NOTES ON THE PAINTED ARCHITECTURAL DECOR OF "THE CHURCH" IN IVANOVO

Patrick LECAQUE (Kirksville, Missouri)

"Historians of Byzantine art, and others who have written about it, have long noted that pictorial compositions in Byzantine art often contain representations of architecture in the background. But the scrutiny of these representations has usually gone no further than noticing their existence."[1]

Listed among the UNESCO World Heritage sites, the paintings of "The Church" of Ivanovo (fig. 1) in northern Bulgaria have attracted the attention of
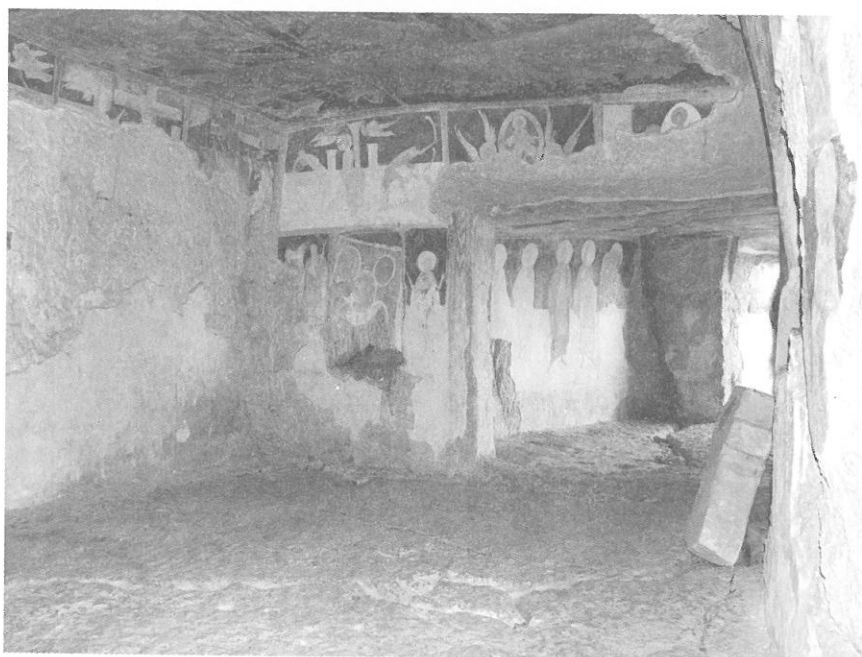

fig. 1

---

[1] Ćurčić, Sl. and Hadjitryphonos, E. Architecture as icon: perception and representation of architecture in Byzantine art. Princeton, 2010, 3.

many Byzantine scholars in Bulgaria and elsewhere[2]. Among the most striking features of the paintings of this rock-cut church is the rich architectural background to the paintings. Yet, one could argue that the architectural background of the paintings has not yet received all the attention that it deserves. Unlike painted buildings of previous periods that are often very basic but realistic constructions, architectural decors of the Palaiologian period tend to represent elaborate structures inspired by Greco-Roman architecture. The paintings of Ivanovo go beyond even the most complex representations of the time. The buildings are constructed with a clear decorative purpose which results in structures that are at times quasi-abstract and at other times nearly surrealist.

In the Annunciation (fig. 2) a large concrete beam, serving no apparent purpose, hangs at an odd angle from a roof, and rests on a thin column; in Christ before Annas and Caiaphas there is a slightly more complex structure with a portico

