

# Digitizing the (post-)Byzantine iconographic and inscriptional heritage in Bulgaria

СОФИЙСКИ  
УНИВЕРСИТЕТ



„СВ. КЛИМЕНТ  
ОХРИДСКИ“  
ОСНОВАН 1888 г.



CLaDA BG

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## THE (POST-)BYZANTINE ICONOGRAPHIC AND INSCRIPTIONAL HERITAGE IN BULGARIA

Bulgaria has always been a land of linguistic and civilizational contact. In the Middle Ages, in the times of the First and the Second Bulgarian Empires, Byzantium was not only a formidable military enemy and an influential political rival but also a constant partner in literary, cultural and religious exchange. Bulgarian rulers accepted Orthodox Christianity from the Byzantine court and Bulgarian men of letters used biblical, liturgical and other sources written in Greek. The Eastern Orthodox religious art with its specific features and characteristics was also borrowed from Constantinople and further developed on Bulgarian soil. As a consequence, on many mediaeval Bulgarian icons and church murals, passages written in Greek are often seen along the inscriptions in Old Church Slavonic.

This situation continues long after Constantinople itself and all of the Balkans have fallen under Ottoman rule. There are numerous post-Byzantine works of religious art throughout the lands of Bulgaria dating from Ottoman times and bearing a mixture of Greek and Church Slavonic paratexts.

Until recently, such paratexts, especially the ones composed in Greek, have been poorly studied and little is known about the relationship between texts and images in the monuments which contain them, as well as about the intertextual relations of different literary sources that lead to their creation.



Fig. 1. The Mediaeval Bulgarian monastery of Alino

## THE ORASIS PROJECT

The ORASIS collection (From the Greek word ὄρασις, -εως, ἦ, the act of seeing, vision, an allusion to the prophetic texts from the Bible, usually attested in the scrolls, held by prophets and saintly figures) aims at creating a digital database that will enable the research of the complex issues connected with such texts and their mutual relationships.

The first stage of the project aims to create a small database and to establish the principles and methods of digital publication of such monuments, then further expanding the initial collection to other periods, other monuments and, potentially, other languages. For now, the focus of our work consists in:

- Texts written in Greek in church murals
- 17. Century monuments
- Digital epigraphic edition
- Commentaries (sources, characters, language, etc.)

For our purposes, we rely on the work of our colleague Tsvetan Vasilev in his printed monograph *The Greek Language in the Churches with Mixed Inscriptions from the XVII c. in Bulgaria* (Sofia, 2017). Other publications will be gradually integrated in our corpus in the course of our activities.



Fig. 2: Saints holding scrolls with liturgical texts, the church of Vukovo (16. c.)

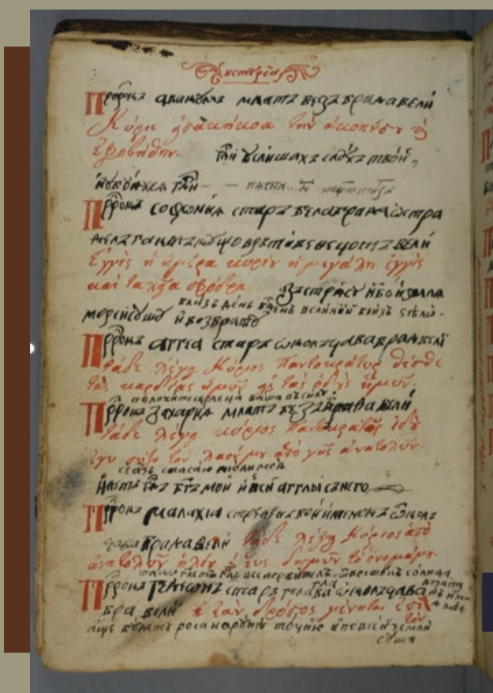
## THE PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Previous printed publications treating Bulgaria's post-Byzantine iconographic heritage do exist, both as big corpora and as specialized monographs dedicated to single monuments.

