

Synaxarion in the Narthex Frescoes of Dionysiou Monastery from Mount Athos

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the study of the narthex decoration from Dionysiou catholicon, located on Mount Athos, which preserves frescoes from post byzantine period, assigned to Cretan school. The athonite architecture space generated a rich and original compositional arrangement of iconographic themes. Stylistic elements of compositions, the theological significance brought into the limelight the peculiarities and similarities with other monuments from Athos and other orthodox churches that have been decorated in post byzantine period.

Keywords: *narthex, menolog, synaxarion, frescoes, Dionysiou*

1. Introduction

Dionysiou Monastery is a hidden place on the west coast of the Holy Mount Athos, built on a stone block of sixty meters which “measures” the sea from an amazing view. Founded at the end of the 11th century by Dionysius (of Greek origin), a holy monk whose name the monastery bears, it had a turbulent destiny full of unfortunate events, such as attacks, earthquakes, Turkish predators, etc. The benefactors of the holy place made it flourish again, especially the ruler Petru Șchiopul who helped it rise in the hierarchy of the monasteries on the Holy Mountain. The church built between 1537 and 1547 at the urging and request of Petru Rareș, the ruler of Moldavia, is dedicated to Saint John the Baptist and is located in the inner courtyard of the monastery (Capuani 1997:148).

2. Synaxarion in the painting of the Dionysiou Monastery narthex from Mount Athos

Reproducing the traditional architectural plan specific to the Holy Mountain, the small differences give it uniqueness through the catholicos positioned on the side, housing a single chapel. The frescoes that decorate the interior of the ship are the work of the painter Zorsis, one of the main representatives of the Cretan school and disciple of the great Theophanes the Cretan (Panagiotis 1987: 408). The painting dates from 1547. The architecture of the narthex from Dionysius imposes its own iconographic program; six monastic vaults, by the transversal arrangement of the arches whose weight is taken over by the two pillars and the central and also by the bays of the vaults forming a special vivid game of plans, intersections and lines. If until now, at least in the models of Moldavian domes, vaults or arches, we used to face a style of scenic dispersion of other themes, here, at the Dionysiou monastery, the Menologist is the one who decorates the ceiling.

Thus, at the level of the vaults, six, in number, and starting with the first vault located in the southeast, the first images of the Menologist appear.

The transversal arrangement of the arches as well as the play of the

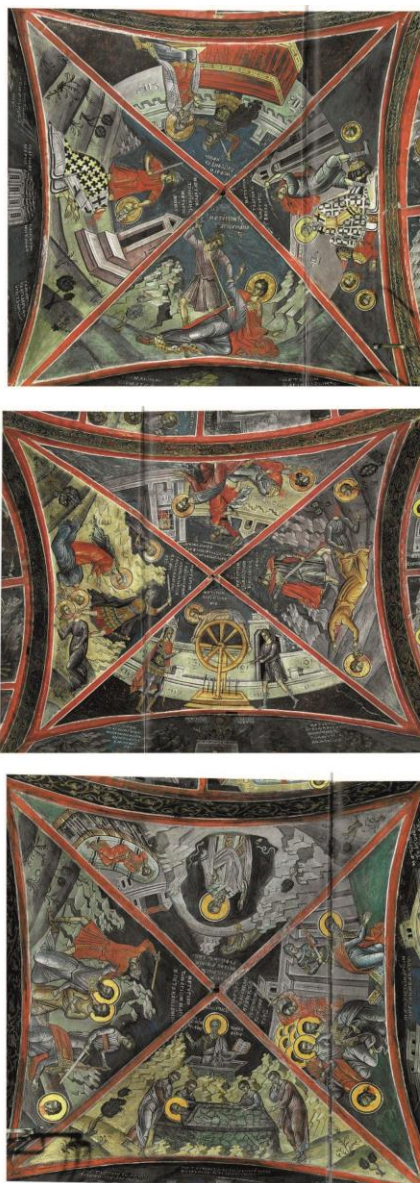


Fig. 1 The three vaults of the narthex on the eastern side, each vault is divided into four registers, on each register appears a scene of martyrdom from the Menologist of September and October.

beams compose geometrically organized spaces, triangles, rectangles divided in their turn into squares that host scenes or characters of the Synaxarion. The first three vaults of the southern part are followed chronologically by the next three on the northern wall, the scenes starting with the saints of September, then on the width of the arches the author places like a nucleus which radiates the next twenty-eight scenes of the Synaxarion cruciform plan (seven scenes on the four arms).

