

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE LAST CREATION OF PALEOLOGAN PAINTING IN THE DOME OF THE METROPOLIS AT MYSTRAS

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According to a report in the newspaper *E Elpis*,¹ it was January the 1st of the year 1837 when the public authorities of Mystras, headed by the bishop of Lacedaemonia, ‘ἐν τάξει καὶ πομπῇ’ opted out of Mystras for good and settled in a public building in the newly founded town of Sparta. And it must have been in a somewhat similar way, though in reverse, that under Frankish rule, shortly after 1262, the inhabitants of medieval Sparta set out to people the foothill community of Mystras.² They built the fortified town of Mystras whence they transferred the See of Lacedaemonia, and Mystras soon became the capital of the Despotate of Morea, flourishing up until the year 1460, when it came under Ottoman rule.³

One of the first buildings in Mystras was the metropolitan cathedral, built between 1262 and 1272, possibly by Eugenios, the first Metropolitan of Lacedaemonia after Frankish rule. It was dedicated to the soldier-saint St. Demetrios, on whose protection the inhabitants were counting in those turbulent years.⁴

Following the architect G. Marinou, who has made an extensive study of the monument’s architecture, the cathedral’s architectural design draws on the local example of the archaic, three-aisled basilica of St. Nikon’s church on the Spartan acropolis.⁵ The original architectural form of the church was preserved up until the mid-15th century; it was around then, that a conversion, involving the addition of a gallery above the side aisles and the narthex, created a five-dome system on the upper storey, following the Constantinopolitan architectural type of the Hodegetria and the Pantanassa of Mystras.⁶ This conversion followed the construction of the church of the Pantanassa and could be ascribed to the same

¹ Newspaper *H Elpis* 22-1-1837, ff. 28-9.

² Zakythinos 1975, 41. Chatzidakis 2005, 15-6.

³ On the history of Mystras see Zakythinos 1975. Runciman 1980. Chatzidakis 2005, 16-20.

⁴ On the church, its history, architecture and decoration, see Millet 1910, pls. 16-9, 64-87. Chatzidakis 1979, 143-79. Chatzidakis 2005, 24-45. Sinos 1999, 416-22. *The City of Mystras* 2001, 57, figs. 48-53, Marinou 2002.

⁵ Marinou 2002, 232.

⁶ Marinou 2002, 199-213.

building workshop; thus, it dates to some time shortly after 1428.⁷ Marinou also observes that the addition of the gallery was not merely in imitation, but must have followed from the need to create a place where the Despot of Mystras and his court could follow the ceremonies, a custom also observed in churches of Constantinople. Furthermore, the gallery can be linked with the coronation of Constantine Palaiologos in Mystras, the last Byzantine Emperor, prior to his departure for Constantinople.⁸ This reconstruction has been attributed to the Metropolitan Matthew, whose name and monograms appear at several locations in the gallery as well as on the arcade of the west façade, following the example of the Pantanassa.⁹

Chatzidakis established that the church had been decorated in its lower, three-aisled part with mural paintings of high artistic quality dating from the end of the 13th century to the beginnings of the 14th century.¹⁰ These were the only paintings known to us until recently, for in 1991 research on the 15th century gallery proved that the central dome and the pendentives were also adorned with murals; hidden for a long time under the plaster that was covering them, the wall paintings were brought to light at that time, and were cleaned and restored under the supervision of the author ([FIG. 1](#)).¹¹

The dome is divided into eight arches, formed by ribs adorned with painted floral colonettes; its iconographic arrangement is organised into three zones, following closely the prototype of the Peribleptos of Mystras ([FIG. 2](#)).¹²

At the centre of the dome, the Pantocrator is depicted frontally against a dark blue background. Austere, he holds the closed Book of Gospels with his left hand, whilst he raises his right hand in benediction; he is clad in a brownish-red chiton adorned with an ochre-coloured clavus and a dark blue himation tightly girt around his right hand. The painting also depicts two medallions bearing the abbreviation IC XC (ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ). His halo is adorned with a cross and bears the inscription Ο ΩΝ, an inscription which occurs only rarely in depictions of the Pantocrator on domes, especially in the 2nd half of the 14th century.¹³

⁷ Marinou 2002, 229.