fig. 2

[2] Particularly relevant for this article are: **Grabar, A.** La peinture religieuse en Bulgarie. Paris, 1928; **Grabar, A.** Les fresques d'Ivanovo et l'art des Paléologues. — Byzantion, fasc. 2, 1957, 581—590; and **Velmans, T.** Les Fresques d'Ivanovo et la peinture byzantine à la fin du Moyen Âge. — Journal des Savants, 1965, Vol. 1, № 1, 358—412.
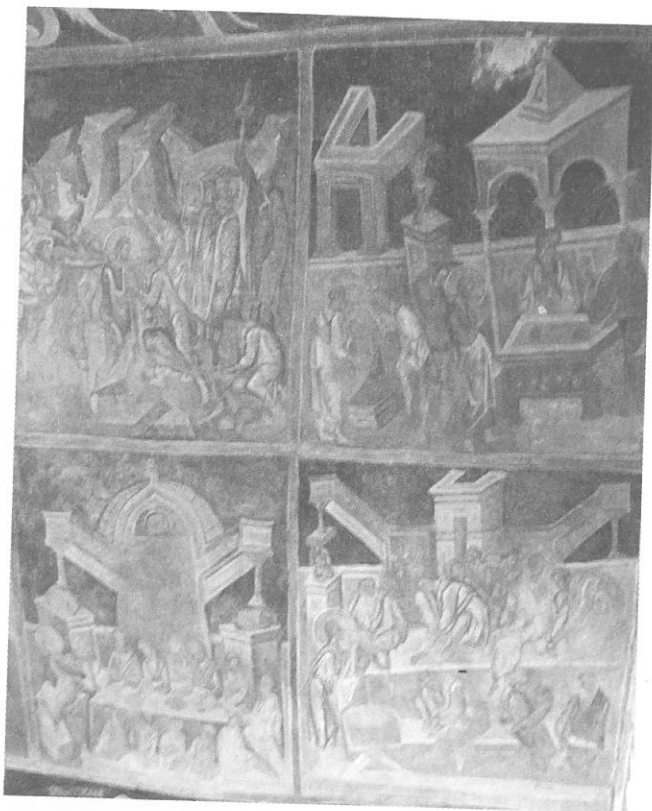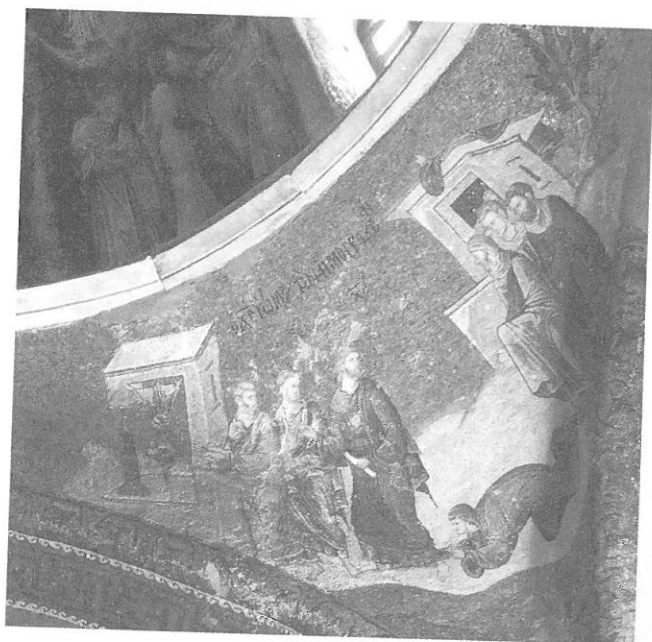
fig. 3

fig. 4

built on a wall that occupies half of the height of the background. The front of the portico has two large pillars, but the rest of the construction does not conform to any of the canons of architecture. Behind the top of the left side of the portico rises a concrete beam, at a 45° angle. It is supported in the back by a thin square pillar. On the right side of the portico an even larger concrete beam stretches out, but at a slightly lesser angle. This one, as we will see below in more details, is supported by a caryatid standing on a square pillar. However, we would expect that caryatid and the pillar it rests upon to be behind the wall. After all, it supports a beam that is behind the portico that is on the wall, but the artist moved the caryatid and its pillar in front of the wall; in Judas being paid thirty pieces of silver, there is a similar decorative sculpture: from the top of the wall that serves as a background sticks out a concrete beam at a 30° angle aimed towards the right and supported by a small square column; similar structures are found in Judas' betrayal, Peter's Denial, the Last Supper, the Washing of the Feet (fig. 3), and other. Similar "beams" already appear in the Menologion of Basil II[3], but they also appear frequently in mural decorations of the late 13th and 14th c. in Greece, Macedonia and Serbia, as well as in Constantinople (fig. 4)[4].

