drapery. The folds of the drapery expand and contract violently in order to help create an impression of dramatic and explosive movement. Another remarkable feature is the painter’s attention to anatomical detail in his keen desire to achieve realism.

The second painter, whom Prof. E. Tsagaridas has conventionally called ‘the painter of the Prayer on the Mount of Olives’, decorated part of the second narthex (the lite), the upper register of which includes scenes from Christ’s Morning and the Passion Gospels. In particular, this painter painted the group of scenes beginning with the Last Supper and ending in the scene of the Betrayal (fig. 8).

Although the latter painter made only a small contribution to the decoration of the katholikon of Vatopedi Monastery, both M. Chatzidakis and especially E. Tsagaridas stress the importance of his work. They claim that this artist belongs to the circle of painters who imitated the style of the Protaton wall-paintings, since both researchers date the monument to 1290. However, their claim that ‘the painter of the Prayer on the Mount of Olives’ insists on painting in exactly the same way as ‘Manuel Panselinos’, and twenty years after the decoration of the Protaton at that, is somewhat dubious. This is because his painting shows no evidence of imitating the Protaton wall-paintings. On the contrary, it shows evidence of having been strongly influenced by the artistic idiom used at the Peribleptos, i.e. the idiom of Eutychios Astrapas. In our opinion, this painter had worked with the Astrapases and at Vatopedi Monastery put into practice what he had learned both as a member of Eutychios’ team and as a member of Michael Astrapas’ team at the Protaton. Various figures in the Betrayal scene bear out the truth of this assertion.

I would say, then, that the two painters who decorated the katholikon of Vatopedi Monastery are closely connected with the decoration at the Protaton, though...
each in a different way. The work of painter A, ‘the painter of the Deposition from the Cross’, to whom should be attributed the bulk of the Palaiologan wall-paintings, displays novel features of both a stylistic and iconographic kind. These, however, cannot conceal the connection between this work and the art of the ‘Propatores painter’ and, therefore, Thessalonica. Painter B (the painter of the life), on the other hand, should be regarded as an associate of the workshop of Eutychios and Michael Astrapas, as his art constitutes a stylistic mixture of elements from the painting at Ohrid and the Protaton.

IV. The wall-paintings of the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church in Prizren

The Cathedral Church of the Bogorodica Ljeviška at Prizren was refounded in the period 1306–1309 by order of King Stefan Uroš II Milutin, under the supervision of the Bishop of Prizren, Sava III (1307–1309), former abbot of Hilandar Monastery and later Archbishop of Serbia (1309–1316). A little later the church was adorned with frescoes, many of which have since been lost.36

An inscription in the exonarthex of the church37 mentions two protomastores, Nikolaos and Astrapas (Νικολάου πρωτομαστού και Αστράπου πρωτομαστού). Renowned scholars have associated the former with the construction of the church and the latter with its decoration. Given that the name Astrapas, as the surname of a painter, occurs in an inscription in the Peribleptos Church at Ohrid, researchers such as D. Panić, V. Djurić, G. Babić and B. Todić38 have unreservedly attributed the wall-paintings in the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church to Michael Astrapas. However, there are serious grounds for questioning the connection between Michael Astrapas and the wall-paintings at Prizren.


37 For the inscription v. Panić, O natpisu, 21–23; Panić, Babić, Bogorodica Ljeviška, 22–27; Marković, The painter, 16, fig. 5.

First of all, in the Prizren church there are no instances of Michael's signature, unlike the Peribleptos at Ohrid and the Staro Nagoričino monastery, where there are numerous examples of his monograms and signatures. Secondly, the surviving founder’s inscription in the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church does not tell us what the professions of the two craftsmen mentioned were. Therefore, it is possible that one was a builder and the other a painter, or that both were either builders or painters. And while there is no solid evidence that the Astrapas at the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church is the same individual as the Michael Astrapas at Ohrid and the Staro Nagoričino monastery, experts consider the ensemble of wall-paintings at the Bogorodica Ljeviška to form part of Michael Astrapas’ oeuvre. This, however, is strange for the very simple reason that the Bogorodica Ljeviška displays no evidence either of the ‘extravagant’ iconographic programme or the remarkable unity of style that are usually evident in Michael’s works, whether signed or not. It is also evident that the wall-paintings at the Bogorodica Ljeviška were executed by four artists in total, each with his own distinctive style. Indeed, their art clearly differs from the refined and classicising style used by Michael Astrapas at the Protaton and at Staro Nagoričino.

More specifically, the principal painter of the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church is credited with having executed the most prominent parts of the decoration (fig. 9). His human figures are corpulent, expansive and ‘majestic’, with long limbs but small heads. Plasticity and a striving for verisimilitude are clearly evident in the faces, with their hooked noses and characteristically “Protaton-style” eyes. Quite a few features of this artist’s painting are reminiscent both of the idiom of one of the painters of the katholikon of the St. Achileos Monastery at Arilje, Moravica (1296), and also of the idiom of the painter of the Chapel of St. Euthymios in Thessalonica. The art of the second main painter of the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church displays a clear connection with the decoration at Ohrid (fig. 10). Its main characteristics are the conventional proportions, the flat, broadened and roughly modelled faces, the bulky noses that appear to have been pressed downwards, the wide mouths with their pointed ends and the frontally drawn ears.