They, however, have a different approach to the subject. The focus is on the images from an art-historical point of view. No proper attention is paid to the texts as such and the words are conceived, more or less, as a part of or an ornament to the images. Consequently, no proper epigraphic criteria are applied to the editions of the texts. The representation of these texts lacks the editorial sigla characteristic of the commonly-used Leiden+ system and is accompanied by poor critical apparatus. Also, such previous editions provide no commentary on the linguistic features and the intertextual relations of the inscriptions, which is one of the main goals of the ORASIS project. Last but not least, most of these publications are inaccessible to international audiences: they are hard to find even in the most distinguished libraries of the world and are usually written in Bulgarian.



Fig. 3: "Corpus of the XVIIth-c. Murals in Bulgaria" (Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2012)



## INTERTEXTUALITY

The sources of the texts attested in the murals can be of various nature. In most cases, the painter used special painter's manuals called hermeneiai (ἑρμηνείαι). These manuals contained instructions on which passages to use for the depiction of a given scene or a given character. Such passages could be drawn from:

- Liturgical and ecclesiastical literature
- Hymnography
- Patristic and ascetic literature
- Hagiography
- Poetry

Sometimes, the painter relied on such sources without the mediation of an ἑρμηνεία. Sometimes still, it is hard to determine how exactly a given text to an image came into existence

Fig. 4: The hermeneia of Dicho Zograf (end of 18. c., handwritten)

## TRACING THE SOURCES

Here is an example of the intricate textual connections and the complex relationships with the sources frequently encountered in this type of monuments. On the northern wall of the narthex of Karlukovo monastery (17th century), there are three scroll inscriptions. The images and the scrolls are in bad condition, hindering the research process.



Fig. 5: Prophets with scrolls on the northern wall of the narthex of Karlukovo monastery (17. c.)

The scroll inscriptions contain texts that can be seen on Fig. 6-8:

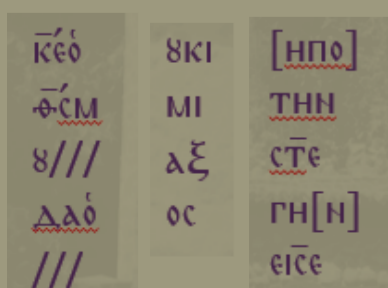


Fig. 6

The scrolls, held by two identified prophets, Varlaam and Micah, as well as an unidentified one, cannot reveal their true meaning if viewed separately. Combined, they convey the following message: Κ(ύρι)ε ὁ Θε(ός) μου [σ]ῖδα ὄ[τι] οὐκ ἰμὶ ἅγιος ὑπὸ τὴν στέγην εἰσελθῆς. Unexpectedly, this is not a passage taken from any prophetic book of the Old Testament, but the beginning of a prayer before taking holy communion by St. John Chrysostom: Lord, my God, I know I'm not worthy for you to enter under the roof of my soul's house.

Difficult texts like these reveal the necessity of a thorough linguistic analysis, which raises additional questions, such as:

- Were the church visitors able to read and identify the text?
- Why was one text distributed between three images?
- Was the text quoted by memory?



Fig. 9: The prophet Varlaam, Karlukovo monastery (17. c.)



Fig. 9: The prophet Micah, Karlukovo monastery (17. c.)

## INTERRELATIONS

A digital corpus of the post-Byzantine church murals from Bulgaria such as the one prepared in the framework of the ORASIS project is most suitable for the detection of intertextual and other connections that could otherwise go unnoticed if the monuments are examined one by one in a straightforward linear way, as in a paper publication. Each inscription will be listed in several indices, connecting it to different sets of other inscriptions according to different criteria. These indices will also be connected with each other, as well as with external collections, e.g. archives where old printed editions of the same texts possibly used by the painters of the period are presented in a digitized form (as seen in Fig. ). This would enable the user, as in the case with the prophetic figures above, to reach the answers to the following questions:

- Was the same quotation (or variations thereof) used in other scenes?
- Were the same scenes depicted elsewhere with different accompanying texts?
- How often such scenes or such texts are to be seen on the northern wall of a church's narthex?
- What other passages (if any) of the same text were used elsewhere in the decoration of a church?

