

Mary as Intercessor in the Decoration of the Chapel in Durrës, Albania

The initial intention of this chapter was to investigate the intercessory function of Mary, based on material evidence, especially on monumental representations of the Balkan Peninsula excluding Constantinople. Due to the scarcity of preserved material and the profound treatment in the scientific literature of both remaining public monuments from the early Byzantine period with representations of Mary, the Eufrasius basilica at Poreč and the Demetrios basilica at Thessaloniki,¹ I decided to investigate the issue in a case-study on the decoration of the funeral chapel in the Albanian city of Durrës. Although this chapel is the best-known monument on the territory of modern day Albania and has attracted the attention of numerous international scholars,² the significance and meaning of its decoration as an entire image program have never been studied. Unlike previous investigations which were concerned with dating the mosaics, the identification of the figures and the determination of the sphere of influence on the different elements, the aim of my research is to analyse the whole program in which the Virgin takes a pride of place. The program visualizes, in my opinion, the worldview of the people who lived in this important centre on the Balkan Peninsula where cultures melted together then just as they do today.

Durrës, known to its Greek founders as Epidamnus and to the Romans as Dyrrachium, lies on the central Albanian coast, opposite the Italian ports of Bari and Brindisi. Its location at the western end of the Via Egnatia which linked Rome to Constantinople guaranteed the flourishing of the city during Roman and Byzantine times. An impressive remnant of the city's vibrant Roman past is its amphitheatre which has been considered "one of the

¹ On the mosaics of Eufrasius basilica see most recently with previous literature: A. Terry/ H. Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor: The Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč*, 2 vols, (University Park, PA, 2007); on the decoration of Demetrios basilica: R. Cormack, 'The Mosaic Decoration of S. Demetrios, Thessaloniki: A Re-examination in the Light of the Drawings of W.S. George', *Annual of the British School of Archaeology at Athens* 64 (1969), 17–52 (repr. in: R. Cormack, *The Byzantine Eye: Studies in Art and Patronage* [London, 1989], I); idem, The Church of Saint Demetrios: The Watercolours and Drawings of W.S. George, *Catalogue of an Exhibition organized by the British Council*, (Thessaloniki, 1985), 45–72, 121–122 (repr. in: Cormack, *The Byzantine Eye*, II); idem, *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and Its Icons* (London, 1985), 50–94; L. Brubaker, 'Elites and Patronage in Early Byzantium: The Evidence from Hagios Demetrios at Thessalonike', in: J. F. Haldon/ L. Conrad (eds.), *Elites Old and New in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East. Papers of the VIth workshop in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Princeton, 2004), 63–90.

² V. Toçi, 'Amfiteatri i Dyrrahit', *Monumentet* 2 (1971), 37–42; N. Thierry, 'Une mosaïque à Dyrrachium', *Cahiers archéologiques* 18 (1968), 227–229; idem, 'À propos de la mosaïque murale de Durrës', *Archéologie* 83 (1975), 60–62; H. Nallbani, 'Mozaiku i kishës së amfiteatrit në Durrës', *Monumentet* 7/8 (1974), 111–118; idem, 'Dëshmi të hershme të pikturave murale në kapelën bizantine të amfiteatrit antik të Durrësit', *Krishterimi ndër Shqiptarë – Simpozium Ndërkombëtar – Tiranë*, 16–19 Nëntor 1999 (URL : http://www.kulturserver-hamburg.de/home/shkodra/simpoziumi/simpoziumi_sek6_art11.html [12.10.2011]); A. Ducellier, 'Dernières découvertes sur des sites albanais du Moyen Âge', *Archeologia* 78 (1975), 35–45; J. Castrillo, 'L'énigme de la mosaïque de Durrës', *Archéologie* 79 (1975), 82–83; I. Nikolajević, 'Images votives de Salone et de Dyrrachium', *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 19 (1980), 59–74; J. Reynis-Jandot, 'Mozaiku mural në kapelën e amfiteatrit të Dyrrahut', *Iliria* 1 (1983), 225–232; Cormack, *Writing in Gold*, 84–85; M. Andaloro, 'I mosaici parietali di Durazzo o dell'origine Costantinopolitana del tema iconografico di Maria Regina', in: O. Feld/U. Peschlow (eds.), *Studien zur spätantiken und byzantinischen Kunst: Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann gewidmet* (Bonn, 1986), 103–112; G. Koch, *Albanien: Kunst und Kultur im Land der Skipetaren. DuMont Kunst-Reiseführer* (Cologne, 1989), 115–117; H. Buschhausen / H. Buschhausen, 'Durazzo und die Anfänge des Christentums in Albanien', *Steine Sprechen. Zeitschrift der österreichischen Gesellschaft für Denkmal- und Ortsbildpflege*, 120, (Juli 2001), 2–19; V. Pace, 'Mosaici e pittura in Albania (VI–XIV secolo). Stato degli studi e prospettive di ricerca', in: M. Buora/ S. Santoro (eds.), *Progetto Durrës. L'indagine sui beni culturali albanesi dell'Antichità e del Medioevo: Tradizioni di studio a confronto* (Triest, 2003), 93–128; L. Miraj, 'The Chapel in the Amphitheater of Dyrrachium and its Mosaics', in: M. Buora/ S. Santoro (eds.), *Progetto Durrës. L'indagine sui beni culturali albanesi dell'Antichità e del Medioevo: Tradizioni di studio a confronto* (Triest, 2003), 245–290; K. Bowes, 'The Durrës Amphitheatre: Archaeology and Memory', in L. Bejko/ R. Hodges (eds.), *New Directions in Albanian Archaeology. Studies Presented to Muzafer Korkuti* (Tirana 2006), 242–256; K. Bowes/ J. Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durrës Amphitheatre: Decoration and Chronology', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité*, 121.2 (2009), 571–597.

larger and better preserved amphitheatres of the Roman world”³. However, the amphitheatre of Durrës gained fame not because of the value of its Roman substance but thanks to the mosaic decoration of the small Christian chapel which was inserted into the Roman structure after its use as a space of spectacle had come to an end.