The first four days of the first south-eastern vault (Fig. 1), of September, host the martyrdom of four saints, respectively of Saints Anthim, Mamos of Caesarea, Vavila - bishop of Antioch, and of the prophet Zechariah. Each vault houses four scenes composed of the triangular shape of the square divided into two diagonals. Next to the vaults, one can find nine tympana, which are placed on the outer sides, those at the ends being juxtaposed with two by two tympana. The Menologist's program descends in circular form from above, from domes, on arches, on the tympana and then on the lateral surfaces of the nave walls up to 109 scenes.

The stage layout is extremely ingenious: the first scene of the Menologist is in the eastern arch of the first vault located just above the last scene at the base of the eastern wall, at the southern end of the narthex. Like a giant spiral, the themes follow the architecture adapting decoratively to the surfaces that host them.

The triangular scenes of the vaults, respectively the images of the first twenty-four days of September are individual, autonomous and authentic compositions, limited only by the red band and the white border. This game of straight and curved lines that form the triangles of the vaults forms a geometric game with a unitary role in the ample context of the enormous composition.

The author treats each scene of the vaults individually, each part of the synaxar, the martyrdom, it is edifying in a vast chromatic, full of dark, gray tones, alternating with the warm and bright ones. The artist will make the approximately square surface of the vaults divided into four triangles vibrate through the multitude of characters and architectural variations. The attitude of the martyrs and the executioners, the image of each scene full of drama are the same as specific elements as in the Moldavian Menologia.

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Menologia. Each scene has an inscription at the top of the compositional triangle. The centers of interest are the martyred saints, caught in different poses, semi-dynamic movements accentuated by the raised arms of the oppressors and their swords or forks. The first four scenes of martyrdom according to the numbering of the perspective plane (Toutos 2010: 242) (Fig.2) are: On the first vault - 1. Martyrdom Martyr Anthimus, Bishop of Nicomedia (September 3) 2. Martyrdom of St. Anep (Mamas) of Caesarea (September 2) 3. Martyrdom of St. Vavila bishop of Antioch (September 4) 4. Martyrdom of the Prophet Zechariah in the Temple (September 5). In the immediate vicinity of this vault is also represented on the first half of the tympana, on the right side of the east wall, (position 53 according to the perspective plan - Fig. 2) and the scene with the Miracle of St. Archangel Michael in Colossae (September 6), on the second half being the martyrdom of the Holy Martyr Sozon (September 7), as a completion of the synaxar on September, which seems to be the most complete.

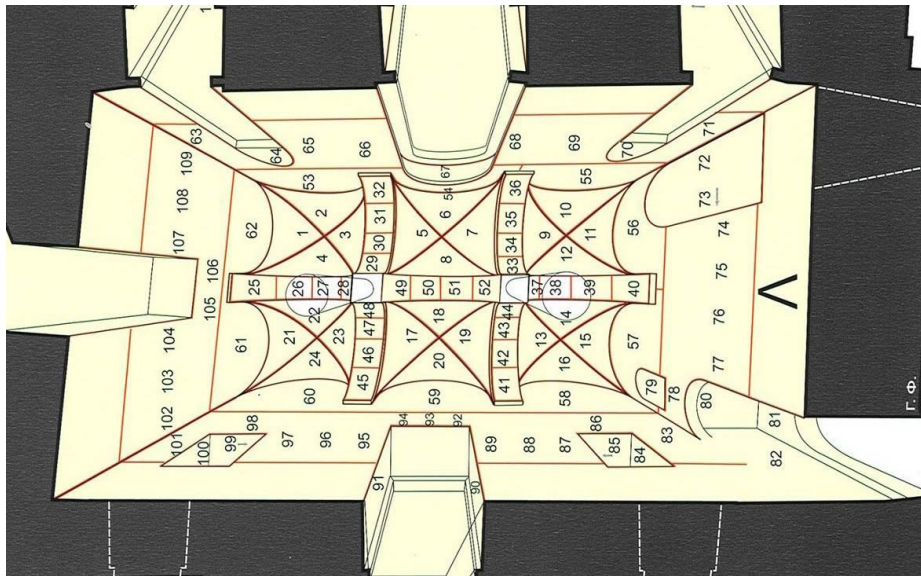


Fig. 2 -The perspective plan of the narthex with the numbering of the scenes according to their order on the architectural surfaces (after N. Toutos and G. Fosteris).

