

THE WALL PAINTINGS FROM THE CHURCH OF HOLY TRINITY (KRUPNIK) IN THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

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***Abstract.** The article presents for the first time unexplored fragments of wall paintings from the late medieval Krupnik Episcopal Church of the Holy Trinity, kept in the National Archaeological Museum. The authors try to answer the question: is it possible that the painters of Krupnik belonged to a larger studio that completely covered the painting of churches in the Middle Struma area (which interpretations exist in the historiography), or rather that their work was influenced by other artists, working in the north-west or south. In order to solve this problem, parallels were sought in the preserved wall paintings from Vukovo, Boboshevo, Orlitsa and Goranovtsi, which date from approximately the same period as the Krupnik Church (XV–XVII centuries). The preserved frescoes show the hands of artists who were well acquainted with the Orthodox iconographic programmes of the late Middle Ages and the post-Byzantine period. The fragments show two layers, painted at different times between the 15th and 17th centuries. The frescoes can also be associated with the active policy of Bishop Jacob II, during which the painting of the Boboshevo Monastery of St. Demetrius and the Nunnery Orlitsa was carried out.*

***Keywords:** frescoes, Krupnik bishops, Holy Trinity Church*

The study of the funds of the National Archaeological Museum led to an interesting discovery: fragments of wall paintings from the episcopal basilica of Holy Trinity in the village of Krupnik (Blagoevgrad Province), which have not yet been published and are unknown to the scientific community. The purpose of this paper is to try to derive some working hypotheses

about the affiliation of the painters who worked in Krupnik in the medieval period. The question that interest us in this paper are: whether the artists from Krupnik were local painters familiar with the late medieval and post-Byzantine iconographic programmes, or whether they were part of a larger school working in the Middle Struma area.

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The fragments were recently discovered by the NAM's curator Bisera Tomova. They were carefully stored in a wooden box when they were brought to the museum in the 1960s. The accompanying note indicates they came from the church in the village of Krupnik. They were listed in the inventory as No. 75 and accepted with the protocol No. 1933/31.12.1966. However, they remained unknown to the compilers of the 2011 catalogue (Gergova et. al., 2011).

There are eleven preserved fragments of the Krupnik's church. They were part of the its decoration.

Fragment 1 (Fig. 1). Part of the broad ochre-yellow halo of a saint, bordered by a bold red line. The main background is green.

Fragment 2 (Fig. 2). Part of a decorative composition. Different colours are used in this decorative element: red, white, green, ochre-yellow.

Fragment 3 (Fig. 3). Part of a decorative composition. Different colours are used in this decorative element: ochre yellow, white, blue, red. A brown line separates the decorative composition from the monotonous green background that probably predominated in the church.

Fragment 4 (Fig. 4). Part of a saint's face – left ear, eye and part of the nose. The contours of the eyes and eyebrows are drawn in brown. The pupil is light brown and the iris is drawn in black. The hair is brownish.

Fragment 5 (Fig. 5). Part of an inscription from a scroll. The letters are written in black ink on a white background.

Fragment 6 (Fig. 6). Part of halo, faded, ochre-yellow base with red line.

Fragment 7 (Fig. 7). Part of halo, faded, ochre-yellow base with red line, end of a white hair also visible.

Fragment 8 (Fig. 8). Part of a pink-reddish vestment with brown lines in the lower part. The saint depicted here is shown in full-length against a dark background. The first frescoes layer is visible underneath¹.

¹ Stanchev noted that “in the life of the building there are two periods marked by the two layers of painting. It is highly probable that the second upper layer of frescoes dates from the time when Krupnik became the seat of a bishop” (Stanchev, 1960, p. 49). The archaeologist's assumptions further problematise rather than clarify the situation. If the second layer dates from the period when Krupnik was established as an episcopal centre (XV century), then the first layer should date from the period im-

Fragment 9 (Fig. 9). Part of the decoration. Bluish background with a white line down the center.

Fragment 10 (Fig. 10). Part of the decoration. Bright colors, reddish, pink and ochre.

Fragment 11 (Fig. 11). Destroyed to the base of the wall. It show the brown and reddish colour in places.

