

YOANNA PLANCHETTE, *La chapelle médiévale du monastère de Bačkovo (Bulgarie). Un monument exceptionnel reconsidéré (Chemins de la mémoire)*. Paris: L'Harmattan 2020. 555 pp., 206 colour illustrations. – ISBN 978-2-343-20441-3 (€ 49.00)

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One hundred years after ANDRÉ GRABAR's visit during the summer of 1920,¹ the mediaeval frescoed church near Bachkovo in southern Bulgaria has received fresh scholarly treatment. Needless to say, this neither cancels earlier studies nor precludes further research. The small format of the author's photographs (pp. 494–547) makes them a poor substitute for those published after the murals' latest cleaning.² PLANCHETTE notes that her predecessor ALEXANDER GRISHIN found many inscriptions inside the building 'in a better state than now' (p. 20) and that her reading of them owes a lot to his.³ The longest such text must, she thinks, refer to a small section of images supposedly added at some point ca. 1200 (p. 274): 'This most venerable church was painted (ἀνιστορήθη) above and below (ἄνω καὶ κάτω) by the hand (διὰ χειρὸς) of the painter John Iberopoulos (Ἰωάννου ἱστοριογράφου Ἰβηροπούλου)...'.⁴ There is also a distinct second layer of murals, hesitantly deemed to be 'plutôt du XIIIe siècle... ou probablement même du XIVe siècle' (p. 215).⁵ The bulk of the

1. ANDRÉ GRABAR, *Роспись церкви-костницы Бачковского монастыря*. Известия на Българския археологически институт 2 (1923–24) pp. 1–68 with pls i–xi.

2. ELKA BAKALOVA et al., *The Ossuary of the Bachkovo Monastery*. Plovdiv 2003.

3. ALEXANDER GRISHIN, *The Bačkovo Ossuary Frescoes of 1074–1083*. Canberra 1980. It is very hard to find a copy of this doctoral dissertation.

4. A drawing and transcription of the Greek text were first published by IVAN GOSHEV, *Нови данни за историята и археологията на Бачковския манастир*. Годишник на Софийския университет. Богословски факултет 8 (1930–31) pp. 341–390, at p. 350. The latest publication, accompanied by a photograph, is MARIA LIDOVA, *Manifestations of Authorship. Artists' Signatures in Byzantium*. Venezia Arti 26 (2017) pp. 89–106, at p. 96. See also the drawing in ELKA BAKALOVA, *Бачковската костница*. Sofia 1977, p. 128.

5. The presence of this second layer was first noted in print by LILIANA MAVRODINOVA, *За датата на стенописите в Бачковската костница*. Годишник на Софийския университет „Св. Климент Охридски“. ЦСВП „Иван Дуйчев“ 83 (1991) pp. 243–251, at pp. 244–245, 250 n. 5.

wall-painting is assigned a date between the late eleventh and mid-twelfth centuries (p. 91).⁶ PLANCHETTE cannot make up her mind if the church was dedicated to the Virgin, to St George, or to St John the Baptist (p. 379). These are all minor points.

The author rightly calls her chosen monument ‘exceptional’: other funerary structures of the same type do survive from the Byzantine Middle Ages (pp. 330–338)⁷ but none retain a lot of wall-paintings.⁸ In order to ‘develop a reading of cult images in their iconographic context’ (p. 28), PLANCHETTE compares the Bachkovo frescoes with those of sixteen other churches from the ninth through fourteenth centuries (pp. 345–377).⁹ Like the one at Bachkovo, those served as places of burial – yet being buried there was a special privilege. (Several texts document the situation: ‘bringing the coffin with his corpse to this our church in the monastery... we have laid him in our family grave’; ‘she will have a place in the exonarthex for the burial of her remains, making her own tomb according to her own wishes’; ‘I request for him to be buried in a stone coffin, in grand style, [under] a rubble vault with appropriate painting’; ‘I wish the tomb to be divided from the entire narthex by the bronze railing that I mentioned earlier’, and so on.)¹⁰ At Bachkovo, on the other hand, the bare bones of all deceased monks would be periodically dug up from the adjacent graveyard

6. Cf. IRINA ORETSKAIA, *On the Style of the Bachkovo Ossuary Frescoes*. *Зорграф* 42 (2018) pp. 37–54. The somewhat vague conclusions at which this author arrives do not contradict PLANCHETTE’s dating. MAVRODINOVA, *За датата на стенописите*, pp. 243–249, argues for a date in the second quarter of the twelfth century.

7. E.g. the small two-storey churches at Othta Eklesia (Gürcüce) and Bambora, both datable to the tenth century: ANDREI VINOGRADOV, *Христианское зодчество после арабов: в поисках новой идентичности. Абхазское царство, Тао-Кларджетия, Карли и Кахетия*. In: *Polystoria. Зодчие, конунги, понтифики в средневековой Европе*. Moscow 2017, pp. 111–173, at 127; ANDREI VINOGRADOV – DENIS BELETSKII, *Бамборский храм и проблема «купольного зала» в Византии и на Кавказе*. *Российская археология* (2012) № 3, pp. 97–108, at pp. 98–99 and 107.

