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The Hermitage of Saint Neilos near Giromeri, Thesprotia

The hermitage of Saint Neilos is located on a rocky outcrop on the right bank of the Kalpakiotikos river, a tributary of river Kalamas (Fig. 1), opposite the monastery of Giromeri, at a site called Theostrouga¹. It lies approximately 300 m. west of the modern settlement of Giromeri. The existence of a monastery in this area is evidenced by historical sources, as it was founded by Saint Neilos Erichiotis², a fact that is recorded both in the Saint's Synaxarium and in his Testament, which was ratified by the ruler of the Despotate of Epirus, Ioannis di Mo-



Fig. 1. Map of the area with the location of the hermitage of Saint Neilos.

Available at: <https://greece-map.net/greece-thesprotia-maps>

¹ On the history, art and architecture of the hermitage and the monastery, see indicatively [14, p. 263; 60, vv. 496–502; 22, pp. 10–11; 17, pp. 9–18, 413–416; 9, pp. 219–226; 53; 15; 5; 26, pp. 141–166, with previous bibliography].

² Saint Neilos descended from the aristocratic family of Laskaris. At a young age he abandoned the secular life and retired to the Monastery of Akoimetoi near Constantinople. After wandering for many years, before 1330 he ended up at a place called Jericho (Erichos) in Albania and a few years later he came to the region of Giromeri and founded the Monastery of the Virgin Hodegetria [60, vv. 498–500; 34, pp. 773–774; 45, pp. 23–24].



Fig. 2. General view of the hermitage of Saint Neilos. Photo by I. Chouliaras



Fig. 3. The interior of the hermitage of Saint Neilos. Photo by I. Chouliaras

nopoli (Orsini)³ in 1336 or 1337 [60, p. 500; 15, pp. 57–59]. Copies of the Synaxarium and the Testament have survived in the Giromeri monastery, the former in a leather-bound codex of the 16th century and the latter on paper, measuring 55×39 cm., dated to 1812 [33, pp. 523–542]. The Giromeri monastery is situated directly opposite the hermitage and the construction of the catholicon we see today dates back to 1567/8 [14, p. 263; 49, p. 624; 45, p. 26; 25, pp. 65, 67].

The hermitage was built inside a cave, now not accessible, as its opening is visible on a vertical cliff, at a height of about 17 m. above the ground (Fig. 2). This opening is walled up and leads to a narrow cave, which cannot be reached to be explored, except by climbing⁴. Another entrance to the cave must have existed to the west, but today it is blocked by large fallen rocks. Traces of wooden beams on the outside of the built section suggest that there must have been a wooden staircase outside the cave, leading to the church. Inside the cave, where a large single space is formed, there must have been a two-story structure, which has collapsed in its entirety and the building materials are spread across the cave floor (Fig. 3). The existence of a second

³ Until recently he was known, incorrectly, as Ioannis Orsini. For the family di Monopoli see [19, pp. 45–90].

⁴ At the base of the cliff, to the left, there is a larger cave, its opening being also walled up. Inside the cave there is an undecorated chapel, the altar of which bears the date inscription: 1859 Φλεβάρη 17 (1859 February 17) [38, p. 316].

floor is documented by six sockets in the rock, on the eastern side of the cave, about 2.40 m. above the present cave floor, probably for wooden beams to be fitted in them. On the second floor level, about 1.50 m. higher than the six sockets, a rudimentary niche can be seen, formed by shaping an already existing natural recess. The ceiling of the cave is about 3.50 to 4 m. above the sockets for the wooden beams, which would have supported the floor of the second story. To the southeast of the cave there is a dry-stone structure, 1.60 m. high and about 1 m. wide, which blocks an opening, leading to another, smaller chamber or, more likely, a fissure in the cave. Yet another small opening appears above the dry-stone structure, also difficult to explore, probably an engleistra (place of reclusion), but further research is needed to establish its function⁵.

