
Ivan Vasilev, Angel Angelov
(Balkan Heritage Foundation / New Bulgarian University)
(Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic
Museum, BAN)

**NEW DATA CONCERNING THE ARCHITECTURE, WALL
PAINTINGS AND DATING OF THE LATE-MEDIEVAL
CHURCH OF ST. PETKA IN BALSHA, BULGARIA**

This article presents the outcomes of an observation and non-destructive survey of the semi-ruined late-medieval church of St. Petka in the village of Balsha in the Sofia region, as carried out by the authors of the article in partnership with Dr. George Bevan of Queen's University, Canada, and Dr. Miglena Raikovska of the New Bulgarian University. The project is an initiative of the Balkan Heritage Foundation, which also funded it. Making use of contemporary photographic techniques, the examination allowed us to further and deepen the available information on the architecture and wall paintings of the Balsha church, while the analysis of the collected data led us to reevaluate the arguments supporting its dating. While the nature of non-destructive surveying prevented us from making definitive conclusions about some of the questions concerning the history of the church, it also helped us generate new hypotheses that ought to be tested with conventional archeological research methods.

The village of Balsha is located at the foot of the southern slopes of the Western Balkan Mountains, as they flatten out into the Sofia Valley, some 25 km north of the city center. The semi-ruined late-medieval church of St. Petka¹ stands next to a contemporary, early 20th church dedicated to the same patron saint, in the approximate center of the surrounding churchyard. The two buildings are situated in a flat area of roughly 1 500 sq. m., at the top of a south-sloping terrain that is delineated by gullies. The location of the earlier church was probably chosen in view of the terrain's dominance over the surrounding area, as well as its defensive advantage.

¹ DD coordinates: 42.84978536349995, 23.26959171084195; DMS coordinates: 42° 50' 59.227" N; 23° 16' 10.53" E. Elevation (at threshold): 657.19 m above sea level. (BGS 2005). Street address: Sofia, Novi Iskar district, Balsha, 4 Svetlin Dimitrov St. In some documents the address appears as: 9 Borova St.

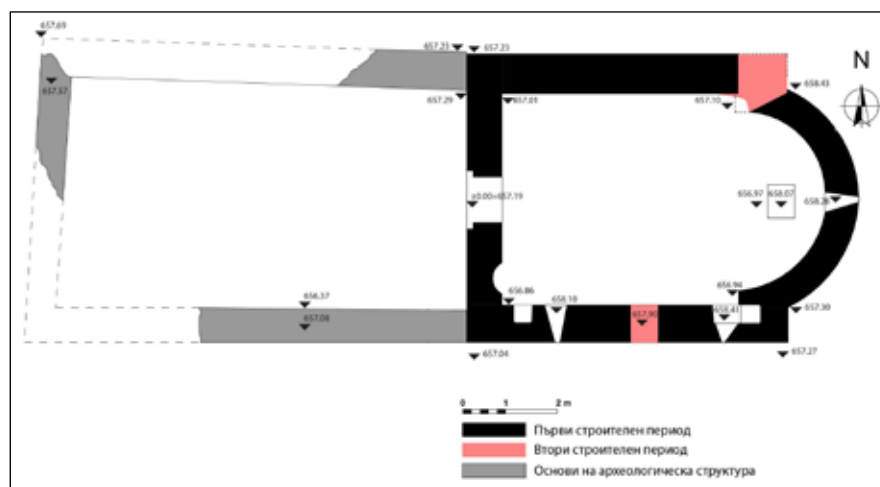


Fig. 1. Ground plan of the church St. Petka in Balsha (A. Angelov, I. Vasilev, M. Raykovska, 2018)

Сл. 1. Основа цркве Св. Петке у Балши (А. Ангелов, И. Василев, м. Рајковска, 2018)

The earliest available evidence for the village of Balsha is found in Ottoman registers dating back to the 16th century.² Its name is related to the personal name Balsh, whose Albanian etymology suggests that the village might have been founded during a migration wave, one of a series of such waves of Christian populations (Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Vlachs, and others) that moved to the Sofia region from the area of Epirus and present-day southern Albania, starting in the Middle Ages and continuing into the early 16th century.³ Ottoman registers also attest that in the 16th and 17th centuries Balsha's population was Christian, and the residents bore typical Bulgarian names.⁴ According to local legend, Balsha was the place of birth and death of the famous late-medieval icon painter Pimen Zografski. Although we are unaware of any thorough studies of the micro region, a number of known sites (churches, villages, and a fortification) from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages are located within a 4 km radius of the village, testifying to the region's long history of habitation.

