

[The Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi](#)

Architecture, Programme, Patronage

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INTRODUCTION

The church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi is one of the major surviving monuments of twelfth-century Byzantium. Commonly referred to simply as Nerezi, the church was built by a member of the imperial family, decorated by some of the best artists of the period, and crowned by five domes in emulation of famous buildings of the Byzantine capital, Constantinople. Thus, although located on the Byzantine periphery, in what is now the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Nerezi stands as an important testimony to twelfth-century Constantinopolitan artistic and architectural trends. Its significance becomes even greater considering that, uniquely among its contemporaries, Nerezi is preserved virtually intact.

As indicated by the dedicatory inscription, Nerezi was commissioned in 1164 by the aristocrat Alexios Angelos Komnenos, a member of the famous Komnenian dynasty that ruled Byzantium during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The church attests the ample resources and the high aesthetic standards of its founder. Nerezi is one of a very few surviving five-domed buildings, and so illuminates this important, but scarcely preserved architectural type. Moreover, the church still contains its architectural sculpture, which gives us valuable information on liturgical furnishings of the twelfth century, and especially on the structure of the iconostasis. Above all, Nerezi is distinguished for the extreme elegance and beauty of its painted cycle. Since almost all monumental cycles from the mid-twelfth century in the Byzantine capital have been destroyed, Nerezi preserves a record of artistic tendencies in the monumental art of Constantinople. At the same time, because many of its artisans must have been local, it also provides evidence for the high quality of regional painters, sculptors and builders active in the province.

Although Nerezi is recognized by scholars as one of the major surviving monuments of Byzantine art, it lacks a scholarly monograph, and large portions of its architecture and ornament remain unknown and inaccessible even to scholars.¹ Its architectural design has not been examined at all. Its important ensemble of Middle Byzantine sculp-

ture is not available for study in published form. Most importantly, its extensive cycles of mural painting are known only through a few images that have been published repeatedly, almost always in black-and-white.² The building thus cries out for a full, monographic treatment. This book endeavors to answer this need.

This book represents the first effort to study Nerezi comprehensively. In successive chapters it examines different aspects of the building: its historical and social context, its architectural design, its sculpture, and its cycle of mural painting. In addressing these varied facets, the book attempts to relate the different components of the building both to one another, and to the relevant contemporary Byzantine monuments. The book does it with two goals. First, as the pioneering study of this major monument, it seeks to provide clear data on it: its measurements, materials, inscriptions, furnishings, and imagery. Second, the book uses this data as a way to gain access to the figure of the patron, the Komnenian aristocrat Alexios Angelos Komnenos. Reading in its structural, programmatic, and aesthetic choices the characteristics of the building's patron, the book raises broader questions about the role which a Komnenian aristocrat and his church played in Nerezi's provincial setting.

Thus, in its scope, the book extends the boundaries of a traditional monograph and encompasses both the study of the church and a contextual analysis of the historic, social and cultural trends of the period. In addition, this study introduces the complete visual documentation of the church. A series of architectural diagrams, drawings and photographs of the decoration, as well as documentary evidence related to the restoration of Nerezi, are presented here for the first time.

The book is divided into six chapters that cover the history, architecture, iconographic and aesthetic considerations of the painted decoration, sculpture, and post-Byzantine phase of the church. The first chapter, which discusses the historical aspects of Nerezi, represents a pioneering attempt to relate facts about the history of the region to the extant information about the church and its

1 The bibliography on Nerezi is surprisingly small. For a listing of bibliography, see T. Vitlarski, "Bibliografija za crkvata Sv. Pantelejmon – Nerezi", *Likovna umetnost* 12/13 (1989): 83–123; S. Čurčić, *Art and Architecture in the Balkans: An Annotated Bibliography* (Boston, 1984), p. 51, no. 123; p. 136, no. 177; p. 168, no. 239; p. 200, no. 405; pp. 306–307, nos. 944–951; V. Djurić, *Vizantijske freske u Jugoslaviji* (Belgrade, 1975), pp. 182–183; and V. Lazarev, "Zhivopis' XI–XII vekov v Makedonii", in: *Actes du XIIe congrès international des études byzantines* (Belgrade, 1962), pp. 105–134.

