

THE REPATRIATION OF FOUR WALL PAINTINGS FROM THE CHURCH OF THE PALAIOPANAGIA IN STENI, EUBOEA

Many years after they were rudely dismantled from the walls of the Church of the PalaioPanagia in Steni, Euboea, and stolen, four wall paintings depicting saints Niketas, Hermolaos, Makarios and Nestor were found in 2007, along with a number of – mostly Italian – antiquities, in the warehouse of an antiquities and art dealer in Basel, Switzerland.

Having identified the fragments with the help of a book written by the future Archbishop of Athens, the competent departments at the Hellenic Ministry of Culture coordinated the various procedures which had to be completed before the wall paintings could be returned to Greece. The works were handed over to Eugenia Gerousi, then director of the 23rd Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, in the offices of Basel's district attorney on 17 February, 2010. Dr Gerousi then escorted the works back to Greece and presented them to the Byzantine and Christian Museum the following day at a ceremony attended by the Minister of Culture and Tourism, Mr Pavlos Geroulanos. The paintings will remain in the Museum on a temporary basis, until they are returned to Euboea along with another three wall paintings which were rescued in the wake of the robbery and brought to Athens for safe-keeping.

The concerted and coordinated actions required to effect the return of these four fragments were made possible by the exemplary cooperation between the Archaeological Service, the Greek Police and Interpol. As a result, after some thirty years, an important Byzantine monument which has suffered much at the hands of criminals is whole again.

THE CHURCH

The church of the PalaioPanagia, a Byzantine cross-vaulted structure, stands in idyllic surroundings on the slopes of Mount Dirphys in Central Euboea.

Although this relatively small church, which is located in an isolated and remote spot between the villages of Loutsas and Ano Steni, was subject to a number of extensive interventions in the mid 20th century, many of its noteworthy wall paintings have survived intact.

The iconographic programme includes scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin Mary as well as a large number of individual saints (military and healing saints, Church Fathers etc.). The work of an important 16th-century artist, the iconography is directly linked to the celebrated workshops of the Theban school.

WHY THE PALAIOPANAGIA?

Despite the extensive damage inflicted on the painted decoration of the church of the PalaioPanagia by time and human interventions, much of beauty still remains. The iconographic programme accords with the customary practice in being symmetrical and divided into five bands of different heights. The two upper bands contain the narrative cycles of the lives of Christ and the Virgin Mary, to whom the church is dedicated. Another two bands contain saints of every sort: the figures in the uppermost of these bands are depicted half-length in medallions; the figures in the lower band are full-length. The band with the medallions contains great Church Fathers close to the sanctuary, and is given over to healing saints and martyrs on the northern and southern walls respectively. The depiction of the hierarchs conducting

the service together which begins in the sanctuary arch continues in the lowest band on the eastern section of both walls, while their remaining surfaces are devoted exclusively to military saints.

The thieves chose to dismount the portraits of the saints from the lowest band. The portraits, though part of the full-length figures, were also complete works in their own right and of a suitable size for the robbers to handle and, later, for the collector to display. Moreover, they call to mind mobile icons, the favoured prey of criminals specializing in the theft of religious antiquities.

The portraits of the military saints in the Palaiopanagia stand out for their natural beauty, their gracious but melancholy expressions and the ethos exuded by their youthful, vigorous faces. They are clearly the work of a talented 16th-century painter whose work is directly linked to the artistic production of the Theban school, whose workshops were much celebrated at the time. Their position low on the wall, almost secular nature and extremely high quality, coupled with the remote location of the church, made them an attractive proposition and easy prey for the thieves.

THE ROBBERY

...it falls to us to report that persons unknown did, on March 23 1975, forcibly remove and steal part of the wall painting depicting Saint George from the chapel of the Palaiopanagia...

It was with this brief statement that the director of the Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, Myron Michailidis, informed the Ministry of Culture and Learning of the first attack by thieves on the church of the Palaiopanagia.

Three years later, the head of the newly-established 1st Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, Eleni Manolessou, would describe in detail the new and more destructive criminal attack on the church's painted decoration which had taken place on the evening of April 23 1978 and resulted in the rude dismounting of five painted figures, the destruction of two more and the theft of icons from the iconostasis. The extent of this second robbery would indicate that it was carried out by a well-organized and prepared gang specializing in the theft of antiquities and religious art and artefacts: wall paintings, being hard to dismount and move safely, are only rarely targeted by criminals, and the Palaiopanagia robbery is the most significant of the few cases recorded.