The decoration in "The Church" also contains details rarely found elsewhere in the fourteenth century. One of these rare elements is the caryatids that appear in the background of the Annunciation (fig. 2), Peter's Denial and Jesus before

[3] **Il menologio di Basilio II (cod. vaticano greco 1613).** Torino, 1907, fols. 73, 232, 233, 307, 322, 324, 339, 381, 398, 406, 409, 411, and 416.

[4] For example in the Dormition of the Virgin, at the Peribleptos of Mistra (1294/95), in **Ćurčić-Hadjitryphonos,** 94; at St. Clement of Ohrid (1295) in the in scenes of the Life of the Virgin and in the Dormition of the Virgin, see **Millet, G. and Frolow, A.** La peinture du Moyen Age en Yougoslavie (Serbie, Macédoine et Monténégro), fasc. 3, Paris, 1962, pls. 1: 1—2; 12:1; at St. Nikita near Čučer (ca. 1307) in Christ Healing a man with Dropsy, **Millet, G. and Frolow, A.** La peinture..., pl. 40,1; and at the King's church in Studenica (1313—14) in the Communion of the Apostles and in the representation of the Evangelist Luke, see **Millet, G. and Frolow, A.** La peinture..., pls. 54:2, and 57:2; in Christ Healing a Blind and Dumb Man and Christ Healing a Woman with a Flow of Blood in the mosaics of Kariye Djami. cf. **Underwood, P. A.** The Kariye Djami, T. 2. New York, 1966, 260 and 268; and XXX. A structure very similar to the "open arms" structure in the Washing of the feet is found is other mural paintings of the period, for example at the Hilandar Monastery in the Healing of the ten lepers, see **Millet, G.** Monuments de l'Athos. Paris, 1927,T.I., 75,2.

Caiaphas and Annas (fig. 5) and the Washing of the Feet (fig. 6). André Grabar who was the first scholar to describe and analyze the paintings of the "Church,"[5] established a parallel between the paintings of this church and the Menologion of Basil II, today at the Vatican Library, dating from the very beginning of the 11th c. But while there are statues in several scenes of the Menologion[6], there are no caryatids in the entire manuscript[7].

Few parallels exist to the caryatids of Ivanovo in Byzantine art, but there are some examples in Western art. An Ottonian miniature from the late eleventh century
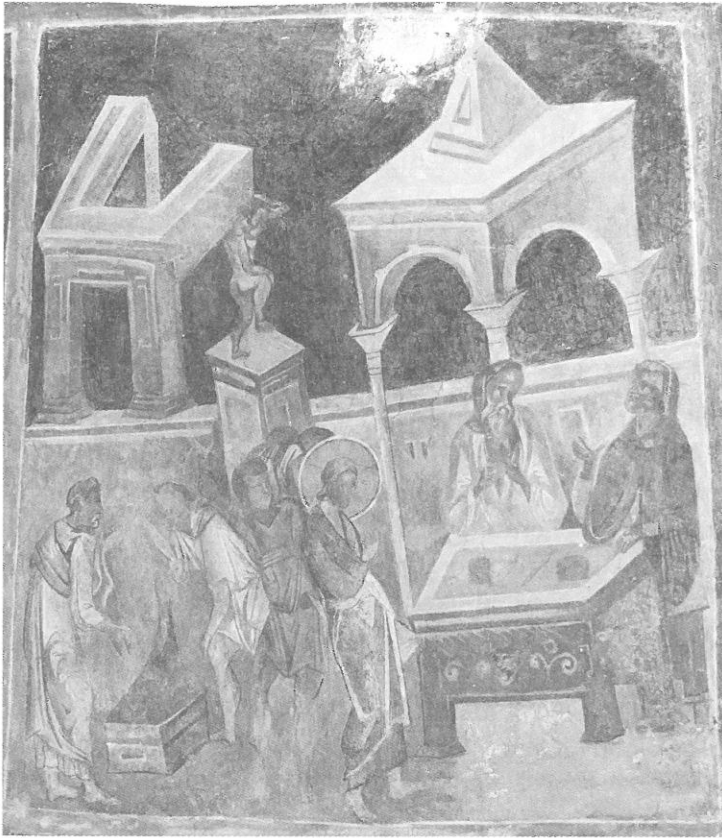