The old church of St. Petka is a single-nave, barrel-vaulted building, with a rectangular plan, single semi-circular apse and a shallow arched projection of the vaulting on its western façade (Figs. 1,3,4). It has two architectural phases. Its collapsed vault and semi-ruined state might have been caused by damage to its roof following the abandoning of the building and/or burglary, or other fac-

² А.М. Чолева-Димитрова, *Селищни имена от Югозападна България: Изследване*. Речник, София – Москва 2002, 96.

³ Б. Гюзелев, *Албанци в Източните Балкани*, София 2004, 27-31; 97-98.

⁴ Б. Цветкова, *Турски извори за българската история*, т. III, София 1972, 105; А. Велков, Б. Цветкова, В. Мутафчиева, Г. Гълъбов, М. Михайлова, М. Стайнова, П. Груевски, С. Андреев, *Турски извори за българската история*, т.V, София 1974, 208, 341; Н. Тодоров, М. Калицин, *Турски извори за българската история*, т. VI, София 1977, 310-311, 319-320, 327.

tors such as an earthquake. According to Bulgarian architectural historian Dafina Vasileva, the local population also contributed to the deterioration of the building by reusing the bricks from its vaulting for the construction of home-based ovens and fireplaces.⁵ By the 1930s, prior to the construction of the new church, the old church had long fallen into disrepair but Balsha residents continued to use it for religious purposes.⁶

In 1927, the building was declared a “national historical site” (Bulgarian: *народна старина*), and in 1969⁷ a “cultural heritage site of national significance” (Bulgarian: *художествен паметник на културата с национално значение*) – as defined by the contemporary Cultural Heritage Act. It is presently protected under a vaulted metal-roof hanger, constructed in 1966. To the immediate west of the building are the foundations of a structure which until now has been interpreted as a narthex constructed at a later period. A collection of tombstones and crucifix fragments excavated from the old church necropolis in 1986 are kept in the fenced area surrounding the church. Their workmanship bears the characteristics of stone-cutting production in the region of the Sofia Balkan Mountains in the 19th century.

The first written mention of the old church of St. Petka in Balsha appeared in 1931, in a brief report by the Bulgarian scholar and public figure Pavel Deliradev.⁸ A few years later, the building was examined by the archaeologist and architectural historian Krastyu Miyatev, who published his findings in the bulletin of the Bulgarian Archaeological Institute.⁹ Miyatev dated the construction of the church to the 14th–15th centuries. Almost three decades later, the



Fig. 2. Prophet Elijah. Niche on the western interior wall, 2017.

Сл. 2. Пророк Илија, ниша на западном унутрашњем зиду, 2017.

⁵ Д. Василева, *Шест средновековни църкви в района на София*, сп. „Музеи и паметници на културата“ 4 (София 1972), 17.

⁶ К. Миятев, *Старинни църкви в Западна България*, Известия на Българския археологически институт за 1939 г., т. XIII (София 1941), 228.

⁷ Министерство на културата на Република България, *Актуален списък на недвижимите културни ценности с категория „национално значение“ (НИНKH) към 2017 г.*, Accessed 2018, September 26, <<http://mc.government.bg/page.php?p=58&s=429&sp=430&t=244&z=576>>

⁸ П. Делирадев, *Старинните църкви в с. Балша*, сп. „Векове“ кн. 3 (1931), 45.

⁹ К. Миятев, *Старинни църкви ...*, 243–245.



