THE WALL PAINTINGS OF ST. NICHOLAS CHURCH IN DEMRE (MYRA). RECENT DISCOVERIES

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St. Nicholas church in Myra, the famous place of pilgrimage in Southern Turkey (Lykia), is also the home place of St. Nicholas' cult. The sources lighting the way of the middle ages in the region of Lykia are very limited. Myra’s name is connected with St. Nicholas’ since early Christianity ¹. St. Nicholas’ date of birth is uncertain. Some sources report Patara (near Myra) as the place where St. Nicholas was born in the 4th century, where he was elected Bishop of Myra and where he finally passed away ².

Myra became an important metropolis of the region since the time of Theodosios II (408-450); the city walls were restored by Markian (450-457) ³. After the earthquake of 529, the city was reconstructed with Justinian I’s support ⁴. Zirids


⁴ FOSS, «The Lykian», cit., 23; ÖTÜKEN, Demre, 86.
plundered Myra and destroyed the church, coming from Afrika by maritimeline, while, before 1043, Iloannes Orphonotrophos, brother of Michael II, repaired the city walls and made donations to the church. According to an inscription still existing in Myra, the emperor Konstantin IX and his wife Zoe renewed an unidentified building – probably St. Nicholas church – in 1042.

After the battle of Malazgirt in 1071, some Italian merchants who took advantage of the migration of Christian people to the mountainous areas, purloined St. Nicholas' relics and took them to Bari in 1087, where a famous cathedral church was erected under his name.

After 1099, Lykia became under the influence of the Byzantine Empire as a consequence of the military successes achieved by Alexios I. But, after the conquest of Antalya in 1207, the Seljuks took control over the southwest region of Anatolia. Pierre de Lusignan, the Cyprian commander of Antalya, launched an attack against the Seljuks settled in Myra since 1350. The last bishop of the city was demoted in 1397, and from that time on also the name of Myra disappeared from the bishopric lists.

In 1963-64, the Turkish Directorate of the Ancient Monuments and Museums took care of the drainage and cleaning of the flooded southern and eastern sides of the church. In 1965, the church history and architecture were studied by U. Peschlow, while its decoration was investigated by O. Feld within a project of the German Archaeological Institute in Istanbul.

U. Peschlow determined the three main construction periods of the church. The first period is dated to the 6th century.

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5 Anrich, Hl. Nikolaos, cit., I, 451; II, 518-519, 525; Harrison, Churches, cit., 122; Foss, The Lykian, cit., 34.
6 For the inscription see: H. Rott, Kleinasiatische Denkmäler aus Pisidien-Pamphylien, Kappadokien und Lykien, Leipzig, 1908, 340; Anrich, Hl. Nikolaos, cit., II, 525; Ötügen, Demre, cit., 86, note 8.
7 Anrich, Hl. Nikolaos, cit., I, 170-173, 435-449; II, 519-520; Ötügen, Demre, cit., 86.
8 Harrison, Churches, cit., 122; Ötügen, Demre, cit., 86.
9 These studies were published and edited by J. Bochardt within the book about Myra in 1975; see: Myra, Eine Lykische Metropole in Antiker und Byzantinischer Zeit, Berlin, Mann (Istanbuler Forschungen, No: 30), 1975.
10 For the construction periods of the church see: U. Peschlow, «Die Architektur der Nikolaoskirche in Myra» (ed. J. Bochardt, Myra, cit., Ber-
(after the earthquake of 529), based on the building technique, the construction materials and also the typological characteristics of its architecture. The building was destroyed by unknown reasons and rebuilt in the 8th century with a plan of a domed Basilica. Taking into consideration the above mentioned inscription of 1042, the north and south annexes of the building are assigned to the middle of the 11th century.

The decorative elements of the church are remarkable as much as its architectural features. In consideration of the limited number of examples of monumental wall painting still surviving in Constantinople and in Anatolia, St. Nicholas’ wall paintings are especially important. No monographic study has been dedicated to the paintings of the church until now, rare and insufficient are the reference publications mentioning these paintings. They consist of thirty-nine scenes, hundred-forty-three single figures, some symbolic depictions, and a variety of floral and geometric patterns. These paintings are located in the apse, the bema, the naos, the aisles, the northeast and southwest corner rooms, the innernarthex, the southeast chapels, the burial chamber, the north annexes and the arcosolium in the west court.

In our research, we identified twenty-four previously undetected scenes. Of these, four are derived from the New Testament (the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Way to Golgotha and the Crucifixion), two from Apocryphal sources (the Koi-mesis and the Anastasis), and sixteen additional scenes are related to the cycle of the life of St. Nicholas. Also there are


ninety-seven single figures representing male and female saints, as well as bishops, martyrs, angels, either standing or busts 12.

The whole complex of paintings can be chronologically assigned between the 11th and the 12th centuries on the basis of epigraphical, historical and stylistic considerations. The paintings dating to the 11th century are found in the aisles and the inner narthex. The symbolic funerary depictions and the ornamental motifs of the outer southern aisle show more Constantinopolitan features. The inner narthex paintings consisting of the representation of the six Orthodox councils are unique in Anatolia. No other Anatolian Byzantine fresco cycle show a parallel narthex location for these council scenes. Stylistic considerations suggest that the paintings of the inner narthex were realized towards the middle of the 11th century 13.