fig. 5

---

[5] **Grabar, A.** La peinture..., 233—246 (esp. 234).

[6] **Il menologio...**, fols. 46, 100, 105, 146, 154, 202, 283, 406; cf. **Grabar, A.** La peinture..., 234, note 8. The same type of statues appears in a 9th c. manuscript, see **Щепкина, М. В.** Миниатюры Хлудовской псалтыри, Москва, 1977, 117.

[7] **Velmans, T.** Les Fresques..., 399, and note 157 refers to folios 46 and 74 in the Menologion, but these folios have stand alone statues in full-length, not caryatids.

fig. 6

from Reichenau shows the Christ in the Tree of Life[8]. He is standing in a mandorla
holding in his right hand the globe of the universe and in his left hand the Tree of
Life. Above him, in a sphere attached to the mandorla, is God the Father. To his
right, and attached to the mandorla in the same manner, is the sun. The moon is
to his left. Below him a caryatid-like nude female in bust holds the mandorla, with
both of her arms raised. This caryatid is the personification of the water = the
Fountain of Life[9]. The mandorla is surrounded by the four symbols of the evangelists.
Each symbol is supported by identical caryatids. While the personification of the
water has long blond hair and fair skin, the four other caryatids have long, black
hair with bluish grey skin. Water flows from their waists. The text on the opposite
page identifies them as the four rivers of paradise[10]. It is interesting to note with A.

---

[8] Already mentioned by **Velmans, T.** Les Fresques…, 389. This manuscript
was kept in the Treasury of the cathedral of Bamberg, today at the Bayerische
Staatsbibliothek in Munich, cod. Lat. 4454, fol. 54. Cf. **Cetto 1950**, pl. 8; and
Underwood, P. A. The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels. — DOP,
Vol. 5, 1950, 125.

[9] **Cetto, A.-M.** Miniatures du Moyen Age, Lausanne, 1950, pl. 8.

[10] See also **Leclercq-Marx, J.** La sirène dans la pensée et dans l'art de
l'Antiquité et du Moyen Âge: du mythe païen au symbole chrétien, Bruxelles,
1997, 133—137.

Cetto[11], that the artist has represented the rivers of paradise as female, not as male, which will rarely happen afterwards. "But the interesting point is that these caryatids, symbols of the four rivers and supporters of the Evangelists are shown in the form of sirens. It might thus be assumed that the sense of this illumination is that the Evangelists have become the successors of the cosmic sirens who were the Platonic musicians of the spheres, and who, to quote Plato, "utter one sound, one note" and from whom there was "the concord of a single harmony."[12] In another manuscript at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, the Pericopes of Henry II, an illuminated manuscript made for Henry II, the last Ottonian Holy Roman Emperor (ca. 1002–1012 AD), there are two caryatids in the Presentation of Mary to the Temple, on the two columns on either side of the Virgin[13]. It is worth noting with Tania Velmans that the theme of the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple borrowed from Byzantine Art appears for the first time in Western Art in this manuscript[14].

But the closest parallel to the caryatids in Ivanovo is found in a Constantinopolitan icon from the beginning of the 14th c. today in the Museum of Ohrid (fig. 7)[15]. This two-sided processional icon with the Virgin Psychosostria (Redemptress) on one side and the Annunciation on the other side was apparently kept at the monastery of the Virgin Psychosostria in Constantinople. This monastery was bestowed to the archbishop of Ohrid at the beginning of the 14th century by the emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282–1328). It was probably transferred to Ohrid shortly afterwards[16]. The icon of the annunciation on the back side is

[11] **Cetto, A.-M.** Miniatures..., pl. 8.