2 Most of the studies on Nerezi are brief, providing only elementary information about the church. See A. Frolov and G. Millet, *La peinture du moyen âge en Yougoslavie* (Paris, 1954), Vol. 1, pls. 15–21. P. Miljković-Peppek, *Nerezi* (Belgrade, 1966); Idem, "Crkvata Sv. Pantelejmon vo seloto Nerezi", in: *Spomenici za srednovjekovnata i ponovata istorija na Makedonija* (Skopje, 1975), Vol. 1, pp. 89–94; Idem, "Prilozi za proučavanje crkve manastira Nerezi", *ZLU* 10 (1974): 313–322; Idem, "Jedna realistička osobenost na freskama Nereza i Studenice", *Zograf* 2 (1968): 4–5. R. Hamann-Mac Lean, *Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien* (Giessen, 1976), pp. 261–276; and R. Hamann-Mac Lean and H. Hallensleben, *Die Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien vom 11. bis zum frühen 14. Jahrhundert* (Giessen, 1963), pp. 16–17; pls. 6–7.

patron.³ The chapter explains what can be deduced about the patron's life and aspirations; what being in Macedonia and in the town of Skopje implied; how far away, in cultural terms, both the capital and other major cities were; and what major political and ecclesiastical events of the time might have influenced the patron's decision to build a church in Macedonia. The answers to these questions, in turn, provide a basis for our understanding of many important features of Nerezi's art and architecture. Built at a time when the presence of the most distinguished members of the ruling family of the Komnenoi was strongly felt in Macedonia, and located in a region of the utmost strategic importance for the Empire, the church stands as a testimony to the twelfth-century political and cultural relationship between the Byzantine capital and its province.

The second chapter addresses the architecture of the church.⁴ This chapter engages in a careful analysis of Nerezi's plan and spatial articulation, as well as in the examination of the structural and decorative features of its exterior. The aim of the chapter is to introduce the major identifying features of the architecture of the church and to place it within the context of other Middle Byzantine monuments. Careful analysis of the church shows that the architecture of Nerezi represents a unique marriage of Constantinopolitan and local traditions. A comparative

survey indicates that Nerezi shares a number of characteristics with contemporary monuments in its own region, thus pointing to the existence of major architectural trends in this geographic area during the twelfth century. In conclusion, the chapter points out a number of peculiar architectural solutions at Nerezi which reveal the aims and aspirations of its patron, Alexios.

The input of the patron is most evident in the painted decoration of Nerezi. The examination of the painted decoration, which is the subject of chapters three and four, contains the first complete analysis of the twelfth-century images that are preserved at Nerezi.⁵ The third chapter examines the iconographic program of Nerezi as a whole for the first time.⁶ It relates the well known and widely published major icons of Nerezi to the unpublished images, such as those on the lower walls with their distinctive choice and grouping of saints, those in the narthex, and in the four side chapels. As a result, the cycle at Nerezi can be singled out for its innovative iconography, for the emotive richness of its content, and for its political message. All of these features are intended to emphasize the human and emotional features of the cycle and to provoke a participatory response from the viewer.

The fourth chapter examines the aesthetic qualities of the paintings at Nerezi.⁷ The chapter questions the tradi-

3 The studies relevant to the history of this monument were written in the first decades of this century, and are exclusively focused on the identity of the patron. The inscription found in the church identifies one Alexios Angelos Komnenos, a son of Theodora Porphyrogenneta, as the patron of the church. The information in this inscription misled some scholars, such as N. P. Kondakov and I. Snegarov, into believing that the patron of Nerezi was the son of the emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180): either the illegitimate son with his niece Theodora, or the child from his second marriage with Mary of Antioch who later became emperor Alexios II Komnenos (1180–1183). V. Marković and I. Ivanov, however, disputed those conclusions. Marković offered a number of hypotheses, but concluded that it was impossible to identify the patron of Nerezi, while Ivanov stated that the real patron of the church was actually Alexios Angelos, whose mother was Theodora Porphyrogenneta, a daughter of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos. Ivanov's view was further supported in an illuminating article by G. Ostrogorski on the family of the Angeli. Ostrogorski maintains that the emperor Alexios II Komnenos was born only in 1169, and that his mother was Mary of Antioch, facts which contradict the information given in the inscription, and thus preclude the possibility of his involvement in Nerezi. Moreover, he also points out, that although the mother of the illegitimate son of Manuel I was named Theodora, she was not of imperial descent, that is not a "porphyrogenneta", thus again contradicting the inscription. Ostrogorski's convincing analysis establishes Alexios Angelos, the grandson of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos, as the patron of Nerezi beyond any doubt. See N. P. Kondakov, *Makedonija. Arkheologičeskoe puteshestvie* (Saint Petersburg, 1909), pp. 174–176; I. Snegarov, *Istorija na Okridskata Arkhiepiskopija* (Sofia, 1924), Vol. 1, p. 87; V. Marković, *Pravoslavno monaštvo i manastiri u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji* (Sremski Karlovci, 1920), p. 22; I. Ivanov, *Bulgarski starini iz Makedonija* (Sofia, 1970), pp. 116–118; and G. Ostrogorski, "Vozvysenie roda Angelov", in: *Iubilejnyj sbornik Russkogo arheologičeskogo obshestva v Korolovstve Jugoslavii* (Belgrade, 1936), pp. 111–129.