⁸ Marinou 2002, 237-8.

⁹ Marinou 2002, 237-8.

¹⁰ Chatzidakis 1979. Chatzidakis 2005, 34-45. Marinou 2002, 87-103.

¹¹ The work was undertaken by a group of conservators of the Greek Archeological Service with the supervision of the conservator of works of art Stavros Papageorgiou and the author's guidance as the director of the 5th Ephorate of the Byzantine Antiquities at that time. See Bakourou 1996, 120-1, pl. 60a.

¹² Mouriki 1971, 217-51, pls. 72-93. Chatzidakis 2005, fig. 47.

¹³ Papamastorakis 2001, 68-71.

In terms of iconography, the depiction of the Pantocrator follows a widely known type in Byzantine tradition, already established in the mosaic of the Pantocrator in the Daphni monastery in Athens.¹⁴ It later recurs in important monuments at Constantinople, such as the Pammakaristos¹⁵ and the Chora monastery (Kariye Djami),¹⁶ while in Laconia the type is attested, among others, in the Episkopi in Mani (c. 1200)¹⁷, in the church of St. Nicholas in the wider area of Monemvasia (second half of the 13th c.)¹⁸, in the Peribleptos in Mystras (1360-1380)¹⁹ and in the church of St. Nicholas at the village of Theologos near Sparta (1370-1400).²⁰

The next zone is occupied by eight full-length figures, depicted against a three-coloured background. To the east and west of the Pantocrator respectively, and on the same axis as Him, the Virgin and the winged figure of Saint John the Baptist (Prodromos) are depicted frontally, representing the Deësis. The Virgin is flanked by two full-length angels, paying homage, while four additional full-length frontal angels occupy the remaining surface of this zone.

The Virgin ([FIG. 3](#)) stands on a footstool, with her hands raised in supplication to the Pantocrator and a white handkerchief attesting to her noble descent hangs down from her belt, the holy symbol of Christianity. This portrayal of the Virgin is closely paralleled by her representation in the scene of the Assumption in the Pantanassa of Mystras.²¹ It is also similar to that in the dome of the Peribleptos ([FIG. 2](#))²², though diverging from it in the breast-high position of her hands.

It is widely known that the presence of the Virgin is associated with her role as the main means of the Incarnation of the Word of God and as an intercessor with Christ for the salvation of mankind. In this case, however, side-by-side with St John the Baptist (Ioannis Prodromos), she represents a Deësisto the Pantocrator.

The related examples of Deësis in the iconography of Byzantine domes that we know of are limited to three: one dating to the end of the 11th century, in the church of Virgin Veljusa, Stromnitza in Serbia (1080)²³ and two dating to the end of the 13th century, in the Omorfi Ekklesia at Galatsi, Athens²⁴ and in the church of

¹⁴ Millet 1899, 105, pl. 48, Chatzidakis 1994, nr 124.

¹⁵ Belting, Mango and Mouriki 1978, pl. I, fig. 30. Chatzidakis 1994, nr 169.

¹⁶ Underwood 1966, 2, pl. 43-4. Chatzidakis 1994, nr 183.

¹⁷ Drandakis 1995, 176, figs. 13-4, pl. X.

¹⁸ Drandakis 1979, 37-8.

¹⁹ Mouriki 1971, pl. 73.

²⁰ Papamastorakis 2001, pl. 52a. Kalopissi-Verti 2006, figs. 2-3.

²¹ Aspra-Vardavaki and Emmanuel 2005, fig. 54.

²² Mouriki 1971, pl. 74.

²³ Papamastorakis 2001, 110-1 with earlier bibliography.

²⁴ Vassilaki-Karakatsani 1971, 35-8, pls. 21, 56.