Fig. 11: Relations between the indices on the ORASIS platform

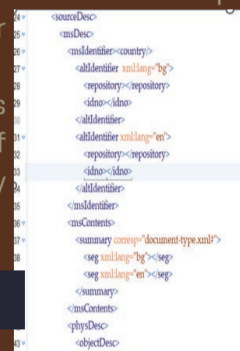


## THE TECHNICAL IMPLEMENTATION

All the inscriptions are encoded in TEI XML according to the schema of the EpiDoc initiative for historical documents (<http://epidoc.sourceforge.net>). This is the first instance of applying EpiDoc encoding to such kind of inscriptions and our template will be made openly available for use by other similar initiatives in the future.

The XML authority lists used to create the project's indices are of iconographic scenes and characters, of quoted passages, of old printed book editions probably used by the painters, etc.

Figure 12: The XML template for the encoding of the inscriptions



The AJAX system stores, presents and processes All the EpiDoc-compliant .xml-files are stored, processed, and visualized by our own AJAX front-end system first created for the purposes of the TELAMON collection of ancient inscriptions in Greek from Bulgaria (<http://telamon.uni-sofia.bg>). Its functionalities regarding the visualization, the indexing and the filters are analogical to the EFES EpiDoc front-end service (<https://github.com/EpiDoc/EFES>) which was the inspiration for the creation of AJAX. The technical implementation, however, is different and is based on an SQL database storing the elements, attributes and values of the XML code. The data thus stored in the DB are then processed with PHP.

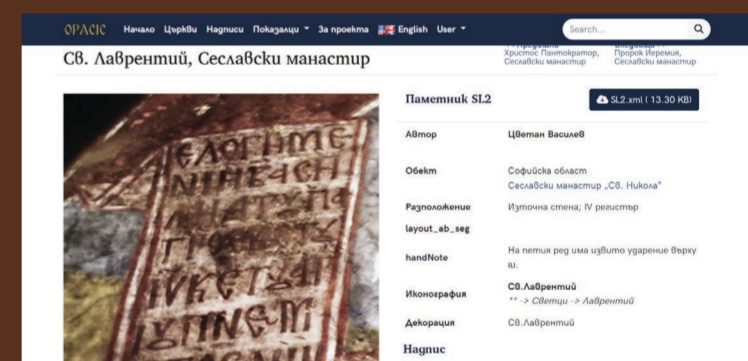
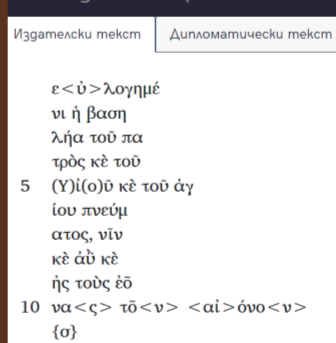


Figure 13: Visualisation of an inscription on the platform

AJAX visualizes the XML code of each inscription in the same way as EFES does. The text is rendered in two versions: editorial and diplomatic. All the metadata for each monument is also represented, together with apparatus criticus and commentary. The available photographs stored in a separate folder in the database in .jpg-format are visualized as well. The representation of each monument on the platform allows for multilingual visualization. The separate inscriptions in the database contain references to the indices.

Figure 14: Representation of the text of the inscription on the site with editorial sigla



Among the new features of AJAX unavailable in other EpiDoc front-end services is the Admin panel with a secure entrance for user accounts with different levels of access. Two separate modules enable the users to edit the XML content (via several embedded XML editors) and the images, as well as to control the general content of the site (menus, etc.).

AJAX is open-source and freely available for download on the TELAMON project's web page both as a server and as a desktop application: <https://telamon.uni-sofia.bg/en/page/project>.

Thus, the workflow of the ORASIS project consists in:

- Collecting data
  - taking high-quality photos of murals
  - deciphering inscriptions
- Research of the existing publications
- Commentary and classification
- Encoding
- Visualization and indexing

## THE PROJECT TEAM:

- Tsvetan Vasilev: main researcher
- Dimitar Iliev: project coordinator and technical supervisor
- Elisaveta Musakova: art historian
- Madlen Naneva: technical assistant
- Ivan Amzov: web developer

To what extent does the choice of text imply literary, liturgical, or theological competence? The ORASIS collection could answer some of these questions and raise new ones, which would be a step ahead along the road of knowledge.