The cave's height, at the highest point, should not exceed 7 m., without taking into account the thickness of fallen material that covers the natural cave floor, while the largest space (Fig. 4), including the two-story construction, has a maximum length of about 3.50 m. and a maximum width of about 2.50 m., therefore we are dealing with a very small church. Approximately in the center of the structure, directly below the level of the archangel, who is depicted on the outer face of the structure, a square window or door opens (Fig. 5), while on the right a water outlet hole can be seen, framed by a curved stone at the base of the hole, which protrudes from the structure (Fig. 5). This hole lies about 1 m. above the floor of the ground story inside the cave. Over the archangel, there is a large rectangular aperture, which could be identified as a window or door to the second floor of the internal structure (Fig. 5), even more so as a few meters to the east, a little higher than the second floor threshold level, there is the niche in the cave's walling with the representation of Vlachernitissa. The mortar is mostly visible from the inner side of the cave, chiefly in the ground floor space, while a few plinths can be seen at the joints in single and rarely in double rows. The church, not preserved anymore, was built inside the cave, probably on the structure's second floor, as the presence of the niche on that level indicates. This church was probably built soon after Saint Neilos had settled in the area, before 1330⁶. The ground floor, judging from the rudimentary water runoff (drainage) construction, must have been used for the daily activities of the monastic brotherhood.

In the hermitage, very few wall paintings are preserved (Fig. 6), one on the outer face of the walled up opening of the cave and two inside the cave. These paintings belong to two distinct phases, one of which dates back to the 14th century, probably in the first half of that century, and the second to the 15th [7, pp.433–435]. Of the first layer visible is the Pantokrator, on the eastern side of the cave ceiling, with an inscription below Him. The mural decoration of the second layer preserves Christ's figure from the representation of the Virgin Vlachernitissa on the eastern side of the second floor, inside the cave, and a full-body archangel on the outer face of the structure, just below the entrance to the cave's second floor. The state of preservation of these wall-painting fragments is poor.

⁵ The most known engleistras are that of St. Neophytos at Paphos, Cyprus, and in Greece that of the cave of St. Nikolaos at Varassova, Aetolia [27, pp. 121–135; 36, pp.97–106; 37, pp. 291–322].

⁶ For the discussion on the exact location of the first monastery, founded by Saint Neilos at Giromeri, see 60, v. 499; 26, pp. 156–158. Worth mentioning is that the two-sided icon of the Giromeri monastery with the Virgin Hodegetria on the front and Saints Peter and Paul on the back side, dates to the third decade of the 14th century [39, pp.375–389; 51, pp. 513–520].

