

# ALBANIA

## Mural Art of Voskopoja

Voskopoja is one of the few Balkan cities that were not built over the foundations of an ancient city. The city is mentioned in written sources of the 17th and 18th centuries. In that period Voskopoja had about 6,000 houses and 30,000 residents. The city had a developed urban area, with cobbled streets, hospital, homes for the elderly, schools, a high school known as the New Academy and one of the first typographies in the Balkans dating back to 1726.

## Wall paintings

Painters like David from Selenica, Constantine and Athanasius from Korça, Michael from Linotopi, painters from Agrafa, etc, are some of the masters who decorated the interior walls of the Voskopoja basilicas as well as their porches. Also their masterful painted icons and the “beautiful doors” of the iconostasis can often be found in churches of Voskopoja and the surrounding area. Painters from Korça and David from Selenica also decorated the massive walls of churches and monasteries in the region as well as in Mount Athos. The mural art of Voskopoja



St. Athanasius Church, Christ Pantocrator, painted by Constantine and Athanasius from Korça

## Churches

The most important buildings in the city were religious. Written sources mention that there were 24 churches in Voskopoja in the 18th century, when the city was flourishing. Only six of them have survived. The magnificent appearance of the three-nave basilicas with large external dimensions represents a refined example of mural art, typical of the post-Byzantine period and realised in “mezzofresco” technique.

follows the Byzantine tradition influenced by the art of Crete and Venice as well as by the Macedonian tradition of the 14th and 15th centuries, which shows a rich and variegated iconography. The decorated mural surface of the interior walls and porches is about 600 m<sup>2</sup>.



St. Athanasius Church, lower register of the apse, degradation of the paint layer



St. Athanasius Church, south wall, gold leaf applied on the halos of the saints



St. Athanasius Church, loss of the preparation and paint layers in the central cupola

## The chronology of the construction of churches and mural paintings

Among the six surviving religious monuments today in Voskojka, the St. John the Baptist Monastery dates back to the 16th century, while the most recent is the church of Prophet Elijah which is devoid of murals. The construction chronology is as follows:

1. The monastery of St. John the Baptist: according to the monastery codex, it was built in 1634 and painted by Michael from Linotopi in 1659.
2. The basilica of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel was built in 1696 and decorated with wall paintings in 1722 by an anonymous painter.
3. The cathedral “Dormition of the Virgin Mary” was built in 1699 and decorated with paintings by Theodor, Anagnost and Sterian from Agrafa in 1712.
4. The basilica of St. Nicholas was built in 1721 and decorated with wall paintings by David from Selenica in 1726 and 1750 by Constantine and Athanasius from Korça.
5. The basilica of St. Athanasius was built in 1724 and decorated with wall paintings in 1744-45 by the brothers Constantine and Athanasius of Korça.
6. The basilica of St. Elijah was built in 1759. There are no wall paintings in it.

## Techniques of execution

The wall as the main support of the building is made of carved and square stones. The plaster, which is the first preparation layer,

is made of lime, river sand, goat’s hair and a considerable quantity of straw. “Intonachino” is the last layer. Covering the entire surface, it is made of lime in order to prepare the surface for painting. An XRF analysis has shown the different compositions of the pigments. Some of them are earth colours, some are minerals, and others enamels. In some cases, we find that gold leaf was applied over the halos of the saints.

## Causes of degradation of the wall paintings

- The main cause of degradation to the surface is attributed to the winter weather, i.e. the freezing winter temperatures of the mountainous area where these churches are found. The weight of snow on the roof structure, which is covered with stone slabs, and the slightest movement can cause moisture infiltration. Defects in the roof during this period are almost inevitable. Consequently, the sensitive technique of mezzofresco has suffered.
- Other causes of degradation are numerous acts of vandalism, such as scratches and writings on the wall painting seriously damaging the integrity of the images and the material. This phenomenon is mainly present in the lower parts of the paintings inside the churches and especially in the porch areas. These “inscriptions” are mainly related to dates and names of people who want to leave a sign of their presence in that place. In certain areas, due to the density of scratches and damage, it is very difficult to perceive the images and scenes depicted.
- Another phenomenon, which rather than being an act of vandalism could be linked to superstition is the scratching of the



St. Nicolas Church, scratches and writings on the wall paintings in the portico area



St. Nicolas Church, abrasion and loss of preparation and paint layers

irises of the saints' eyes. The scrapings were swallowed with the food in the belief that they would heal eye ailments. This phenomenon is clearly visible in the portraits of the saints located in the lower part of the paintings.

- It is worth mentioning that the churches of Voskopoja are under state protection and were awarded the status “Monument of Culture of the First Category” on March 17, 1948. Since then, different interventions have been made on the buildings as well as on the wall paintings. Conservation and restoration works carried out by specialised Albanian institutions, as well as joint

projects with European partners, have not been sufficient to adequately maintain the integrity of these artistic values.

- It should be considered that for a period of about 25 years during which the religions in Albania were prohibited, the community did not have access to these churches, could not take care of them or use the spaces for religious services.

This article is based on different studies performed over the years by specialists in conservation, architects, engineers, historians, and art historians.

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