

CONSTANTIN IEROMONACHOU
AN ICON PAINTER IN MOSCHOPOLIS (1693-1726)

Constantin Ieromonachou was mentioned, at first, by Th. Popa, who gives an information about two icons with his signature dated 1693¹. These icons belonged to a small church in Lushnia and later on were brought to the monastery of St. John Vladimir near Elbasan². One of them depicts Christ as Pantokrator and the other one the Virgin enthroned with Child. In 1989 K. Naslazi has written about two other icons painted by Constantin Ieromonachou in 1693: St. John the Baptist and a Synaxis of Archangels, which were brought from Lushnia and exhibited at the Museum of Medieval Arts in Korcha³.

The subject depicted in these four icons and their almost similar size (90x50 cm) led us to the conclusion that these were made to decorate the first row of a church templon. These type of icons are called also «icons of veneration» and are placed on both sides of the Holy Gate. Their size, as a rule, is larger than the other icons placed in upper rows and their subject contains a Deisis (formed by Christ, Virgin and St. John the Baptist) and one or more icons depicting saints, angels, or feasts as depended on the spiritual requests of the locality where the church is built.

Based on this criterion and in the origin of icons we have classified more than 30 icons in groups, each group belonging to one church, or one templon. For each group of veneration icons Constantin Ieromonachou has signed and dated one or two icons, so we have the possibility to follow his activity and see his evolution in icon-painting technique.

The above mentioned four icons from Lushnia, dated 1693 are characterized by a heavy decoration of the background (created with stucco-in-relief and then coloured in gold) very carefully painted details and ornaments which stand in great contrast with an

1. Th. Popa, «Mbishkrimi dhe piktura në katedralen Fjetja e Shën Marisë në Voskopojë», *Buletin i Universitetit Shtetëror të Tiranës, Seria Shkencat Shoqërore* 3 (1962) 88.

2. Th. Popa, *op.cit.*, note 22 where he says that these icons comes from the church or the village Kosova e Madhe in Lushnia. Now the icons are in the Institut of Cultural Monuments (ICM) in Tirana.

3. K. Naslazi, «Disa konsiderata për pikturin mesjetar Konstantin Ieromonaku», *Monumentet* 2 (1989) 68 saying that the icons come from the church of the village St. Friday (Shën e Premte) in Lushnia.

inefficient skill shown at the portraits.

Very close to these qualities is another icon depicting Christ as Pantokrator, signed and dated 1694, coming from a church in Lenga near Pogradec⁴.

The activity of Constantin Ieromonachou in Moschopolis began with a group of four icons, much larger in size (1,60×0,80 cm), depicting Christ, Virgin, St. John the Forerunner and St. Nikola, dedicated to decorate the large templon of the Cathedral basilica of Dormition. Two of these icons, Christ as Pantokrator and St. John the Forerunner bear the signature «by the hand of Constantin Ieromonachou 16.4»⁵. Unfortunately the decimal cipher is missing in both icons, but we believe these icons were made in 1694.

In the first icon Christ is enthroned and accompanied by prophets and apostles. The throne itself is decorated after the baroque style, with angels, seraphims and evangelists symbols depicted on it. The background is smooth, while the stucco-in-relief technique is used only for the nimbus. The portrait of Christ is very likely to that of Lenga (1694), but showing a much better skill. This slightly higher quality is shown also at the small portraits of prophets and apostles. In general, the skillful treatment of miniature details has led the icon toward an expression of monumentality.

The next icon, depicting the Virgin enthroned with Child accompanied by prophets on both sides, has the same beautiful correlation of miniature and monumentality. Her throne is not the same with that of Christ, but the medallions with prophets painted inside them have the same shape of vine branches. Here again, the nimbuses of the Virgin and Child are modelled with the stucco-in-relief technique.

The icon of St. John the Forerunner depicts him with wings like an angel and as Messenger of God. The gold background is painted with very thin flowers, giving an image of glimmering light, symbolizing the Divine interference at this moment. His portrait, the landscape and his beheaded head are very good painted, too. The signature of Constantin Ieromonachou and the date 16.4 are written between his legs.

The fourth icon is depicted St. Nichola, the Bishop of Myra, seated on a big throne, which covers nearly all the background. On the both sides of his head are depicted small images of Christ and Virgin giving him the Gospel and the polystavrion. What is left from the background is decorated with the stucco-in-relief technique, like in the icons of Lushnia and Lenga.