The chapel stands built into the amphitheatre’s west side aligned with its minor, east-west axis (figs. 1–3). It is an apsed hall narrowing to the east in accordance with the shape of the previous Roman structure and includes the inner-most main gallery and two opposite alcove spaces. For the construction of the chapel the vaults and the eastern wall of the eastern alcove were demolished as well as one of the amphitheatre’s main viewing boxes located above, whereas the western alcove was left intact creating above a kind of gallery in the west end of the chapel. The whole structure was covered by a timber roof. Two large, arched openings in the side walls connect the chapel with the adjacent spaces thus emphasizing the close association between them (fig. 2). To the north there is a small circular basin, supposedly a baptismal font, whereas the spaces to the south served for funerary purposes: in the alcove next to the chapel a masonry tomb has been found; the next alcove to the south, which was closed by a wall decorated with cross, has been identified as an ossuary.⁴ Additionally, several graves were excavated in the arena and within the amphitheatre’s galleries, particularly around the chapel.⁵ The decidedly funereal character of the place coincides with the recently proposed function of the western alcove of the chapel as a monumental burial chamber. As there are no reports of graves excavated in the alcove, this hypothesis was based on a photograph taken prior to the removal of the floor which shows a stone wall reaching to the lower border of the mosaics and running around the alcove. This wall probably belonged to a large masonry tomb as it was too narrow to have served as a bench.⁶ The arrangement of the space also points to the funereal character of the alcove. As the remaining springers reveal, the alcove was separated from the chapel by a thick arch and thus formed an independent space (figs. 3, 4).

A closer examination of the western alcove and its relation to the remaining structure raises the question of whether the initial use of this alcove as a funerary chamber coincides with the construction of the chapel. This question was posed by Reshat Gega but has been overlooked by other researchers who, despite having different opinions about the dating, all agree that the whole structure belongs to a single construction phase. On the contrary, Gega’s observations led him to the conclusion that the funeral chamber predated the construction of the chapel: in its initial phase the interior, including the arch, was entirely painted; the mosaics were executed in a later period. The apse and the side walls of the chapel were built in a second construction phase. During this later phase the upper part of the arch separating the western alcove from the hall was destroyed; the interior of the hall was painted over while the western alcove preserved its previous decoration.⁷ I do not want to enter here into the discussion of this hypothesis, which to me seems very plausible, but rather to take note of the fact that, at the time when the mosaics were executed, the western alcove formed an independent space serving as a funeral chamber.

The mosaic panels on the west and south walls of the western alcove do not belong to its initial decoration (fig. 6). They have replaced earlier frescoes which covered the entire chamber as faded traces visible on the ceiling and on the north wall as well as below the mosaics suggest.⁸

³ Bowes/ Mitchell, ‘The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater’, 571; on the amphitheatre pp. 571–576; see further: Toçi, ‘Amfiteatri i Dyrrahit’; L. Miraj, ‘Amfiteatri i Durrësit’, *Iliria*, Nr. 2 (1986), 151–169; Bowes, ‘The Durrës Amphitheatre’.

⁴ Bowes, ‘The Durrës Amphitheatre’, 254–255; Bowes/ Mitchell, ‘The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater’, 578–579, 594–597.

⁵ Miraj, ‘The Chapel in the Amphitheater of Dyrrachium’, 252–255; Bowes, ‘The Durrës Amphitheatre’, 247–248; Bowes/ Mitchell, ‘The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater’, 575–576.

⁶ Bowes, ‘The Durrës Amphitheater’, 252; Bowes/ Mitchell, ‘The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater’, 588, fig. 15.

⁷ R. Gega, ‘La chapelle de l’amphithéâtre de Durres’, in: R. Farioli Campanati (ed.), 1° colloquio dell’Associazione Italiana per lo Studio e la Conservazione del Mosaico (AISCOM): Seminario internazionale di studi su: “L’Albania dal tardoantico al medioevo, aspetti e problemi di archeologia e storia dell’arte”, Ravenna, 29 aprile – 5 maggio 1993. Corso di Cultura sull’Arte Ravennate e Bizantina, 40 (Ravenna, 1993), 527–536.

⁸ The existence of frescoes was noted by Nikolajević, ‘Images votives de Salone et de Dyrrachium’, cit. n. 41; Dh. Dhamo, ‘Konsiderata mbi zhvillimin e mozaikut paleokristian në Shqipëri’, *Iliria* 16, 1 (1986), 311–315, Pl. III; Gega, ‘La chapelle de l’amphithéâtre de Durres’, 531, 534–535; H. Nallbani, ‘Dëshmi të hershme të pikturave murale në kapelën bizantine të amfiteatrit antik të Durrësit’; Buschhausen / Buschhausen, ‘Durazzo und die Anfänge des Christentums in Albanien’, 7; Pace, ‘Mosaici e pittura in Albania’ 96–97; Bowes, ‘The Durrës Amphitheatre’, 249, 251; for a more detailed description and analysis: Bowes/ Mitchell, ‘The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater’, 580–584, figs. 7, 8.

The ceiling paintings show a large medallion surrounding a bust of the bearded Christ with nimbus holding a closed book in his left hand and making a two fingered-speech gesture as a sign of blessing with his right (figs. 5, 11). The bust looks down to the west. Bowes and Mitchell were able to discern further that the beard of Christ was sharp and pointed and that he was wearing a yellow chlamys and a blue tunic; the medallion was filled with blue and contoured in red.⁹

Outside the medallion only a pair of animal horns is still discernible in the lower south-western corner, according to Bowes and Mitchell against a blue background.¹⁰ Earlier reports inform us that the head of a lion was also recognizable,¹¹ supposedly in the north-western corner. The preserved remnants of the paintings on the ceiling allows one to conclude that here was represented a heavenly scene emphasizing the glory of Christ flanked by the four apocalyptic living creatures which are usually understood as symbols of the evangelists.

Although the subject of the representations on the ceiling was known largely from earlier reports, only the careful investigation of the wall paintings by Bowes and Mitchell and their team clarified their content to some extent.¹² Thus, they could detect a total of three standing saints accompanied by *tituli* in black letters. On the western end of the north wall a beardless nimbate military saint wearing a girded knee-length tunic and chlamys and holding a spear and shield was represented.¹³ At the northern end of the west wall a torso and hand from a frontal figure clothed in a pallium remained. The saint probably stood to the side of a large axial composition that occupied the centre of the west wall. Beneath the Stephanos mosaic panel on the south wall Bowes and Mitchell discerned traces of a painted inscription including the letters CT, which led them to the conclusion that the mosaic replaced a painted image of the same saint.¹⁴

As has been suggested, the three mosaic panels adorning the south and west walls of the alcove were laid at roughly the same time but in successive stages, beginning with the western panel, followed by the large one on the south wall and concluding with the Stephanos panel on the same wall (fig. 6). Their lower borders do not reach the initial floor of the chamber¹⁵ – a peculiarity which can be explained by the existence of a masonry tomb at the site.

