

ENGLISH TEXT

INTRODUCTION

The Myrtia monastery (fig. 24), at the 23rd kilometre on the road leading from Agrinio to Thermo, near Lake Trichonida, is the oldest monastery in Aitolia, in almost continuous operation from at least 1491 to the present. It is an important monument for the study of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine painting, due to the fact that its *katholikon* is decorated with wall paintings belonging to four distinct phases: a) 12th–13th c., b) 1491, c) 1539 and d) beginning of the 18th c. This study focuses on the 1491 wall paintings, which adorned the original *katholikon*, that is, the sanctuary of the present *katholikon*, and were painted by Xenos Digenis from Mouchli in Arcadia. Xenos Digenis has also signed the wall paintings in the church of the Hagioi Pateres (Holy Fathers) at Apano Floria, Selino, Chania on the island of Crete (1470), and of the Koimesis (Dormition of the Virgin) at Palaia Frastana (pres. Kato Meropi), Pogoni in Epirus.

Digenis' paintings in the Myrtia monastery, his best-preserved work, attracted the attention of researchers early on. During the first decades of the 20th century G. Lambakis (1908) and D. Loukopoulos (1925, 1928, 1940–1942) published transcriptions of the dedicatory inscription with the name of the painter, but they were not in accord as to the proper reading of the year of execution of the paintings (“,ζ”), which Lambakis identified as “στηθ (6029)” (= 520/21) and Loukopoulos as “,ζνη (7058)” (=1549) and “,ζνθ” (= 1550/51). In mid-century, M. Chatzidakis (1952) was the first scholar to read correctly “1491” as the year of their execution. In subsequent years Chatzidakis, in his studies on Post-Byzantine painting (1953, 1966, 1969–1970, 1974, 1987, 1997), referred again to Digenis and his wall paintings highlighting their interest for researchers. The importance of Digenis' work for the study of Post-Byzantine painting has also been stressed by A. Xyngopoulos (1957).

A. Orlandos was the first to publish a comprehensive study on the decoration, in 1961. In his extensive paper on the architecture and painting of the

katholikon of the Myrtia monastery, he commented on the inscription of 1491, analysed the iconographic programme executed by Digenis and described his wall paintings, which he linked, in terms of style, with Palaiologan art and in particular with the Macedonian School of Painting of the 14th century.

Several researchers who commented on the wall paintings in the following years, namely P. Vocotopoulos (1967), M. Vassilaki-Mavrakaki (1976), A. Paliouras (1985), M. Garidis (1989), St. Maderakis (1991) and E. Georgitsoyanni (1992), pointed out their Cretan origins. Other researchers have used them as comparative material in studies on icons and frescoes of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries [D. Mouriki (1968), M. Chatzidakis (1969, 1986), K. Lassithiotakis (1969), P. Vocotopoulos (1977–1979, 1990), N. Chatzidakis (1982–1983, 1997), M. Acheimastou-Potamianou (1983, 1994), H. Deliyanni-Doris (1988), A. Tourta (1991), Chr. Baltoyanni (1994), A. Semoglou (2001–2002), M. Paisidou (2002)]. What is missing so far is an extensive, in-depth study of the paintings themselves, which would be highly interesting and useful, given the fact that these are not only the best-preserved paintings by Digenis but also one of the few precisely dated ensembles of paintings of the second half of the 15th century.

THE ARCHITECTURE AND THE WALL PAINTINGS OF THE KATHOLIKON OF THE MONASTERY

The wall paintings under examination cover the surfaces of the sanctuary of the present *katholikon* of the monastery (fig. 24), which, according to Orlandos (1961), passed through a series of construction phases.