[12] **Underwood, P. A.** The Fountain..., 125.

[13] **Cetto, A.-M.** Miniatures..., pl. 12; cited by **Velmans, T.** Les Fresques..., 3999, note 158.

[14] **Velmans, T.** Les Fresques..., 399, note 158.

[15] Mentioned by **Velmans, T.** Les Fresques..., 399, note 156; see **Talbot Rice, D.** Art of the Byzantine Era. London, 1963, pl. 89; **The Icon. The Byzantine Tradition in Europe, Russia, and the Near East through Seven Major Epochs.** New York, 1987, 72; **Балабанов К.** Иконите во Македонија, Скопје, 1995. **77;** **Babić, G.** Icons. Munich, 1998, 52—53; **Velmans, T.** Le style de l'icône et la règle constantinopolitaine. Les Balkans et la Russie (VI°—XV° siècle). — Le grand livre des Icônes. Sofia, 2002, 59 and fig 38; **Byzantium,** edited by Cormack, R. and Vassilaki, M. London, 2008, № 99 with a bibliography.

[16] **Babić, G.** Icons..., 50; **Evans, H.** Byzantium. Faith and Power (1261—1557). New York, 2004,179.

considered by many to be one of the best examples of Byzantine art during the Palaiologian renaissance, but I would argue that the artist had trouble balancing the space devoted to the angel and to the Virgin. A good example of a well-proportioned, balanced representation of the Angel and the virgin is the late 14th century icon of the Annunciation today at the holy Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai[17]. Although this icon is smaller (61 cm x 42, 2 cm) than the Ohrid icon (93 cm x 68 cm), the angel and the virgin are scaled down to allow space for the Virgin to sit comfortably in a large throne on the right of the icon, and to leave space between the angel and the virgin. In the Sinai's icon the angel is standing straight up, his right arm bent forward, but close to his body. His right leg is bent backward, but his other leg is straight. So the angel in the Sinai's icon takes less than a third of the width of the icon, while in the Ohrid's icon the angel's right arm is fully extended towards the Virgin, and his legs are wide apart. As a result he takes over half of the width of the icon. Thus the virgin, sitting on the right of the icon, is sitting in a space too narrow for her. She is sitting on a backless throne not under the shelter that is supposed to protect her from the sun[18], but in front of it because the shelter is not wide enough for her to fit in as we see in many other icons. The shelter itself consists of a concrete awning supported in the front by two columns. This is a very common architectural element in Byzantine art in the 14th c[19]. The right column is hidden by the seated Virgin. The left column rests on a rectangular pillar crowned by a green Corinthian capital. It supports an abacus. On the abacus rests a green (marble imitation) column. At the top of the column on top of a capital is a crouching atlante/caryatid (fig. 7) supporting another capital that holds the roof of the shelter. While the other column is not visible, a crouching atlante similar to the one on the left column is clearly visible above the head of the Virgin (fig. 7). It is a perfectly symmetrical composition. Both hold the capital on their shoulders with both arms raised, holding the capital above them in an identical position. Both are naked. Both are sitting one leg resting on the abacus below them horizontally bent inward, as one would if assuming a lotus position. That is to say that the atlante on the left column has his left leg bent inward, while the atlante on

---

[17] **Evans, H.** Byzantium..., № 246.

[18] See for example the Virgin fed by an Angel at Kariye Djami in **Underwood, P. A.** The Fountain..., 126 [92].

