



Byzantine Painting from the west coast of the Black Sea

Summary :

The elements preserved today do not allow a clear view of the stylistic trends of painting from the west coast of Black Sea during this period. However, we may assume that the Byzantine influence, notably the Constantinopolitan trends, was ample until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The influence of some other, more archaistic stylistic trends, can also be traced. As for the 16th-17th centuries, the influence of the Cretan School is visible.

Date

9th-18th c.

Geographical Location

west coast of Black Sea

1. Introduction

During Antiquity many Greek towns were founded on the Black Sea's west coast which would continue to play an important role in terms of cultural developments. The most important of these cities were [Odesos](#) (mod. Varna), [Mesembria](#) (Nessebăr), [Apolonia](#) (Sozopol). In the Middle Ages they were important urban centers holding strong relations with the Byzantine capital, [Constantinople](#), as well as the Bulgarian ones – Pliska, Preslav (in the 9th-10th c.) and Veliko Tărnovo (in the 13th-14th c.).

Archeological excavations reveal many richly decorated churches and monasteries in and around the Black Sea towns. Unfortunately only the architectural decoration (capitals, cornices, fragments of marble [iconostases](#)) and some liturgical vessels survived. From the early frescoes few remains have been preserved nowadays.

2. Medieval monuments (9th – end of 15th c.)

2.1. Sozopol

Fragments of painting of unknown date were found during the archeological excavations in the old church of the Virgin Eleousa (of Tenderness) in the monastery of St John the Baptist on the island near Sozopol. The church was built in the late 5th or the early 6th century and was destroyed in the early 9th century.

2.2. Nessebăr

The early decoration of the church of St. Stephan in [Nessebăr](#) is practically lost. Neither the date, nor the iconographic programme can be specified.

Some traces of frescoes are still discernible in the [bema](#) of the church of St. John Aleitourgetos in Nessebăr. The images of Church Fathers, the colors of which have faded off for the most part, probably date to the second part of the 14th century.



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An image of unknown donor in the church of St. John the Baptist in Nessebär also dates to the 14th century. According to A. Grabar, the image is typical, from stylistic point of view, of the archaic trend of Balkan painting of this period. The closest parallels are the frescoes from Zemen monastery and the frescoes in the ossuary of the Bačkovno monastery, commissioned by the Bulgarian king John Alexander.¹

2.3. Aladja manastir

The rock-cut monastery of Aladja, near Varna, is one of the most interesting monuments, not only because of the impressive landscape, but also from an artistic point of view.² We have information about two layers of frescoes in the main church: the first one from the end of 12th – beginning of the 13th century, while the second from the end of the 13th century. Unfortunately only copies of them exist today.³

The chapel on the upper storey of Aladja manastir preserves frescoes that are the subject of discussion. Some scholars claim that they date to the late 13th - early 14th century.⁴ According to others they date to the mid-15th century.⁵ We consider that they were painted during the last quarter of the 14th century. The ceiling of the chapel is adorned with a scene of *Majestas Domini*. Christ is represented in a *mandorla* supported by four angels. He is sitting on a rainbow and is giving blessing with two hands. The four corners of the scene were occupied by medallions, of which only the three can be seen now; they contained the figures of the Virgin and the apostles Peter and Paul. On the walls of the chapel images of saints – monks and hermits – were depicted.

3. Post-Byzantine Painting

3.1. 16th – 17th century

The next wall paintings date to the late 16th- early 17th century, when in a relatively short period various churches in Nessebär and the monastic church on the island of St. Anastasia (Bolshevik) in the Burgas bay were decorated. All these frescoes were made by artists and workshops coming probably from the island of [Patmos](#).

The most important of their works are the wall paintings in the church of St. Stephan in Nessebär. The name of St. Stephan is newly adopted and exists only since the 19th century. In the 16th century the church was dedicated to the Virgin Zoodohos Pege (mean. the «life-giving source») and was the cathedral church of Nessebär. That is why it is known as the New Metropolitan church. In 1598/99 the metropolitan Christophoros undertook reconstruction and redecoration of the building, having collected donations by all the habitants. A new annexe was added in the west part and all the interior was adorned with frescoes very well preserved until nowadays. The decoration is very rich as regards the repertoire of the subjects and scenes. Apart from the usual *Dodekaorton cycle* and the cycle of the Christ's Passion we have also a *ministry cycle*, a cycle of the Feasts according to the Pentekostarion, a cycle of scenes from the Virgin's childhood, the cycle according to the Eothina and many other scenes and images. The frescoes were painted by three artists familiar with the Cretan painting trend of the same period. They came probably from Patmos, and they have even painted an interesting panoramic view of the island with the monastery of St. John the Theologian and the cave of the Apocalypse inside the New Metropolitan Church in Nessebär.⁶

Two painters of this team continued to work in Nessebär and its area for more than ten years. They made the frescoes the church of Sv. Spas (Christ Savior) and of St. George the Little (or the Younger), as well as in the monastic church



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on the island of St. Anastasia (Bolshevik). All these monuments are relatively small. The iconographic programmes are traditional.

