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THE FIGURATIVE WALL PAINTINGS IN THESSALONIKI FROM THE END OF THE 4TH TO THE 7TH CENTURY AD

(Taf. CXCVIII–CIC, Abb. 1–4)

Abstract

Im Mittelpunkt dieser Studie stehen die figürlichen Malereien in Thessaloniki vom Ende des 4. Jhs. bis zum 7. Jh. n. Chr. Der Großteil dieser Malereien wurde erstmals ausführlich monographisch behandelt. Im Rahmen der Untersuchung konnten neue Erkenntnisse zur – teilweise exzeptionellen – Ikonographie der Malereien gewonnen werden. Darüber hinaus war es möglich, die Malereien durch Malerei- und teilweise auch durch Mosaik-Denkmäler der gleichen Kunstlandschaft nicht nur zeitlich näher zu bestimmen, sondern auch unter Heranziehung überregionaler Vergleichsdenkmäler in die allgemeine Stilentwicklung der jeweiligen Entstehungszeit einzuordnen. Die vorliegenden Ergebnisse werfen somit nicht nur ein neues Licht auf die lokale Kunst dieser bedeutenden Metropole, sondern geben auch in gewissem Maße Aufschluss über verlorene Bildthemen von Malereidenkmälern anderer Regionen und wohl auch von denen der Hauptstadt Konstantinopel.

This paper proposes a new approach to late antique wall paintings from Thessaloniki¹. The argument is based on the decoration of two double tombs, the one from Dimosthenous-Street 7 and the so-called Susanna-tomb, and on the monumental paintings from the Agora and from the south wall of the church of Saint Demetrius. The analysis of these monuments leads to a better understanding of the quite exceptional iconography of the paintings. Furthermore, the monuments can be dated more precisely. Accordingly, a more detailed picture emerges of the local art of this important metropolis, which at the same time gives us an idea of the thematic range of the lost paintings produced in the city of Constantinople and other regions.

In 1993 a double barrel-vaulted tomb was discovered at Dimosthenous Street 7. The tomb was completely decorated with paintings, which are now exhibited in the Byzantine museum of Thessaloniki (Abb. 1)². Tomb 1 shows ten panels on all four walls with figurative representations of biblical stories. The rest of the tomb is painted with motifs typical of funerary art such as birds, peacocks and the christogram. The walls of tomb 2 mainly present paintings of imitated marble, while the ceiling shows a geometric pattern with vegetal motifs. The biblical scenes in tomb 1 refer to both the Old and the New Testament and for some of them a new interpretation seems plausible. As far as the images from the New Testament are concerned we have an undetermined scene (a Miracle of Healing or a blessing scene) together with a representation of the Raising of Lazarus on the north wall and the figure of the Good Shepherd on the west wall. The south wall probably shows the Miracle of the Paralytic and possibly the Multiplication of Loaves and Fish or rather the Miracle at Cana. The other scenes are related to stories of the Old Testament. Job with his wife as well as Moses striking water from the rock is depicted on the north wall. Daniel in the lions' den and a combination of two Moses scenes (Moses receiving the Tablets of Law and removing his sandals) can be seen on the south wall. Another painting on the east wall shows Adam and Eve.

¹ This article presents a very short summary of some results of my Ph.D. thesis (completed in 2010), which was supervised by Prof. Dr. D. KOROL (Münster) and Privatdozentin Dr. U. KOENEN (Zürich). For further information to all these monuments, see Bonnekoh 2011 and Bonnekoh 2013. I would like to thank S. FAUST for his critical examination of the English text.

² Markē 2006, 145–154. 158 f. 223 cat.-no. 52 f. fig. 8. 83–92. 99–100. 125–127 pl. 7–11. 19–20. 62. 63a. 71b.