On the second central vault on the east side of the narthex (Fig. 2-3) are the following four scenes: 5. The martyrdom of the daughters Apostolate Sophia - Pistis, Agapia and Elpida in Italy 6. Martyrdom of St. Euphemia (September 16) 7. Martyrdom of Apostolate Sofia and Irina (September 17) 8. The Martyrdom of Saints Apostolate Trophimus, Savation and Dorimedont (September 19). On the tympanum above the entrance to the nave is a composition (position 54 according to the perspective plan - Fig. 2) With the martyrdoms of the Holy Martyrs Minodora, Mitrodora and Nympho of Bithynia (September 10), the Holy Great Martyr Nichita the Goth thrown into the fire and the Holy Great Martyr Eustatius and Theopistus, his wife, and their two sons, Agapius and Theopistus, were martyred in a burning copper cauldron (September 20). On the third vault in the south-east (Fig. 3) There are also four other scenes of martyrdom: 9. The martyrdom of Saints Andrew, Peter and John that took place in Africa (September 23) 10. The commemoration of the move to the Lord of the Holy Glorious Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian (September 26) 11. Commemoration of the Holy Martyr Calistratus, and of those with him 49 holy martyrs



Fig. 3 - The three vaults of the narthex on the western side, each vault is divided into four registers, on each register appears a scene of martyrdom from the Menologist of December and October

(September 27) 12. St. Gregory of the Great Armenia (September 30). On the fourth southwest vault (Fig. 2-3) we find the following four scenes from the Menologist of October starting with 13. The Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs: Nazareth, Protasius, Ghervasia and Chelsius (October 14).

14. Martyrdom of the St. Mardisciple Longhin the Soutas (October 16) 15. Martyrdom of the Holy Reverend Martyr Andrew of Crit (Crete) 16. Martyrdom of the Holy Martyr Uar (Var) (October 19). In the vicinity of this vault, on the left tympanum of the east wall (position 55) there is another composition, which marks the beginning of the synaxar on October, with martyrs: St. Apostle Ananias (October 1), St. Martyr Cyprian the sorcerer and St. Justin the Virgin (October 2) and St. Dionysius the Areopagite (October 3), followed in the immediate vicinity, on the northern tympanum (position 56) by the martyrdoms in the chronological order of the Holy Martyrs Sergius and Vah (October 7th) and the Holy Apostle James of Alphaeus (October 9th) who was crucified. On the northwest tympanum (position 57) is the representation of the martyrdoms of the Holy Martyrs Prov, Tarah and Andronicus (October 12). On the tympanum to the left of the entrance to the narthex (position 58) are represented in a cave the seven young men of Ephesus: Maximilian, Iamvliih, Martian, Dionysius, Antoninus, Exacustodian and Constantine mentioned on October 22nd and the martyrdom of the Apostle James, the brother of the Lord who -they threw him down from the wing of the temple and while he was still alive they killed him with a wood mentioned on October 23rd. On the fifth central vault in the western part of the narthex (Fig. 2) there are four other compositions: 17. The martyrdom of St. Demetrius the fountain of myrrh (October 26) 18. The martyrdom of St. Nestorius (October 27) 19. The martyrdom of the Holy Great Martyr Areta (October 24) 20. Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs Marchian (Marcian) and Martyrdom (Martyrdom) (October 25). In the immediate vicinity of this vault on the tympanum above the entrance to the narthex (position 59) is a generous space on which was represented in early November with the martyrdoms of the Holy Martyrs Achindin, Pigasie, Aftonie, Elpidifor and Anempodist (November 2) and the Saints Martyrs Achepsima, Joseph and Aitala (November 3) and the Holy Martyrs Galaction and Epistimi from Emesa celebrated on November 5th. On the sixth northwest vault, and the last, there are again four scenes of martyrdom in December: 21. The martyrdom