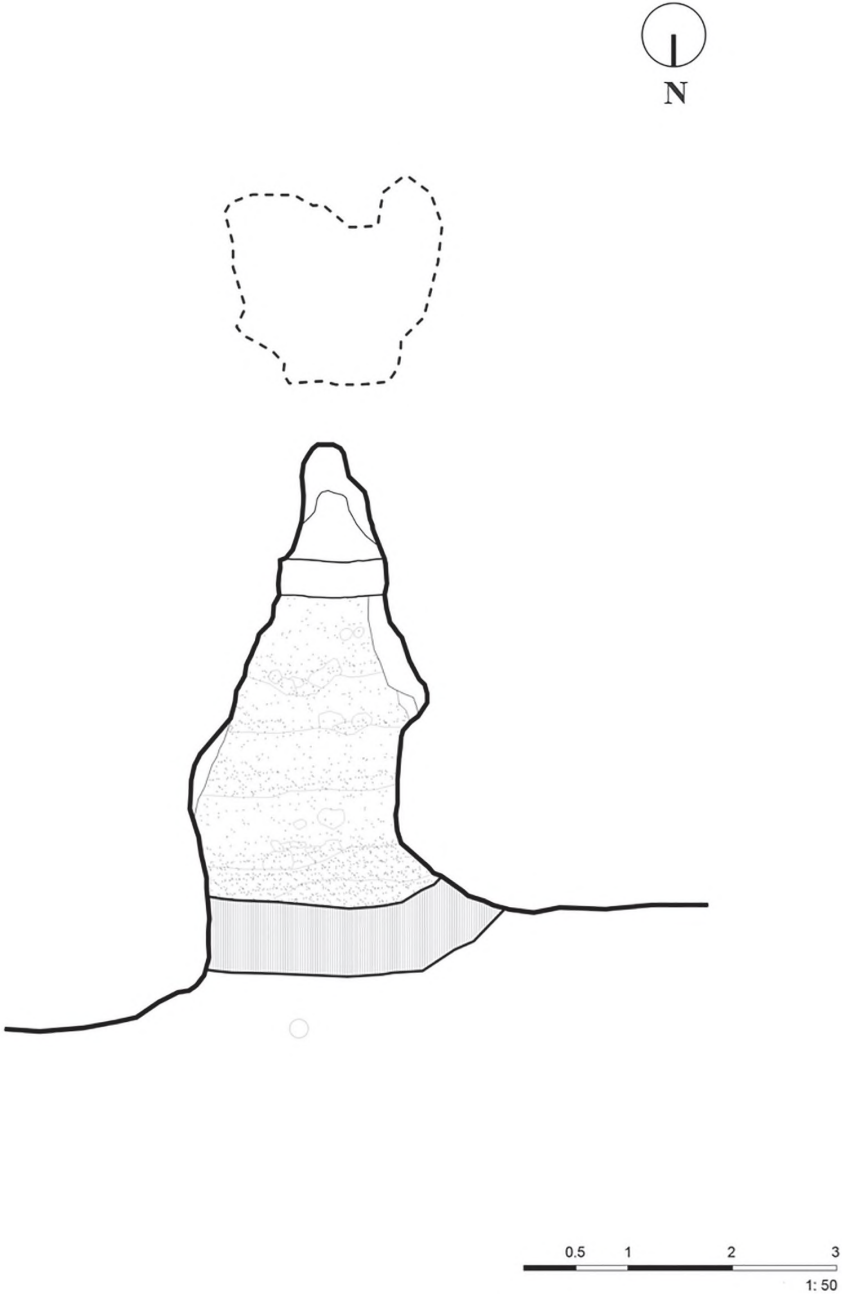


Fig. 4. Plan of the cave. Hermitage of Saint Neilos. Drawing by I. Chouliaras

Christ Pantokrator (Ill. 54, 55) is depicted in a frame, blessing with his right extended hand and holding in his left hand, in front of his chest, an open book, the inscription on it, though, has faded away. Further below, separately framed is an almost illegible inscription, arranged in three rows, written in black letters against a white background: ΕΕ ΟΥΡΑΝΟΥ [...] ΟΙΔΕ ΠΑΝΤΑ [...] ΩΝ/ ΕΝ ΤΗ [...]. By these few words we understand that it is the thirteenth verse of the thirty-second Psalm⁷, possibly in a variant, since the second line begins with the final *E* from the word ΟΙΔΕ (saw) and ends with the plural ending -ΩΝ, possibly the ending of the word [ΑΝΘΡΩΠΩ]ΩΝ (people), but the third line begins with the phrase ΕΝ ΤΗ..., which is not included in this particular Psalm⁸. However, this psalm is often written within the narrow zone surrounding Christ Pantokrator in the dome [40, p. 73].