Two other icons belong to this period, until 1700⁶. In the first one St. George is depicted killing the dragon, princess Elisavet near the lake and her parents, the Queen and King Selvios, on the city walls handing him the keys of the city. A small scene of St. George's martirization is painted below the walls. The background is decorated with the stucco-in-relief technique and covered with gold.

In the second icon, with a symmetrical composition to the first one, is depicted St.

4. K. Naslazi, *op.cit.* The icon is exhibited in the Museum of Medieval Arts in Korcha.

5. Th. Popa, *op.cit.*, p. 82. He gives information for the icon of Christ and not for that of St. John the Forerunner.

6. K. Naslazi, *op.cit.*, p. 68, 69, 70. These two icons come from the basilica of St. Nichola in Moschopolis and now are in ICM, Department of Korcha.

Demeter fighting in front of a city-harbour developed inside and outside its walls. The walls of this city, which must be Thessaloniki, and the warships on the sea are fortified with canons. A short inscription over the white walls says: «by the hand of Constantin Ieromonachou»; however there is no date⁷.

Another beautiful and very monumental depiction of St. George and Demeter was made by Constantin in 1703⁸. Here the saints are depicted standing, not in military clothes, but in ceremonial vestments of Imperial Court. They are calm and imposing, with beautiful faces according to the character of the icon. The whole background is smooth and gold. Even their nimbuses are made by lightly strokes of very small flower marks, giving accent to their monumentality. The floral decoration is restricted only for the necklaces, vestment bands and their sandals.

An icon of Archangels Michael and Gabriel can be classified around the same year. The two Archangels are depicted after the model of the Synaxis of Archangels. Christ, inside a round mandorla, is of the type Emmanuel and with wings as Angel of the Great Council.

Two other icons signed by Constantin Ieromonachou and dated 1710 are exhibited in the Museum of Medieval Arts in Koscha⁹. In one of them Christ as a High Priest enthroned and with apostles at both sides of his head is depicted. In the second one the Virgin is enthroned with Her Child and accompanied by prophets at both sides of Her throne. At Her feet is depicted Jesse dreaming his vision (Jes. 11,1-2). The Virgin is crowned after the western type «Maria Regina» - Queen of Heavens.

Two other icons of the same size, from the church of St. Peter and Paul's monastery in Vithkuqi¹⁰, are in the same museum. One depicts St. John the Baptist, half profile and looking toward a small image of Christ painted in the left upper corner of the icon. The other icon represents a Synaxis of Apostles, where Peter and Paul figure in front of them.

A very interesting icon of St. Michael is recorded as coming from the church of Life-giving Source in Korcha¹¹. Archangel Michael is depicted in military vestments, keeping

7. This icon is composed by two joined wooden panels. Times ago it was sawed at the bottom, and the small pieces were thrown in a corner of the church without care. In 1986 we gathered every black wood piece in the church for restoration works. After the two bottom pieces of this icon were restored we joined them and although it was a fragment, put in disposal of K. Naslazi for publication (K. Naslazi, *op.cit.*, 71). Not seeing the upper part of this icon (which was found and restored three years later) Naslazi has considered it as a later work of Ieromonachou. A very careful work, made by our restorers of the Department of Cultural Monuments in Korcha, gave us the possibility to admire this lovely icon.

8. Th. Popa, *op.cit.*, p. 82 and 88 thinks that Constantin of 1703 and 1710 is a different person from Constantin of 1693 and 164. The arguments that these works were made by the same painter are given by K. Naslazi, *op.cit.*

9. Th. Popa, *op.cit.*, informs that these icons were in the monastery church of St. Peter and Paul in Vithkuqi. The icon of Christ was on the episcopal throne and that of the Virgin on the proskinitar. In the Museum of Medieval Arts in Korcha both icons are registered as coming from the church of Life-giving source in Korcha. K. Naslazi has published them with the Korcha's address (K. Naslazi, *op.cit.*, pp. 65-67). This disorder may have happened during the 1981's registration, when this museum was founded and there were brought nearly 5000 icons from all over Albania.