of St. Mina Calicheladu (i.e. the one with the beautiful cousin), Ermogen and Evgraf (December 10) 22. The martyrdom of St. Levchie and Calinic (December 14) 23. The Martyrdom of St. Theodore of Alexandria (December 3) 24. The Martyrdom of St. Varvara (December 4). On the tympanum in the immediate vicinity of this vault (position 60) is the representation of the martyrs of the Holy Martyrs of Christ: Eustration, Auxentie, Evghenie, Mardarie and Orest celebrated on December 13th who suffered terrible torments before receiving the crown of martyrdom. On the next tympanum (position 61), the southern one it represented the martyrdoms of the Holy Martyr Sebastian stabbed by arrows (December 18), the beheading of the Holy Martyr Boniface (December 19) and of St. Martyr Ignatius Theophorus (December 20th) in the centre composition shot down by lions.

The calendar of December continues, again with four scenes of martyrdom, this time of smaller dimensions, positioned on the soffit of the arches between the northeast and northwest vaults (Fig. 4): 25. The martyrdom of St. Anastasia Pharmacolytria (the savior of poison) (December 22) 26. The Martyrdom of St. Julian (December 21) 27. The Martyrdom of the Holy Ten Martyrs of Crete (December 23) 28. The Martyrdom of St. Eugenia (December 24). December ends with a larger composition (no. 62 in perspective) - Fig. 2) located on the south-eastern tympanum of the narthex which includes 3 martyrs of St. Archdeacon Stephen, of the Saints twenty thousand martyrs who burned in Nicomedia and of the holy fourteen thousand infants, slain by Herod celebrated on the 27th, 28th and 29th of December.

According to the enumeration of the perspective plan (Fig. 2), the following scenes from the synaxarium for November follow: 29. The martyrdom of St. Stephen the New (November 28) 30. The martyrdom of St. Andrew (November 30) 31. The Martyrdom of St. Emilian (?) 32. The Martyrdom of Saint Paramon (November 29).

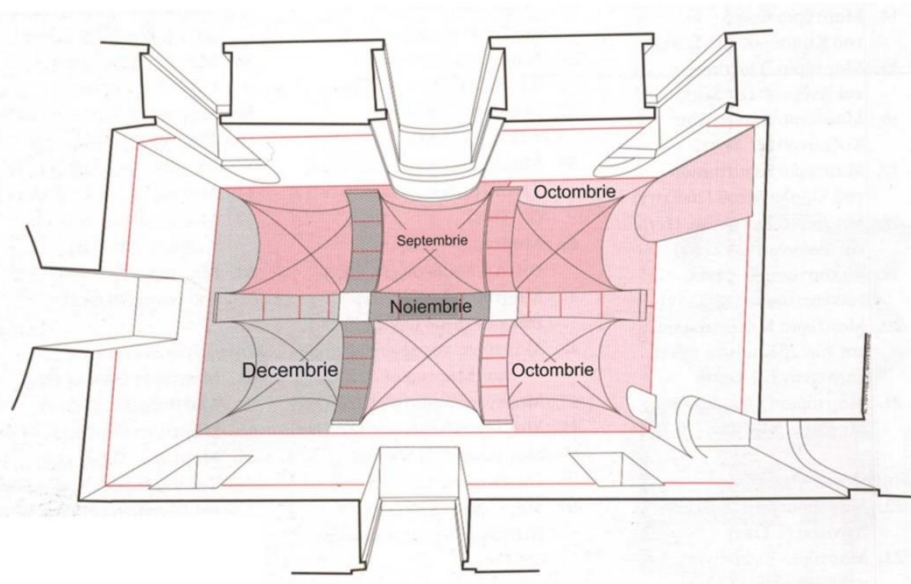


Fig. 4 - Order of reading the four months of the Menologist on the surfaces of architecture (after N. Toutos and G. Fousteris)

