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DOWN AND BEYOND: THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH UNDER THE ORTA MOSQUE IN STRUMICA

Abstract: The paper explores the architectural and painterly remnants of the medieval church found under the Orta Mosque in Strumica discovered within the archaeological investigation of the site. The unconventional perimeter of the edifice, as well as the striking features of the fresco fragments found in the building speak in favour of a medieval sacral object constructed with ambitious spatial design and decorated with quality fresco painting in regard to their stylistic characteristics. In that sense, the paper intends to define the outline of the medieval temple, to determine its chronology and to date the fragments of the fresco arrangement more precisely.

Key words: Orta Mosque, Strumica, domed basilica, fresco painting, 11th century.

When one talks about Strumica as an ecclesiastic center, one has to mention the participation of its bishop Theodor in the First ecumenical council in Nicaea (325), the expansion of the cult dedicated to the Fifteen Holy Hieromartyrs of Tiberiopolis towards the end of the 9th century, the Vita created in their honor by the Ohrid Archbishop Theophylact and the transformation of their temple into a feudal metochion of Emperor Dušan’s mausoleum in the mid-14th century¹; these are only some of the references that legitimize the prestigious religious status of Strumica on the cultural map of the Middle Ages. Positioned in the center of the geo-strategic coordinates that frame the region geographically situated north of Thessalonica, the town grew into an urban settlement developed on the margins of the Balkans’ arterial roads. Well-fortified with defensive structures of different typological formation², Strumica existed as a church center with a

¹ Ц. Грозданов, *Портрети на светителите од Македонија од IX-XVIII век*, Скопје 1983, 127-135.

² Д. Цветанов, *Свети петнаесет Тивериополски маченици, од црковен комплекс до цивилно предградие на средновековна Струмица*, Култот за Св. Петнаесет Тивериополски маченици во средновековната и во поновата епоха – историја, култура и традиција, Струмица 2019, 175-179.



Fig. 1. The Medieval Church under the Orta Mosque, view of the naos from northwest
Сл. 1 Средњовековна црква испод Орта џамије, поглед према наосу са северозапада

verified bishopric status throughout the entire medieval era. In the frames of that religious aura, funded upon the ancient ecclesiastical administration, martyr cults, as well as feudal constellation of khetorial privileges, the town grew into a center of a socio-cultural articulation and diverse cultural activities which resulted in creation of representative sacral monuments, particularly in the period from the 10th until the 12th century. Among the most important, one should mention the church dedicated to the Fifteen Holy Hieromartyrs of Tiberiopolis (turn of the 10th century)³, the Vodoča church complex with architectural and painterly phases articulated throughout the 11th century⁴, the temple dedicated

³ Д. Коцо, П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Резултатите од археолошките ископувања во 1973 г. во црквата "Св. 15 Тивериполоски маченици"* - Струмица, Зборник. Археолошки музеј на Македонија VIII-IX, Скопје 1978, 93-96; P. L. Vocotopoulos, *The Role of Constantinopolitan Architecture during the Middle and Late Byzantine Period*, Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik 31/2, Wien 1981, 558; Б. Алексова, *Loca Sanctiorum Macedoniae. Култ на мартирите во Македонија од IV до IX век*, Скопје 1995, 161-168; S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, Milano 2006, 21-24; E. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, Македонија. Милениумски културно-историски факти, Скопје 2013, 1548-1549, 1553-1555.

⁴ П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Комплексот цркви во Водоча*, Скопје 1975, 20-63; S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 45-47, 56-60; E. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1551-1552, 1568-1570, 1583-1587; E. Dimitrova, *Ars Inimitabilis. The Church Complex of St. Leontius at Vodoča*, Niš & Byzantium Symposium. Collection of scientific works, vol. XIV, Niš 2016, 343-355.

to the Holy Virgin Eleoussa in the village of Veljusa⁵ and the sacral structure erected in honor of the Forty martyrs of Sebaste in the village of Bansko⁶, both from the end of the 11th century.