Other information about the history of Nerezi is mostly collected from the compilations of monastic inscriptions, such as Lj. Stojanović, *Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi* (Belgrade, 1902–1926; reprint 1986–1987), and Ivanov's, *Bulgarski starini iz Makedonija*. These sources, however, do not tell us more than that the church actually existed and functioned as a monastery in post-Byzantine times.

4 Information about the architecture of Nerezi is mostly confined to brief discussions of its basic features in general studies on Byzantine architecture, and tangential treatment of a few select aspects of the architecture of the church in works on other monuments. See R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1986), pp. 376–377; C. Mango, *Byzantine Architecture* (New York, 1976), p. 308; S. Nenadović, *Bogorodica Ljeviška. Njen postanak i njeno mesto u arhitekturi Milutinovog vremena* (Belgrade, 1963), pp. 107–109; and S. Ćurčić, "Architectural Significance of Subsidiary Chapels in Middle Byzantine Churches", *JSAH* 36/2 (1977): 94–110.

5 The painted decoration is the most commonly discussed aspect of the church. Since the twelfth-century cycle was discovered and published by N. Okunev in 1926, it has received wide scholarly attention. It is important to note, however, that the earliest accounts of the program, such as those by N. Okunev, F. Messesnel, and M. Fauchon, became rather standard and were often repeated in later works. See N. Okunev, "Les peintures de l'église de Nèrèz et leur date", in: *Actes du IIIe congrès international des études byzantines* (Athens, 1932), pp. 247–248; Idem, "La découverte des anciennes fresques du monastère de Nèrèz", *Slavia* 6 (1927): 603–609; F. Mesesnel, "Najstariji sloj fresaka u Nerezima", *GSND* 7/8 (1929–1930): 119–132; and M. Fauchon, "Les peintures du monastère St. Panteleimon de Nèrèz", *L'Art Sacré* 6 (1938): 213–217.

6 Although iconographic features of the Nerezi cycle as a whole have not been examined, some of the images have been discussed; see G. Babić, "Les discussions christologiques et le décor des églises byzantines au XIIe siècle", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 2 (1968): 368–386; H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 53–68, 91–108; and C. Charalampidis, "The Importance of the Threnos in the Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi", *Cyrrillomethodianum* 3 (1975): 149–162. The study of D. B. Trajkovska, "Za tematska programa na živopisot vo Nerezzi", *Kulturno nasledstvo* 22/23 (1995–1996): 7–25, appeared too late to be considered for this study.

7 Although the style of Nerezi paintings has attracted considerable scholarly attention, published studies commonly see Nerezi as a source of influence on later art, rather than as an important phenomenon *per se*. See Lazarev, "Zhivopis' XI-XII vekov v Makedonii" (see footnote 1), pp. 110–115;

tional concept of stylistic analysis and claims a close association between aesthetic and iconographic features of the scenes and images, both of which aimed at underlining the message of the program. While accepting the traditional opinion that the style of Nerezi's paintings originated in early twelfth-century Constantinopolitan art, this chapter introduces the idea that the aesthetics of the capital had already been imported into the Balkans by the middle of the century. A close comparative analysis between Nerezi and monuments which are located in its vicinity indicates that Constantinopolitan artists were very active in Macedonia and that a number of different workshops from the capital likely resided in the region at that time and trained local artists to continue their tradition. The presence of these artists is explained through the importance that Macedonia had for twelfth-century Byzantium.

The impact of the Constantinopolitan artistic tradition is also seen in the sculpture, which is analyzed in chapter five. The sculpture at Nerezi is mostly confined to the iconostasis, reconstructed from the remains found *in situ* at the beginning of this century.⁸ The analysis of the sculpture offered here differs from earlier scholarship in the identification of the sources which may have influenced the sculpture at Nerezi.⁹ Close examination of the preserved sculptural fragments, including stylistic and iconographic analysis, establishes them as prime examples of the artistic tradition which originated in the capital and was widespread in the region by the twelfth century. This chapter also attempts to reconstruct the shape and form of the original iconostasis at Nerezi by comparing it to other examples of iconostases which are preserved in contemporary churches.