Fig. 3. The late-medieval church of St. Petka, western façade, center, and the modern church of St. Petka, left

Сл. 3. Касносредновековна црква Св. Петке, западна фасада и нова црква Св. Петке

site was re-examined by Dafina Vasileva, who included it in a group of public Christian buildings in the Sofia region sharing similar floor plans and architectural features.¹⁰ In 1986, Romyana Pobornikova conducted archaeological research in the area west of the church, excavating “an extension of its foundations”, still visible and accessible today, and pits filled with human bones. Agreeing with Dafina Vasileva’s earlier interpretation, Pobornikova’s unconvincing, sparsely illustrated publication of findings¹¹ reiterated that the foundations belonged to a narthex of later period. Both Vasileva and Pobornikova subscribed to Miyatev’s dating of the church of St. Petka to the 14th–15th centuries.

At the turn of the 21st century, the old church of Balsha appeared on the pages of several publications.¹² Between 2008 and 2016, the Balkan Heritage

¹⁰ In this group she includes the church of St. Theodore Tyron (now the katholikon of the Balsha Monastery), the ruins in the Monastiro locality outside Balsha, the church of St. Petka in Kremikovtsi, the church of St. Petka in Svoge, and the church of St. Petka of the Saddlers in Sofia. Д. Василева, *Шест средновековни църкви*, 17–25.

¹¹ Р. Поборникова, *Нови археологически изследвания на три средновековни църкви от Софийско*, сб. Сердика-Средец-София 2 (София 1994), 117–143.

¹² К. Хаджиев, *Кирилски епиграфски паметници от църквата в село Балша, Софийско*, сп. Нумизматика и епиграфика 1 (София 2003), 225–236; А. Ангелов, *Паметници на християнското монументално изкуство в Западна България*, София 2013, 16, 18, 20–22, 136, 187–188; М. Raykovska, G. Bevan, I. Vasilev, *Integration Of Different Computational Photographic Modalities In High-Accuracy 3D Building Models: The Case Of The Church Of St. Petka, Bulgaria*. Virtual Archaeology (Methods and Benefits). Proceedings of the Second International Conference Held at the State Hermitage Museum



Fig. 4. Eastern façade, 2017.

Сл. 4. Источна фасада, 2017.

Foundation, in partnership with the New Bulgarian University and individual scholars such as Dr. George Bevan of Queen's University, Canada, used it as a site for its field school in graphic and photographic documentation of cultural heritage sites. In 2017, the church was the subject of a non-destructive archaeological survey led by the authors of this article, alongside Miglena Raikovska and George Bevan. Among other documentation, our team produced a photogrammetric model of the building, Reflectance Transformation Images of its surviving mural inscriptions, and decorrelation stretched images (Fig. 9) of the faded wall paintings.¹³

Most 21st century scholars of the old church of St. Petka¹⁴ agree that its construction and interior decoration occurred in the late 16th or early 17th centuries, yet none of the published materials contain detailed argumentation in support of such a dating. Based on our observations, we believe that the most persuasive such arguments can be found in the building's architectural and iconographic features, which we discuss below.

Approximately 60% of the original building survives today. The western and southern walls are preserved in their entirety, while less than half of the

1–3 June 2015 (St. Petersburg 2015), 139–157; А. Ангелов, И. Василев, М. Райковска, *Документирани на архитектурните останки и стенописи на късносредновековната църква „Св. Петка“ в село Балица, Столична община*, Археологически открития и разкопки през 2017 (София 2018), 698–700.

¹³ М. Raykovska, G. Bevan, I. Vasilev, *Integration Of Different ...* (2015), 139–157; М. Raykovska, G. Bevan, I. Vasilev, and V. Tenekedjiev, *An Application of Colour Decorrelation Stretching to Faded Frescoes in a Late Medieval Church St. Petka, Western Bulgaria*. Paper presented at the 36th Symposium on Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art and Archaeology, Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens, Greece, 2016.

¹⁴ In addition to those mentioned, see also Б. Пенкова, Ц. Кунева (ред.), *Корпус на стенописите от XVII век в България*, София 2012, 10.



Fig. 5. Roof fragment above the southwestern corner of the church, 2017.