The Architecture of the Medieval Church

Archaeological Context. The Medieval Church under the Orta Mosque lies on a site rich with multiple cultural layers, ranging from antiquity to the late Middle Ages. These strata, clearly visible in the stratigraphy of the surrounding terrain, indicate continuous habitation and reuse of the area. Despite significant deterioration caused by natural processes and human intervention, enough architectural evidence remains to allow for a reconstruction of the church's original form and typology. The structure had considerable dimensions, measuring approximately 20 meters in length (excluding the apse) and 13 meters in width, and was oriented along the traditional east-west axis. The best-preserved parts belong to the southwestern segment, where massive masonry walls survive up to 1–2 meters in height. The northeastern section is entirely missing, while the southeastern corner, located directly beneath the mosque's foundations, shows extensive damage. (Fig. 1)

Architectural Characteristics. Based on the surviving masonry on the western part, the building was clearly divided into three aisles - a central and two lateral ones. The main entrance was from the west, consisting of a single opening leading directly into the central part of the nave. No evidence of additional entrances has been found. On the east, the building ended with a deep semicircular apse, both internally and externally. (Fig. 2) A dome once covered the easternmost part of the naos, classifying the building as a three-aisled domed basilica, notably without a narthex. The upper structure has completely collapsed, but the positioning of the vertical supports suggests that the nave was covered by semi cylindrical vaults, while a dome approximately 4.5 meters in diameter rose above the square eastern bay. The preserved wall fragments show rough masonry of irregularly hewn stone and occasional brick courses, indicating a non-uniform building system. The modest remains make it difficult to determine precise applied construction techniques or articulation and decorative patterns.

Chronological Framework. The architectural features alone do not allow for an exact dating of the monument. The surviving elements are not directly linked to a specific style or phase in Byzantine architecture. However, the presence of two distinct layers of fresco painting, discovered both on remaining wall surfaces and within reused building materials, provides a firmer chronological

⁵ П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Манастир Св. Богородица Милостива во селото Велјуса крај Струмица*, Скопје 1981, 32-248; S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L' arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 47-50, 60-62; E. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1570-1572, 1587-1591; E. Dimitrova, *The Church of the Holy Virgin at Veljusa*, Skorje 2016, 5-22.

⁶ Д. Коцо, П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Новооткриената црква на локалитетот Св. Четиресет*, Завод и Музеј Струмица. Зборник, Струмица 1989, 65; Б. Алексова, *Losa Sanctorum Macedoniae. Култ на мартирите во Македонија од IV до IX век*, 169.

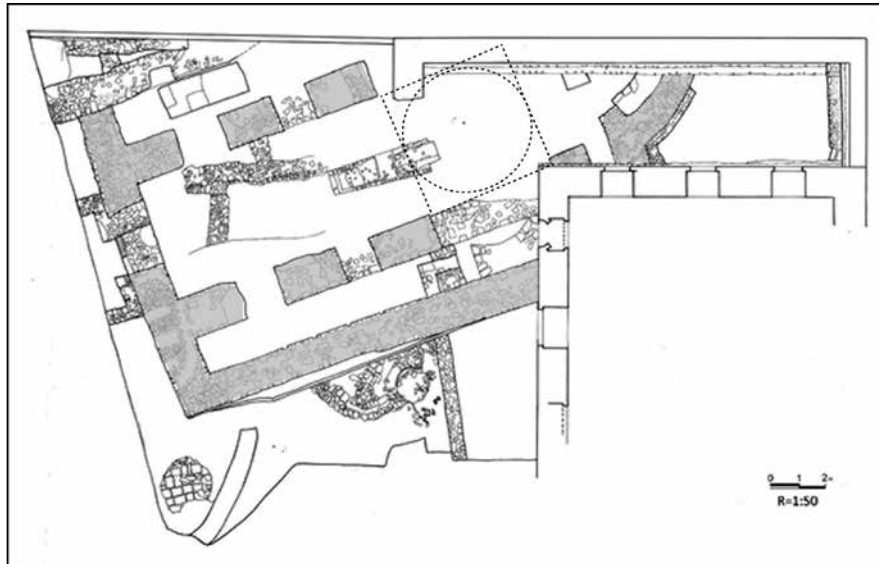


Fig. 2. The Medieval Church under the Orta Mosque, plan of the church (source: Institute of protection of Monuments and Museum – Strumica, with author's modifications)

Сл. 2 Средњовековна црква испод Орта џамије, план грађевине (извор – Завод за заштиту споменика културе и Музеј Струмица, са модификацијама аутора текста)

anchor. The first layer of the frescoes points out to the first half of the 11th century, a period that therefore likely marks the building's construction. The existence of two painting layers cannot be definitively interpreted as evidence of two separate architectural phases. Their presence may reflect later redecoration rather than structural modification, leaving this issue open to further investigation.