Saint Nicholas in the village of that name near Monemvasia, Laconia²⁵. In this last example in particular, the iconographic similarity also lies in the position of the Virgin and the Prodomos, in relation to the Pantocrator, in the presence of angels paying their homage to the Virgin, as well as in the depiction of the Prodomos holding the open inscribed scroll.

The winged, angel-like Prodomos ([FIG. 4](#)) extends his left hand to hold his decapitated head on a plate, a sceptre and a curved scroll bearing the inscription *Οὗτος ἐστὶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ζώντος*. He raises his right hand in benediction. His sheepskin is coloured dark-blue, while his himation is coloured in brown and brownish-red brushstrokes. It is difficult to find parallels to this representation, since, as already mentioned, the dome of Saint Nicholas, Monemvasia is the only depiction where he holds a scroll.

The two angels adjacent to the Virgin kneel piously with their hands raised in Deësis, covered in their brownish-red himations and dark blue chitons ([FIG. 5](#)). They share iconographic similarities with the angels before the Virgin in the Peribleptos ([FIG. 2](#)).²⁶

The four frontal angels function as royal guards of honour for the Pantocrator ([FIGS. 6-7](#)). They are clad as military dignitaries, their drapery coloured in brownish-red and blue. Two of them bear the insignia of imperial authority, a sceptre and an orb, on which a cross is inscribed. Both their clothing and the sceptres they hold indicate the Pantocrator's absolute power. The other two hold spears in their right hands, whilst their left hands hold part of their himations. The two angels adjacent to the Pantocrator can be identified with Michael and Gabriel on his right and his left respectively, as normal. The identification of the remaining angels is not certain.

The representation of frontal angels on the dome is already known from the middle Byzantine era; but during the Paleologan period it continued in a small number of monuments.²⁷ For instance, in the church of St. Nicholas at Monemvasia, only two angels are depicted in half-figure to the north and to the south of the Pantocrator.²⁸ Their military costume, as well as the orb and the spear that each angel holds, which denote the sovereignty of the Pantocrator, are conventionally depicted. In the Metropolis, they are clothed in military dress, while in other known examples they are clad in imperial or archaic costume.

The third zone of the dome is occupied by 16 full-length high priests and prophets of the Old Testament, two on each pillar depicted in a range of poses

²⁵ Drandakis 1979, 37-8.

²⁶ Mouriki 1971, pl. 74.

²⁷ Papamastorakis 2001, 116-7.

²⁸ Drandakis 1979, 37-8.

([FIGS. 8-9](#)). Samuel holds the horn, while the remaining 15 hold curved inscribed scrolls. Among them, David, Solomon, Moses, Habakkuk, Zacharias, and Amos can be identified. David's scroll bears the inscription *Ἀκουσον θύγατερ καὶ κλῖνον τὸ οὖς σου...* (Psalms 44:11), Moses' reads *Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν* (Genesis 1:1), Habakkuk's reads *Ὁ Θεὸς ἐκ Θαμνῶν ἤξει, καὶ ὁ ἅγιος ἐξ ὄρους κατασκίου δασέος* (Habakkuk 3:3) and Zachariah's reads *Χαῖρε σφόδρα, θύγατερ Σιών· κήρυσσε, θύγατερ Ἱερουσαλήμ* (Zachariah 9:9). Their drapery varies; sometimes they are clad in royal or Hebrew dress and other times in a chiton and a himation, as ancient philosophers. Their drapery is coloured in tones of dark blue, brownish red and dark brown.

The joint presence on the dome of prophets and high priests together with the Pantocrator is well-attested from the middle Byzantine period, in the monastery at Daphni for example.²⁹ Already prevalent in the 13th century, this theme also recurs in the late-Byzantine era, as in the Peribleptos³⁰ and in the church of St. Nicholas near Monemvasia³¹, to mention only two examples from the Despotate of the Morea. On their inscribed scrolls they state a variety of messages, either referring to the Pantocrator, as on the scroll of Moses, or to the Virgin, as on the scroll of David. In addition, the Virgin is prefigured by Samuel's horn.