An examination of the records reveals that the church was targeted repeatedly during the nineteen seventies by robbers who were presumably attracted by its extremely well-preserved, rare 16th-century wall paintings and its remote location. Now, after many years of persistent effort on the part of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and the Greek Police's Antiquities Bureau, the wall paintings have come home.

AT THE BYZANTINE MUSEUM: CONSERVATION AND IDENTIFICATION

A number of small fragments of wall painting on plaster came to light in autumn 2007 when artefacts were being transferred to the Museum's new archaeological storage area. Found in a wooden drawer along with various other objects, they were accompanied along with other indications of their provenance by a hand-written note marked "Steni, Euboea".

Bibliographic research linked the fragments to the church of the Palaiopanagia, and identified them more precisely with the depiction of a military saint from the church's northern wall.

In parallel, stylistic similarities were noted with another two wall paintings which came from Nea Makri in Attica and had entered the Museum's collections in 2004: one was a section from the head and shoulders of a bearded man in a medallion; the second depicted the head of a kneeling prelate.

With their hieratic solemnity and aristocratic nobility, these monumental and transcendental forms clearly belonged to a group of paintings of great artistry. Additional careful research confirmed the initial impression that they were from the church of the Palaiopanagia, where their precise position was ascertained in the iconographic programme.

SCIENTIFIC DOCUMENTATION – RESTORING THE MONUMENT

The book of Hieronymos Liapis *Mediaeval Monuments of Euboea* proved a valuable tool in identifying the wall paintings stolen from the church of the Palaiopanagia. The work, written in Greek by the future archbishop of Athens when he was still an archimandrite and published in 1971, won an award from the Academy of Athens and included photographs of a large part of the church's iconographic decoration. These would be included among the documentation accompanying the request for the return of the wall paintings, and would play an important role in ultimately securing their repatriation.

The archbishop's study would also prove invaluable in identifying the wall paintings from the same monument which were found in the Byzantine and Christian Museum and whose documentation had been lost. That these should have come to light while efforts to secure the return of the Basel paintings were still ongoing was a most impressive and fortuitous coincidence.

This events highlight the extent to which the protection of our cultural heritage hinges on scientific documentation in the form of archaeological records, documentary photographs and drawings, research and its publication.

Scientific documentation can contribute decisively to the tracing of lost artefacts, and serve as one of our most fundamental and effective tools for safeguarding, claiming and regaining cultural goods. At the same time, it can help preserve and piece together historical memory, and prevent valuable scientific data from being lost when a monument is robbed.

Sending the wall paintings back home...

Funding for conserving and restoring the church's entire iconographic decoration was approved by the Hellenic Ministry for Culture and Tourism following the repatriation of the wall paintings from Basel and the identification of another three sections of wall paintings from the Palaiopanagia held in the Byzantine and Christian Museum. Collaborating with the Museum's Conservation Department, the 23rd Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities undertook to implement the project, which was completed in December 2010. The conservation process, which was overseen by the conservators G. Pappas and D. Tsitomeneas, involved removing the gauze which had been attached in the immediate aftermath of the robbery in 1978. The wall paintings were subsequently fixed and pointings were made, the mineral deposits were cleaned from the painted surface and the modern iconostasis was removed.

In September 1969, Stavros Papageorgiou, then a conservator to the Central Conservation Workshop, visited the Church of the Palaiopanagia in Steni as part of a tour of monuments on Euboea and in Boetia. Having recorded the state of preservation of the church and its wall paintings, he proceeded to test various cleaning materials and methods on wall paintings depicting saints full-length and in medallions for his report. The photographic documentation of these tests were submitted to the Central Conservation Workshop archive and to the 1st Region of Byzantine Antiquities, under whose jurisdiction the church then fell.

In their efforts to dismount the wall paintings, the thieves first scored the mortar and then tried to detach it using chisels. Since both their tools and their techniques were entirely inappropriate, they destroyed far more of the wall paintings than they succeeded in removing.

Conservators from the Hellenic Ministry for Culture took a series of emergency measures to temporarily hold the remaining wall paintings in place immediately after the thefts and extensive vandalism suffered by the church of the Palaiopanagia on the night of August 23, 1978. Having attached gauze to the edges of those wall paintings which were at risk of collapse to protect them until such time as the church could be systematically restored, a large number of painted fragments were retrieved from the floor and sent to the Byzantine and Christian Museum for conservation.