Typological Analysis: The Basilica with Dome. The church's basic plan follows the basilica model, which persisted throughout the Byzantine period across the empire's cultural sphere. This type remained particularly prevalent during the 11th century, as evidenced by monuments in Servia, Serres, and Veroia⁷. The appearance of Middle Byzantine basilicas in Macedonia is most often associated with the construction of St. Achilleios in Prespa and St. Sophia in Ohrid, dating from the late 10th and early 11th centuries⁸. To this same period belongs a compact group of small vaulted basilicas in Kastoria - St. Stephen, Sts. Anargyroi, and Taxiarchs - Metropolis⁹. The proportional ratio of length to

⁷ Ćurčić, S. *Architecture in the Balkans from Diocletian to Suleyman the Magnificent*. New Haven, 2010, 395-398.

⁸ V.Korac, *Sur les basiliques médiévales de Macedoine et de Serbie*, CIEB XII, T.III, 180-182; Moutsopoulos, *Anaskafe tes basilikes tou Agiou Achilleiou*, EEPS 5 (1971): 47-461; S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 86-89; E. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1564-1568.

⁹ Ćurčić, S. *Architecture in the Balkans*, 312-315; N. K. Moutsopoulos, *Ekklesies tes Kastorias. 9-11 aionas*, Thessaloniki 1992, *passim*.

width (1:0.65) places the Orta church within the compact mid-Byzantine basilica type. The arrangement of interior supports suggests semi cylindrical vaults over the aisles and a central dome above the eastern bay, identifying it as a domed basilica. However, the lack of substantial surviving material remains makes it impossible to determine the specific sub-type within this broad category—whether it was a usual domed basilica, a cross-vaulted type of a church, or a transitional type, domed basilica leaning toward the cross-in-square plan. (Fig. 3) Comparable examples are found in the Strumica region, particularly the Eastern Church of the Vodoča Monastic Complex, which exhibits similar transitions between basilica and cross-domed forms¹⁰. Another close analogy is St. Sophia in Ohrid, a monument combining basilica and domed elements, likewise dated between the late 10th and 11th centuries¹¹.

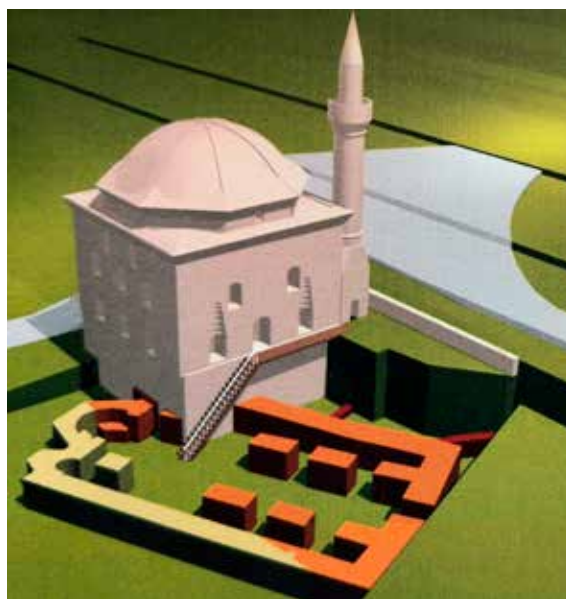


Fig. 3. axonometric of the plan, Catalogue authorized by Margarita Stamenova Atanasova, *The Spiritual Traditions of Tiberiopolis* (2003)

Сл. 3 Аксонометријски план, Каталог аутора Маргарите Стаменкове Атанасове, *Духовните традиции на Тивериопол* (2003)