[19] For example in the mural paintings of Studenica (King's Church, 1313/14), see **Ćircović, S., Korać, V., and Babić, G.** Le monastère de Studenica, Belgrade, 1986, fig. 101 and more importantly fig. 110; also in Gračanica (1318—1321), see **Тодић, Бр.** Грачаница. Приштина, 1999, VI and 55; and at the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora in Constantinople (1315—1321), in the mosaics as well as in the frescoes, see **Underwood, P. A.** The Kariye Djami, Vol. 2, 86, 159—160, 268; vol. 3, 426,

fig. 7

the right column has his right leg bent inward. The other leg is also bent, but vertically. This is a different position from the atlante in the Washing of the Feet at Ivanovo – the other two are standing. In the Washing of the Feet the atlante/caryatid – it is impossible to determine the gender in this scene – is sitting in the lotus position with the right knee slightly raised. The right arm rests on the right knee. The left arm is along the left side of the body the hand touching the pillar below.

Another icon of the Annunciation from the end of the 14th c. today at the Tretyakov gallery offers an interesting parallel to the icon of Ohrid (fig. 8)[20]. Here,

[20] Лазарев, В. Н. История византийской живописи. Москва,1986, 165 and il. 545; **The Icon...**, 262; **Государственная Третьяковская Галерея. Древнерусское искусство X — начала XV века**, Москва, 1995, Т. 1, 172—173, № 72; **Velmans, T.** Le style de l'icфne..., 59.

too, the angel's right arm is fully extended towards the Virgin, and his legs are wide apart. But unlike the Ohrid's icon, he is not standing on a podium, and neither is the Virgin comfortably seated on a backless throne, her head bent forward. Her right arm is raised close to her body; only her hand is visible, turned towards the angel Gabriel. Her right arm hangs by her left side. Behind her is a building similar in many ways to the one in the Ohrid icon and yet different. The first story of the building is hidden by the seated Virgin. All decorative elements are to her right and above her. Above her head we can see two columns that support two beams that, in turn, support the roof. The columns are above the head of the Virgin, not behind her. The capitals are very similar in both icons – simplified Corinthian design -, but they are red, and so are the columns, in the Moscow icon, and green in the Ohrid icon. The roof is in the shape of a conch where in the Ohrid's icon it is flat. The inside of the roof is entirely decorated in the same way it is decorated in the Ohrid icon. Between the angel Gabriel and a Virgin we can see an extension of the building hidden behind the Virgin in the form of a gallery consisting of two arches of different height supported by two identical columns in marble, on golden bases, topped by identical capitals with mascarons. Above the arch supported by these columns is a tall, square column similar to the column supporting stylite saints in Byzantine art. But there is nothing on top of the column other than a little piece of a large, red curtain hanging between the roofs of the buildings. This type of decorative cloth has been widespread in Byzantine art since at least the 11th c. and is omnipresent in 14th c. paintings from icons and manuscripts to mural paintings.

One detail that is not immediately apparent in the Ohrid icon, but that was duly noted by V. N. Lazarev, is the representation of two statues of warriors on the wall behind the archangel Gabriel (fig. 9); one under an arcade right behind Gabriel, under his raised wing, the other under his extended right forearm[21]. These statues appear to be very similar to the ones found in several illustrations of the menologion of Basil II: standing warriors with a spear and a shields with a long cape but otherwise nude on fol. 46; three statues in a similar pose on a sarcophagus on fol. 105; five similar statues on a fountain on folio 146; seven more on another sarcophagus on fol. 154; one single statue on top of a building on fol. 202; another single statue on top of a building on fol. 283; and, finally, a single statue on a sarcophagus on fol. 406[22].

But the caryatids/atlantes of the paintings of Ivanovo are not direct copies of models from the antiquity with well-established proportions and elegant silhouette, usually standing in three-quarter or full length. These crouching atlantes are very

---

[21] Лазарев, В. Н. История..., ill. 516—517.