Both the architecture and the natural elements are carefully studied (mountains, shrubs, landscape) are analysed on columns of shadows and lights, the artist emphasizing the elements of detail, moulding them on the curves of architecture. Viewed together, scenes belonging to a vault, for example, can be grouped into a cyclic ovoid shape. The intersection of the red lines highlights the scenes bathed in serious tones in which the author places warm spots of ochre and reds, ornaments, yellows and whites. Thus we observe how the value contrasts are the most highlighted; the actions seem to take place at night, the sky, respectively the background of the upper part of the compositions placed at the top of the triangle is closed as a tone, and seems to open the pyramidal sad atmosphere of martyrdom. The author is analytical and precise, nuanced backgrounds with gradual transitions from light to shadow and vice versa. The architecture is rich in details and the characters are treated individually, captured in gestures specific to each one. The mountains also vibrate in warm and cold tones and the characters are dressed in various ways and their positioning betrays

the originality and creativity with which the entire space of the narthex was decorated.

Between the first and second vaults, but also between the second and third vaults, on each side, southern or northern, the architecture hides the surfaces of the soffits of the arches that host scenes that complement the Menologist's months, missing November, which is not represented anywhere in the level of the six vaults. The positioning of these four scenes on the soffit of the arch between the first and the second vault complements the months of the Menologist, the month of November being missing, none of the November holidays being represented on the six vaults.

On the soffit of the arch between the second and third vault there are 4 other representations of the martyrs from September that complete the chronological order of September: 33. The martyrdom of St. Anastasia (?) 34. The martyrdom of St. Apostle Codrat (September 21st) 35. The Martyrdom of St. Hypatia and Andrew (?) 36. The Martyrdom of St. Phocas (September 22). On the soffit of the arch between the northeast and northwest vault are four compositions that complete the synaxarium for October, their numbering being according to the perspective plan (Fig. 2): 37. The Martyrdom of St. Florence (October 13) 38. Martyrdom St. Agatodor and Agatonica (October 13th) 39. The Martyrdom of St. Mc. Evlampie and his sister Evlampia of Nicomedia (October 10) 40. Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs Carp and Papil (October 13).

On the soffit of the arch between the northwest and the central vault just above the entrance to the narthex are a number of four scenes that end the synaxar on October: 41. The Martyrdom of St. Anastasia Romana (October 29) 42. The Martyrdom of St. Martyr Terentius, Neonilla and their sons Nita, Sarvil, Ierax, Theodus, Fota, Vil and Evnichi (October 28) 43. Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs and brothers Zenovie, bishop of the city of the Aegeans and sister of Zenovia 44. Martyrdom of the Holy Martyr Epimah (October). On the soffit of the last two arches, the one between the central vault and the southwest vault are represented by the following 4 scenes that complete the synaxarium for November: 45. The martyrdom of St. Nicander the bishop of the Bridegroom and Hermes the priest (November 4) 46. The martyrdom of St. Paul , the archbishop of Constantinople the confessor (November 6th) 47. The martyrdom of the thirty-three martyrs of Melitina and the martyrdom of St. Jerome

(November 7) 48. The martyrdom of the Holy Great Martyr Mina the one of Cotiani (November 11), and on the other arch between the two other vaults from November are represented in the central vaults: 49. The Martyrdom of the Holy Great Martyr Plato (November 18) 50. The Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs and Confessors: Gurie, Samona and Aviv (November 15) 51. The Martyrdom of St. Philip the Apostle (November 14) 52. To the Holy Martyr Varlaam (November 19).

Thus, with these last scenes of martyrdom, the synaxarium represented at the level of the vaults ends, foreshadowing a model worth following for the next generations of muralists. The architectural structure proposes a challenge to adapt the iconographic program and the talent of the craftsmen. The tympana shelter four months of the respective church year, October, November, and December; the lower register begins its development starting with the left side of the east wall, where the author depicts the holy hermits, pillars, hierarchs: St. Simeon the Pillar, St. Alipius the Stylite, St. Simeon the Younger Stylite (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 - St. Stylites - St. Simeon the Stylite, St. Alipius the Stylite, St. Simeon the Younger Stylite - the eastern wall of the narthex

On the background of earthy ocher or dark blue green, the pillars reign in vibrating towers, in games of modulated lines reminiscent of the natural structures of the old stone towers. Placed in the center, with both hands bent, the saints seem to pass on teaching through their ascetic and graceful faces. Suspended in time, these bust-captured characters create a rhythm of shapes and colors, of modulated and expressive lines that seem to follow the plans of the architecture, the folds of the clothes and the light of the portraits. The east wall hides three entrances to the nave: one central, the one to the nave, and two smaller ones on the side. Above the entrance to the nave, the artist paints a scene, a new compositional challenge, hidden in a semicircular vault, of the Three Young Saints: Ananias, Azariah and Misail (Fig. 6). This scene from the Old Testament is celebrated on December 17. It represents the three young men on fire, protected by an angel.