Comparative Observations and Interpretation. When compared with other Byzantine monuments of similar typology, the Church under the Orta Mosque stands out as a regional variant rather than a direct imitation of some distant monument. Its composition combines a basilica ground plan with four pairs of piers or pilasters, creating an eastern bay surmounted by a massive dome of approximately 4.5 meters in diameter. This concept recalls Justinianic prototypes, yet the overall execution belongs to the mid-Byzantine manner - marked by shortened proportions, massive supports, and narrow opening spaces in-between. The closest analogies should be sought nearby, particularly within the Vodoča church complex. From the preserved remains of the exterior walls and the four massive interior piers, the spatial concept of the oldest Eastern Church in the Vodoča Monastery can be visualized—a spacious cubic volume crowned by a massive 7-meter dome. The placement of the piers at the corners of the naos anticipates the dominance of the domed bay in the central space, similar to the Medieval Church under the Orta Mosque.

¹⁰ П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Комплексот цркви во Водоча*, Скопје 1975, 20-63; Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 45-47.

¹¹ B. Schellewald, *Die Architektur der Sophienkirche in Ohrid*, Bonn 1986; Б. Чипан, *Св. Софија: катедрален храм на Охридската архиепископија*, Скопје 1995; В. Коран - М. Шупут, *Архитектура византијског света*, Београд 1988, 121-124; Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 27-34.



Fig. Exhibit A, Image of St. John the Baptist
Сл. Артефакт А, Лик Јована Претече



Fig. Exhibit B, Image of St. Nicholas
Сл. Артефакт Б, Лик светог Николе

Furthermore, the later church within the Vodoča complex - the reconstructed Eastern Church from the late 11th century - repeats this hybrid basilica-with-dome scheme, presenting a transitional model toward the classical cross-in-square type. The dominance of the dome is reduced, and the overall spatial proportions become more balanced. Thus, the concept realized in the older Eastern Church is partly reflected in the Medieval Church under the Orta Mosque, while in the reconstructed Eastern Church, it appears as a standard form of dome placement like in the cross-in-square plan. Thus, the Church under the Orta Mosque reflects a regional interpretation of the domed basilica, sharing conceptual and structural affinities with Vodoča monuments and embodying the architectural evolution of the period - from elongated basilica layouts to more centralized domed schemes.

Conclusion. The Medieval Church under the Orta Mosque exemplifies a transitional phase in the development of Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture in Macedonia. It merges the basilica spatial logic with a centralized domed emphasis, reflecting both continuity and innovation within the 11th-century architectural landscape. Its analogies with nearby monuments, particularly those of the Vodoča Monastery complex, underscore the region's active participation in the broader Byzantine architectural production. Despite the fragmentary state of preservation, the monument contributes significantly to our understanding of the local adaptation of Middle Byzantine building traditions and the dynamic exchange of architectural forms across the Balkan provinces of Byzantium.

The Fresco Painting of the Medieval Church

The fresco painting of the medieval church consists of fragments kept in the collection, as well as photo archive of the Museum in Strumica. Published without an ambitious intention to their iconographic and stylistic features in a catalogue of fresco fragments authorized by Margarita Stamenova Atanasova entitled *The Spiritual Traditions of Tiberiopolis* (2003), these mostly anonymous works of art still wait on their painterly and chronological determination. Therefore, in this paper we will expose some of the most interesting fragments (some of which have been put together in an appropriate iconographic unity by the art historians/conservators in the Museum of Strumica) with an aim to disclose their visual identity and particularly to determine their chronology more precisely. During the investigation of the fragments we have noticed the different approach to the construction of their visual constellation, therefore they will be represented in two separate clusters which concur with their supposed chronological references. The first cluster includes the following components:

Exhibit A - image of John the Baptist (25 x 24, 5 cm) consisting of 24 smaller fragments with well-preserved facial contours, almond shaped line of the right eye, two arched eye brows, most parts of the facial features and the golden halo (Fig. Exhibit A).

Exhibit B – image of St. Nicholas (54 x 41 cm) consisting of some thirty smaller fragments displaying adult features of a receding hair line, almond shaped eyes, arched eye brows, elongated vertical contours of the nose and short, thick white beard with roundly shaped silhouette. Besides the golden halo, one can clearly see the saintly garment with a part of the phelon and omophorion (Fig. Exhibit B).