Сл. 5. Кровни фрагмент изнад југозападног дела цркве

northern and eastern walls have survived. Less than 25% of the original vaulting over the southern wall and apse is preserved, including a few fragments of the roof. The ratio between the length and width of the naos (both exterior and interior) is 10:9¹⁵ (Fig.1). A pair of niches opposite each other on the northern and southern walls, on each side of the apse, served as prothesis and diaconicon. The naos was covered by a brick barrel vaulting, while a brick semi-dome covered the apse.¹⁶ The semi-dome of the apse is 0.4 m narrower than the naos and vaulting.

The church has a single, western-wall entrance¹⁷, which stands at 0.2–0.25 m above the original floor and is highlighted by an indentation of 0.15 m from the western façade. A vaulted patron niche, with a depth equal to the indentation of the entrance, stands above it. On the outside, the upper western façade is decorated with an arched projection of the main vault, with the arch protruding 0.24 m from the façade.¹⁸ Its impostes coincide with the foundation of a four-layer brick cornice¹⁹, which is preserved on the western, southern and eastern façades. The surface of the eastern wall (Fig. 4) with the apse²⁰ is smooth, with the exception of the cornice. The apsidal embrasure window is partially preserved. The southern façade is flat, punctuated only by a cornice and three windows: two embrasure-shaped ones, to the east and west, and a larger rectangular one in the middle²¹, the latter made during the second construction period

¹⁵ Dimensions: Length: external, without apse – 7.45 m; internal, without apse – 5.50 m.; central longitudinal axis, with apse – 11.10 m. Width: external – 6.68 m; internal – 4.84 m; western and eastern walls – 0.80 m; northern wall – 0.96 m; southern wall – 0.88 m. Height: western façade, threshold to ridge – 4.87 m; internal, floor to vaulting – 4.40 m; vaulting – 2.10 m; external walls, ground level to cornice – 2.00 m; internal walls, floor to vaulting – 2.10 m.

¹⁶ Bricks used in vaulting and apse, dimensions: 0.26 x 0.26 x 0.04 m.

¹⁷ Entrance door, dimensions: height – 1.60 m; width – 1.05 m; depth – 0.80 m.

¹⁸ Bricks used in arch, dimensions: 0.27 x 0.25 x 0.04 m.

¹⁹ Cornice, dimensions: height – 0.20 m; maximum width – 0.10 m.

²⁰ Apse, dimensions: exterior depth – 1.60 m; interior depth – 2.00 m; exterior width – 5.00 m; interior width – 4.10 m; surviving height, from modern-day terrain – 3.15 m.

²¹ Embrasure windows have similar dimensions: approximate height – 0.60 m; approximate external width – 0.08 m; internal width between 0.48 and 0.58 m. Later square

(it is unclear if this was an expansion of an older embrasure). The northern façade was to a large extent sunken into the terrain, which has a north-south slope.

The church walls were constructed with emplecton technique, using crudely hewn ashlar (local sandstone of red and yellow hues, grayish dolomitized sandstone and even paragneiss) of various sizes and forms, spolia²², whole or broken bricks, as well as white and occasionally pink mortar as binder. The infill consists of whole or broken stones, brick rubble, and mortar. Flagstones and (whole or fragmented, sometimes reused) bricks were used to align the masonry. On the exterior, the joints between the ashlars were once widely plastered with mortar, with only the middle of the stones visible, their contours drawn over the mortar as ornamentation. But today most of this mortar is gone, due to long exposure to the effects of climate. Cloisonné masonry was used in the lower part of the apse-containing façade.

The building's original roof is missing, but extant fragments suggest that the vaulting was covered with a layer of mortar-bound stone-and-brick rubble that in turn served as the foundation for two layers of mortar-bound square bricks²³ that started from the cornice and followed the curve of the vaulting (Fig. 5). A surviving roof fragment above the western façade has an angular ridge, but the apex of the rest of the vaulting might well have been rounded. The quality of the bricks, the slope and the execution of the masonry, however, do not in any way suggest that this was the roof's top layer, as Miyatev and Vasileva have argued.²⁴ We believe it might have been covered with lead.

window, dimensions: height – 0.98 m; width – 0.62 m.