Fig. 6 - The Three Young Saints: Ananias, Azariah and Misail - composition above the small entrance from the narthex to the nave on the right side of the east wall

This composition is symmetrical with another composition above the other entrance (to the nave), of the Holy Trinity. The author places in the lower register of the narthex, the eastern part, liturgical scenes. Above the side doors (the main ones towards the nave) there are two identical scenes in shape: the one mentioned above, of the Holy Trinity and the Oak Scene from Mamvri (located at the eastern right end of the main door to the nave). The two scenes are thus composed to highlight the importance of the Trinity in the culture and history of the Orthodox Church but also in their topographic location near the scenes of the same register, namely the Deisis scene with the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist (Fig. 7). This large composition is fractured by the main door that connects the narthex and the nave.

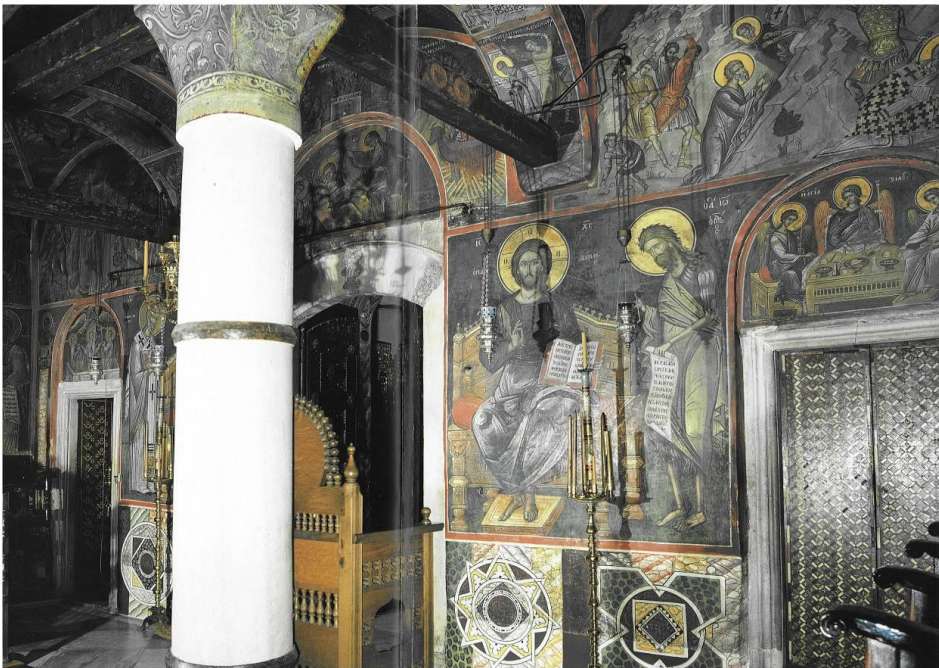


Fig. 7 - The compositions Deisis and Christ Anapeson - the eastern wall of the narthex, we notice one of the two central pillars that support the vaults, but also the three entrances to the nave

Above the entrance to the nave, the painter places a scene entitled Christ Anapeson (Fig. 8), like the iconographic program belonging to the exonartex of the Vatoped monastery. Recognized as a foreshadowing of the Passion and Resurrection, this scene, Christ Anapeson makes the connection between the two great episodes of His existence as Man. Here Jesus Christ is painted as a Child caught in sleep but with eyes half-open to suggest the eternal and unceasing vigil; He is made under the watchful eye of His mother, the Virgin Mary. Sitting on a red drape, Jesus seems to be thinking about what the angel is revealing to him: the instruments of the crucifixion. What the angel announces to him are foreshadowings of the signs that will be placed at the Holy Judgment on the Throne of Hetoimasia: “he who guards you will not sleep. Behold, thou shalt not sleep, neither shalt thou sleep, neither shalt thou remember thy coming and coming from henceforth, even for ever” (Psalm 121:4-8) .