The posture of Christ, his right hand extended in blessing and in his left hand holding an open book close to his chest, in terms of iconography, corresponds to his posture when depicted in apses or niches, in Byzantine times, primarily in churches of Crete⁹, but also in the Metropolis of Mystras (1272–1288) [28, pl. 65.1]¹⁰. This iconographical type, though, is more rarely depicted in the dome, as for example in Agios Nikolaos at Kyriakoselia, Crete (1230–1236) [3, pp. 284–285], in Sotiras Christos at Eleftherna of Rethymno (early 13th c.) [54, fig. 88; 55, p. 347] and in Agios Nikolaos at Kampinari of Platsa in Mani (1337/8) [31, fig. 50]. When Pantokrator is represented in the dome, more common is the closed book [40, pl. 1, 6, 13, 20a, 35, 36, 55–59, 62a, 72, 82a, 84, 87, 95a, 101, 102, 119, 158]. In any case, the type of Pantokrator, as well as his posture, resemble the corresponding figure on a pillar of the narthex of the Dečani monastery at Kosovo (c. 1343) [48, fig. 256] and in the arch above the south entrance of the nave of the katholikon in the monastery of the Virgin at Matejčë near Kumanovo (1348–1352)



Fig. 5. The walled up part of the opening of the cave (inside the circle the water runoff construction). Hermitage of Saint Neilos. Photo by I. Chouliaras

⁷ The Greek version of this psalm is: ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἐπέβλεψεν ὁ Κύριος, εἶδε πάντας τοὺς υἱοὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων (*The Lord looks down from heaven; He sees all the sons of men*).

⁸ Possibly the word ΤΗ (earth) follows the phrase ΕΝ ΤΗ in a variation of the fourteenth verse of the same Psalm: ἐξ ἐτοίμου κατοικητηρίου αὐτοῦ ἐπέβλεψεν ἐπὶ πάντας τοὺς κατοικοῦντας τὴν γῆν.

⁹ As we see indicatively in Archangel Michael at Kavalariana of Kandanos (1327/8) [23, pp. 21–23, fig. 5], in Agios Dimitrios at Platanos of Selino (1372/3) [50, fig. 232] and in Agia Marina at Mourne of Rethymno (beg. 14th c.) [43, fig. 399].

¹⁰ The representation features in the apse of the diakonikon and belongs to the first layer of the wall painting.