Three scenes of the Old Testament will be examined more thoroughly here because of their exceptional iconography. The figures of a sitting man and a standing woman shown in one of the panels of the north wall should certainly not be interpreted – as the excavator had proposed – as a representation of the deceased and his wife, but rather as an image of the suffering Job and his wife Sitis. The subject seems to have been introduced in early Christian art shortly before the middle of the 4th century. But the image in Thessaloniki has some peculiar features: Among other things, Job wears a beard and gesticulates as if to speak, a motif that later appears in the Byzantine book illumination. The same iconographic relationship seems to apply to the shape of the dunk heap rendered as a big yellowish structure. The scene of the tomb painting should not be understood as a mere ‘provincial’ reproduction of the subject, as its unique iconography might suggest. It must rather be interpreted as a rare testimonial of an image inventory, which is lost today, but once was presumably much richer.

The only parallel of the combined scene showing Moses removing his sandals and receiving the law is preserved in the catacomb of the Via Latina (middle of the 4th century) in Rome. The reason for the rarity of this double motif leads to the assumption that it was specially commissioned by the owners of the tombs. On both monuments Moses is depicted removing his sandals and looking up to God, whose figure is destroyed in the Via Latina painting, however. In Thessaloniki the image of Moses removing his sandals is consistent with the general iconography. In contrast, the elements related to the scene of Moses receiving the Tablets of Law display some unusual features: On the one hand, *two* panels are passed to Moses; on the other hand, God presents the Tablets of Law to Moses with *both* hands. As far as I know, to both details there is no close parallel in late antique/early Byzantine art. The long garment that hangs from the hands of God might be a local peculiarity, since a similar garment is attached to the hand of God in the scene of the Sacrifice of Abraham in the tomb from the Theological Faculty of Thessaloniki³. Further conspicuous features are the deep red hands of God and the same body color of Moses. These features presumably allude to Exodus 19:18 or 34:28.

The figures of Adam and Eve refer to the Fall of Man, with Eve accusing the serpent (Genesis 3:13). Remarkably, Adam covers his genitals with an apron made of two leaves, as it is known from images of the 3rd century rather than the 4th century. Eve conceals her pubic only with her left hand. Moreover, she is dressed in a transparent green skirt. In another tomb fresco in Thessaloniki Eve also wears a skirt of leaves, but it is not transparent⁴. There is no evidence for such a garment, which only covers the lower part of the body, in late antique Christian art outside the city of Thessaloniki.

The dating of the tomb is based on the analysis of the iconography and some stylistic considerations. In comparison with other tomb paintings in Thessaloniki, on the Balkans and in Rome it seems reasonable to assume that it was decorated in the second half or rather in the last three decades of the 4th century.

The second monument discussed in this paper is the double barrel-vaulted tomb of Susanna, which was discovered in 1968⁵. Today, the paintings are exhibited in the Byzantine museum of the city as well. The lunette of the west wall shows Susanna flanked by the two elders (Abb. 2). Susanna is depicted in the *Orans*-type. She is dressed – as usual – in a rich drapery (here a *dalmatica* with fringes). Contrary to other images she neither wears a veil nor has she drawn a *palla* over the head. The two elders are beardless and stand in front of trees, which indicate that they have revealed themselves already. As the composition of the scene is unparalleled in the hitherto known western monuments, it adds a new version to the iconography of the subject. In the East it seems to be exceptional, at any rate. Furthermore, the upper zone of the east wall and the ceiling of the tomb are decorated with a landscape with trees, while the lower zone as well as the walls of the second tomb show high quality marble incrustations.

The common dating to the end of 4th or perhaps to the beginning of the 5th century is confirmed by the comparison with local paintings as well as selected paintings on the Balkans, in the catacombs of Rome and in Constantinople.

³ Markē 2006, 134 f. fig. 70 pl. 4a. The tomb is dated to the middle of the 4th century.

⁴ Markē 2006, 145 fig. 80. The representation was found in the tomb of Apolloniados Street 18 (dated to the middle of the 4th century).

⁵ Markē 2006, 185–187. 195. 224 cat.-no. 60–61 fig. 20. 22. 141–142 pl. 24a. 67a.

