

---

*Sofija Grandakovska*

**MONASTIC ATMOSPHERE IN THE CHURCH OF  
ST. CONSTANTINE AND HELENA IN OHRID**  
(Aspects of intermediality of the icon painting and literary forms)

*1. General introduction*

When speaking of a medieval art monument as of a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, such is the church of St. Constantine and Helena in Ohrid, it is inevitable to be approached from a standpoint of a comprehensive text, which joins the framework of the global semiotic system of cultural heritage and art, bearing an immense anthropological dimension in its essence. The question that this text deals with is: Why the church and the monastic atmosphere within may well be treated as a text?

Evoking the legend of frescoes as “talking images”, we will notice that it is becoming a basic syntagm of recognition that follows the fine art during the entire middle ages. Hence, we can speak of transmission of a truth from one creative system into another system of articulation. In the syntagm “talking images” are facing two artistic systems: the system of the word and the system of the visual art, which transposed one into each other, reveal the profound interrelation between arts and profound communicability between different styles of speech, in search of the truth. The interlacing between the texts of different arts, points out the capacity of the text to be read through history and to include itself in it. Therefore, each structure in the culture can be understood as a text<sup>1</sup>.

If we start from this cognition of the intertextuality, which basically studies texts belonging to different arts in the moment of their overlap and if we add up to this the semiotic interest for signs in the communication process, then we can state that each text in the system of culture may be interpreted as a sign which can be sent, can be received as an information and at the same time can be processed into information. Therefore, if the text is understood as a sign, then the text itself, in its inner understanding, absorbs the symbol as well, the image, the color, the word and all of them can be brought down under the term icon or iconic presentation of the content and the essence in each particular art<sup>2</sup>. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Konstantinović, Zoran. *Uvod u uporedno proučavanje književnosti*. Beograd: SKZ, 1984, p.18.

<sup>2</sup> The life of signs, their combination and their role in society is the main approach of linguistics as a part of semiotics. In: Saussure, de Ferdinand. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot, 1964.

experience of the literary semiotics reaffirms that exactly in the iconicity lies the specific modeling power of the text. The existence of iconic's inner mechanism for modification of the object of the text in a certain specific manner is the basic standpoint when speaking for tangibility aspects of intermediality of the icon painting and the literary forms. And so, what we see in the fresco shall be the same what we read in the Wholly Bible.

If by the visual language of the Orthodox fresco painting we may establish transposition of literal, i.e. lingual or gospel truth, and then when speaking of the text on the Orthodox monasticism, we may establish an existence of a language which narrates the fresco painting text as it is reflected in the mirror. Thus, the language of the fresco, the visual identity of what it represents, finds its own counterpart of interpretation exactly in the pragmatic model of semiotic perception of this phenomenon, which in this text will necessarily restrict its methodology on a semiotic function of the fresco painting.

## *2. Visual and literal text of monasticism*

In order to fulfill his monastic oath and to reach the ontological height of the spirit and unity with God, the monk ought to live according to the gospel truth and the heavenly truths endowed to us by God. If the painter intends to convey the Evangelical truth by the language of colors, then he must live according to the gospel truth in order to succeed to convey the mystical connection with God through his own prayer. Thus, the monk lives through the text of the icon, its hierarchy, its canonic paradigm and its complexity by its profound, inner iconography. In that course, the monastic phenomenon might be reviewed as semiotics which through its own signs of speech give the living function of the icon, its sacredness. Thus, we can refer to monasticism as a living icon, a living Gospel. The language and the iconic are in an equal correlation, because they represent additional ways of expression.

If the dialogue with God implies dialogue, conversation, intercourse, then in the essence of that dialogue lays a possibility for revealing and seeing the truth by means of the spiritual eye, which will be able to read the symbols and the signs of love. Discovering God is an everlasting process. Its forms expressed through the monastic feat, are bearing the aspiration for intercourse with the Invisible, Omnipotent and Almighty God, and the prayer, and is the most certain path within the aspiration. Thus, the dialogue with God bears the profound essence and substance of the prayer. The essence and the substance of the prayer, i.e. the monasticism and the dialogue with God find its expression in the example of the fresco painting which belongs to the church of St. Constantine and Helena in Ohrid.