A brief account of the destiny of the church following the death of its patron, Alexios, is presented in chapter six, the epilogue. Turbulent historical circumstances in Macedonia, as well as a series of natural disasters necessitated several restorations of the church. These restorations resulted in a number of new painted layers, none of which

matched the beauty, prestige, and programmatic unity of the original, twelfth-century cycle. With the loss of its distinguished patron, Nerezi also lost its distinguished status in the cultural history of the region.

In concluding the discussion of Nerezi, one theme, the relationship between Constantinopolitan and provincial artistic traditions, evident in its architecture, sculpture, and paintings, deserves special attention. Previous scholars who have touched upon that problem were apparently influenced by the current geopolitical structure of the region. For example, in determining the origin of the art of Nerezi, various scholars claim that it stands as a representative of the Thessalonikan school, as an example of local artistic trends, as a distinctive Bulgarian monument, or as an example of the Constantinopolitan tradition.¹⁰

A careful examination of all aspects of the church, undertaken in this study, establishes Nerezi as the prime example of the assimilation of local and Constantinopolitan artistic trends. It seems that the military, political, and cultural expansion of Byzantium in the Balkans in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, discussed in the first chapter, affected the artistic production. Constantinopolitan artistic workshops were active in the region and trained local artists to continue their tradition. Their impact is evident in the five-domed structure of Nerezi, which clearly recalls Constantinopolitan buildings, as well as in the refinement and beauty of the style of the paintings and sculpture. Constantinopolitan artists, architects, and artisans, however, encountered a strong local tradition, evident in some aspects of architectural planning and the programmatic messages at Nerezi. Thus, rather than promoting a particular national school or artistic current, the uniqueness of Nerezi lies in the way in which different traditions are combined. The significance of this monument goes beyond its artistic merits, as structural, aesthetic, and programmatic features of Nerezi reflect both the current political and social conditions in twelfth-century Macedonia, and the identity of its patron, Alexios.

V. Djurić, "La peinture murale byzantine XIIe et XIIIe siècle", in: *XVe congrès*, pp. 1–96; L. Hadermann-Muisguich, "La peinture monumentale tardo-comnène et ses prolongements au XIIIe siècle", in: *XVe congrès*, pp. 99–127; and M. Rajković, "Iz likovne problematike nereskog živopisa", *ZRVI* 3 (1955): 195–206.

⁸ Like the paintings, the sculptural fragments of the iconostasis were also first discovered by N. Okunev; they were mostly scattered around the church. See N. Okunev, "Altarnaia pregrada XII veka v Nerezje", *Seminarium Kondakovianum* 3 (1929): 5–23. Subsequently, the iconostasis was reconstructed under the supervision of Dj. Bošković. See Dj. Bošković, "La restauration récente de l'iconostase à l'église de Nerezi", *Seminarium Kondakovianum* 6 (1933): 157–159; Idem, "Arhitektonski izveštaji. Obnova ikonostasa u Nerezima", *GSND* 11 (1932): 221–223; Idem, "Izveštaj i kratke beleške s putovanja", *Starinar* 6 (1931): 182–183.

⁹ Following the reconstruction in the early thirties, very little has been said about this sculpture. Apart from K. Petrov's study and a brief analysis by I. Nikolajević-Stojković and A. Grabar, the sculpture of Nerezi is scarcely noted. See K. Petrov, "Kon neispitanata protoistorija na lokalitetot Sv. Pantelejmon vo Nerezje", *Godišen zbornik na Filozofskiot fakultet* 7 (1981): 172–186, and Idem, "Dekorativna plastika vo Makedonija vo XI i XII vek", *Godišen zbornik na Filozofskiot fakultet* 12 (1962): 161–168; I. Nikolajević-Stojković, "Prilog proučavanju vizantske skulpture od 10. do 12. veka iz Makedonije i Srbije", *ZRVI* 44 (1955): 182–184; and A. Grabar, *Sculptures byzantines du moyen âge* (Paris, 1976), pp. 105–106. These studies postulate a wide variety of sources for the style and iconography of Nerezi's sculpture: from Early Christian to Islamic art.

¹⁰ A. Xyngopoulos, *Thessalonique et la peinture macédonienne* (Athens, 1980), pp. 15–20; Miljković-Peppek, "Crkvata Sv. Pantelejmon" (see footnote 2), pp. 89–91; and Ivanov, *Bŭlgarski starini iz Makedoniia* (see footnote 3), pp. 116–118.