The biblical themes represented in the two burial complexes discussed above indicate artistic influences from the Western and/or Eastern Roman Empire. Nevertheless, the scenes also constitute a ‘provincial’ type in its own right, if we take into account the images of tomb 1 from the Dimosthenous-Street, for example, the iconography of which is unique in the late antique/early Byzantine period. In addition, the high quality of all the tomb paintings should be emphasized. Their extraordinary art-historical importance becomes even more conspicuous in comparison with other famous monuments such as the Via Latina catacomb in Rome. We should thus be aware, that not only the major centers, but also other regions and places of the late Roman Empire have produced important independent visual creations in the 4th century.

The only remains of figurative paintings from the end of late antiquity are the monumental frescoes from the Agora and from the church of Saint Demetrius in the city centre of Thessaloniki. The study of these monuments has yielded numerous new insights. One of these paintings was discovered in the 1960ies on the east wall of a room situated in the southeast area of the Agora complex that belonged to the *cryptoporticus*⁶. In my doctoral thesis I attempt the first detailed discussion of the iconography, proposing new interpretations of the panels: The upper register is occupied by Christ sitting on a throne. He is dressed in purple robes and probably holds a Codex in his left hand, while he might have performed a gesture of speech with his right hand. Apparently he is flanked by two apostles wearing tunic and *pallium*. Only the right figure, which holds the cross decorated with precious stones in its hand, can be identified almost certainly: It must be Peter. The second apostle must remain unnamed, because it is badly damaged. In any case, the two apostles fulfil the function of throne guardians.

The lower register shows two men dressed in the civic costume flanking a cross. The scene is set into an architectural structure with suspended curtains (Abb. 3).

For iconographic reasons the two figures can certainly not be identified with the saints Kosmas and Damian, the physicians, as earlier scholars have claimed. The civic costume rather points to some other saints or even state dignitaries, who could possibly be identical with the donators. For lack of attributes and inscriptions the persons must remain unnamed, however. Although there are no close parallels, symmetrically composed scenes showing the enthroned Christ accompanied by two apostles or angels or other persons seem to come up in the 4th century. In other cases these groups of persons participate in the adoration of the cross. The image in Thessaloniki was thus constructed by means of certain codes or formulae which were easily recognized and could be adjusted to specific needs. The objects in question, where these codes occur, are small-scale works of art, but they might reflect monumental representations from the Eastern Roman Empire. The importance of the painting found in the Agora area can therefore be compared to the paintings of the monasteries of Bawit and Saqqara, which give us an idea of the lost eastern monumental church painting. Unfortunately, the original function of the room in Thessaloniki cannot be determined with certainty. It has been interpreted as *agiasma*.

In earlier scholarship the Agora painting has generally been dated to the 6th or 7th century. A detailed stylistic analysis has shown, however, that it should rather be compared to paintings and mosaics from the last third of the 5th century and from the 6th century. But it is impossible to be more precise, as the chronology of the relevant monuments is still unsure. Nevertheless, a dating to the 6th century is supported by the ‘Bildprogramm’ in its entirety and by considerations regarding architectural transformations in the surroundings of the *cryptoporticus*.

The study of the paintings preserved on the south wall of the church of Saint Demetrius (erected in the first half of the 6th century) has turned out to be particularly fruitful. Detailed analysis of the iconographic and iconological details of the *adventus* scene has especially shown that it is not possible to identify the central horseman with an emperor, as many scholars have assumed (Abb. 4)⁷. The man wears the civic costume consisting of a purple *chlamys* with golden *tablion*, a white tunic with pearls attached to it, and purple trousers as well as shoes, which themselves are decorated with gold and pearls. An imperial figure would be characterized by further attributes such as precious stone jewelry. Besides, the horseman in Thessaloniki is characterized by a diadem in the shape of a simple band, for which there is no evidence in imperial images

⁶ Cf. Xyngopoulos 1979.

⁷ See most recently with secondary literature Belenēs 2004; Mentzos 2004.

after the Constantine period, unless it is bound around a helmet. Our band is therefore considerably different from the imperial diadems which are decorated with pearls and precious stones. Eventually, the figure in question can not represent an emperor because of the blue halo of the horseman clearly differing from the typical gold-coloured imperial halo.