The above facts do not permit us to draw a connection between the wall-paintings of the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church and the art or work of Michael Astrapas, particularly if we take into account the fact that the

The wall-paintings of the Protaton Church were very probably executed during the same period as those in the Bogorodica Ljeviška. This has already been understood by Sv. Radojčić and pointed out by M. Soteriou.\footnote{S. Radojčić, \textit{Die Meister der älterserbischen Malerei vom Ende des XII bis zur Mitte des XV. Jahrhunderts}, in: Πεπραγμένα του Θ΄ Διεθνούς Βυζαντινολογικού συνεδρίου I, Αθήνα 1955, 436; Σωτηρίου, \textit{Η Μακεδονική Σχολή}, 20.} The wall-paintings in the Bogorodica Ljeviška are the work of two main painters, Nikolaos and Astrapas, as has already been proposed,\footnote{Βαφειάδης, \textit{Στερη βυζαντινή ζωγραφική}, 179–180; \textit{Πρωτάτον}, 184–185. It should be noted that Astrapas, the second painter of the Bogorodica Ljeviška, is probably a member of the Astrapas family from Thessalonica. On this subject v. S. Kisas, \textit{Solunska umetnička porodica Astrapa}, Zograf 5 (1974) 35–37; Todić, \textit{Signatures}, 653–661; Marković, \textit{The painter}, 22.} whose art draws on the work of the painter of the Chapel of St. Euthymios (the ‘Propatores painter’) and that of Eutychios, respectively, and not the work of Michael Astrapas.

At this point it should be pointed out that the view that the three fresco ensembles at the Peribleptos in Ohrid, the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church and the Staro Nagoričino monastery are all directly connected with the artistic development of Michael Astrapas has only served to bedevil research. This is because the stylistic differences between the three monuments lead scholars to make fanciful interpretations and, of course, to accept that Michael’s art, for reasons that are unclear, was in a constant state of development over a period of about twenty years following his work at Ohrid. In my estimation, correct interpretations and explanations can only be provided if the first two monuments cease to be associated with the painter Michael Astrapas. For it is obvious that in the first monument the rough, unrefined art of Eutychios is predominant, while in the second the painting of the two protomastores, Nikolaos and Astrapas, is most prominent – a style of painting that marked the transition between the bold, unrefined realism of the thirteenth century and the ‘academic’ mannered style of the second decade of the fourteenth century.

\section{The wall-paintings in the katholikon of the Staro Nagoričino monastery}

The katholikon of the monastery at Staro Nagoričino (near Kumanovo), which is dedicated to St. George, was built and decorated between 1312/3 and 1317/8 with funds provided by King Stefan II Milutin. It is the first signed work by Michael Astrapas (as the son of Eutychios) and was executed after Astrapas had completed his work on Mount Athos.\footnote{V. indicatively: P. J. Popović, V. R. Petković, \textit{Staro Nagoričino}, Piača, Kalenić, Beograd 1933, 1–49; Milijković-Pepek, \textit{Deloto}, 56–58; Đurić, \textit{Vizantijske freske}, 51–52; K. Balabanov, \textit{Freski od Makedonija – crkva Sv. Gorgi s. Staro Nagoričane Kumanovsko XIV vek}, Skopje 1979; B. Todić, \textit{Staro Nagoričino}, Beograd 1993; \textit{Srpsko slikarstvo}, 320–325 and passim; Βαφειάδης, \textit{To Πρωτάτο}, 189–191. Cf. M. Marković, \textit{Mihailo Astrapa i freske Kraljeve crkve u Studenici}, in: \textit{Monastir Studenica – 700 godina Kraljeve crkve}, ed. Lj. Maksimović, V. Vukošinović, Beograd 2016, 173–183.} The wall-paintings in the katholikon, unlike those in the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church, display an impressive unity of style. One gains the impression that they were all executed by one and the same painter - Astrapas himself. However, there was a second painter, who helped to paint the Biblical and hagiographical scenes. This artist also painted a number of individual, mainly saintly, figures in the western part of the church. The art of this painter
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bears a great resemblance to the art of the painter ‘Nikolaos’ at the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church (fig. 11a–11b). I use the phrase ‘bears a great resemblance to’ and not ‘is identical to’ because in the case of the katholikon at Staro Nagoričino, this painter was obliged to follow the artistic norms laid down by Michael Astrapas.

At Staro Nagoričino the artistic idiom employed by Michael Astrapas in his wall-paintings at the Protaton Church has become standardised. If we compare the figure of Christ on the east pier of the Athonite monument (fig. 12a) with the corresponding figure of Christ the Saviour at Staro Nagoričino (fig. 12b), we can see that in the latter case the face lacks the liveliness and naturalness of the former. Although less roughly-drawn than the face at the Protaton, it is schematic nonetheless. More specifically, the use of flesh tones in the figure of Christ at Staro Nagoričino is limited, while the outlines are gentle. The nose is slenderer and more aquiline, compared with that of the figure of Christ at the Protaton, while the eyes are languid. The hair of the figure of Christ at Staro Nagoričino lacks plasticity, since it has become a tangle of bright wavy strands, a phenomenon not to be seen in the church at Karyes.