An illustrative example of the above text is the church-donor composition which depicts monk Parthenij and his mother Maria presbyter, both of them presented in monastic garments. It brings near not only the connections between arts and history, but much more the connection between the iconic and the monastic phenomenon. The inscription beyond the southern door in Greek language reveals that the monk Parthenij erected the church from base,

which articulates his human and monastic pledge toward God as a text, which at each revert could be interpreted as a strong connection between the prototype (archetype) and the type. Just behind him, is depicted his mother presbyter - Maria. This visual sign of the fresco painting allows it to be read as an eternal and alive dialogue of commitment to God, filled up with their three quarterly position of the body which supports the gesture of prayer as its own essence and deep ontology of devotion. The gesture contains a lingual part as well; there are inscriptions of individual prayers of both the monk Parthenij and the presbyter Maria, which direct to the ontological call of prayer and connection with God and their unshakeable faith in Him.

The narrow connection among the visual and literal signs is transparently again enunciated in the text of prayer, and as an example, we are pointing the prayer of Maria the presbyter. Namely, her three quarterly positions of the body and arms, as one part from her outside or formal iconography, is staying in relation of complementarities with the textual part of her prayer, signified through the language (linguistic) form. Such relation of complementarities confirms the connection between two media: fresco painting and linguistic (text) which leads directly to ontological testamentary of the dialogue with God. The prayer of Maria the presbyter is: Δέηδις τῆς δοῦλη(ς) τοῦ Θεοῦ Μαρία πρεσβυτέρα μῆτηρ του κτήτορος τοῦ κ(ρ) Παρθενίου ἄρο(μον)αχ(ου).<sup>3</sup> Affirming again her role of a maid servant of God, Maria the presbyter, mother of Partenij the monk (and priest), offers the power of the prayer to reveal the inner source of the sacredness, which is showing the process of humans' verticalization and bonds with God. From another hand, this textual moment from the Ohrid fresco painting raises itself as a strong confirmation of the prayer discourse, which is in fact 'long for verticalization' of the fallen human nature. Also, this rare example of presenting female presbyter and female monk from the fresco painting directs the fact about the consciousness and role of female monasticism in Macedonian 14<sup>th</sup> century and power of the prayer as an expression of a sign of the strongest love which is burning down fallen Adams' nature.

### 3. Maria the presbyter?

The church-donor' couple, monk Parthenij (Παρθενίος) and Maria the presbyter (Μαρία πρεσβυτέρα), appears as a counterpart of the couple St. Constantine and Helena, the patrons of the church. Considering the church-donor composition which contains the titles monk and presbyter, and extends the knowledge of their family tree (followed through four generations) the science concludes that this family cherishes an extensive and solid priest tradition that played a giant role in the history of Ohrid and the Orthodox world within the clergy and the monastic and ascetic feat in this area of the Balkans.

In this visual fresco hierarchy of signs, what stands out as a very strong and unusual sign is that the title presbyter (contrary to the title monk) stands next to Maria's character. This important sign, which refers to one of the oldest priest functions, unusual for a woman, rises before the contemporary science as

<sup>3</sup> The inscription is given by the reading from Суботић, Гојко. *Светии Констiантин и Јелена у Охриду*. Београд: 1971, p. 107.

a huge question with no final answer yet. On the other hand, there are numerous assumptions (which provoked the analyses of this text as well) dedicated to this problem and this unique example in the Macedonian fresco painting. Therefore, this text deals with several self-imposed questions which are closely related to the title presbyter (gr. πρεσβυτηρος, πρεσβυτηρας) and to the monastic female tradition in Macedonia.

The first provoked question, connected with title presbyter when we speak about it as a female title, is: can't we foresee the institution of widows as one of the most respected in the frames of early church? Although, the female monasticism does not assume institutional clergy, yet we have numerous examples in the history which indicate the enormous role of the woman in the process of dissemination and institutionalization of Christianity. With further development of the institution widow in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century, they receive particular pastoral assignments, especially social assignments (providing care for ill people, and sometimes performing even liturgical functions). The most important role of the widows can be found in a Syrian document from the 5<sup>th</sup> century – Testamentum Domini or the Apostles' tradition. During the Eucharistic Communion, the widows are supposed to stand on the left side, behind the presbyters, opposite the deacons who are supposed to take the same positions, but from the right side. The widow receives Communion after the deacon, and before the sub deacon or the lector. Such treatment of the widows may appear as consecration, which leads to another service of the woman – the act of the consecrated deaconess. The widow ought to have been honorable person, at least 60 years old and with a single marriage history behind her.