²² A total of seven pieces of spolia (quadrae and other architectural elements of grayish dolomitized limestone; one of them with a memorial inscription in Cyrillic) were used in the construction of the church; two were used for the Holy Table.

²³ Dimensions: 0.25 x 0.25 x 0.03 m.

²⁴ К. Миятев, *Архитектура на средновековна България*, София (1965), 217; Д. Василева, *Шест средновековни...*, 18.



Fig. 6. Coinciding foundations of the walls of the church of St. Petka and the “western structure”, 2017.

Сл. 6. Основе зидова западне структуре испод цркве Св. Петке. Југозападни угао, 2017



Fig. 7. Melismos. Fragment of the wall-painting in the southern part of the apsidal conch, 2017.

Сл. 7. Поклоњење, фрагмент зидног сликарства у јужном делу апсиде, 2017

The architectural articulation of the church interior consists of several blind and windowed niches. A tall, narrow niche with an embrasure window situated in the southern wall, before its juncture with the eastern wall, served as the diaconicon²⁵. A further niche²⁶ inside the diaconicon's eastern reveal has two compartments separated horizontally with boarding and was probably used as storage for vestments and curtains. Dafina Vasileva was the first to notice the traces of a prothesis niche²⁷ opposite the diaconicon, in the northern wall. It was walled up with dry masonry during the second construction period and is now flush with the rest of the wall. The shape of the prothesis quite likely echoed that of the diaconicon. A small vaulted niche with a cross painted in its center²⁸ is located in the western end of the southern wall. Next to it, on the western wall, 0.5 m above the floor, is a larger concave niche²⁹, also vaulted, containing the image of St. Elijah (Fig.2).

All previous scholars of the Balsha church have stated that its original floor has not been preserved.

However, a cleaning in 2017 revealed two extant fragments with an overall area of 0.9 sq. m. in the southeastern corner of the naos, just a centimeter below the present-day floor, which had been covered with a thin layer of dust and ashes. The fragments are paved with thin square terracotta tiles³⁰.

The Holy Table is made of spolia: a limestone ashlar serves as a plinth, while an upended plinth serves as the table's top. We cannot corroborate with certainty Miyatev's suggestion³¹ that the two pieces were part of a classical-era altar. Moreover, the stone foundation of the iconostasis as marked in Miyatev's floor plan has not been noted by any subsequent scholar, and no traces of it can be observed today. He might have meant two other surviving objects – a

²⁵ Diaconicon, dimensions: length – 0.60 m; width – 0.40 m; height – 2.10 m.

²⁶ Niche, dimensions: height – 1.00 m; width and depth – 0.44 m.

²⁷ Д. Василева, *Шест средновековни...*, 18.

²⁸ Dimensions: height – 0.64 m; width – 0.40 m; depth – 0.40 m.

²⁹ Dimensions: height – 1.60 m; width – 0.62 m; depth – 0.28 m.

³⁰ Dimensions: 0.27 x 0.27 x 0.02 m.

³¹ К. Миятев, *Старинни църкви ...*, 229-230.



Fig. 8. Western interior wall, 2017.

Сл. 8. Западни зида цркве, 2017.

column base and a hexadecagonal monolithic column portrayed in the illustrations to his article. The column might have been taken from a disused templon or another interior design element with liturgical function. However, it remains unclear whether the two objects were, indeed, once part of another building, from another time or location.

The foundations of the structure located west of the church (Fig. 1) were first noticed by Dafina Vasileva and were excavated in 1986 by Romyana Pobornikova. Both scholars believed that they were part of a narthex added to the original church at a later point.³² Pobornikova mentioned a construction joint between the two structures but did not include a photograph to support her observation. Our own examination has led us to a couple of alternative hypotheses for these remains, which we have conditionally called “the western structure”. With these foundations, the building might have been a narthex, an exonarthex or even a small courtyard. Its walls were made of rough-cut stones (mostly sandstone) bound with white mortar. A socle of sorts, 0.15–0.4 m wide, makes up their substructure. The axes of the southern and northern walls of the western structure coincide with those of the church (Fig. 6). The surface and width of its southern wall also coincide with those of the southern façade. However, the northern wall of the western structure is 0.15–0.2 m wider than the northern wall of the church and seems to continue under its foundations. Moreover, the construction material used in the western structure is the same