Despite the poor state of preservation the main characteristics of the western panel can clearly be discerned (fig. 7). The axial-symmetrical composition comprises a large-scale central figure flanked by two angels and two female saints of about the same size, as well as by two diminutive donor figures. Although the upper part of the central figure is not preserved, it has been identified as the standing Virgin Mary by the remaining long brownish-purple robe and the (dark) blue maphorion with white borders falling down symmetrically on either side in zigzag folds.¹⁶ At the left side of her head the upper parts of letters which probably indicated the name MAPIA can be seen.

The winged angels on both sides of the Virgin are represented in the typical attire of messengers of God as seen in the better preserved figure to the left of the Virgin. The angel wears a white *chiton* and white *himation*, as well as sandals on his feet and carries a red staff in his left hand. Both outer framing figures are greatly damaged, but their identification can be confirmed thanks to the inscriptions at the left side of their heads. The figure at the north edge is designated as COΦΙΑ (Sophia) whereas her counterpart in the south is called E[IPH]NH (Eirene). It

⁹ Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 580, fig. 7.

¹⁰ Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 580.

¹¹ Nallbani, 'Dëshmi të hershme të pikturave murale në kapelën bizantine të amfiteatrit antik të Durrësit'; Buschhausen / Buschhausen, 'Durazzo und die Anfänge des Christentums in Albanien', 7.

¹² Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 580–582, like those on the ceiling, the wall paintings were inspected with the help of a hand lens, additionally digital photographs of the extant paintings were manipulated through heightened contrast.

¹³ Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 581, fig. 8.

¹⁴ Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 581–582.

¹⁵ Which was found some 45–50 cm beneath the present floor, Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 579.

¹⁶ Although some scholars have identified the central figure as Christ (cf. J. Reynis-Jandot, 'Mozaiku mural në kapelën e amfiteatrit të Dyrrahut', 226; Andalaro, 'I mosaici parientali di Durazzo' 112), the majority has agreed about the female sex of the figure. With few exceptions (cf. A. Ducellier, 'Dernières découvertes sur des sites albanais du Moyen Âge', proposes one of the wives of emperor Leon; Castrillo, 'L'énigme de la mosaïque de Durrës': St Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great) there is also a general consensus that the image represents Mary (cf. Nikolajević, 'Images votives de Salone et de Dyrrachium', 63; Buschhausen / Buschhausen, 'Durazzo und die Anfänge des Christentums in Albanien', 15; Pace, 'Mosaici e pittura in Albania' 98; Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 585).

seems that they are clad in imperial garments as the remaining part of Sophia's long robe with precious decoration reveals, and both wear tiny imperial red shoes. In addition, the orb in Sophia's left hand and the nimbus around the head of Eirene are still visible. It is also worth noting the different colour backgrounds on which each appears – Eirene's is green while to the left side of Sophia it is blue with white stripes – which probably indicates their attribution to different spheres.

Both small figures flanking the lower part of Mary's body are slightly turned to the centre reaching their covered hands toward the Virgin (fig. 8). Despite the poor state of preservation of the figure on the Virgin's right, it is still possible to discern the man's short beard and broad brownish mantle which leaves his lower legs, clad in black, uncovered. The corresponding female figure appears in a robe and maphorion covering her head similar to that of the Virgin.

The large mosaic panel on the south wall in a shape of irregular trapezoid shows a similar central composition as on the west wall, but with reduced number of figures (Fig. 9). The main figure – meanwhile unambiguously identified as *Maria Regina*¹⁷ – appears in imperial official attire consisting of a tunic, a full-length purple dalmatica, a jewelled loros and tiny red shoes; encircled by a golden nimbus the head is adorned with a high gem- and pearl-studded crown with long *prependoulia*; the insignia in her hands – a cross staff with two cross bars in the right and a crowned orb in the left – further emphasize her majesty.

In contrast to the angels on the west wall, those flanking the Virgin here are clad in court costumes including a tunica, a white, knee-length dalmatica decorated with *segmenta* and fringe, a dark blue chlamys and tight trousers of the same colour. Their blond hair is bound with a white ribbon; in the left hands they hold a staff whereas the right are raised in front of the chest in a gesture of *silentio* (*silence*). The inscription over the head of the left angel reads: †K(υρ)E BOHΘHCON TOY ΔΟΥΛΟΥ COY ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ (“Lord preserve your servant Alexander”). It seems very likely that the diminutive figure to the right of the Virgin is a representation of the named Alexander (fig. 10). His posture and attire are very similar to those of the small male figure on the west panel, but the facial traits of the south figure are here better preserved: like his counterpart on the west panel he has a short beard; his short black hair shows a bald patch or tonsure – a question that still remains dubious.¹⁸ The female figure on the Virgin's left side is lavishly clad. She wears a full-length red robe decorated with *orbiculi* as well as red shoes on her feet. Her ornate high headdress which is reminiscent of the Virgin's crown deserves particular attention.¹⁹ The long, white fringed veil seems not to cover her elaborate headdress but has the appearance of an aureole around her head.²⁰

The narrow adjacent mosaic panel contains only one figure which, thanks to the inscription flanking its nimbus († O ΑΓ[Ι]Ο C ΤΕΦΑΝΟC), can with certainty be identified as the protomartyr Stephanos (fig. 9). The young beardless martyr is depicted frontally wearing a white tunic with red *clavi* as well as a white pallium decorated with crosses, his golden hands raised before his chest in prayer. It is furthermore worth noting remnants of small nails found at around neck level on Stephanos as well as on the two angels of the adjacent panel. According to

¹⁷ Earlier researchers have mistaken the figure for a male (cf. Toçi, ‘Amphiteatri I Dyrrahit’, 40: identified the figure as emperor Alexander (912–913) based on the inscription above the left angel; Thierry, ‘Une mosaïque a Dyrrachium’, and idem, ‘À propos de la mosaïque murale de Durrës’: in connection with the inscription identified it as Christ; Ducellier, ‘Dernières découvertes sur des sites albanais du Moyen Âge’: instead of Alexander he proposed that it was the portrait of emperor Leon; Castrillo, ‘L’énigme de la mosaïque de Durrës’: Constantine the Great). Most however, have recognised its female sex, although some have proposed an identification other than Maria Regina (cf. Nallbani, ‘Mozaiku i kishës së amfiteatrit në Durrës’, 113–114 and idem, ‘Dëshmi të hershme të pikturave murale në kapelën bizantine të amfiteatrit antik të Durrësit’: has rejected the identification as emperor Alexander, he showed that it was a representation of a woman; C. Bertelli, ‘La pittura medievale a Roma e nel Lazio’, in: C. Bertelli (ed.), *La pittura in Italia: L’Altomedioevo* (Milano, 1994), 206–242, cit. n. 36: suggests with caution St Helena; Pace, ‘Mosaici e pittura in Albania’, 100–108 and Miraj, ‘The Chapel in the Amphitheater of Dyrrachium’, 272–273: both suggest that the image represents an empress). Arguments which clearly favour the identification as Maria Regina are the flanking angels, the prayer inscribed over the left angel as well as the donors, see: Nikolajević, ‘Images votives de Salone et de Dyrrachium’, 68; Reynis-Jandot, ‘Mozaiku mural në kapelën e amfiteatrit të Dyrrahut’, 225–232: suggest that the figure represents the Virgin Angeloktistos, a mixture of the Queen of Heaven and an intercessory figure; Andaloro, ‘I mosaici parientali di Durazzo’, 104–105; Buschhausen / Buschhausen, ‘Durazzo und die Anfänge des Christentums in Albanien’, 14; Bowes/Mitchell, ‘The Main Chapel of the Dures Amphitheater’, 586.

