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. Its architectural design has not been examined at all. Its important ensemble of Middle Byzantine sculpture 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. 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


The studies relevant to this monument were written in the first decades of the century, and are usually focused on the identity of the patron. The inscription found in the church identifies one Alexios Angelos Komnenos, a son of Theodora Porphyrogeneta, 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 Porphyrogeneta, 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 “porphyrogeneta”, thus again contradicting the inscription.


Other information about the history of Nerezi is mostly collected from the compilations of monastic inscriptions, such as Lj. Stoianović, Start srpski zapisi i natpisi (Belgrade, 1914–1926; reprint 1986–1987), and Ivanov’s, Bulgarštci 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.


The painted decoration in 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. Mesensel, and M. Fauchon, became rather standard and were often repeated in later works. See N. Okunev, “Les peintures de l’église de Nérèz et leur dater”, in: Actes du IIIe congrès international des études byzantines (Athens, 1932), pp. 247–248; Ilem, “La découverte des anciennes fresques du monastère de Nérèz”, Slavica 6 (1927): 603–609; F. Mesensel, “Najstariji sloj fresaka u Nerezima”, in: Sremski Karlovci, 6 (1938): 213–217.

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 Studen 2 (1968): 368–386; H. Maguire, Art and Eloquence in Byzantium (Princeton, 2001), pp. 53–68, 91–92; and C. Charalamboudis, “The Importance of the Threnos in the Church of St. Pantaleimon at Nerezi”, Byzantinische Zeitschrift 22/23 (1995–1996): 7–25, appeared too late to be considered for this study.

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 веков в Македонии” (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. 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. 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, 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. 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.