³² It has a quadrilateral shape with the following external dimensions: north – 11.13 m; south – 10.85 m; west – 7.20 m; east – 6.90 m. The thickness of the walls varies between 0,75 and 0,90 m.

kind, and even size, of stone used in the first, foundational row of the southern façade of the church. All of these observations have led us to theorize that the western structure might be an earlier building whose eastern foundations were used in the construction of the late-medieval church. Such hypothesis can only be tested with a carefully conducted subsequent archeological excavation. But for the time being, without rejecting Vasileva/Pobornikova's hypothesis, we are offering an alternative version of the construction history of the church.

Our review of the architectural and construction characteristics of the Balsha church confirm Dafina Vasileva's conclusion that it has similar construction technique, materials, designs of the prothesis/diaconicon niches, brick roof structure and arches to the group of churches she studied in the Sofia region. Contemporary Bulgarian scholars, however, have dated the construction of three of these six churches (including their likely archetype, the church of St. Petka of the Saddlers in Sofia) to the 16th–17th centuries.³³ Moreover, the projected arch on the western façade of the Balsha church is typical for Balkan (not just Christian but also public Ottoman) architecture of the 16th–17th centuries, and later.

Arguments in support of a later dating can also be found in the iconography of the wall paintings in Balsha. The church was decorated at a single point in time, with the paintings executed directly onto a thin (2-4 mm) layer of mortar. The iconography follows the established models in Balkan Orthodox art in the post-Byzantine period. A fragment of the Melismos scene (Fig. 7), with the images of five (of originally ten) Early Church fathers holding unfolded scrolls with faded text from the Divine Liturgy, has survived in the apse. Krastyu Miyatev reported that the Eucharist was depicted above the Melismos scene³⁴, of which in 2017 only eroded fragments of the figures of two apostles had survived. An image of a deacon is partially preserved in the diaconicon's eastern niche, while a half-length representation of a hermit is located across from it, on the western reveal of the diaconicon.

The iconographic program of the southern wall starts off with a two-tier painted socle decorated with alternating straight and undulating lines, which form parti-colored triangles. A register of full-length, full-face depictions of saints, grouped in pairs and separated by Bursa-style arches³⁵, is located directly above it. Partially preserved are the figures of four of them. The icons of St. Athanasius of Alexandria and another, unidentified liturgist are situated

³³ З. Ждраков, Сцената „Въздвижение на кръста“ и датирането на стенописите от църквата „Св. Петка Самарджийска“ в София, сп. Изкуство 2 (София 1990), 40-46; Б. Пенкова, Стенописите от църквата „Св. Петка Самарджийска“ в контекста на балканското изкуство от XVI в., сп. Проблеми на изкуството 2 (София 1991), 32-42; А. Ангелов, Паметници на християнското ..., 47-49; Б. Пенкова, Ц. Кунева (ред.), Корпус на стенописите..., 230.

³⁴ К. Миятев, Старинни църкви ..., 231.

³⁵ The Bursa-style arch was introduced in Ottoman architecture in the 16th century and was widely used in both public and residential buildings until the early 18th century, when under the influence of European Baroque, it was replaced by the Edrine-style arch. See: G. Goodwin, *Ottoman Architecture*, London 2003; R. Günay, *Tradition of the Turkish House and Safranbolu Houses*, Istanbul 1998, 42-43.



Fig. 9. Decorrelation stretched image of the faded wall paintings on the western interior wall (photo by George Bevan and Miglena Raykovska)

Сл. 9. Део зидно сликарства на западном унутрашњем зиду (фото Џорџ Беван и Миглена Рајковска)

west of the diaconicon. The register is then interrupted by a subsequently made window – an intervention that has almost completely destroyed the image of St. Petka³⁶, of which only contours remain. Next to it, in the space between the two windows, is a heavily damaged depiction of St. Catherine of Alexandria. Thick frames, with the areas between them containing vegetative motifs, decorate the reveals of the western window. The reveals of the Oriental-style, pointed-arch niche to its immediate west are adorned with six palmettes in the form of medallions. A cross is painted in the middle of the niche, with the letters IC XC and vegetative motifs above its horizontal arms. The scene Abraham's Hospitality, from which the figures of Sarah and two angels are preserved, is depicted above the western window and niche.