¹⁸ Andaloro, ‘I mosaici parientali di Durazzo’, cit. n. 34 rejects the possibility that the man is tonsured, the contrary opinion is expressed by Pace, ‘Mosaici e pittura in Albania (VI–XIV secolo)’, 107, who considers the tonsure as evidence for the influence from the Latin West.

¹⁹ Andaloro, ‘I mosaici parientali di Durazzo’, 106 calls the headdress crown.

²⁰ As noticed also by Andaloro, ‘I mosaici parientali di Durazzo’, cit. n. 35.

Bowes and Mitchell, lamps were most probably hung on these nails, which suggests that the images were venerated.²¹

As a result of lengthy discussion since their discovery in the 1960s an assignment of the mosaics to the sixth or seventh century has been widely accepted. This dating is based, on the one hand, on their unambiguous stylistic, compositional and technical similarity to the sixth- or early seventh-century mosaics in the church of St Demetrios in Thessaloniki and, on the other hand, on a comparison with the sixth-century image of *Maria Regina* in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome.²² Recently the chronology of the Durrës mosaics has been challenged by Bowes and Mitchell, who proposed a dating of the ninth to the eleventh century.²³ Both researchers have based their hypothesis mainly on archaeological evidence as well as on iconographical and stylistic analysis of the paintings predating the mosaics. The archaeological evidence concentrates on ceramic fragments inserted into the chapel's walls which have been dated to the period between the ninth and eleventh centuries. While it is possible that the ceramic fragments were inserted during some reparations, or if Gega is right and the building of the chapel post-dated the funeral chamber, then the ceramic fragments can be taken only as an evidence of the dating of the chapel and not of the mosaics.

The main argument, however, supporting the proposed later dating is based on the iconographic motifs of the fresco-decoration which predates the mosaics. Thus, Bowes and Mitchell have equated the image of Christ on the ceiling with the type of the Pantocrator that commonly decorated vaults and apses after the ninth century. They found the closest comparanda for the representation of the "theophanic vision" in the eleventh-century rural churches of St Merkurios and St Michael on Corfu, where the eastern walls show theophanies with the Pantocrator in bust form.²⁴ As a stylistic comparison to the frescoes in Corfu is impossible due to the faded state of the painting in Durrës, it remains inexplicable why both researchers have overlooked the widespread representations of Christ surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists which are known in early Christian and early medieval church decoration mainly in the West, but also in the eastern part of the Empire.²⁵ Bowes and Mitchell compare the scanty remains of the military saint in Durrës to an eleventh-century example in the church of St Merkurios on Corfu, emphasizing "the strikingly similar knee-length belted tunic and cloak"²⁶ – a piece of evidence that, in my opinion, does not suffice to date the paintings in the chamber of Durrës to the period between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Moreover, although rare, warrior saints were also depicted during the early Byzantine period in military costume and with weapons: in addition to the three examples cited by Bowes and Mitchell,²⁷ one can mention the seal of a certain Theodore from the Zacos collection (no. 1289) on which Theodore Tiron is represented in military

²¹ They were "sunk into the plaster while it was still malleable", Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 587–588, fig. 14; for parallels: P. J. Nordhagen, Icons Designed for the Display of Sumptuous Votive Gifts, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987), 453–460.

²² Thierry, 'Une mosaïque a Dyrrachium', 229; idem, 'À propos de la mosaïque murale de Durrës', 60–62; Castrillo, 'L'énigme de la mosaïque de Durrës', 82–83 (dates to 600–700 or 800–850 but not later); Nikolajević, 'Images votives de Salone et de Dyrrachium', 68; Cormack, Writing in Gold, 84–85; Andaloro, 'I mosaici parietali di Durazzo', 107; Buschhausen / Buschhausen, 'Durazzo und die Anfänge des Christentums in Albanien', 15; Pace, 'Mosaici e pittura in Albania', 109; Miraj, 'The Chapel in the Amphitheater of Dyrrachium and its Mosaics', 274; J. Osborne, Images of the Mother of God in Early Medieval Rome, in: A. Eastmond/ L. James (eds.), Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium. Studies Presented to Robin Cormack (Aldershot, 2003), 135–156, at 140.

²³ Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 582–584, 588–594. A tenth-century date was proposed also by earlier scholars, cf. Toçi, 'Amphiteatri i Dyrrahit', 40; Ducellier, 'Dernières découvertes sur des sites albanais du Moyen Âge', 44. This dating was based on the identification of Alexander mentioned in the inscription on the south panel as emperor Alexander (912–913); Reynis-Jandot, 'Mozaiku mural në kapelën e amfiteatrit të Dyrrahut', 227, dated the mosaics to the eighth century, comparing them to the Roman examples of Maria Regina.

²⁴ Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 583.

²⁵ For examples from Rome and Ravenna see F. W. Deichmann, *Ravenna: Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes*, (Wiesbaden, 1958–1989), Bd. II, Kommentar, 3. Teil, 304–310; for examples from the East see idem, 310–311 and K. Wessel, 'Evangelistensymbole', in: K. Wessel (ed.), *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst* 2 (1971), 508–516. A closer parallel to the subject matter in Durrës is found in the seventh-century paintings in the dome of the church in Drosiani on Naxos, where the bust of Christ in medallion has been represented twice accompanied by the symbols of the evangelists (fig. 12), N. Drandakis, *Οι παλαιοχριστιανικές τοιχογραφίες στη Δροσιανή της Νάξου* (Athens, 1988), 51–58, Pl. I.

²⁶ Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 582.