In our estimation, these artistic choices may be attributed to Astrapas’ tendency to follow the idealised classicising form that was gradually gaining sway in the metropolitan art of the period. Thus it is no accident that towards the end of his career, in the Church of St. Niketas at Čučer near Skopje (ca. 1322)43 (fig. 13), Michael Astrapas adopted an idiom similar to that used in the Chora Monastery in Constantinople.

VI. Conclusions

According to the arguments presented above, the wall-paintings in the Protaton Church at Karyes on Mount Athos should be dated to between 1309 and 1311. In other words, they are almost contemporary with those in Vatopedi Monastery and those in the Bogorodica Ljeviška Church. Although the sources are silent, there are reasons why Michael Glabas Tarchaneiotes should be accepted as the most likely patron of the Protaton wall-paintings, and the protos Athanasios as the inspiration behind the iconographic programme.

The Protaton Church was decorated by two painters working together on equal terms: Michael Astrapas and the painter of the Chapel of St. Euthymios (the ‘Propatores painter’), two of the most illustrious and productive artists of the reign of Andronikos II Palaiologos. It appears that Tarchaneiotes, one of the great patrons of the age, played a part in bringing the two painters together to decorate the most important monument on Mount Athos. These two painters established an artistic idiom that was entirely in keeping with the classicising aesthetic and ideology of the aristocracy of the day, the origins of which should be sought in the art of Eutychios, the leading figure in the Thessalonian workshop that was to produce such illustrious artists in the early fourteenth century.44 It should be noted that Michael Astrapas’ personal idiom and artistic stamp stand out for the first time in the Protaton and not in Ohrid or Prizren. These last two monuments should, for that matter, be disassociated from Astrapas’ output. As for the ‘Propatores painter’ (the painter of the Chapel of St. Euthymios), it should be stressed that the work of this individual – a celebrated Thessalonian painter who appears to have worked in more than one monument on Mount Athos – corresponds completely with the description of the work of the painter ‘Manuel Panselinos’ that is provided by Dionysios of Fournia in his Painter’s Manual.45

Fig. 13. The church of Saint Niketas near Skopje, St. Niketas, detail (after: Marković, Sveti Nikita)


Κόλιας Τ. Γ., Η μεταφάτη Καταλόγου και Μεταγράφημα των Αθηνέων μάργαρων (1311), Επετηρίς Ευμένιου, Θεσσαλονίκη 26 (1956) 360–369 [Koliáς G. T., Eikatá tou Katalógon kai Metagráphma twn Athinémon margvwn (1311), Epeteri Euménnou, Thessalonikí 26 (1956) 360–369]


Зидно сликарство у Протатској цркви, настало 1309–1311. године, представља кључни споменик за наше разумевање уметничке продукције тог периода и начина на који су различити сликари међусобно сарадивали. Током конзерваторских радова на Протатском живопису 2015. године откривен је сликарски потпис с именом ΕΥΤΥΧΙΟΣ или ЕΥΤΥΧΙΟΥ, односно именом једног од двојице фрескописаца цркве Богородице Перивлепте у Охриду, чиме су оповргнута мишљења која су заступали многи истраживачи у вези са ауторством зидног сликарства Протатона. Чињеница да је сликарство Протатона повезано са уметничком изразом Михаила Астрапе, а не његовог оца, уз чињеницу да је Михаил потписивао своја дела као Μιχαήλ Εὐτυχίου (Михаил, син Евтихија), нужно води до закључка да би име у натпису требало реконструисати у генитиву, као патроним Михаила Астрапе.

Ипак, Протатску цркву није осликао један, већ двојица живописца који су радили заједно, под једнаким условима: Михаил Астрапа и сликар капеле Светог Јевтимија у Солуну, из реда најистакнутијих уметника у Византији. Чини се вероватним да је Михаил Глава Тарханиот позвао и повезао ову двојицу славних солунских сликара како би украсили главни споменик Атонског полуострва, највероватније под надзором прота Атанасија (1306/1307–1309).

У Протатону уметност двојице поменутих сликара достиже свој највећи сјај. Ту двојица уметника усавршава и васпостави уметнички израз Евтихија Астрапе, водеће личности солунске радионице која ће изнедрити тако славне уметнике почетком XIV века. Треба напоменути да се лични израз и уметнички печат Михаила Астрапе први пут истичу у Протатону, а не у Охриду или Призрену.

Дело “сликара праотаца” (живописца капеле Светог Јевтимија) – прослављеног солунског сликара за кога се чини да је радио у више манастира на Светој Гори – у потпуности одговара опису дела сликара „Манојла Панселина” који је оставио Дионисије из Фурне у свом Приручнику за сликаре, што је чињеница која не би требало да измакне нашој пажњи.