[22] **Menologio 1907**, fols. 46, 105, 146, 154, 202, 283, and 406.

fig. 8

fig. 9

close in style to the numerous examples found in Romanesque churches in Western Europe, in Italy and France in particular. Among the Romanesque sculptures of Auvergne, Zygmunt Świechowski has found two different categories of atlantes:[23] the pseudo-atlantes that are the most widespread and that represent naked characters seated with their legs sharply raised to touch their shoulders and reaching the abacus; the "authentic" atlantes are standing with their arms raised that support the abacus[24]. Another good example of these "authentic" atlantes is found in a series of three holy water basins in the department of Hautes Pyrénées in southern France from the beginning of the 13th c. These atlantes are dressed and support the top of the basin with their arms raised, or with their shoulders[25].

[23] **Świechowski, Z.** Sculpture romane d'Auvergne. Clermont Ferrand, 1973, 259-60, ill. 295—318.

[24] **Świechowski, Z.** Sculpture..., ills. 307—309.

[25] **Salvan-Guillotin, M.** Un groupe de bénitiers romans ornés d'Atlantes dans les Hautes-Pyrénées. – Archéologie du Midi médiéval. Tome 14, 1996. 175—179.

fig. 10

    The background of the Last Supper (fig. 10) consists of a very tall, plain, light
brown, building with no decoration or opening on the façade except for a small
window at the top. It takes up the entire vertical space of the background. The roof
is in the shape of a pointed arch, with a small decorative column on the ridge.
Each curved hip of the roof is lined by a curved grid consisting of two lines parallel
to the curvature of the roof, divided into 16 rectangles on each side. The grid is
light blue while the background of the entire scene is dark blue. Similar structures
are found in mural paintings of the 14th c. but are used to represent the stone coffer
roofs or ceilings already in use at the time of the Greeks and the Roman, not to
outline a building as it is the case here[26]. The same type of "skylight" is found in

---

[26] For this type of roof see for example the Nativity of the Virgin in the king's
church in Studenica **Millet, G., Frolow, A.** La peinture du Moyen Âge en Yougoslavie,
fasc. III. Paris, 1962, pl. 60, 1.
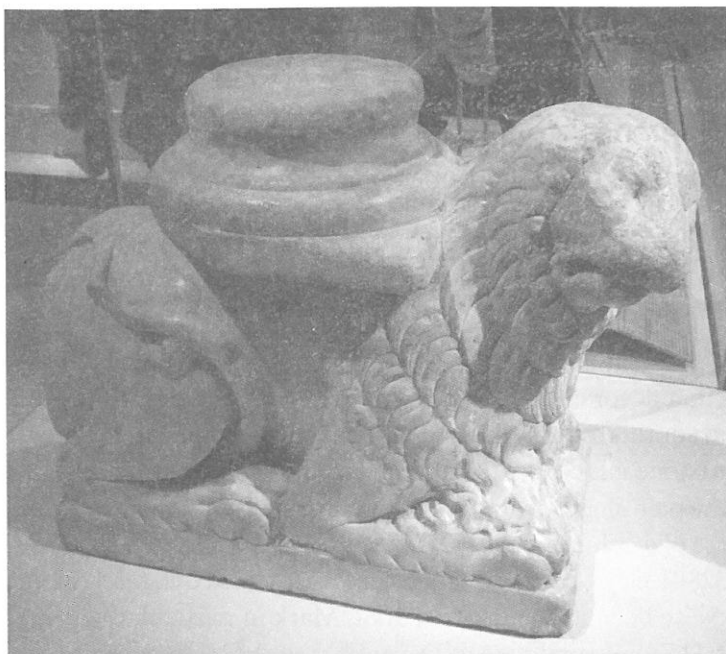
fig. 11

another scene which is almost entirely destroyed today[27]. But the most striking feature of this architectural background are two enormous concrete beams that look like wide-open arms. The beams rest on short columns. The design of this structure is very similar to the one in a scene from the Life of Joseph in the exonarthex of St Sophia in Ohrid, dating probably from 1313–14[28]. But in Ohrid this building is one of the architectural elements of the background, where here it overwhelms the entire scene.