²⁷ Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durres Amphitheater', 582–583.

dress holding a cross-staff and shield, and the encaustic icon in Sinai depicting both Theodores with a lance and shield.²⁸

Thus the main arguments delivered by Bowes and Mitchell but also the additional evidence to which they refer, hardly disprove the sixth- or seventh-century dating for the mosaics, which has been based convincingly on iconographical, stylistic and technical comparison with examples from Thessaloniki and Rome dated to this time.

Let us now sum up and interpret the observations above. The western alcove of the amphitheatre's chapel was a separate, independent space functioning as a private funerary chamber very likely for a rich family. The earlier paintings on the ceiling and the north wall have never been replaced by mosaic panels, and it seems probable that they remained part of the decoration, which together with the mosaic panels on the south and west wall feasibly constituted one coherent program (figs. 5, 6). The image of the Virgin Mary became its central focus as a consequence of replacing the paintings with the mosaic panels. Visualising a perpetual prayer for intercession, the program expresses in a sophisticated manner the hope for salvation of the donors who were buried in the chapel.

As final recipient of the prayer, Christ is depicted on the ceiling residing exactly above the tomb of the donors. Closely connected to the image of Christ were the representations of the four living creatures which originally surrounded the medallion (fig. 11). Due to the poor state of preservation, today it is impossible to comprehend their exact meaning because we cannot discern if they carried books or had a nimbus. According to the biblical texts which refer to the four living creatures (Ezekiel 1:5-14 and Revelation 4:6-8), they stood in immediate proximity to God. During the early Christian period they became symbols first of the Gospels and later of the evangelists. The direct relationship of both the Gospels and the evangelists to Christ closely connected the four living creatures to the natures of Christ and thus they also became symbols of his human and divine natures.²⁹ The representation on the triumphal arch of San Apollinare in Classe (seventh century) is closely associated with the paintings on the ceiling in the chamber of Durrës. It shows the bust of Christ in a medallion as supreme ruler and judge flanked by the symbols of the evangelists, where they function as types of his human and divine natures and predictors of his second coming.³⁰ The dogma of Christ's two natures is particularly emphasised in the seventh-century paintings of Drosiani on Naxos, where Christ is represented twice in the dome: in his human and his divine natures and in connection with the symbols of the evangelists (fig. 12).³¹

The panel on the west wall represents a hierarchical composition where the donors, who were probably buried in the chamber, are located on both sides of the Virgin who acts as their protector and intercessor to Christ shown on the ceiling (figs. 7, 8). The Virgin was depicted in the humble, typically Byzantine guise and was likely accompanied by the "old-fashioned"³² appellation *MAPIA* or rather *ΑΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ*. As the maphorion falls down symmetrically on either side it has been suggested that Mary was depicted without the Christ Child and with her hands raised before her chest in a gesture of prayer.³³ The possibility cannot, however, be excluded that she was holding a medallion with the Christ Child as seen in a miniature in the Syrian Bible (Paris. syr. 341, fol. 118) dated to the seventh or eighth century, where the maphorion is also rendered symmetrically.³⁴

Whereas the central part of the representation – the Virgin surrounded by angels – is common in early Christian art, the female figures flanking them who have been identified as personifications of Peace and Wisdom are very unusual (fig. 7).³⁵ Both Eirene and Sophia have been understood in Christian tradition as hypostases of the incar-

²⁸ Ch. Walter, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition* (Aldershot, 2003), 51, Pl. 23; G. and M. Soteriou, *Εικόνες της Μονής Σινά, 1:Εικόνες* (Athens, 1956), Pl. 15.

²⁹ On the four living creatures see: Wessel, 'Evangelistensymbole', 508–516; Deichmann, *Ravenna*, Bd. II, 3. Teil, 299–314.

³⁰ Deichmann, *Ravenna*, Bd. I, 277; Bd. II, 2. Teil, 279; Bd. II, 3. Teil, 310.

³¹ Drandakis, *Οι παλαιохριστιανικές τοιχογραφίες στη Δροσιανή*, 51–58.

³² R. Cormack, 'The Mother of God in Apse Mosaics', in: M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine art* (Milan, 2000), 91–105, esp. 94.

³³ Nikolajević, 'Images votives de Salone et de Dyrrachium', 63; Buschhausen / Buschhausen, 'Durazzo und die Anfänge des Christentums in Albanien', 15.

³⁴ J. Meyendorff, L'iconographie de la Sagesse divine dans la tradition byzantine, *Cahiers archéologiques* 10 (1959), 259–277, Fig. 1.

³⁵ Some doubts are expressed by Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durrës Amphitheater', 585. They point to fragmentary inscriptions to the left of Sophia "which might provide the ΑΓΙΟC epithet", and could indicate saints but they nevertheless accept the common opinion.

nate Logos and are thus connected directly to Christ and indirectly to Mary who gave birth to God.³⁶ This same idea is visualised in the said miniature in the Syrian Bible (Paris. syr. 341, fol. 118) at the beginning of the Proverbs of Solomon. Here three frontal standing persons are represented, including the Virgin Mary holding an oval shield with the Child in the middle, to the left Solomon and to the right a female personification bearing a cross staff. According to Meyendorff, the flanking figures represent both authors of the Proverbs, Solomon and Wisdom, whereas the emphasized image of the Virgin Mary holding Emmanuel defines the ecclesiastic tradition: Wisdom who had built her house (Prov. 9:1) is one hypostasis of the incarnate Logos.³⁷ Mary functions here as the temple of Wisdom; she is not herself “wisdom”, but the dwelling place of God who took flesh from her.³⁸

The miniature is one of the very few early Christian examples where a personification of Sophia is represented;³⁹ even rarer are the images of Eirene⁴⁰ and there is no known parallel of their joint depiction as in Durrës. In my opinion, as their presence on the panel was important for emphasising the role of the Virgin in the incarnation, the artist harked back to the rich examples of pagan art where personifications are widely used.⁴¹

In contrast to that on the west side the hierarchical composition on the south wall reveals fully imperial associations. Mary is undoubtedly the Queen of Heaven guarded by her attendants, the *silentarii*, and receiving the honour of the donors who hope for salvation through her intercession (figs. 9–10). The image of Mary is unique due to the fact that she neither makes an intercessory gesture nor holds the Christ Child. Instead she possesses the attributes of her son’s imperial dignity: the cross staff as a sign of the triumph of Christ and the crowned globe symbolising his universal power.⁴² Nikolajević has pointed to the reliquary in Grado as a parallel emphasizing the identity of the Virgin with her divine son: here the Virgin is seated on a throne with a cross-sceptre in her right hand; whereas the Jesus-child sitting in her womb is represented without a nimbus, Mary has the cross-nimbus usually preserved only for Christ.⁴³ As on the mosaic panel in this example the Virgin is represented as co-equal with her son by sharing his attributes of power, and in this way she is identified as the material hypostasis of the divine.