The founder's composition portrays Maria presbyter as a mature woman, consecrated into a nun, after the death of her husband John the priest. Maria presbyter is also a widow, who bears the monastic title and lives in harmony with the ascetic rules. As a widow – nun, we may well suppose that she had been involved in the social life of the city of Ohrid; helping sick people, performing pastoral duty; spreading the Gospel words among the people and the ill ones, among the women and children. Since, it is known that prior to their baptism, the woman had been initiated into the holy secrets of baptism and faith by widows, but in domestic environment. The fresco painting of Maria the presbyter does not offer any additional arguments that could eliminate such role of this mature nun. She had lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and had strongly propagated the Apostles' epistles, speaking of the woman's role in the church, especially the decree of the Carthagina summit which precisely defines the duty and the responsibility of the widows.

The second question that the title presbyter from the Ohrid fresco painting imposes, is the following one: Are we dealing with a title which implies certain function in this particular period of the history (for which we do not have accurate facts) or is it just a tendency for keeping her former social status, as a wife of the late John, who in the church notes is exclusively referred to as priest?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> About the familiar pedigree in continuation of four generations of Maria presbyter and Partenij see in: Суботић, Гојко. *Светии Конѕијантин и Јелена у Охриду*. Београд:1971

Within the line of possible answers which would supplement the text on female monasticism, here before us reveals another big presumption, that presbyter Maria held that title as her own, personal, based on the following observations: She could have been Mother Superior of one of the female monasteries in Ohrid in that period, or maybe such title allowed her to travel outside the monastery and to live away from it. This presumption stands as a great opportunity before the science to transform itself in a great argument or a fact, which could enlighten the question on the 14<sup>th</sup> century female monasticism in Macedonia and the Balkans.

From the available data of the contemporary science, it is clear that in this 14<sup>th</sup> century, the church of St. Bogorodica Bolnicka (or Church of Hospital Virgin) in Ohrid, was erected as a testament of St. Clement's Monastery and it functioned as a female monastery. This fact comes from a Greek parchment bible from the Ohrid manuscript collection. (Public Museum no.75) which had been given to the church of St. Bogorodica Bolnicka by the bishop of Slanica (Pella) Anthonius, in 1368, through the abbot of the St. Clement's Monastery and the donor of this church, Jacob. On the other hand, in the Bed-roll of donors and supporters for the St. Clement's monastery restoration there stands the name of a nun Leonthia who, along with ten other from St. Bogorodica Bolnicka had given gifts. The fact of the existence of the sisterhood of nuns corresponds to the paintings in the composition of the Judgment Day in the porch of the church where the righteous women and the nuns are a part of the choir of the chosen ones going to the heavenly doors.<sup>5</sup> Also, during the conservation of this church, in the 1950s of 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>6</sup> in a discovered tomb, next to the northern wall, a skeleton of an older woman was found together with her spindle. On the other hand, St. Bogorodica Bolnicka was located in Dolna Porta, in a neighborhood called Bolnicka and got its name according to its function: a health – resort.

#### *4) New historical and scientific establishment of female monasticism*

In "The History of Ohrid Archbishopric" (volume 2),<sup>7</sup> by the renowned Ivan Snegarov we may find enclosed The Donors' Memorial<sup>8</sup>, which contains a long list of donors of St. Clement's Monastery and in which, among the others, there is a list of names of eleven (11) women,<sup>9</sup> (only eight of them having the title monk), each supplemented by a gift that each of them donated individually. In the same book, it is written that: "In the city of Ohrid, in the neighborhood Bolnica (Hospital), attached to the church St. Bogorodica there was a female

<sup>5</sup> This scene from fresco painting in St. Bogorodica Bolnicka is noticed by Grozdanov, Svetan in: *Охридскојто људно сликарство* (Ohrid: 1980), p.168

<sup>6</sup> *Охрид и охридско низ историја*, vol.2. Скопје: INI, 1985, p.302.

<sup>7</sup> Снегаров, Иван. *Историја на охридската архиепископија-патриаршија*. Софија: Академично издателство: 1995, p.343.

<sup>8</sup> *Ib.* p.542-568.