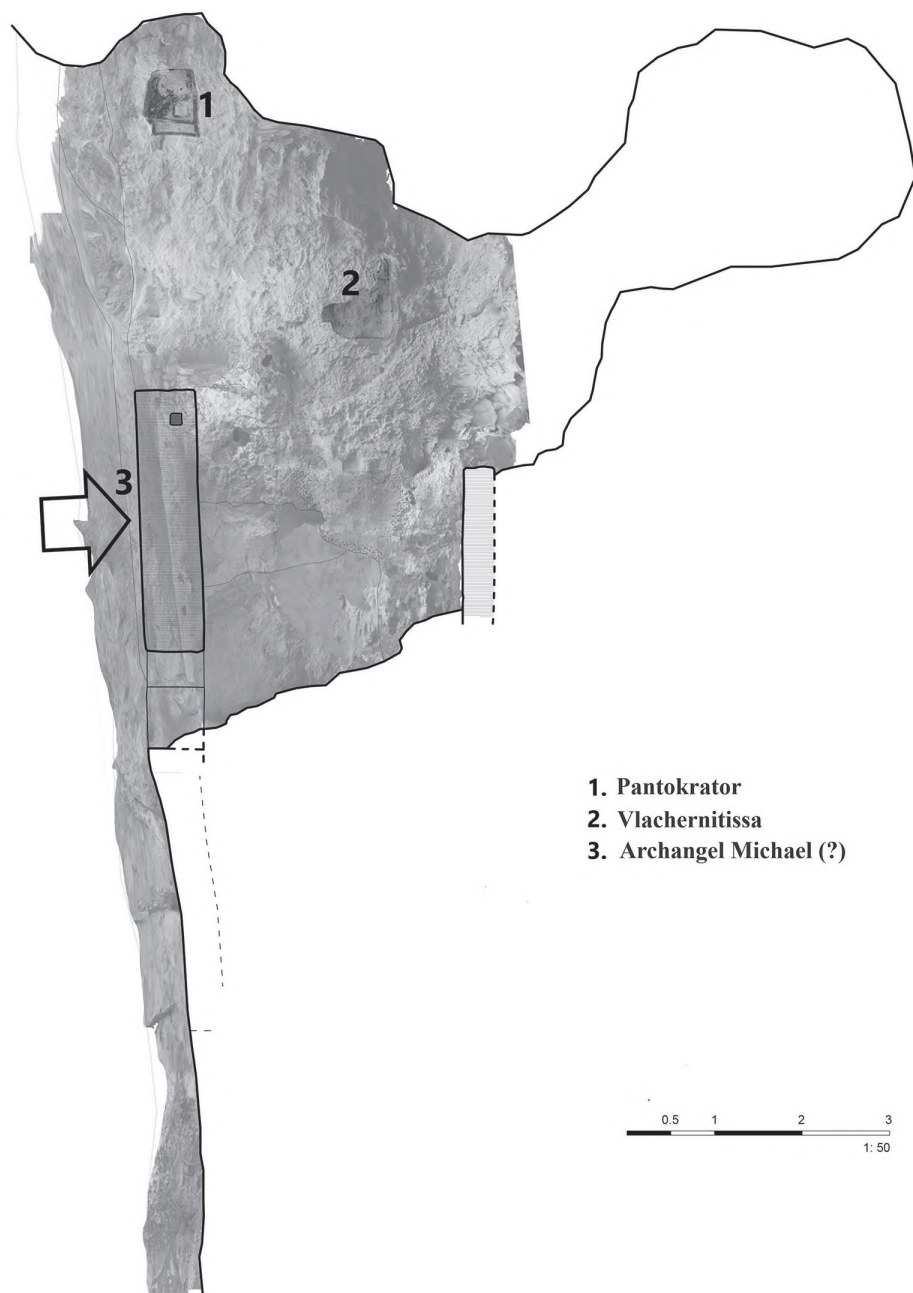


Fig. 6. Section of the cave with the location of the frescoes. Hermitage of Saint Neilos. Drawing by I. Chouliaras

[10, pl. XLVI, fig. 69], which are the closest parallels to the Saint Neilos Hermitage. Pantokrator adopts a similar blessing gesture in Staro Nagoričino (1316–18) [47, fig. 8], albeit in a full-length depiction. The dark olive-green shades on the face and hand (Ill. 55), the body volume, the color gradations, but also the smooth and well-designed folds, recall corresponding figures in Palaeologan monuments of the first half of the 14th century, mainly in Macedonia [52, p. 237, fig. 4, p. 244, fig. 15–16; 42, p. 338, fig. 5.19, p. 373–376, fig. 6.22–25].

On the eastern side of the second floor, the niche in the rock is delineated by a red band. Of the Virgin Vlachernitissa representation in the niche, only Christ is preserved in a shell-shaped roundel (Ill. 56). He extends his right hand in blessing and brings the left hand in front of the body, probably holding a closed scroll. Arranged on either side of his head are the initials *[I]* *C* *XC*. Segments of the Virgin's maforium and her raised left hand are also visible. Under this representation, bordered by a thick red band, is a rectangular space, which may have contained an inscription.

The shell-shaped roundel follows the type of similar roundels in monuments of the 15th century and early post-Byzantine times, such as Agios Nikolaos at Malouni [56, fig. 24, 26]. The latter is situated not far away from Saint Neilos hermitage and the frescoes of its first phase date to the first third of the 15th century [7, p. 431]. Moreover, the same type of roundel is encountered elsewhere, for instance at Apolpaina in Lefkada (1450) [58, p. 145, fig. 9, 10], in Agios Athanasios at Koustochori of Imathia (end of the 15th c.) [18, fig. 1], in Agios Dimitrios at Metamorfofi of Kozani (end of the 15th c.) [8, pp. 295–296, fig. 3] and, a variant of it, in the hermitage of Mikri Analipsis at Prespa (first half of the 15th c.) [2, p. 346, 476, fig. III. 51, III. 65], in Panagia at Meronas of Amari (c. 1400) [44, fig. 354] and in Matka (1496/7) [46, p. 147, pl. 109], while it is common in later 16th and 17th century monuments, primarily in northern Greece [41, pl. 96a; 4, fig. 29, 290; 30, p. 93]. In general, the type of the glory that surrounds Christ, his posture, his broad and bright face, combined with his clothing, reciprocate north Greek or Macedonian patterns.