10. K. Naslazi, *op.cit.*, p. 72.

11. K. Naslazi, *op.cit.*, coming to a conclusion of seventeen years activity of this painter (1693-1711), he

a sword with the right hand and hanging a balance with the left. Small devils are shown under his balance, trying to grab the spirits who throw it off.

In 1711 Constantin Ieromonachou has painted also the icons for the templon of the church of monastery of St. Naum near Ohrid¹². Their size is similar to the icons of Vithkuqi (1710). Similarities can be also observed in the icons of Christ as a High Priest, the Virgin with the Child, St. John the Baptist. A new subject entering in his work is the depiction of Stt. Naum and Clement of Ohrid, the disciples of Stt. Cyril and Methodius whose popularity in this region is still very strong. At St. Naum's feet Constantin has painted some miniatures from saint's life. In another icon Constantin has depicted St. Marena with St. John Vladimir. St. Marena was very popular in this region, too; a church was dedicated to her in Moschopolis and a monastery in Lenga, near Pogradec, which was decorated by another good painter named Constantin from Shpat (ex-Spathias), in 1754¹³. The other saint, St. John Vladimir has lived in 10th c. He was a Serbian prince from Duklia, north of Shkodra. He was converted from catholic to orthodox and was a prominent fighter against Bogomiles and for the spreading of Orthodoxy to the Serbians, Albanians and Bulgarians. He married the daughter of the first Bulgarian King Samuel, but years later he was decapitated by his brother-in-law. His body was buried with great ceremony in a church near Elbasan, founded by him after a vision he had (during hunting) of a golden cross. After his death, his wife began a monastic life near his church, laying in this way the foundations of the monastery of St. John Vladimir. The church was restored in 1383 by Carl Topia, an Albanian catholic prince, and was rebuilt completely in 1901. St. John Vladimir was the only saint who was popular among the orthodox as well as to the catholic and moslem people.

Constantin Ieromonachou had painted his image many times in Moschopolis. These icons are very big (1,40x0,80 cm) since they were ordered to decorate the large templons of the basilicas. He worked the same way with the image of St. Naum of Ohrid. He created a new portrait of this saint, differing very much from his 15th c. models¹⁴. These images of St. Naum of Ohrid and St. John Vladimir were copied twenty years later by the «Zographi Brothers», Constantin and Athanas Terpo from Korcha, who depicted them in their frescoes in the basilicas of St. Athanas (1745) and St. Nichola (1750).

The last group of icons made «by the hand of Constantin Ieromonachou» are those for the templon of St. Athanase's basilica in 1726. The subject is nearly the same: Christ as a High Priest, the Virgin enthroned with the Child and accompanied by prophets, St.

also observes that Ieromonachou has an evolution in his work.

12. C. Grozdanov, *Portreti svetitelja iz Makedonije iz IX-XVIII veka*, Skopje 1983, p. 214; D. Cornakov, *Ikonostas crkve Sv. Nauma. Zbornik Naum Ohridski*, Ohrid 1985, pp. 111-115; D. Cornakov, *Macedonian Monasteries*, Skopje, Manastiri 1995, p. 21. The authors from FYROM make an unification of Constantin Ieromonachou (1711) and Constantin Zographi, the father of Terpo, from Korcha, whose activity began in 1744 (together with his brother Athanas in the monastery church of the Birth of the Virgin in Ardënitsa, Lushnia) and ended in 1783 (together with his son Terpo in the church of Xeropotamos monastery in Mount Athos).

13. Th. Popa, «Piktor Konstantini prej Shpati», *Buletin për Shkenecat Shoqërore* 4 (Tinarë 1955) 211.

14. C. Grozdanov, *op.cit.*; K. Weitzman - G. Alibegasvili - A. Velskaja - M. Chatzidakis - G. Babić - M. Albatou and T. Voinescu, *The Icon*, Studio Editions, London 1990, pp. 194-195.

John the Forerunner, who holds the signature and the date 1726, the Synaxis of Archangels, Stt. Athanase and Cyril, the bishops of Alexandria and another icon of St. George and Demeter, but this time depicted in military vestments.