Exhibit C – image of a feminine character (33 x 43 cm) consisting of thirty smaller fragments displaying only the thin eye brows and the upper portion of her eyes, which, as elements of the facial elaboration are damaged to a large extent. The forehead of the saint is covered with the upper part of the maphorion depicted with a cobalt blue colour. The golden halo is clearly visible, while the image is represented on a dark blue background (Fig. Exhibit C).

Exhibit D – image of a feminine individual (28, 5 x 37, 5 cm) consisting of twenty smaller fragments. Her eyes are almond shaped, the eye brows are neatly situated in the lower part of the forehead, there are regular vertical lines in the formation of the nose and the lips are incarnated with bright red colour. The saint wears a luxurious headdress decorated with shiny silver elements connected with ornamental component situated over the forehead. On her left ear there is an earring, yet, due to the damage caused to the fragment, its typology cannot be determined. Nevertheless, one can see that it is a silver earring with a red gemstone (Fig. Exhibit D).

Exhibit E – image of a feminine individual (21 x 27, 5 cm) consisting of some twenty smaller fragments displaying the middle and the lower part of the facial representation – correctly modeled nose with two vertical lines and lips incarnated in bright red colour. The chin is shaped in an oval form, while the neck is anatomically modeled and framed with a red edging of the garment coloured in dark olive green shade. Behind the image of the female saint, one can



Fig. Exhibit C, Image of a feminine character
Сл. Артефакт Ц, Представа женског лика



Fig. Exhibit D, Image of a feminine individual
Сл. Артефакт Д, Представа женског лика

see a veil covering her shoulder, while above her right ear there is a part of the headdress, which, due to the minimum visible portion, cannot be typologically determined. The image is framed with a golden halo (Fig. Exhibit E).

The second cluster of fresco fragments includes the following components:

Exhibit F – image of St. Peter the apostle (26 x 35, 5 cm) consisting of twelve smaller fragments and represented in semi-profile, with white hair and long white beard composed of thick locks. Around the image one can see the golden halo, while over his left shoulder there is a portion of the purple chimation. In the left part of the fragment one can see the left hand and a portion of the garment of an individual dressed in goldish coloured costume decorated with a vertical stripe. The position of St. Peter's image slightly leaning towards the unrecognizable character depicted to the left of him can be closely associated as a part of the scene depicting the scene of the Communion of the apostles with St. Peter as a leader of the south procession of apostles (Fig. Exhibit F).

Exhibit G – image of St. Andrew the apostle (21 x 24 cm) consisting of seven smaller fragments displaying almond shaped eyes, accentuated black incarnated irises, triangularly modeled eye brows, long white beard configured in locks and a portion of the golden halo. The garment which is thrown over the right shoulder of the saint is incarnated in light ochre colour. The upper portions of his image and head are not visible. The position of the saintly image represented in semi-profile and the fact that it has been discovered in the altar part of the edifice point to the possibility that he, too, was represented as an element of the scene of the Communion of the apostles as a member of the south apostolic procession (Fig. Exhibit G).

Exhibit H – image of a male individual (38 x 54 cm) consisting of fourteen smaller fragments displaying a face with a short hair and short, round shaped beard. The colour of the hair is dark auburn, but in the region of the beard, the pigment has completely fallen off. What is clearly visible is saint's left eye with an accentuated black incarnated iris and triangular shape of the eye brow. The image is framed with a golden halo. Over his right shoulder one can see a portion of a dark blue chimation. In relation to the visible facial features of the represented saintly individual and based on the fact that the fragments have been found in the altar space of the edifice – the usual place of the depiction of the composition showing the Communion of the apostles, there is a possibility that the saint may be identified as Jacob the apostle participating in the northern procession of apostolic figures (Fig. Exhibit H).

Exhibit I – partially preserved image of a male individual (dimensions unknown) consisting of four smaller fragments. Regardless of the damage caused to the picture, one can clearly see the forehead of the saint and his white hair framing it with wavy locks. The right eye of the masculine character has accentuated black iris above which there is a portion of the triangularly shaped eye brow. The left eye is not visible, except for the eye brow, while around the partially preserved contours of the head, one can see the golden halo which framed the represented image (Fig. Exhibit I).