On the outer face of the walled up opening of the cave, the frontal, full-length figure of an archangel [38, p. 316; 6, p. 150, fig. 3]¹¹ (Ill. 57), probably Michael, is depicted, whose head is not preserved. The archangel steps on a pillow, in military outfit and a long red cloak. He wears a bronze breastplate, which forms an elliptical opening at the abdomen and is reinforced at the sternum with metal bands. In his left hand, he holds the scabbard of the sword, while he must have raised the sword in his right hand. On his feet he wears white shoes made of strips of cloth, tied in a knot. Unfortunately, the figure is difficult to date due to the extensive damage, but we are of the view that it belongs to the same wall-painting layer as the Vlachernitissa.

In the pose of raising the sword and holding the scabbard, the archangel is portrayed in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine period in several monuments, but the exact way he held the sword in the case of Saint Neilos hermitage, is not clear. Nevertheless, we think it likely that he extended horizontally the right arm and bent the elbow towards his chest, holding the sword raised in front of his right shoulder. At this point, we cite similar representations of the archangel in monuments of all periods, but mainly of the 14th and 15th century in Central Bal-

¹¹ The representations inside the cave were not known, but the archangel on the outer face of the rock was always visible [38, p. 316; 6, p. 150, fig. 3].

kans and Crete, as in Agios Nikolaos at Manastir (1271) [21, fig. VI], Agios Achilleios at Arilje (1295/6) [29, pl. 87.2; 59, pl. XXV], Agios Nikolaos at Geraki (end of the 13th c.) [32, fig. 94], Agios Dimitrios at Makrychori of Eyvoia (1302/3) [13, pp. 91–92, pl. 32], the Dormition of the Virgin at Ljubostinja, Serbia (1388) [11, sh. IX], Panagia at Diblochori of Rethymno (early 14th c.) [43, fig. 87], Panagia at Drymiskos of Rethymno (1317/8) [43, fig. 113, 114], Agia Fotini at Preveli of Rethymno (c. 1400) [43, fig. 466], Agioi Apostoloi at Seirikari of Kissamos (1427) [24, pl. 115y], probably Panagia at Cerskë near Leskovik (end of the 14th c.) [20, p. 92, fig. 4] and later in the narthex of Panagia at Studenica (1568) [61, fig. 259, 263]. Finally, we should emphasize the significant iconographical similarities with the partially preserved representation of an archangel in the neighbouring church of Agios Nikolaos at Malouni (first third of the 15th c.) [7, fig. 12]. Regarding the details of his clothing, these resemble more closely the archangel Michael from the monastery of Myrtia in Aetolia (1491) [1, pp. 124–129, fig. 13], where we see similar lily flowers (*krinanthemums*) under the elliptical opening at the abdomen and the same circular ending of the breastplate at the base of the sternum.

The Christ from the representation of Vlachernitissa inside the cave and the archangel on the outer face of the walled up opening of the cave could be generally dated to the 15th century, given that their condition does not allow for a more precise dating, although they may go back to the first half of that century, since the hermitage must have been abandoned already by the beginning of the 16th century¹², perhaps even earlier, when the monks were forced to build their new monastery on the opposite slope of the Farmakovouni hill, possibly following the destruction of the hermitage by rock fall, due to an earthquake or some other cause.