In my opinion, both contrasting images of the Virgin – the human woman who gave birth to God and the Queen of Heaven – are best explained as references to the human and divine natures of Christ. Henry Maguire has shown that the main aim of the mid-sixth century mosaic program in the apse of the Cathedral of Eufraasius at Poreč was to accentuate the dogma of Christ’s dual nature that was accordingly visualised twice: once on the vertical axis and again on the horizontal.⁴⁴ On the vertical axis Christ’s divine nature was portrayed on the triumphal arch where he is majestically sitting on a globe surrounded by his apostles; his human nature as the image of the Child sitting

³⁶ J. Meyendorff, ‘Wisdom-Sophia: Contrasting Approaches to a Complex Theme’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987), 391–401; D. M. Fiene, ‘What is the Appearance of Divine Sophia?’, *Slavic Review* 48.3 (1989), 449–476; P. Plank, ‘Sophia’, *Lexikon des Mittelalters* VIII, 2051–2052; E. Dinkler, ‘Friede: C. Christlich’, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* VIII, 460–492.

³⁷ Meyendorff, *L’iconographie de la Sagesse divine dans la tradition byzantine*, 263–264, Fig. 1; D. I. Pallas, ‘Ο Χριστός ως η Θεία Σοφία. Η εικονογραφική περιπέτεια μιάς θεολογικής έννοιας’, *Deltion tis christianikis archaiologikis eteraias* 15 (1989–90), 119–144, at 129 has interpreted the female figure as an allegory of the church.

³⁸ cf. Meyendorff, ‘Wisdom-Sophia’, esp. 391–393; on the contrary, Mary was seen as Wisdom, as suggested by M. Barker, *Wisdom Imagery and the Mother of God*, in: L. Brubaker/ M. B. Cunningham, *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images* (Aldershot, 2011), 91–108.

³⁹ Further examples: Nikolajević, ‘Images votives de Salone et de Dyrrachium’, 64 refers to a relief in Egypt now in the Museum of Brooklyn; Bowes/ Mitchell, ‘The Main Chapel of the Durrës Amphitheater’, 592 cite sixth- to eighth-century episcopal seals as well as the sixth-century Vienna Dioskurides (Cod. med. gr. 1, fol. 6v); this latter example, also mentioned by Andaloro, ‘I mosaici parietali di Durazzo’, 112, is irrelevant as the inscription ΣΟΦΙΑ is a later addition.

⁴⁰ Dinkler, ‘Friede: D. Ikonographisch’, 498–502.

⁴¹ L. S. B. MacCoul/ A. Cutler, ‘Personifikation’, in: ODB III, 1634–1635. W. Pötscher, ‘Personifikation’, in: *Der kleine Pauly*, 4, 661–663. Two of the most important churches in Constantinople were dedicated to Sophia and Eirene as God’s attributes. Both are also mentioned together by Romanos Melodos, see *Kontakion* 54, *Oikos* 20, ed. P. Maas/C.A. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi cantica: cantica genuina* (Oxford, 1963) and ed. J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode. Hymnes*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1964–65); tr. in German J. Koder, *Romanos Melodos, Die Hymnen*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 2005), vol. 1, no. 23, 281–2. I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewer for that reference.

⁴² Nikolajević, ‘Images votives de Salone et de Dyrrachium’, 68.

⁴³ Nikolajević, ‘Images votives de Salone et de Dyrrachium’, 68, Fig. 4.

⁴⁴ H. Maguire, ‘Body, Clothing, Metaphor: The Virgin in Early Byzantine Art’, in: L. Brubaker/ M. B. Cunningham, *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images* (Aldershot, 2011), 39–51, esp. 39–42.

on his mother's lap appears in the semi-dome below. On the horizontal axis "the paradox of the two natures of the incarnate Christ" was expressed through the scenes of the Annunciation and Visitation on both ends of the apse wall. According to Maguire "we have here a contrast between two types of conception: first, the spiritual, or miraculous, conception, that is evidenced by the reception of the angel's message in the Annunciation, and second, the physical conception, that is evidenced by the bodies of the two women in the Visitation mosaic".⁴⁵

As references to both natures of Christ the images of the Virgin in Durrës offer a pictorial expression of her power of intercession and justify it in different ways: once as a human woman enabling the incarnation and a second time as a heavenly queen sharing the divine power with her son. Thus, despite the fact that the inscription on the south wall is a direct prayer to Christ and despite the great importance placed upon Stephanos' intercessory role as indicated through his golden hands and his orans-attitude, Mary is given prominence as mediator between God and the donors.

The donors venerating her are very likely the owners of the grave placed in the chamber and it appears that the same pair was represented on both images (figs. 8, 10). In the Theodotus chapel in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, a rare example of a private family chapel from the eighth century, the donor Theodotus was represented even three times – each time in the same costume but in a different context and with varying intention. The first representation, which Belting calls the official votive image, shows in the centre *Maria Regina* sitting on a throne and holding her Child surrounded by the apostles Peter and Paul and by the saints to whom the chapel was dedicated, Quiricus and Julitta. Theodotus, holding the model of his donation, stands at the right edge of the composition, and as his counterpart on the left appears Pope Zacharias. On the second image, according to Belting the votive image of the family, the Virgin Mary, clad in traditional simple costume and holding the Child in her hands, stands among Theodotus' family. The donor is represented for third time in a personal votive image venerating Quiricus and Julitta.⁴⁶

It is noticeable that whereas, like Theodotus, the male figure in Durrës is portrayed wearing the same clothes on both mosaic panels, the apparel of his female companion differs from image to image. Eye-catching, however, is the similarity of her attire to that of the Virgin: on the western panel both Mary and the female donor wear simple costumes, whereas on the south they are both lavishly dressed (figs. 7–10). It seems to me that this similarity cannot be accidental but rather a sophisticated device associating the female donor with the Virgin. Charles Barber has observed a similar relationship between Mary and the widow Turtura on the fresco in the Catacomb of Commodilla in Rome, dated to around 530. Here the diminutive figure of Turtura is introduced to the enthroned Virgin and Child by the flanking saints Adauktus and Felix. An accompanying inscription written by the son of the widow praises her chaste fidelity to her death husband. This "praise of the chaste mother and also her costume" which, as in Durrës, is similar to that of Mary suggests to Barber "a direct correlation of the Theotokos and Turtura".⁴⁷

The close relation of the female donor to the Virgin in Durrës emphasises the woman's piety and establishes Mary as her heavenly counterpart granting intercession. As funerary chambers belong to the private sphere, this observation supports the assumption that the Virgin "had a special appeal for women ... apart from the obvious gender connection, women in traditional societies belonged to the private sphere, from which we have a good deal of evidence of devotion to the Theotokos."⁴⁸ However, both images leave no doubt that the male donor also sought Mary's aid in his hope for salvation as he is taking the prominent place on her right. St Stephanos on the south wall acts as an additional advocate for Alexander forwarding his prayer to Christ, which does not diminish the prominent role of the Virgin as intercessor but creates "a hierarchical structure in the process of intercession".⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Maguire, 'Body, Clothing, Metaphor', 42.