³⁶ To identify this image, we have used К. Миятев, *Старинни църкви ...*, 232.

The second register on the southern wall consists of a freeze of medallions containing half-length portraits of Christian martyrs, painted in pairs, with one figure turning to the other in $\frac{3}{4}$ profile. Three of the original medallions have survived intact, while two are partially preserved.

The third register included scenes from the life of Jesus Christ and the Holy Week, of which two have partially survived today. A heavily eroded and barely recognizable version of The Washing of the Feet is located above the diaconicon, while a fragment of Pilate's Court appears in the register's westernmost section.

The iconographic program of the western wall (Fig. 8) echoes that of the southern wall, beginning with an identical two-tier painted socle. The first section of the first register contains an image of a hermit saint. Next to it, above the niche, is the painted bust of another saint, while the area near the entrance has the traditional image of Archangel Michael (Fig. 9). Inside the niche is a depiction of the prophet Elijah (Fig. 2). The register continues northwards, past the church entrance, with representations of Sts. Constantine and Helena, and St. Panteleimon.³⁷ The reveals of the entrance door are decorated with crosses against a background of stylized vegetative motifs. The second register on this wall consists of a freeze of eight (of originally eleven) medallions, in varying degrees of preservation, depicting female martyrs. A representation of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary is situated in its middle. Traces of two other scenes can be seen on either of its sides, but their poor state prevents their identification.

The northern wall is the most heavily damaged of the four. Only a limited number of painting fragments, mostly from the two-tier ornamental socle, have survived. Another exception is a fragment of a saintly figure situated next to the prothesis niche, whose richly ornamented robe is strewn with embossed white dots representing pearls.

A fragment from the Jacob's Ladder scene is preserved on the intrados of the projected arch on the western façade of the church. With typical precision, the painter has rendered a group of angels in imperial dress, in dynamic poses, ascending and descending a ladder. The patron saint niche above the church entrance contains a fragment of its original ornamental frame of stylized palmettes, arranged along the apex of its arch.

The iconographic program of the church of St. Petka in Balsha has all the characteristics of Christian art in the Balkans in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.³⁸ Despite their fragmented state, the paintings attest to the training and skill of their author(s), who were probably familiar with the work of well-known contemporaneous painters in the major Orthodox centers in present-day northern Greece. The image of the prophet Elijah in the western wall niche is especially note-worthy in this respect. The traditional medieval scene of "the saintly prophet Elijah in the cave, being fed by a raven" is replaced here by a

³⁷ We have identified these using decorrelation stretched images produced by George Bevan and Miglena Raikovska.

³⁸ On this topic, see: М. Куюмджиева, *Рукою грешного изиграфа. Още веднъж за живописците в късносредновековната и предосманската епоха*, сп. Проблеми на изкуството 1 (София 2018), 3-24.

full-face representation of the prophet, echoing the work of the Cretan masters in the monasteries of the Meteora and Mount Athos.³⁹ It is possible that the painter(s) were representative(s) of a Sofia icon painting workshop, which was very active precisely during this period.⁴⁰ If this were the case, he (or they) would, no doubt, have been familiar with the iconography of the church of St. Petka of the Saddlers in Sofia (decorated c. 1581)⁴¹, as there are a number of similarities between the two churches⁴². Such similarities can also be found between the paintings in Balsha and the earlier layer of paintings in the Kurilo Monastery of St. John of Rila (1596) near Sofia.⁴³ As our decorrelation stretched images demonstrated, the iconographic program of the western wall of the Balsha church to a large extent echoes that of the katholikon of the Kurilo Monastery, which is evident in the images of Archangel Michael, St. Panteleimon, and Sts. Constantine and Helena, as well as in the rendering of aristocratic dress, and specifically the use of embossed representing white dots to represent pearls.