The sanctuary belongs to the first construction phase of the *katholikon* that served as the *katholikon* of the monastery until at least 1491, when, according to the dedicatory inscription preserved on its south wall, Xenos Digenis covered its surfaces with his paintings. It is a single-nave barrel-vaulted church with a semicircular apse and a saddleback roof, 2.85 m. in width and 4.75 m. in length (drawing 1, A). It is built of rubble masonry with a few bricks in the joints and limited brick-work decoration, which adorns only the east side (fig. 24). Although the exact date of the founding of the church is unknown, it can be dated around 1200, a date assigned by Orlandos (1961) and Vocotopoulos (1967)

to the paintings of the first phase of decoration, on the west and east side of the north wall, based on the study of their iconographic and stylistic features.

A cross-in-square church of the distyle type was added to the west side of the original building at a later date (drawing 1, B); the new building became the main church of the *katholikon* and the older building became the sanctuary. At that time, a small entrance was opened on the west side of the south wall of the sanctuary, so as to establish a direct passage between it and the churchyard of the monastery. The window on the east side of the same wall must have been opened at a somewhat later date, to admit more light into the sanctuary. The new church has cloisonné masonry, with one or two bricks in the vertical joints, brick-masonry on the upper half of the west cross arm and brick-work decoration on the gables of the cross arms and on the drum of the dome. The preserved fragment of the dedicatory inscription on the tympanum of the north barrel-vault, referring to the renovation of the church in 1539 (“ο/ καινεισμ / ,ζ·μ·ζ”), is very important for dating the new building.

In the third phase of construction, a timber-roofed narthex (drawing 1, Γ) of plain rubble masonry was added to the west side of the church. Its construction can be dated before 1712, that is, before the construction of the single-nave chapel dedicated to the Taxiarchs, adjacent to its south wall (drawing 1, Δ), according to the barely discernible painted inscription above the walled-up entrance that led to it. The chapel of the Taxiarchs was demolished in December 1903. After 1712, an exonarthex was added to the west side of the narthex (drawing 1, E); it was demolished before 1961.

The wall paintings in the *katholikon* of the Myrtia monastery belong to four distinct phases:

First phase (late 12th/early 13th c.). The earliest paintings are preserved in the sanctuary of the *katholikon*. To this phase belong

a) on the north wall

1. the Dormition of the Virgin on the west side and
2. the representation of Deacon Stephen with a tripartite (red-white-red) vertical decorative band to his right on the east side,

b) on the south wall

1. the partially preserved unidentifiable frontal saint, holding a cross, under the window on the east side, with a vertical decorative band to his left, similar to the one on the west side of Deacon Stephen (drawing 2β), and
2. a small fragment of an unrecognizable painting situated between the aforementioned band and the representation of archangel Michael, of the second phase of decoration (drawing 2γ).

Second phase (1491). The wall paintings of this phase, signed by Xenos Digenis, the subject matter of this study, cover the rest of the walls of the sanctuary and will be analysed in the following chapters.

Third phase (1539). To this phase belong the paintings in the main church of the katholikon. In the dome is the representation of the Pantokrator, surrounded on the drum by the Heavenly Powers, the Virgin and St John the Baptist; on the east side of the drum is the Hagion Mandylion. In the pendentives are the depictions of the four Evangelists. On the barrel-vaults of the cross arms are scenes from the Feast Cycle and the Cycle of the Life of Christ, separated by three busts of prophets in medallions, whereas more scenes are depicted on the tympanum of the south, north and west cross arm, and above the Royal Door. The Baptism and the Feast of Herod cover the two small apses of the east wall, to right and left of the Royal Door. On the vertical walls there are full-length saints with a *podea* below, while above them, on the vaults of the two west angle chambers, there are busts of saints in medallions. Apostles and bishops are represented full-length on the west piers, Christ and the Virgin on the west face of the east piers. The decoration dates from 1539, according to the painted inscription on the tympanum of the north vault (“ο / καινεισμ / ,ζ·μ·ζ”), and has been associated with the School of Thebes.

Fourth phase (early 18th c.). The decoration of this phase covers the walls of the narthex and is arranged in three zones: in the lower zone there are full-length saints, in the middle zone the 24 Oikoi of the Akathistos Hymn, and in the upper zone a multitude of prophets in medallions. On the south wall, next to the