The archaeologist Stanchev (1921–1978) was the first who mentioned these frescoes. In his study about the Krupnik's church, he noted: “Inside, the walls were also covered with additional mortar plaster. Two layers are visible. The lower one – the older one – was made of a thick mortar, composed of lime and a large amount of sand. The mortar of the upper layer was weaker, hollow, mixed with thin straws and chaff. Both layers show traces of fresco painting. Pieces of plaster with traces of frescoes were also found in the embankment that filled the church. Only one of the larger fragments shows anything more definite – part of a face with an eye and an ear. In terms of colour, according to the fragments found: purple, bright red, ochre, pale yellow, green and black” (Stanchev, 1960, p. 46; Kostov, 2009, p. 60). In the embankment, Stanchev also found several blocks from the construction of the upper part of the church. On one of them, the archaeologist noticed plaster “together with faint traces of painting” (Stanchev, 1960, p. 49; Kostov, 2009, p. 62).

The church of Holy Trinity, from which the fragments come, was built in the 14th century (Stanchev, 1960, p. 49; Nenov, 1994–1995, p. 3a). The exposed synthronon in the main apse of the altar, in the centre of which the “base of a throne” is projected forward² confirms its episcopal status. Architecturally, the church is three-conch, and it is possible that a “cylindrical drum, ending in a dome” was raised over the central square, as Stanchev suggested (Stanchev, 1960, p. 49). The three identical apses probably supported the drum on which the dome was formed. In the second half of the 17th century, the church was

mediately after the church was founded (XIV century), which suggests the existence of an economically prosperous local parish that could afford to decorate its church.

² For the history of the Krupnik bishopric, see Snegarov, 1932, p. 164, p. 232; Lalchev & Tomova, 2006, pp. 147–170; Kostov, 2009; Mincheva, 2014, pp. 22–23; Kovachev, 2015, pp. 19–24; Filipov, 2016, pp. 17–21; Kovachev, 2021, p. 7.

converted into a mosque (Stanchev, 1960, p. 49).

The condition of the fragments preserved in NAM is not good, which makes the identification of the scenes and their location in the church space almost impossible. From what Stanchev wrote, it is not entirely clear exactly in which part of the temple the mural fragments were found.

There are too few images from the area and from the 15th–17th centuries to use for comparison, although we can note certain similarities in the green background of **fragment 1** with that of the few surviving frescoes from the Church of St. Nicholas in Vukovo (Angelov, 2013, p. 53), as well as from the Church of St. Demetrius in Boboshevo and from the Church of St. St. Peter and Paul in the “Orlitsa” Convent.

The churches of Boboshevo and Orlitsa were painted with the financial support of Bishop Jacob II of Krupnik (Nenov, 1994–1995, pp. 7a–8a; Kuyumdzhiev, 2015, p. 47). It is possible that the Krupnik church was also painted during his time. It is quite possible that the painter from Krupnik belonged to the studio that worked in the Monastery of the Venerable Prohor of Pčinja, in the church of the “Orlitsa” Convent, in the Gornjak monastery and in the Mislovshtitsa monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos, or at least knew their works³. Tsveta Kuneva connected the frescoes of the Monastery of the Venerable Prohor of Pčinja, the Gornjak monastery, the Mislovshtitsa monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos and the church of the “Orlitsa” Convent with the Kratovo studio, whose patron is Mara Branković (Kuneva, 2022, p. 58). It is possible that the itinerant painters and the influence of the studios took place within the framework of the Patriarchate of Peć, which was restored in 1557 and whose diocese included the dioceses of Krupnik, Kratovo, Dupnitsa and Radomir (Angelov, 2013, p. 48; Zaharieva, 2018, p. 37). The common political context is also important: the mentioned settlements, together with Stip, Radovich, Ovche pole, Strumitsa and Kyustendil were part of the domain of the despot Jovan Oliver in the 14th century (Zaharieva, 2018, p. 36). A similar hypothesis can be supported by the discovery of a stylistic affinity between the Kripnik fragments and the iconography of the Church of St. Demetrius in Boboshevo and that of the church of the “Orlitsa”

³ For the work of this studio, see y Zaharieva & Mihaylovich, 2013, pp. 7–13; Kuyumdzhiev, 2015, p. 47.

Convent. A similar variety of colours, similar to **fragment 2**, **fragment 3** and **fragment 10**, used mainly for decorative purposes, can be seen in the arch surrounding the patron image of St. Demetrius placed above the entrance to the nave in Boboshevo, as well as in some decorative elements decorating the deacon icon of the church of the “Orlitsa” Convent. A zigzag decoration similar to **fragment 2** is found on the eastern wall of the altar of the Church of St. Archangel Michael near Goranovtsi, framing the central apse of the altar.