<sup>9</sup> *Ib.* p.547.

monastery.”<sup>10</sup> Below in the footnote no.4, Snegarov explains that most likely apart from the Abbess Leonthia<sup>11</sup>, in that church lived seven other nuns, mentioned in the Memorial. (no.15)

Later on, this fact captures the interest of the distinguished byzantolog Cvetan Grozdanov in his book “The Ohrid fresco painting from the 14<sup>th</sup> century“ (Ohrid, 1980), where he states: “In the Memorial of the donors, apart of the minor contributors, also mentioned is the gift of the Abbess and the nuns from the St. Bogorodica Bolnicka .... The fact that St. Bogorodica Bolnicka is a church attached to the Ohrid female monastery might be linked to Parthenie’s mother, Maria presbyter, and her role in the restoration of the church“.<sup>12</sup>

When looking back at the facts from the Donors’ Memorial and its final clarification, we reach one new interesting detail concerning the factual number of the nuns and transcribing facts according their gifts to the St.Clement’s Monastery. Namely, there were not only seven, but eleven names facing the truth, together with the Mother Superior. Thus, in the Memorial of donors and supporters of St. Clements’ restoration stands the name of Abbess Leonthia, who together with ten other women devoted to God (and not only seven) bestowed the church. They are mentioned in the text in the following succession: Mother Superior Leonthia (Λεονθια), Ioanikia (Ιοαννικια), Anastasia (Αναστασια), Stephania (Στεφανια), Paraskeva (Παρασκευι), Stephania (Στεφανια), Martha (Μαρθα), Stanica (Στανιτσα), Bosna (Μποσνα), Maria (Μαρια) and Iervanija (Ιερβανια). When reviewing the text it is possible to elicit the actual gifts they donated: three vests, two wash-basins, one silver pot, one bowl, one baking tin, one icon lamp, one hymn canticle, one frying pan, one box.<sup>13</sup>

What is interesting and should be underlined as a fact when speaking about names of these women mentioned in Donors’ Memorial, is the fact that near the names of eight women is staying the title monk (μοναχή), and those are: Leonthia, Ioanikia, Anastasia, Stephania, Paraskeva, Stephania, Maria and Iervanija. On a contrary, next to other residual names (Martha, Stanica and Bosna) the title monk is not pointed out. According these facts and embracing Snegarov’s notes which are directing only eight monks, we are stressing the question: Who were the three other women who are appearing as donors in document? Knowing that one of the changes which happen when becoming a member of monastic order, is receiving other name, which is in fact one of saints’ name. Following this rule, names Stanica and Bosna could not be familiar with any saint’s name. But can we avoid the possibility that these three women could have been novices in a monastery and they were maybe on a way to receive the monastic order and consecutively their monastic names (this is strictly

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.302.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Grozdanov, Cvetan in: *Охридскојџо љишно сликарство*. Ohrid: 1980, p.168.

<sup>13</sup> Transcription of this part from the “Memorial of donors” was done with a great help from Natalija Popovska, MA at classic philology from the Institute of National History in Skopje, Macedonia, and in this opportunity I would like to thank her for the great effort and helping new investigations to result with new readings on historical texts.

significant with Stanica and Bosna, because there is a base that we can say that maybe name Martha was monastic name of mentioned woman, even though the title monk is not appearing in document, but maybe she was on a prompter road embracing monastic order and her monastic name is already in use)? Or, were they widows who decided to lead their life in a devotion to God, living in monastery dedicated to Church of Hospital Virgin, which was also performing as a hospital? And, why their names were mentioned in such document, exactly in the part speaking for nuns as donors? This is very unusual and sensitive moment from the document, because if they were ordinary people, only believers in God from town of Ohrid, who wanted to help St. Clement's restoration, their names should have stayed in those parts when speaking about the townspeople as donors. The part of sentence in Donors' Memorial, where their names appear in dative form, is: „monk Stephania together with Martha (Μαρθασ), Stanica (Στανιτσασ) and Bosna (Μποσνασ) gave one torch for their undying glory to God...”, which creates the situation for further investigations concerning this moment of document. The original sentence is: (Στεφανια μοναχη μεθα και Μαρτασ, στανιτσασ και μποσνασ αφιερωσαν  
μιαν κανδυλαν  
αιωνια η μνεμη)

It is observable that names of Stanica and Bosna are written with small letters instead of writing personal names with capital letters. Only Martha's name is given with capital letter. According our investigations which are concerning this problem, it could be supposed that factual things could be observed in this manner: it could direct to the level of literacy of the recorder of the document; and in such particularity we could speak about grammar mistake as a result of insufficient illiterate recorder. On a contrary, maybe from a 'long distance', concerning only pale association, we could suppose that small letters of these two personal names show some kind of lower hierarchy towards others from sisterhood? But, on the other hand, Martha also does not possess title nun or monk, and her name is grammatically written in a proper manner. Within the line of possible answers, we can not avoid this thing: these three women who do not embrace the title nun, but are staying as donors together with sisterhood from St. Bogorodica Bolnicka, must have been in a strong relation with this female monastic communion, the only familiar one for the period of that historical time in Ohrid. They must have been inseparable part from the female community and embraced the behavior of prayer which includes the ontological “αιωνια η μνεμη”.