The paintings dating to the 12th century are located in the northern and southern annexes, in the arcosolium of the west court and in the northeast corner room. The paintings in the arcosolium in the west court are accompanied by an inscription dating them to 1118 14. In the southern burial chamber, the iconographic features, the style and the program of the paintings show more local features (fig. 1, 2, 3). The closest parallels can be found in Cyprus 15. These paintings are probably

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12 Because of the poor conditions of conservation affecting the wall paintings, we could not take good quality photos for publication. This is why we publish here a selection of accurate drawings of the identifiable remains of the paintings instead of their pictures. Some of these paintings were already mentioned in the excavation reports; see: Y. ÖTÜKEN, «1993 Yili Demre Aziz Nikolaos Kilisesi Kazisi», XVI. Kazi Sonuclari Toplantisi, Ankara, 1994, (N. ÇORAGAN, Freskolar, 371); Y. ÖTÜKEN, «1994 Yili Demre Aziz Nikolaos Kilisesi Kazisi» XVII. Kazi Sonuclari Toplantisi II, Ankara, 1996 (N. ÇORAGAN, Freskolar, 382-383); Y. ÖTÜKEN, «1995 Yili Demre Aziz Nikolaos Kilisesi Kazisi» XVIII. Kazi Sonuclari Toplantisi II, Ankara, 1996, (N. ÇORAGAN, Freskolar, 480-481).


14 For the inscription, see: ROTT, Kleinasiatische, cit., 340.

Fig. 1. The way to Golgotha and Crucifixion (*Southern burial chamber*).

Fig. 2. Koimesis (*Southern burial chamber*).

Fig. 3. Anastasis (*Southern burial chamber*).
the work of local craftsmen. The style of the paintings in the northern and southern annexes strengthens our chronology towards the beginning of the 12th century.

The paintings of the south burial chamber have some remarkable features. The saints, the bishops and the martyrs in the grave niches, were generally arranged according to the liturgical calendar and they also stand as well-wishers and protectors of the buried.

Since all other examples of St. Nicholas’ cycle are located outside of Anatolia, the Myra cycle can legitimately be considered the first and only example in Turkey (fig. 4 a, b, c). The earliest antecedent can be traced in a well known Sinai icon of the 11th century 16. Other examples in monumental painting occur after the end of the 12th century.

 Dating the paintings of the burial chamber to the beginning of the 12th century, the Myra cycle could be the earliest exam-

![Fig. 4. St. Nicholas’ cycle (Southern burial chamber).](image)
A. St. Nicholas rescues Demetrios from drowning. B. Journey to Jerusalem. C. St. Nicholas heals a sterile woman.

16 For the Sinai icon see: K. Weitzmann, «Fragments of an Early St. Nicholas Triptych on Mount Sinai», Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εφημερίς, 1964-65,5-6, Tab. 4-5; Ševcenko, The Life, cit., 29, 159.
ple in Byzantine monumental painting of a St. Nicholas complete cycle. Also there are some important iconographic innovations, such as the scene of «St. Nicholas healing a sterile woman» which derives from the «Vita Nikolai Sionitae.» \(^{17}\) (fig. 4c).

Other paintings dating to the 12th century can be found in the northeast corner room and also in the three southern chapels. The Communion scene in the northeast room is a unique work because of its dome location. The style of the paintings in the northeast corner room and of those in the southern chapels, shows, in my opinion, the work either of a Constantinopolitan or of a local craftsman, but trained in Constantinople.

In conclusion, it's my belief that a merge of influences from the Byzantine capital with local traditions must have occurred in St. Nicholas' paintings, a confluence of different stimuli and artistic experiences, justified — among other causes — also by the vicinity of the Sanctuary in Myra with the huge harbour of Andriake (present Antalya), providing both intense cultural and commercial relationship among the city of Myra, the Mediterranean coast and Constantinople \(^{18}\).


\(^{18}\) Unfortunately, these important paintings are going to vanish if urgent work of consolidation and conservation is not carried out. In 1994 the technicians of the restoration laboratory of the Turkish Ministry of Culture in Istanbul, reported a dramatic degree of deterioration in the paintings. These are going to vanish because of the combined action of natural agents such as salinity and humidity as well as by the irresponsible behavior of the numerous visitors to the place. The plaster is getting mossy and swollen because of dampness. Also, dampness seriously deteriorates the supporting walls. Finally, in 1998 the restoration work started (carried out by the restorer, R. Isler), with funding provided by the Turkish Ministry of Culture. We hope we can find new financial resources in the coming years to complete the restoration work.
ABSTRACT
As a current member of the Turkish archaeological team headed by Yıldız Ötüken of Hacetepe University working at St. Nicholas’ Basilica in Myra (Turkey), Nilay Çorağan reports about the preliminary results of her study on the whole decoration and the most recent findings at the famous Lykian Basilica and Sanctuary. Particularly interesting for the history of the illustration of the complete cycle of St. Nicholas’ life and miracles at its earliest stages are the scenes of the southern burial chamber, probably the work of local craftsmen. Also noteworthy are the New Testament and the Feast cycle scenes decorating the northeast corner room and the three southern chapels, probably the work of a Constantinopolitan atelier. According to the Author, both the recently discovered series of paintings can be dated to the first quarter of the 12th century. The status of conservation of the fresco paintings is very poor: it needs immediate intervention in order to preserve an important and rare testimony of the metropolitan monumental painting, realized under the patronage of the Comnenian dynasty.

KEY WORDS