After 1726 we have no more information about Constantin Ieromonachou and his work. In the Museum of Medieval Arts in Korcha and in the Institute of Cultural Monuments in Tirana there are also many other icons without signature and date, but defined as his hand or workshop. In total, we have registered fiftythree icons of different size. All these icons have led us to the conclusion that Constantin Ieromonachou was one of the best painters of his time. His work is characterized by the gradual simplification of ornaments and backgrounds in search of monumentality, which remained his main feature. His creative work with the images of St. Naum of Ohrid and St. John Vladimir implies that he was not only a great master, but also an authoritative personality among the clergy in Moschopolis.

As far as we know his work is documented in thirtythree years (1693-1726). Based on the large size icons (which exclude the possibility of any transportation), we think that his workshop was in Moschopolis and seems to have been a very good one.

A long inscription on the west wall of the basilica of St. Nikola says that David has painted it accompanied by Constantin and Kristo¹⁵. These painters, Constantin and Kristo, are not mentioned in any other church and we don't know who they are. Trying to give a small contribution, we think that one of them is Constantin Ieromonachou. Constantin Ieromonachou painted the big icons for this basilica (which was built in 1721-22) perhaps one or two years after its naos was built (1722-1724). It is possible that, after he had finished the icons for the basilica of St. Athanas (1726)¹⁶ he could have accompanied David together with Kristo in painting the frescoes of St. Nichola. Another possibility is that Constantin may have put this workshop and his people into David's disposal for the decoration of this large and beautiful basilica. But the most possible explanation is that the name of Constantin (Ieromonachou) figures in the inscription as the painter who decorated the templon and its icons, which is also a considerable work in a church decoration. The inscription of St. Nichola, showing great respect for David's work¹⁷, defines him as coming from Selenitsa, while Constantin and Kristo seem to be considered as well-known painters in the city. The idea of having two well-known painters in the same city, in the same year and with the same name «Constantin» it is not satisfactory until now.

We hope that future studies will bring more information about the productive work of Constantin Ieromonachou and his personality. We believe that this excellent painter was a very important man of the city and the enlightenment of his activity will answer many questions about art and architecture in Moschopolis.

15. Th. Popa, *Piktorët mesjetarë shqiptarë*, Tiranë 1961, p. 63.

16. The naos of the basilica of St. Athanas was built in 1721 and the arcade in 1724.

17. Our translation: «...painted excellently... and greatly... by the hand of the scholar and with the elegant skill of greatly devoted Mr. David of Selenitsa and accompanied by Constantin and Kristo...» (Th. Popa, *Piktorët mesjetarë*, p. 63).

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Kliti Kalamata

ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΣ ΙΕΡΟΜΟΝΑΧΟΣ.
ΕΝΑΣ ΑΓΙΟΓΡΑΦΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΜΟΣΧΟΠΟΛΗΣ (1693-1726)

Μέχρι σήμερα ο Κωνσταντίνος Ιερομόναχος αναφέρεται ως αγιογράφος ελάχιστων εικόνων στη Λούσνια, στη Μοσχόπολη, στην Κορυτσά, στο Βυθικούκι και στην Αχρίδα, στο διάστημα μεταξύ 1693 και 1712. Η εισήγηση αυτή εξετάζει περισσότερες από τριάντα εικόνες που είναι αρκετά μεγαλύτερες από τις προαναφερόμενες και τις οποίες φιλοτέχνησε στη Μοσχόπολη μεταξύ 1694 και 1726 στο εντυπωσιακό εργαστήριό του, όπου διακοσμούσε και τα τέμπλα των εκκλησιών. Με βάση τους κατασκευαστικούς κανόνες των τέμπλων και τα θέματα των εικόνων του, οι εικόνες αυτές έχουν ταξινομηθεί σε κατηγορίες ανάλογα με τα τέμπλα όπου ανήκαν. Από την κάθε κατηγορία ο Κωνσταντίνος υπέγραψε μία ή δύο, αναγράφοντας παράλληλα και την αντίστοιχη ημερομηνία. Η εξέλιξη της δουλειάς του φαίνεται μέσα από τη χρονολογική και τη συγκριτική ανάλυση που αναδεικνύει έναν εξαιρετο καλλιτέχνη της εποχής του και έναν αυστηρό κληρικό της Μοσχόπολης. Πρόκειται, προφανώς, για τον άγνωστο Κωνσταντίνο που συνεργάστηκε με τον Δαβίδ από τη Σελανίτσα και τον Χρίστο για τη διακόσμηση της βασιλικής του Αγίου Νικολάου το 1726.