8. The sole exception seem to be the fourteenth-century murals in the Chiladari ossuary on Mount Athos, which PLANCHETTE mentions in passing on pp. 336–337.

9. Ayvali Kilise and Yılınlı Kilise in Capadocia, St Stephen in Kastoria, the Παναγία τῶν Χαλκέων in Thessaloniki, the Αφεντικό in Mistra, the former monasteries of Pammakaristos and Chora in Istanbul, the Savior’s Church at Nereditsa near Novgorod, the crypt of the Hosios Loukas Monastery, the hermitage of St Neophytos at Paphos, the churches in Boyana, Mileševa, Sopoćani, and Kintsvisi, the Annunciation Chapel at Udabno, the funerary chapel at Khobi.

10. JOHN THOMAS – ANGELA CONSTANTINIDES HERO (eds), *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents. A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders’ Typika and Testaments*. Washington DC 2000, pp. 525, 704, 823, 839.

and stacked on the building's lower floor – in a manner probably similar to what PLANCHETTE's last illustration (p. 555) shows as still customary on Mount Athos.¹¹ Two frescoes that faced the brethren's assorted skeletons depict a bishop, a priest, and a deacon performing a memorial service, and Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ez 37:1–14). Neither scene has a parallel in Byzantine monumental art.

The 'reevaluation' announced in the book's title is triple. First, PLANCHETTE's description of the Bachkovo murals (pp. 92–286) is more detailed, more analytical, and more complete than earlier ones. (Even so, her text deals exclusively with iconography. There is absolutely no discussion of style.) Second, PLANCHETTE questions the existence of a distinct type of two-storey 'Bulgarian funerary church' defined back in the day by GRABAR:¹² the three buildings which supposedly represent this type turn out to be structurally and functionally different from one another (pp. 317–322). Third, comparison with related monuments aims 'to fill a large gap' in the scholarship by showing how hope for salvation was represented in the visual culture of the Eastern Mediterranean (pp. 29, 345–377).

Perhaps inevitably, the volume includes a bit of 'the otiose matter that is commonly added to doctoral theses to increase their bulk' (pp. 15–70, 291–308).¹³ Its alphabetical index is excellent (pp. 461–468). PLANCHETTE incidentally reports (p. 57 n. 113) one very curious piece of information: an Armenian Gospel book from AD 966 was formerly kept at the Bachkovo Monastery.¹⁴ Another aside of hers is somewhat misleading: a chapel in

11. The photograph was taken by MARTIN MITOV. See also DIMITRIS TSOUGARAKIS (ed. and tr.), *The Life of Leontios, Patriarch of Jerusalem (The Medieval Mediterranean 2)*. Leiden 1993, p. 55: 'In order to keep the memory of death his constant companion, many times as the day was breaking he stole out of his cell and went to the common cemetery of the brethren; there he took his clothes off, and with them took off all fear of the soul's cowardice, and taking spiritual courage he put himself, as a voluntary corpse, in one of the coffins in which the remains of the departed were kept. And he stayed there almost all day long, without anyone knowing what he did. And what did he do? Nothing but throw himself into wails and make the bodies in the sepulchre drenched with his tears...'

12. ANDRÉ GRABAR, *Българские церкви-гробницы*. Известия на Българския археологически институт 1 (1921–22) pp. 103–135.

13. CYRIL MANGO, *The Brazen House. A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace in Constantinople* (Arkaeologisk-kunsthistoriske meddelelser 4, 4). Copenhagen 1959, p. 5.

14. ΜΑΝ'Ο ΣΤΟΙΑΝΟΒ, *Опис на гръцките и други чуждоезични ръкописи в Народната библиотека „Кирил и Методий“*. Sofia 1973, p. 187. This manuscript must have entered the Bulgarian National Library in 1892. An older catalogue describes it as be-

the southwest corner of the monks' living quarter is claimed as an ossuary (p. 74) but was actually built for prayer in wintertime, when the main church was difficult to heat.¹⁵ One might also note a trivial detail: the bibliography, which is very complete and extensive, includes a few garbled words (царквата, български погребални обичай) thoughtlessly converted from Latin script back into Cyrillic: it is strange that the author, née TSVE-TANOVA, writes French so well but should have lost grip of her native language.

All in all, this is a very useful and reasonably priced book. Every research library ought to have a copy of it.

Keywords

Bačkovо; ecclesiastical architecture

ing of unknown provenance: ВЕН'О ТSОНЕВ, Опис на ръкописите и старопечатните книги на Народната библиотека в София. Vol. I. Sofia 1910, p. 517 (cat. 580/163).

15. ГОШЕВ, Нови данни (n. 4 above), pp. 361, 363–364. According to that article, the winter chapel dates from 1719.