Exhibit J – partially preserved torso of a male individual (dimensions unknown) consisting of fifteen smaller fragments displaying the upper part of a body and his left hand holding a scroll. The garment he wears is purple coloured with folds incarnated in grey chromatics and depicted in vertical positions. Due to the limited visual elements, one can just say that the fragments represent a standing masculine figure holding an unfolded scroll. In the upper left corner of



Fig. Exhibit E, Image of a feminine individual
Сл. Артефакт Е, Представа женског лика



Fig. Exhibit F, Image of St. Peter the Apostle
Сл. Артефакт Ф, Лик светог апостола Петра



Fig. Exhibit G, Image of St. Andrew the Apostle
Сл. Артефакт Г, Лик светог апостола Андрије



Fig. Exhibit H, Image of a male individual
Сл. Артефакт Х, Представа мушке особе

the picture a very tiny portion of the golden halo can be seen (Fig. Exhibit J).

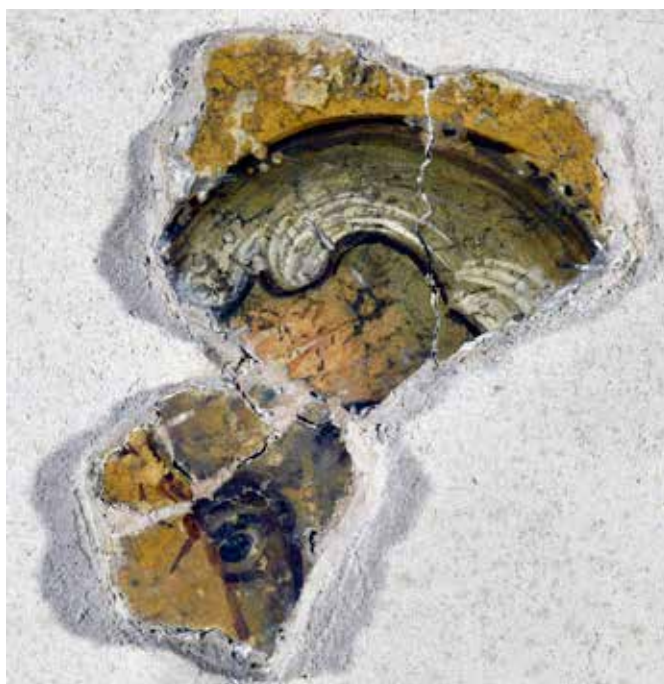
On the ground of the analysis of the mentioned fresco fragments which clearly emanate painterly exposition belonging to two different aesthetic matrixes, one can conclude the following: the fresco fragments from the first cluster (Exhibits A, B, C, D, E) manifest stylistic spectrum consisting of thin drawing, tonal modeling of the volume, round forms in the depiction of the facial elements and delicate palette of colours in which one can determine gradual transitions of the modular components - all of which refer to the chronological determination in the first half of the 11th century, in the time of the classic expression in the evolution of the so called style of Macedonian dynasty of the mid-Byzantine era. Analogue examples that can be painterly and aesthetically connected with the first cluster of fresco fragments exist in the territory of Macedonia in the already mentioned time interval. Namely, the image of St. Euplos, the deacon depicted in the eastern part of the Western church in the Vodoča complex (around 1025)¹² displays sty-

listic similarities with the exhibits from the first cluster in the manner of the distribution of the drawing, approach to the modeling of the facial features, chromatic distribution of the shades of the palette of colours, as well as the spectrum of painterly nuances applied in the creation of the saintly images. In

¹² П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Комплексот цркви во Водоча*, 27, Т. XI; Idem, *Два непознати фрагмента на фреска од Водочката црква*, Зборник. Музеј на Македонија, н.с. бр. 3 (Средновековна уметност), Скопје 2001, 48; Е. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1585, fig. on page 1584.

Fig. Exhibit I, Partially
preserved image of a male
individual

Сл. Артефакт И, Делимично
очувана представа мушке
особе



that regard, the similar stylistic parameters detected in both monuments can lead to determination of the main chronological spectrum of the frescoes executed in the underground temple which would concur with the second or third decade of the 11th century.