Stressing out these questions and returning to our general subject, the presented information might lead to a conclusion that the connection between Presbyter Maria and St. Bogorodica Bolnicka and the monastic sisterhood, might represent a new feat for the science which would result in certain cognition. On the other hand, having in mind the actual historical environment in Ohrid, without neglecting the fact that her son Parthenij is mentioned as a big pastor in Ohrid, it would be worth the thought that Maria presbyter truly participated in the restoration of the church St. Pantheleimon and was a part of the sisterhood. The text from the church St. Constantine and Helena gives evidence

of the property and the real estate that belonged to Parthenies' endowment; but there is no data whether he or his family endowed some of the objects to another church or a monastery. Yet, having in mind their status of a clerical family, known by its great spirituality, it should not be excluded that presbyter Maria, inspired by her great religiousness, was undeniably bestowing gifts, such as icon lamp, icons, silver pots, curtains, shirts, hymn canticles etc. Even though in the Donors' Memorial we can read the name Maria the monk, we can not be convinced from this that she was exactly Maria the presbyter. But embracing the facts from this written monument as historical document of the existence of female monasticism in Macedonia, in front of the science are standing huge questions which are bringing the great and new truth about the life of a strong female sisterhood as one bond in the monastic history on the Balkans, and which should be answered in the future.

The church of St. Constantine and Helena displays great pictorial and architectural similarity with the church of St. Bogorodica Bolnicka; however this is of no further interest for this text. But, what is interesting at this time to be pointed on, is the apparition of unusual large number of female pictures in the icon painting of St. Helena and Constantine, especially the scenes from the hagiography of St. Paraskeva on the facade of the southern church, i.e. the chapel; scenes which in the history of great Byzantine painting in the Balkans stand out as the oldest preserved samples. Why was the chapel dedicated to St. Paraskeva (Παρασκενῆ), protector of the deceased and a personification of the passion of Christ for salvation of the human kind – it is a question that might lead us to a hint of the donors' message, maybe of the mother- Maria the presbyter. Thus, the presbyters' prayer, the monastic garment and the entire language of this churches' fresco painting embraces within itself the several layers of the fresco painting and the connection between the ontological dialogue with God and the historical moment which some how resembles a monastic mystery which continues to last as a great text which is existing as still not finished one.

*Translated by: Anica Cvetanovska*

*Софија Грандаковска*

МОНАШКА АТМОСФЕРА У ЦРКВИ СВ. КОНСТАНТИНА И ЈЕЛЕНЕ У ОХРИДУ  
(Повезаност сликања икона и литерарних форми)

Питање којим се бави овај рад је: зашто се црква и монашка атмосфера у њој могу третирали као текст?

Слика монахиње Марије-презвитера у цркви Св. Константина и Јелене у Охриду представља редак пример средњевековног фреско-сликарства. Њена слика је још интересантнија стога што је уз њено име додата титула „презвитер“. Ова се титула може разматрати из различитих углова: да ли је ова институција, што се тиче титуле, још увек постојала у Охриду у XIV веку; да ли је Марија-презвитер могла да буде једна од игуманија неког женског манастира са подручја Охрида, или је припадала

калуђерицама које су живеле ван манастира; или, можемо ли наслутити улогу Марије-црквеног старешине у женском манастиру св. Богородице болничке; можда титулу „презвитер“ можемо тумачити као назив „удовица“. Ово је неколико главних питања којима се рад бави.

Исто тако, овај рад нуди нека нова читања старих историјских текстова. То је, на пример, Споменица добротвора и заштитника, која укључује податке о калуђерицама из Охрида и у којој се може наћи и утврдити као чињеница веза између Марије-свештенице и Охридског сестринства. Та нова читања доносе нова открића која се у овом раду по први пут објављују и презентирају научној јавности.

Повезаност литерарног и визуелног се у овом раду анализира кроз књижевну теорију и путем семиотичког модела одабира података и њиховог читања.