On account of his costume and *insignia* the person represented here must have played a prominent role in the late antique/early Byzantine hierarchy of the empire, at any rate. In comparison with written sources and other images from late antiquity and the early to middle Byzantine period, it seems plausible to identify the figure with a prefect. However, the iconography of our horseman can also be associated with some biblical rulers who occasionally are represented in the guise of high officials or foreign kings. The parallels are particularly conspicuous in the case of the Pharaoh on fol. 8^r in the Syrian Bible in Paris (from the 6th/7th century).

In conclusion, the scene probably depicts a prefect or a foreign king in the company of soldiers, dignitaries and *praecursores* performing an *adventus* in a burning city. According to the fragmentary inscription a second extant painting shows the church of Saint Demetrius of Thessaloniki. Its gallery is occupied by praying women and children, who are threatened by armed intruders. Unfortunately, our historical sources don't give us any information on an *adventus* of a king or prefect in Thessaloniki. The reports of Saint Demetrius' miracles at least, refer both to the appearance of an eparch in the city (10th report of the 1st miracle collection) and to the *adventus* of a foreign king, that is the 'Slavic leader' Chatzon (1st report of the 2nd miracle collection)⁸. Although neither story can be assigned to our scene with absolute certainty⁹, there seems to be a greater affinity to the episode of the prefect. His *adventus* took place in 608/609 at a time of civil war¹⁰, which presumably also threatened the city of Thessaloniki. Only the intervention of Demetrius prevented the town from getting involved. Our painting might allude to this event by the representation of a flying angel. A miracle with a prefect on the south wall of the church is conceivable, because after the 1st report of the 1st miracle collection a Miracle of the Healing of the prefect Marianos is depicted on the outside wall of the church¹¹.

A third painting from the south wall of the church shows the saint in the *Orans*-type accompanied by two flying angels. The three panels seem to be part of a once larger cycle. As the *adventus* scene and the image of the church are obviously executed with greater workmanship than the scene showing Demetrius as *orans* and the entire upper zone (showing birds, fruit baskets and crosses), we have to assume that different painters or even (foreign?) workshops were involved. For iconographic and stylistic reasons the paintings should be dated to the period of the so-called 'Hellenisms' (between 527 and 641).

Even if the interpretation of the individual scenes partly remains obscure, they seem to trace back to the reports from the miracle collection of Demetrius. As the two passages mentioned above can be dated to the years 608/609 and 614¹², they could very well be the subjects of our wall paintings. These were probably completed during the renovations of the damages caused by an earthquake and the ensuing fire around 620/30 AD. If we take into account the epigraphic evidence¹³, as well, a date between 620 and 650 is plausible. Most likely, we are dealing with the earliest preserved example of a cyclic monumental representation of a saint in the context of a church.

⁸ Lemerle 1979, 109–116 § 81–93; 174. 179 § 194.

⁹ We have to take into account that written sources might change in the course of time.

¹⁰ Lemerle 1981, 41. 43.

¹¹ Lemerle 1979, 67 § 24.

¹² Lemerle 1981, 41. 43. 92. 99–101.

¹³ Djuric – Tsitouridou 1986, 43 f. Cat. no. 41.

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Abbildungen

- Fig. 1: General view of tomb 1 at Dimosthenous Street 7 (after Markē 2006, pl. 7a).
- Fig. 2: Susanna-Tomb, west wall (after Θεσσαλονίκη. Ιστορία και Τέχνη [Athens 1986] fig. 18).
- Fig. 3: Greek Ministry of Culture, Byzantine Museum of Culture, Thessaloniki. Agora-painting, lower zone (Photo: P. BONNEKOH).
- Fig. 4: Church of Saint Demetrius, *adventus*-scene (after I. X. Τατσιᾶς, Ὁ ἅγιος Δημήτριος, Πολιούχος Θεσσαλονίκης, Thessaloniki, 2004, fig. on p. 36).

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