The most unusual decorative element in this scene is the sculpted lion at the base of each column (fig. 10). Lions are not unknown as decorative elements in Byzantine art[29]; however this particular type of representation is unknown in

---

[27] Василиев, А. Ивановските стенописи, София, 1953, № 22, 33.

[28] **Millet, G.** La peinture du Moyen Âge en Yougoslavie, fasc. I. Paris, 1954, VIII and pl. 86, 2.

[29] See, as one of many examples, **The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture in the Byzantine era A. D. 843–1261**, Ed. By Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom. New York, 1997, 192, in the Vatican Octateuch from the 12th c., fol 473v. shows a lion head as the spout of a fountain on the wall of the House of Eglon, King of Moab.

Byzantine painting[30]. Although there are several examples of lion head capitals in Armenian manuscripts, for example[31], couchant lions as the one represented here are extremely rare.

The base of each column consists of a couchant lion lying on top of massive square pillars. But there are numerous examples of couchant lions in Romanesque art in Italy for example, such as the Campanian columns from the second half of the twelfth century today at the Victoria and Albert museum in London[32], or the first half of the thirteenth century Campanian couchant lion also at the V&A Museum in London (fig. 11)[33]. A decorative column at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore "probably came from a ciborium or pulpit [,]. The inlaid glass and stone fragments that decorate the column— called "cosmati" decoration— is typical of central and southern Italian design and occurs on columns, facades, tombs and even floors (stone inlay)."[34] Unfortunately, the lion base of that column is modern. Closer to the paintings of Ivanovo both in time and in place are examples of lions, one at a base of a column, the other as a capital in the church of the saint Savior in Dečani (1328–1335)[35]. As Jovanka Maksimović pointed out, many of the sculptural ideas that were born in Venice, and at St. Mark in particular, easily found their way first to Dalmatia and then to Dečani[36].

---

[30] **Grabar, A.** La peinture..., 234, note 9, refers to the lion on fol. 385 as a caryatid, but it is in fact a roaring lion on top of a large building, not a caryatid; Velmans sees in the capitals supported by the atlantes in the Ohrid's icon lion heads, but they appear to be mascarons, not lions.

[31] **Der Nersessian, S.,** Miniature Painting in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia from the Tenth to the Fourteenth century, Vol. II. Washington, 1993, on the canon table of a manuscript dated from 1166, ill. 3; cf. with **Mathews, T. F. and Sanjian, A. K.,** Armenian Gospel Iconography. The tradition of the Glajor Gospel. Washington, 1991. fig. 21b, in the illustration of a canon table in a manuscript dated from 1306; or an even more elaborate decorative scheme with multiple animals on capitals —including lions — in a portrait of Evangelist Luke, work of the second painter on page 298.

[32] **Pope-Hennessy, J.** Catalogue of Italian sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum. London, 1964, vol. III, [№ 4—9].

[33] **Pope-Hennessy, J.** Catalogue..., vol. III, [№ 10—11].

[34] http://art.thewalters.org/detail/16552/column-with-a-lion-at-the-base/ accessed on September 8, 2013.

[35] **Максимовић. J.** Српска средњовековна скулптура. Нови Сад, 1971, ills. 179—180 and 187.

[36] **Максимовић. J.** Српска..., 116; **Maksimović, J.** Tradition byzantine et sculpture romane sur le littoral adriatique. — Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta, 11, 1968, 93—98.

The painted architectural décor of "The Church" is clearly another example of the fact that art in Bulgaria in the 14th c. took its inspiration not only from Constantinopolitan and Athonite models, but also from Western models. Several examples of three dimensional statues showing a western influence, and possibly a western origin, were found in Veliko Turnovo, the Bulgarian capital in the 13th – 14th c. Similarly, a capital with the representation of an angel found in the Great Lavra at the foot of Tsarevec, also in Veliko Turnovo, clearly shows a western influence. So it is not surprising to find an Italian influence in the décor of "The Church" in Ivanovo, a monument whose donor is the Tsar of Bulgaria himself, John Alexander, whose capital was Veliko Turnovo.