The fresco fragments of the second cluster (Exhibits F, G, H, I, J) manifest stylistic features which, according to the accentuated drawing and somewhat thicker contours in the depiction of the saintly images, coloristic modulation in configuration of the forms, as well as the complement character of the utilized shades from the palette of colours, refer to the closure of the 11th century when the classic characteristic of the style of Macedonian dynasty were distorted in a visual palette of more linear approach and expressive chromatic structure in the execution. This accentuated function of the line in the creation of the visual impression can be seen in the fresco decoration of some churches in Cyprus dated at the end of the 11th and beginning of the 12th century¹³, while in the territory of Macedonia the traces lead to the fresco arrangement of the renovated Eastern church in the Vodoča complex (end of the 11th century), particularly in the execution of the saintly images in its altar space where one can see the linear approach and the coloristic resonance of shades in the configuration of facial

¹³ A. H. S. Megaw, A. Stylianou, *Cyprus. Mosaics and Frescoes*, New York 1963, figs. 8-11; D. C. Winfield, E. J. W. Hawkins, *The Church of Our Lady at Asinou, Cyprus. A Report on the Seasons of 1965 and 1966*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* vol. 21, Washington 1967, 260-265. A. Stylianou and J. A. Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus: Treasures of Byzantine Art*, Nicosia 1997, 119-121.



Fig. Exhibit J, Partially preserved torso of a male individual

Сл. Артефакт Ј,
Делимично очувани
торзо мушке особе

characteristic¹⁴. Also, similar approach in the execution of saintly images can be seen in the church dedicated to the Virgin Eleoussa in the village of Veljusa (after 1080)¹⁵, particularly in the depiction of the Old Testament King David and the prophet Ezekiel in the drum of the dome and the image of Christ in the scene of the Harrowing of Hell¹⁶, which point to the end of the 11th century as a date of execution of the painting in the underground church.

On the ground of the conclusion drawn by the stylistic analysis of the fresco fragments and determination of their chronological amplitude, which, according to the painterly features points to the first half of the 11th century, as well as the late 11th century, one can assume that the fresco painting in the underground church was executed in two consecutive phases. The first phase of the fresco decoration was, most probably, created in the third decade of the 11th century, in the period when in the region of Strumica many of the damaged or demolished sacral edifices were renovated as shown by the example of the Western church in the Vodoča complex the fresco painting of which represents

¹⁴ S. Korunovski - E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L' arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 58; E. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1586.

¹⁵ E. Dimitrova, *Манастир Св. Богородица Милостива во селото Велјуса крај Струмица*, 216-220.

¹⁶ Eadem, *The Church of the Holy Virgin Eleoussa at Veljusa*, Skopje 2016, figs on pages 13, 14, 19.

stylistic and painterly equivalent to the fresco fragments in the underground church. The second phase of its fresco decoration points to a painterly product created in the late 11th century, time of significant artistic activities and representative painterly accomplishments in the area of Strumica, i. e. the erection and fresco painting of the renowned Eastern temple of the Vodoča church complex, as well as the mausoleum temple dedicated to the Virgin Eleoussa in the village of Veljusa – examples that are the closest stylistic analogies for the fresco fragments of the underground church. In that regard, one can conclude that the church was originally decorated with fresco painting in the opening decades of the 11th century, while the renovation of the fresco decoration followed in the late 11th century, when the second layer of frescoes was executed. Given that the components of the second painterly layer, at least most of them, most probably belong to the Eucharistic composition depicting the Communion of the apostles – mandatory element of the altar decoration, we assume that the creation of the new layer of frescoes was due to the damage of the eastern apsidal portions of the underground church which were restituted in the end of the 11th century.