⁴⁶ H. Belting, 'Eine Privatkapelle im frühmittelalterlichen Rom', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987), 55–69, fig. 1–4; cf. P. Romanelli/ P. J. Nordhagen, *S. Maria Antiqua* (Rome, 1964), 36–38.

⁴⁷ Ch. Barber, 'Early Representations of the Mother of God', in: M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine art* (Milan, 2000), 253–261, esp. 254–255, Pl. 196.

⁴⁸ A. Cameron, 'Introduction', in: M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium* (Aldershot, 2005), xxvii–xxxii, esp. xxix–xxx; similar notion H. Maguire, 'Byzantine Domestic Art as Evidence for the Early Cult of the Virgin', in the same volume, 183–193.

⁴⁹ Barber, 'Early Representations of the Mother of God', 253–255 has shown the same not only for the Turtura fresco but also for the late sixth- or early seventh-century icon from Sinai of the Virgin and Child with Archangels and saints and for the now lost sixth-century Maria cycle in the basilica of St Demetrios in Thessaloniki.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that the decoration program of the private funerary chamber in the amphitheatre of Durrës reveals very important aspects for the understanding of the function of Mary as intercessor during the sixth or seventh centuries in this culturally-blended region of the Balkan peninsula. The sophisticated program which reflects the worldview of the donors buried in the chamber and expresses their hope for salvation clearly emphasizes Mary's role as supreme mediator for humankind, indicating at the same time her closer association with the female donor. Mary's power of intercession has been justified by presenting her twice in two contrasting images as an indication of both natures of Christ and thus closely connecting her to her son, who as final recipient was depicted on the ceiling above the tomb of the donors.



Fig. 1: Amphitheater of Durrës, view of the chapel from the southeast (Photo: G. Fingarova).

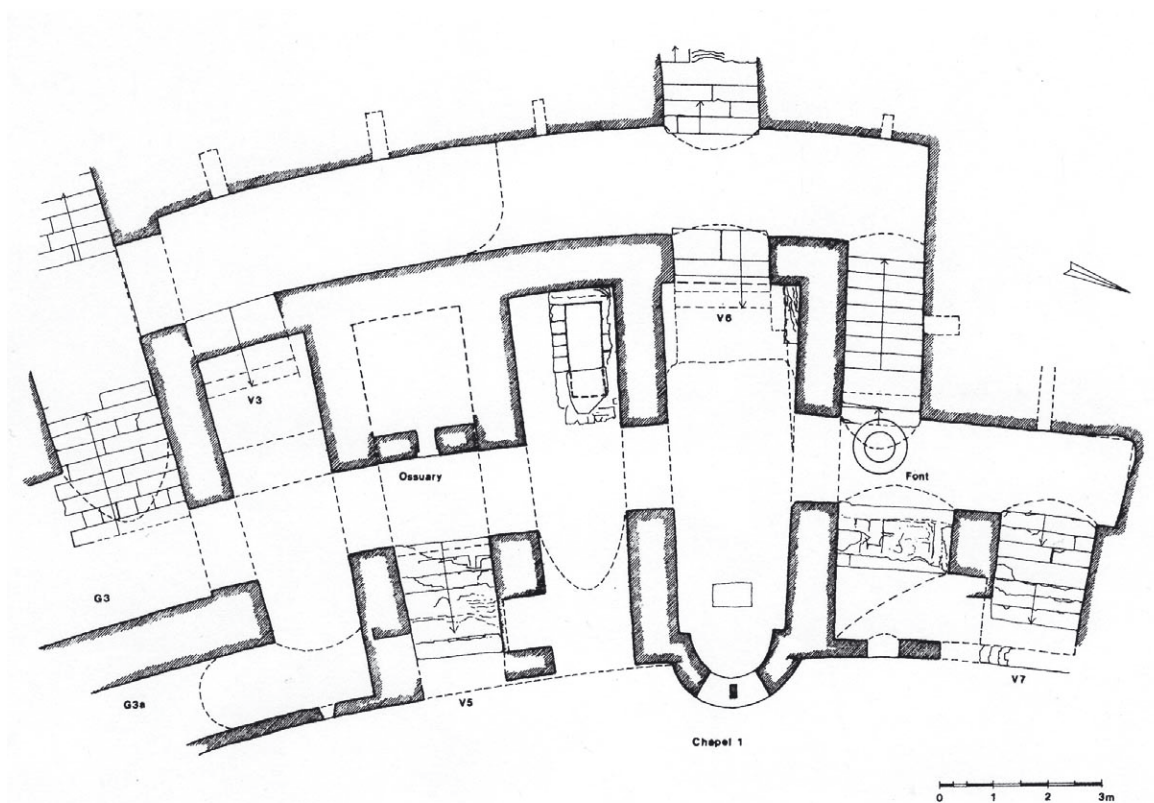


Fig. 2: Chapel complex, plan (D. Andrews, in: Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durrës Amphitheater', Fig. 3).