The four pendentives figure the four Evangelists in their traditional places, clad in chitons and himations in tones of dark blue and brownish red ([FIGS. 10-13](#)). Inscriptions bearing their names are not extant. However, the identity of the Evangelist Matthew is certified by the nearby presence of an angel ([FIG. 11](#)), while the Evangelist John dictates the Gospel to his disciple Prochoros ([FIG. 13](#)).

With the exception of John, who is depicted against a rocky background, denoting the landscape of Patmos, all the other Evangelists appear in front of interesting, tall buildings; they are seated on wooden furniture close to a lectern, in the process of writing their Books of the Gospel. In fact, one of them sharpens his pencil realistically, just as in the scene in the Pantanassa.³²

In terms of style we note the following:

The figures on the two upper zones are rendered with a hieratic stillness, and appear to gesticulate little. The figures composing the well-organised chorus that surrounds the Pantocrator have their powerful bodies clothed in rich, multi-folded draperies. The series of prophets on the third zone, however, is partly differentiated by means of the bodies' postures and the movement, conveyed by the curved scrolls, as well as by some of them raising their hands to the

²⁹ Millet 1899, 105, pl. 48, Chatzidakis 1994, nr 124.

³⁰ Mouriki 1971, pls. 72, 76-89.

³¹ Drandakis 1979, 38.

³² Aspra-Vardavaki and Emmanuel 2005, fig. 66.

Pantocrator. Overall, the general impression of the composition, including that of the Evangelists, is static.

In terms of the way faces are rendered, the artist has selected from a range of physiognomies: in his portrait, the Pantocrator is depicted with an oval face, with a long, thin nose and modelled hair, dominated by linear, almond-shaped eyes. The undercoat is dark olive-brown; upon it are laid ochre and brown-red and the luminous flesh strokes are limited to the centre of the face. Parallel white highlights are drawn square with the forehead and the eyes' edges, and vertically on the nose. Sidelong lights are also drawn along the firm neck and the well-shaped fingers of the figure.

The intense shading characterising the figure of the Pantocrator can be compared to the shading on his face in the donors' portrait in the church of St. Paraskevi, at Geraki (1430/1, [FIG. 14](#)).³³ In both cases the highlighted parts are deliberately limited to the centre of the figure's face. There is of course a difference in the Mystras painting in terms of the intensity of the brush-strokes by which the highlights have been drawn and in terms of the selection of other, warmer colours.

The bearded figures of prophets and high priests on the dome at Mystras have been shaped by the same artist's hand that painted the Pantocrator. The same artist can also be traced in the beardless young figures, as for instance in the angel turned to the Virgin, and in the prophet Amos, who are characterised by large faces, round chins, thin noses and massive lips. The same characteristics are attested in the iconography of paintings from the wider area of Laconia, as indicated in the portrait of the donors in the church of St. Paraskevi in Geraki.

The archangel identified as Michael stands out among the group of frontal angels. The dark undercoat occupies a smaller area of the surface of his face, rendering it warmer and more illuminated. There is also an expressionistic tendency in the dark shadowing around the eyes and the white highlights, setting apart or encompassing parts of the face and resting denser on the hair. This way of rendering the face finds parallels in figures from Geraki: in the representation of St. George in the church of Zoodochos Pigi³⁴ and of the archangel Gabriel in the church of the Taxiarches (c. 1430).³⁵

The tall, thin figures with small heads and bent necks also find parallels in the style of paintings at Geraki. For example, we can mention once more the figures in the representation of the donors in the church of St. Paraskevi at Geraki ([FIG.](#)

³³ Dimitrokallis 2001, figs. 268, 270.

³⁴ Dimitrokallis 2001, figs. 246, 248.

³⁵ Dimitrokallis 2001, figs. 327-8.