The decoration, the remains of which can be seen in **fragment 2**, **fragment 3** and **fragment 10**, was probably used to separate the architectural elements of the church (as in the Manasija Monastery and in Goranovtsi) or to fill the socle space, thus clearly marking distinct the border between the earthly and the heavenly, the profane and the sacred. It is possible that the inner part of some of the windows was also decorated with similar zigzag ornaments, as in the eastern altar window of the Church of St Petka, Vukovo. It is also possible that **fragment 3** is part of the upper border of the socle, given the beginning of the monotonous green background⁴. Liliana Stankova noted the tendencies in post-Byzantine Orthodox art towards “increased decorativeness, provoked by the increased interest in “decoration” at the end of the 16th century” (Stankova, 2013, p. 84).

The painters have chosen mainly light and warm colours, with shading in some places by strokes and in others by circles. They were painted using the tempera painting technique. The green and dark backgrounds in some places probably follow the trends of the XV–XVII centuries. Anna Roshkovska and Liliana Mavrodinova have noted: “For church art [in the period under consideration – Kr. K.] is generally characteristic dark and heavy colouring with black and a very dark blue background, on which the faces of saints, biblical and gospel scenes stand out” (Roshkovska & Mavrodinova, 1985, p. 55).

Several conclusions can be drawn from the Krupnik fragments. The decoration of the church shows that the local ecclesiastical community

⁴ The preferred places for ornamentation are those that are not entirely occupied by the images of saints or the Old Testament/New Testament gospel plots. Thus, Anna Roshkovska and Lilyana Mavrodinova highlighted “the openings of the doors and windows”, “the arches, the pilasters and columns, the buttresses, the pendants” (Roshkovska & Mavrodinova, 1985, p. 55).

had the financial means to hire painters to decorate the interior of the bishop's church. This may also be connected with the activity of the bishops of Krupnik, who financially supported other churches in the Middle Struma area. The hired painters belonged to or knew the work of the studios that painted the Church of St. Demetrius in Boboshevo and the church of the "Orlitsa" Convent, as can be seen by comparing several examples. However, any attempt to identify the depicted figures and their exact position in the church (at the time of the first and second layers) could not be scientifically justified due to the scarcity of fragments and the lack of written sources on what the interior of the Krupnik church looked like.