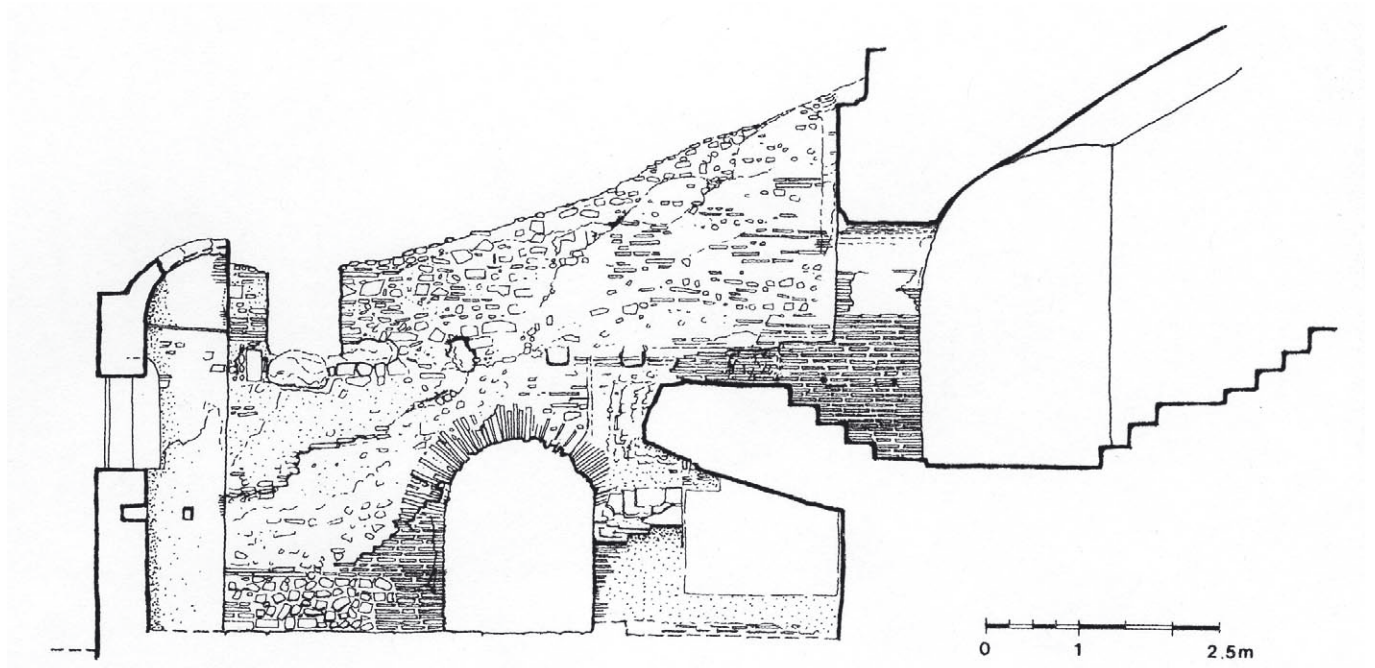


Fig. 3: Chapel, elevation of the south part (D. Andrews, in: Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durrës Amphitheater', Fig. 5).



Fig. 4: Western alcove, view from east (Photo: G. Fingarova).

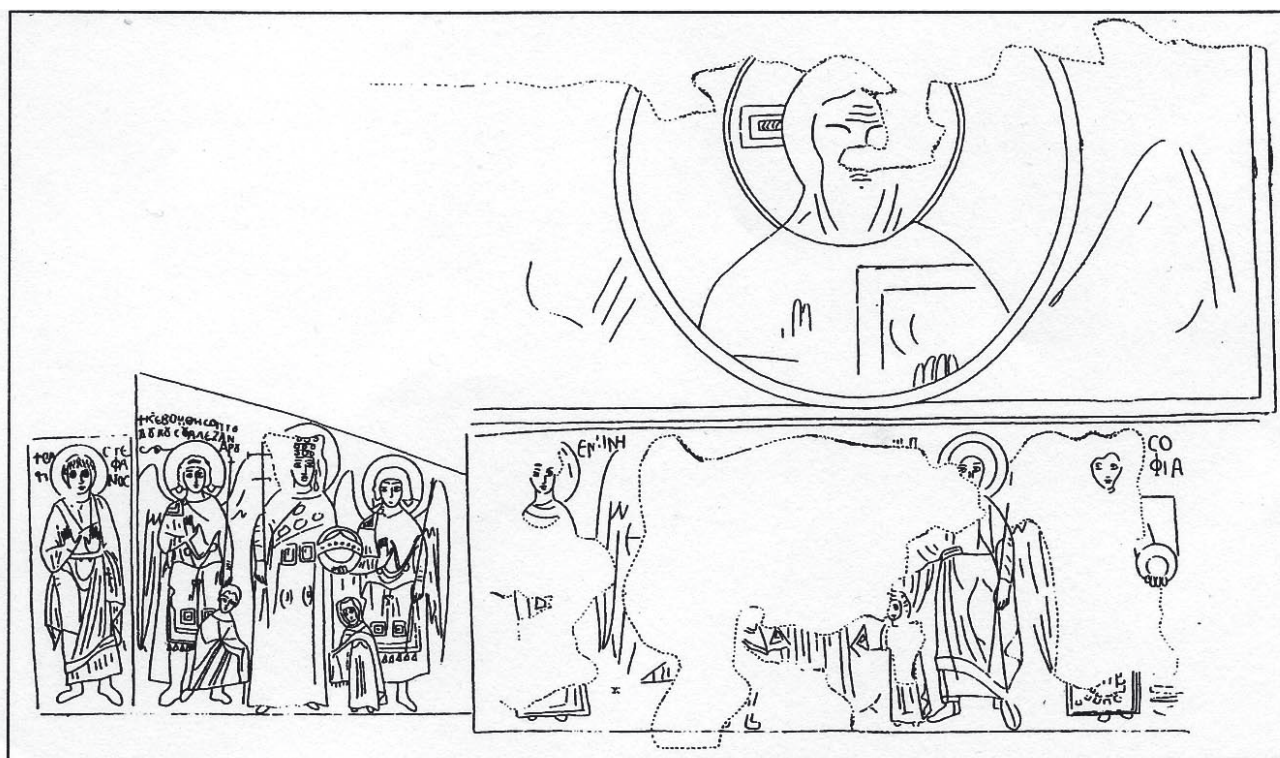


Fig. 5: Western alcove, line drawing of the decoration (Dhamo, 'Konsiderata mbi zhvillimin e mozaikut paleokristian në Shqipëri', Pl. III).



Fig. 6: Western alcove, view from northwest of the south and west walls (Photo: F. Gargova).



Fig. 7: Western alcove, mosaic panel on the west wall (Photo: F. Gargova).



Fig. 8: Western alcove, mosaic panel on the west wall, detail of donor figures (Photo: G. Fingarova).



Fig. 9: Western alcove, mosaic panels on the south wall (Photo: G. Fingarova).



Fig. 10: Western alcove, mosaic panels on the south wall, detail of donor figures (Photo: G. Fingarova).



Fig. 11: Western alcove, painting on the ceiling (Photo with superimposed scaled line drawing of paintings: S. Diehl, P. Haipi, R. Das, in: Bowes/ Mitchell, 'The Main Chapel of the Durrës Amphitheater', Fig. 7).



Fig. 12: Naxos, Drosiani, paintings in the dome (Drandakis, *Οι παλαιοχριστιανικές τοιχογραφίες στη Δροσιανή*, Pl. I).