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ИЗА И ИСПОД: СРЕДЊОВЕКОВНА ЦРКВА ИСПОД ОРТА
ЦАМИЈЕ У СТРУМИЦИ

Када је крајем XI века, бескомпромисно аналитични и луксузно акрибични Охридски архиепископ Теофилакт саставио Канон у част Петнаест струмичких мученика, Струмица је била једна од кључних тачака религиозне мапе креиране од стране византијске еклезијастичке институције и континуирано администриране директно из црквоног центра у Охриду. Тако је ризоматски карактер идеје о храбром мучеништву петнаестак хришћанских хероја из Струмице, која се, као потврда о постојању локалних култова раширила према северу и западу, потврдио верску моћ Струмице као значајног и утицајног средњовековног епископског центра. Резултат тога било је стварање репрезентативних сакралних споменика као што су: црква посвећена већ споменутиим Струмичким мартирима, црквени комплекс у Водочи, Богородичина црква у селу Вељуси и храм подигнут у част Четрдесет севастијских мученика у Банском (сви из периода X – XII века. У групу ових споменика сада се већ убраја и средњовековни храм који се налази испод Орта цамије у Струмици који неконвенционалним периметаром грађевине, као и импресивним одликама пронађених фреско фрагмената говори у прилог сакралног објекта конструисаног са амбициозним просторним дизајном и декорисаног квалитетним фрескама што се тиче њихових стилских карактеристика. Архитектонске карактеристике цркве испод Орта Цамије резултат су важне фазе развоја црквене архитектуре у Македонији.

Типолошки концепт ове грађевине обједињује просторну логику базилике са наглашеним централним куполним травејом, одржавајући истовремено и континуитет и иновацију у архитектонском пејзажу XI века на ширем подручју Византије. Упркос фрагментарном стању очуваности, овај споменик значајно доприноси нашем разумевању локалних адаптација средњовизантских градитељских традиција и указује на динамичне размене архитектонских форми широм балканских провинција Византије.

У односу на фрескоживопис, пажљивим разматрањем очуваних фрагмената који су нам били доступни, констатовали смо постојање две различите групе фресака, углавном са представама мушких или женских светитељских ликова. У првој групи спадају фрагменти чије су карактеристике: танак и прецизан цртеж, моделација облика изведена је тоналном дистрибуцијом волумена, фацијална обележја светитељских ликова карактеризирају се очима изведеним бадемастим формама са полукружно изведеним веђама, усне су мале и акцентирани црвеним инкарнатом, док је тен ликова акцентиран светло црвеним нијансама који дају живе акценте топлом океру. Колористичка палета садржи топле тонове (засићени окер, тамно смеђа, кармин црвена са скерлетним акцентима). Местимично виде се и хладније боје (маслинасто зелена, кобалт плава, дубоки пурпур и светло сива). У другој групи ставили смо фрагменте чији је цртеж наглашен и са акцентираном контуром, светитељски ликови су изведени линеаристички, али без графицизма, моделација облика доловљена је комплементарним бојама дистрибуираним линеарно. Фацијални облици су делимично сегментирани, контура ликова је динамична и разиграна, очи су бадемасте, веђе су у облику трокута. Колористичка палета је засићена, топли тонови доминирају (окер, смеђа, маслинасто сива, светло црвена, оптички акценти су рађени белом бојом).

У односу на датовање, на бази изведеног цртежа, тоналне модулације волумена, облих форми у изведби фацијалних елемената и деликатне колористичке палете у којој се јављају поступни прелази модуларних компонената, прва група фрагмената упућује на прву половину XI века, у време класичног израза у развоју стила Македонске династије (компаративни примери: светитељски ликови у Западној цркви Водчког црквеног комплекса, око 1025). Са друге стране, на бази наглашеног цртежа, акцентираних контура у приказивању светитељских ликова, колористичке модулације у обликовању ликовних елемената и комплементарности употребљених тонова колористичке палете, друга група фрагмената упућује на крај XI столећа, када се класичне карактеристике стила Македонске династије дисторзирају у визуелној палети линеарног приступа и експресивне хроматске структуре у изведби (компаративни примери: фреске у обновљеној Источној цркви Водчког комплекса и сликарство Богородичине цркве у Вељуси – крај XI столећа). У том смислу, може се основано предпоставити да је црква добила свој оригинални фреско живопис у првим деценијама XI века, док је пресликавање фресака уследило крајем истог столећа, бар што се тиче апсидалног дела цркве пошто највећи број фрагмената друге групе највероватније припада евхаристичној композицији Причешћа апостола.