In conclusion, our analysis of the architecture, style and iconography of the church of St. Petka in Balsha demonstrates that the church might have been constructed in the late 16th or early 17th centuries – a period of proliferation of new religious buildings in the Sofia region and present-day western Bulgaria. The latter was enabled by the economic and demographic surge in the Ottoman Empire and Europe in the 16th and early 17th centuries, as well as by the policies of Ottoman sultans of that era, who allowed the Christian institutions under their control⁴⁴ to encourage the construction and renovation of Orthodox churches throughout the Balkans.

³⁹ See, for example: Δ. Σοφianos, Ε. Τσιγαρίδας, *Αγία Μετεώρα. Ιερά Μονή Αγίου Νικολάου Αναπαύσα, Καλαμπάκα* 2003, 149; M. Chatzidakis, *The Cretan Painter Theophanis. The Wall-paintings of Holy Monastery of Stavronikita*, Mount Athos 1986, fig. 26.

⁴⁰ Α. Ангелов, *Паметници на...*, 185-191.

⁴¹ З. Ждраков, *Сцената Въздвижение на кръста ...*, 40-46; Б. Пенкова, *Стенописите в църквата “Св. Петка Самарджийска” в контекста на балканското изкуство от XVI в.*, Проблеми на изкуството, 2 (1991), 32 – 41.

⁴² For example, in both churches, Abraham’s Hospitality is located in the western half of the southern wall, a break from its traditional location on the eastern wall, above the prothesis. The figures of the hermit located between the diaconicon and the arcosolium on the southern wall of the church of St. Petka of the Saddlers in Sofia and the western reveal of the diaconicon in the Balsha church are also treated similarly.

⁴³ Б. Пенкова, *Стенописите от Драгалевския и Куриловския манастир от края на XVI век и техният художествен контекст*, сп. Проблеми на изкуството 1 (София 2018), 47-58.

⁴⁴ These include the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, its subordinate Archbishopric of Ohrid, which oversaw the Diocese of Sofia until at least the middle of the 16th century, as well as the Patriarchate of Peć, which was reestablished in 1557. Some contemporary scholars (Machiel Kiel, Radmila Tričković, Olga Todorova, Biserka Penkova, Angel Angelov) believe that the Bishopric of Sofia became part of the diocese of the Patriarchate of Peć upon the latter’s revival and was governed by it until the very early 17th century, when it was “restored” to the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Иван Василев, Ангел Ангелов
(Фондација „Балканско наслеђе“/Нови бугарски универзитет)
(Институт за етнологију и фолклористику са Етнографским музејем, БАН)
НОВИ ПОДАЦИ О АРХИТЕКТУРИ, ЖИВОПИСУ И ДАТОВАЊУ
КАСНОСРЕДЊОВЕКОВНЕ ЦРКВЕ СВЕТА ПЕТКА У С. БАЛША, БУГАРСКА

Полуразрушена црква Св. Петке у селу Балша (у области Софије) налази се на јужној падини Старе планине на 25км од центра бугарске престонице. Храм има статус непокретног културног добра од националног значаја и налази се јужно од модерне цркве посвећене истом свецу. То је правоугаона једнобродна грађевина засведена полуобличастим сводом, са полукружном плитком апсидом и пројекцијом лука на западној фасади, позната и као „кратки анти“. Сачувани остаци су око 60% оригиналне структуре и покривени су заштитним хангаром. Сви истраживачи који су проучавали цркву у 20. веку: Крастју Мијатов, Дафина Василева и Румјана Поборникова датирају грађевину у 14. 15. век. Међутим, у 21. веку, искраживачи су склони да прихвате касније датовање цркве – у касни 16. или почетак 17. века. Недеструктивно истраживање и документовање коју су аутори спровели између 2008. и 2017. године даје аргументе у прилог овој тези. У чланку је детаљно описана архитектурае и живопис споменика, укључујући и нове податке. Наиме, заједно са најближим паралелама архитектуре и живописа храма, указују да је саграђен и осликан не пре последње деценије 16. века.