The frescoes in the church of Sv. Spas (Christ Savior) in Nessebăr have been preserved in a good condition. They date to 1609. At that time the church was dedicated to the Virgin of the Ascension.⁷

The church of St. George the Little (or the Younger) was destroyed in 1946, but a large part of the frescoes had been detached before this date. Today they are exhibited in the National Archeological Museum and the National Art Gallery of Sofia.⁸

Insignificant fragments of late 16th – early 17th century works of artists from the same workshop from Patmos survive in the monastic church on the island of St. Anastasia (Bolshevik).⁹

Finally, a fresco of St. Marina in the church of St. John the Baptist in Nessebăr dates to the 17th century.

3.2. 18th century

Some frescoes from the 18th century are attested in the churches of St. Stephan, St. George the Old and St. Clement in Nessebăr. They are of inferior quality compared with the wall paintings from the 16th - 17th century.

In St. Stephan the new decoration was carried out after the construction of an **exonarthex** on the west part of the church. The entire eastern wall of the exonarthex is adorned with a Last Judgement composition.

St. George the Old, decorated in 1704, does not exist nowadays. The church was destroyed in 1946. A number of its murals, which had been detached before its destruction, are exhibited in the National Archeological Museum and the National Art Gallery of Sofia.

The church of St. Clement in Nessebăr was originally dedicated to the Archangels. Today only the east part of the edifice is still standing. The frescoes adorning it are typical of the bema iconographic programmes.

4. Portable icons

A large number of portable icons come from the Black Sea west coast region. Most of them were originally in Nessebăr. We have also icons coming from [Balchik](#), Varna, Balgarevo, [Ahtopol](#), Sozopol and other places. Today these icons are exhibited in the Department of Old Bulgarian Art / the Crypt of the National Art Gallery, in the Ecclesiastical Museum of History and Archeology, in the National Archeological Museum of Sofia, the regional art galleries of Burgas and Plovdiv, and the regional historical museums of Varna, Nessebăr and Sozopol. The icons date from the 12th to the 19th century. Apart from their artistic qualities, some of them are of important historical value. For example, a silver-gilded icon of the Virgin with Child Christ was donated, in 1342, to the Nessebăr monastery of the Virgin Eleousa, by the uncle of the Bulgarian king John Alexander. An icon of St Stephan was commanded by Demetrios Kantakouzenos, descendant of the imperial Byzantine family and father of the famous Michael Kantakouzenos (Sheitanoglu).



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5. Evaluation

The surviving evidence do not allow a clear impression of the stylistic trends of painting from the west coast of Black Sea during the medieval period. However, we may assume that the Byzantine influence, notably the Constantinopolitan trends, was ample until the [fall of Constantinople](#) in 1453. The influence of some other, more archaic stylistic trends, can also be traced. As for the 16th -17th centuries, the influence of the Cretan School is visible in the monumental painting in the region, in terms of both style and iconography: the Temptations of Christ, the Massacre of the Innocents, the Panorama of the island Patmos and the images of Saint Catherine and Saint Phanourios, all in the church St. Stephan, are eloquent examples of this.

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Aladzha Monastery

<http://www.bulgarian-tourism.com/aladja/galery7.htm>

Glossary :

bema

The area at east end of the naos in Byzantine churches, containing the altar, also referred to as the presbetry or hierateion (sanctuary). In these area take place the Holy Eucharist.

Christ in Glory (Majestas Domini)

Συμπληρώστε την περιγραφή στην γλώσσα μετάφρασης

Dodekaorton

The twelve important Great Feasts of the liturgical year: the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, the Baptism of Christ, the Transfiguration, the Entry into Jerusalem, Raising of Lazarus, Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Dormition of the Virgin and Pentecost. During the middle and late Byzantine period, the Dodekaorton was represented in a series of scenes that were included in the typical iconographic programme of a byzantine church.

exonarthex (outer narthex)

The transverse vestibule or portico preceding the narthex of the church.

mandorla (doxa)

(and mandrole) A round, elliptical or rhomboid bright aureole that encloses the whole figure of Christ, or more rarely the figure of the Virgin, in some representations

ministry cycle

An iconographic cycle compiling scenes of the miracles of Christ.

templon or iconostasis

A structure separating the sanctuary from the main church. At first, it simply divided the nave from the presbytery, but later it became higher, with small columns and an epistyle. From the 11th century onwards, icons were placed between the templon columns and, somewhat later, icons were also placed above the epistyle, thus forming the iconostasis. The templon were originally from marble. Wooden iconostases appeared from the 13th century.