Fig. 8 - Christ Anapeson - rear window above the main entrance to the nave

This scene has a moralizing role, framed between the scenes of the great martyrs of Orthodoxy, Christ urges an eternal vigil and an incessant prayer. The present composition, located in the rear window, is flanked by the two mentioned above, located above the secondary entrances, and forms a spiritual passage of the Trinity, the Three Young Men in flames guarded by the angel, Christ watching the baby has an angel and the three angels of Abraham's Feast.

The lower cycle looking southwest is furrowed by the faces of the great saints: Maximus the Confessor, John the Great, etc. Just above the auxiliary entrance on the corner of the north wall, in a small niche is the representation of the Martyrdom of St. Catherine (pos. 79, mentioned on October 25); below, on the soffit of the entrance arch is painted St. Maximus Cavsocialivitul (position 80, mentioned on January 13). The Athonite saint and a disembodied man spent his life in deserted and untrodden places, living only in small huts, which after a while he left, burned and left; for this he was also called "cavsocalivistis" (hut burner), followed by St. Paul Hiropotamus (pos. 81, mentioned on June 28), the founder of the Xeropotamou monastery in the Holy Mountain.

Conclusions

The illustration of the space at the Dionysiou monastery houses in the narthex, according to the iconographic plan around 109 scenes, various themes that amaze by the freshness of the message, the structure of the compositions, the modeling of the themes on the forms of architecture, the talent and skill of the painter.

The menologist or Sinaxar at both the vaults and the tympana include the illustration of the first four months of the church calendar, the martyrdom scenes are distributed according to the importance of the saints of that month, the most important scenes occupying the vaults, then the others being arranged in chronological order on the soffit of the arches that support the vaults, then moving to those of the tympana that close the calendar.

The scenic distribution of the program amazes with the diversity of forms in which the author paints each theme: triangle, square, rectangle, semicircle, telescope, thus proving that he had the special qualities of a good decorator, draftsman and colorist. The scenic background of the

ensemble in the narthex is dark blue, giving up the golden stars, they appear as a story image. Austerity seems to be the rule that the artist wants to transmit to the monks, and against the gloomy and vibration-free background, the author constructs with the help of plastic means of expression and the elements of plastic language static images worthy of envy. The characters are supple, ascetic, dressed in simple drapes that follow the anatomy of the saints, suggesting the importance and the message they convey.

The Christ Anapeson scene, the main character, the Infant, has almost the same size of the face as the other characters, just to increase its importance as a central character and to increase the message it wants to convey. This theme is a closed, centrist composition, with a single center of interest and psychology - the person of the Infant; the eyes and the axes of the characters arranged symmetrically, heading towards the child.

Christ seems to be portrayed like a mature man thinking, his face betraying adolescent, mature features that do not in any way depict the portrait of a baby like the lovers of Renaissance painting. The purpose of this composition is to refer to meditation as well as to place above the door that leads to the altar and the nave, by default. The hypostasis of the Deisis surrounded by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist but also by St. Hierarch Nicholas seems to be a preparation of the iconographic plan from the iconostasis of the monastery, the narthex space thus gaining the importance it deserves: a double of Deification, a space of spiritual preparation to step towards new theological spaces that bring us closer to the Holy of Holies.

The faces, the portraits of the characters are expressive, ascetic, the eyes seem thoughtful, even sad, thoughtful, rich or foreign clothes, austere and simplistic, alternating and gradually harmonizing the feeling that the space of the narthex launches. The lines appear alternating, from fine calligraphic lines to modulated lines with value modulations, from vermilion red to browns, from oranges to ocher and white, from green-blue to green-chrome that mixes, like a mosaic, with grays values of the clothes of hierarchs (St. Nicholas of the Deisis scene).

The details, both in the small scenes and in the scenes at the base of the narthex walls are treated as an important surface by the clusters of shapes carefully studied like the icon technique. A good analyst and a good

researcher of the life of the saints, the author proposes in the narthex of Dionysius, a unique, athonite ensemble, in which the characters of the New and Old Testament seem to be chained in a range of Christian signs and symbols ready to be received.

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