14), as well as the winged Prodomos and Jesus in the scene of Christ Helkomenos in the church of Zoodochos Pigi.³⁶

Drapery folds are rendered by means of a system of sidelong, curved and rectilinear strokes, which often create geometrical shapes, bringing to the fore the figure's body, volume and posture. It seems that in some figures the mannerism is more marked, as in the angels holding orbs, in some of the prophets and the Evangelists, where the drapery forms folds on the thighs as well as angular folds, bringing their bodies to the fore. Similar angular folds are found in the Hodegetria³⁷ and in the Pantanassa³⁸ at Mystras. In the Metropolis, however, the folds are marked by some harshness compared to the monuments just mentioned and indicate a later date.

The graphic detail of the way the angel holds his chlamys with one hand beside his body also follows Paleologan examples, such as those in the Chora monastery in Constantinople.³⁹

The drapery in the Metropolis is painted in both warm and cold tones, more often in dark brown or red combined with blue colours.

The scenes depicting the four Evangelists are dominated by the vertical axis, which defines the pivotal centre of the triangular pendentives. The rocky natural landscape occurs in only one scene, the one with Ioannis Prodomos (the Baptist), while in all the other scenes the background is architectural, consisting of simple buildings with gabled tiled roofs and lateral walls, as found in the Pantanassa.⁴⁰

To sum up the above in terms of the iconographic themes on the dome of the Metropolis in Mystras, the following observations can be made:

The artist revisits an established theme found on the domes of Paleologan churches, suggesting specific iconographic similarities with the churches of the Peribleptos and the Pantanassa which are also at Mystras itself, yet greater similarities to the church of St. Nicholas in the village of that name at Monemvasia. As far as style is concerned, we have pointed to an interesting similarity with monuments at Geraki, the St. Paraskevi church, as well as to the churches of the Taxiarches and of Zoodochos Pigi. The art of these three churches has been attributed to a painting workshop active in Geraki around 1431, the year when the church of Zoodochos Pigi was decorated.⁴¹ The themes also present similarities to certain monuments at Mystras, the Hodegetria and Pantanassa churches.

³⁶ Dimitrokallis 2001, figs. 253a, 256.

³⁷ Chatzidakis 2005, fig. 36, 39-40. *The City of Mystras* 2001, fig. 170.

³⁸ Aspra-Vardavaki and Emmanuel 2005, fig. 126.

³⁹ Underwood 1966, 3, pl. 423.

⁴⁰ Aspra-Vardavaki and Emmanuel 2005, fig. 64-66.

⁴¹ Kalopissi-Verti 1988, 194, Papageorgiou 1990, 69, Papageorgiou 2005, Papageorgiou 2007.

Evaluating the data thus presented, the dating of the decoration of the dome in the Metropolis at Mystras can be placed in the second trigintennium of the 15th century, after the murals of the Pantanassa of Mystras. During this period domes are usually decorated with more modern themes, most frequently the Divine Liturgy, but in the Metropolis of Mystras the sovereignty of the Pantocrator and of His Deësis is dominant.⁴² The achievement of the salvation of the human race through the Incarnation of God's Word and the interceding Virgin have a special symbolism and are politically timely. It also constitutes the sole theme on the upper storey of the Metropolis, a church whose decoration was never completed.⁴³ It was possibly the tragic events in Constantinople in 1453, and in Mystras in 1460, combined the financial crisis, which prevented its completion.

It would not be far-fetched to associate the oral tradition about the coronation of Constantine Paleologos as Emperor at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mystras - where the relief of double-headed eagle, a symbol of the Paleologan dynasty, can be found⁴⁴ - with the historical testimony of Georgios Sphratzis, who states that royal delegates in Constantinople *εἰς βασιλέα στέψωσι τὸν δεσπότην κυρ Κωνσταντῖνον...τῇ ἑκτῇ Ἰανουαρίου* ('they will crown as King the Despot Constantinos...on the 6th of January').⁴⁵

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⁴² Papamastorakis 2001, 316-25.

⁴³ Marinou 2002, 87, 238.

⁴⁴ Kavvadia-Spondyli 1990, 48-57, pls. 18-20. *The City of Mystras* 2001, fig. 49.

⁴⁵ *CSHB* 1838, III.I, 205, 17-9.

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