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APPENDIX



Fig. 1. Part of the broad ochre-yellow halo of a saint. Photo: Bisera Tomova

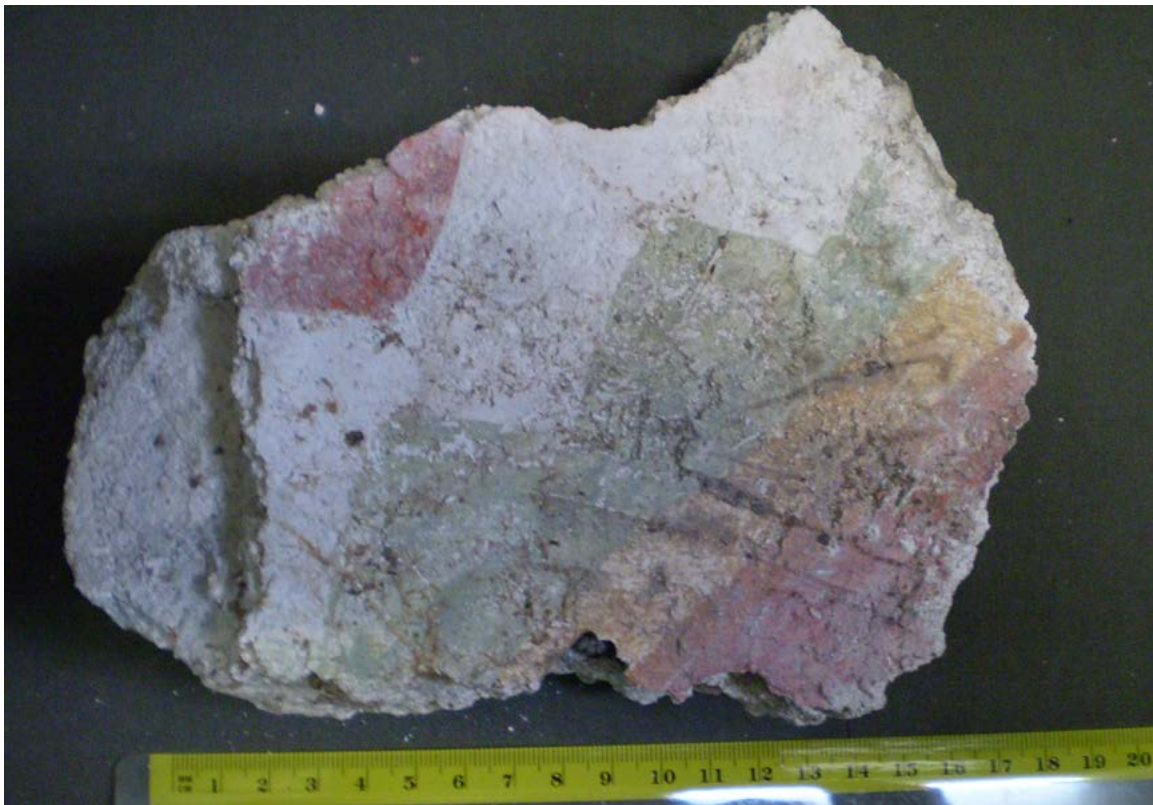


Fig. 2. Part of a decorative composition. Photo: Bisera Tomova



Fig. 3. Part of a decorative composition. Photo: Bisera Tomova



Fig. 4. Part of a saint's face. Photo: Bisera Tomova



Fig. 5. Part of an inscription from a scroll. Photo: Bisera Tomovaa



Fig. 6. Part of halo, faded, ochre-yellow base with red line. Photo: Bisera Tomova

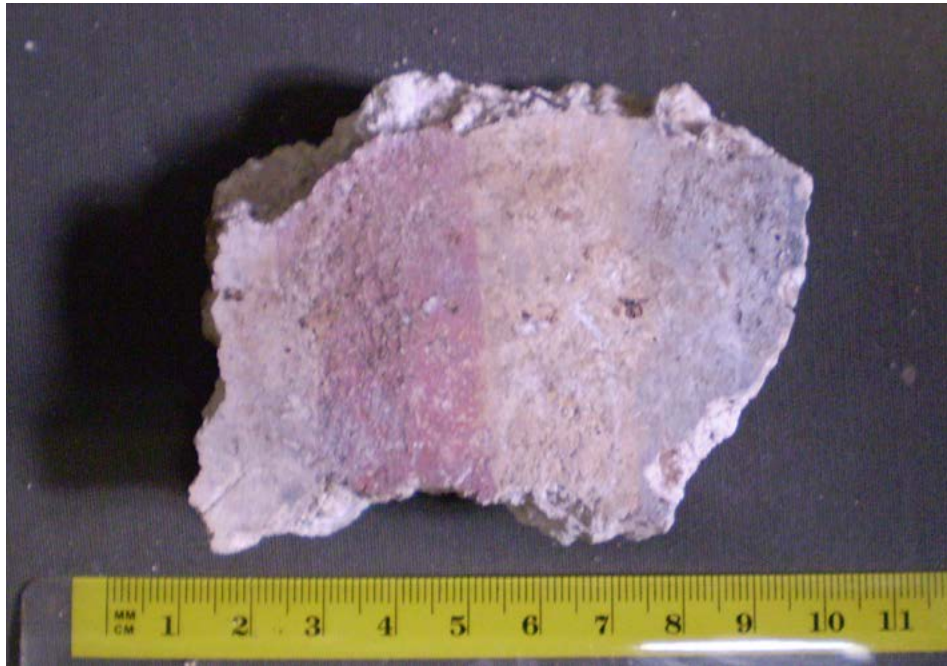


Fig. 7. Part of halo, faded, ochre-yellow base with red line, end of a white hair also visible.
Photo: Bisera Tomova



Fig. 8. Part of a pink-reddish vestment with brown lines in the lower part.
Photo: Bisera Tomova



Fig. . 9. Part of the decoration. Photo: Bisera Tomova



Fig.10. Part of the decoration. Photo: Bisera Tomova



Fig. 11.. Destroyed to the base of the wall. It show the brown and reddish colour in places.
Photo: Bisera Tomova