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¹² The beginning of the 16th century (1533) is when the current location of the monastery of Giromeri is mentioned in historical sources [60, v. 500; 15, pp. 61–66; 16, p. 31; 26, p. 158].

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Title. The Hermitage of Saint Neilos near Giromeri, Thesprotia

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Abstract. The hermitage of Saint Neilos is located on a rocky outcrop opposite the monastery of Giromeri. The existence of a monastery in this area is evidenced by historical sources, as it was founded by Saint Neilos Erichiotis, a fact that is recorded both in the Saint's Synaxarium and in his Testament. The hermitage was built inside a cave, now not accessible, as its opening is visible on a vertical cliff, at a height of about 17 m. above ground. This opening is walled up and leads to a narrow cave. Inside the cave, where a large single space is formed, there must have been a two-story structure, which has collapsed in its entirety. The church was probably on the structure's second floor, as the presence of a niche on that level indicates. This church was probably built soon after Saint Neilos had settled in the area, before 1330. In the hermitage, very few wall paintings are preserved, one on the outer face of the rock and two inside the cave. These paintings belong to two distinct phases. Of the first layer the image of Pantokrator is visible on the eastern side of the cave ceiling, with an inscription below Him. The mural decoration of the second layer preserves Christ's figure from the representation of the

Virgin Vlachernitissa on the eastern side of the second floor, inside the cave, and a full-body archangel on the outer face of the walled-up opening of the cave. Christ Pantokrator is depicted in a frame. The dark olive-green shades on his face and hand, the body volume, the color gradations, but also the smooth and well-designed folds, recall corresponding figures in Palaeologan monuments of the first half of the 14th century, mainly in Macedonia. Of the Virgin Vlachernitissa representation in the niche, only Christ is preserved in a shell-shaped roundel. The shell-shaped roundel follows the type of similar roundels in monuments of the 15th century and early post-Byzantine times. In general, the type of the glory that surrounds Christ, his posture, his broad and bright face, combined with his clothing, follows north Greek or Macedonian patterns. The Christ from the representation of Vlachernitissa inside the cave and the archangel on the outer rock surface could be dated to the 15th century, maybe to the first half of that century.

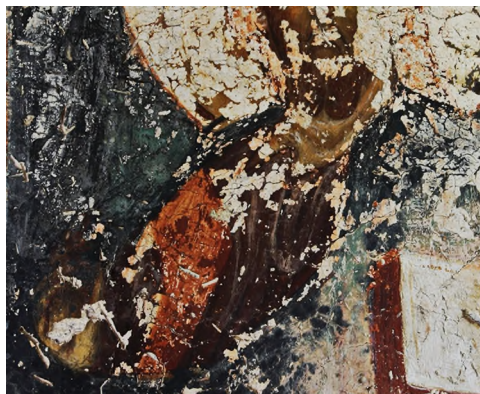
Keywords: Palaeologan painting, 14th–15th centuries, Saint Neilos Erichiotis, Epirus, Thesprotia, Giromeri, Hermitage

Название статьи. Скит Св. Нила близ Гиромери, Теспотия

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Аннотация. Скит Св. Нила расположен на отроге скалы напротив монастыря Гиромери. Существование монастыря в этой местности подтверждается историческими источниками. Его основал св. Нил Эрихиот, что засвидетельствовано и в житии святого, и в его завещании. Скит был устроен в пещере, которая ныне недоступна, поскольку ее проем располагается на вертикальной скальной поверхности на высоте 17 м. Этот проем замурован, он ведет в узкую пещеру. Внутри нее — единое зальное пространство, в котором размещалась двухэтажная постройка, полностью обрушившаяся. Церковь занимала второй этаж этой постройки, на что указывает ниша на этом уровне. Церковь, вероятно, была построена вскоре после того, как св. Нил поселился в этой местности, до 1330 г. В скиту сохранилось несколько фресок, одна на наружной стене скалы и две внутри пещеры. Они относятся к двум разным фазам. К первому слою может быть отнесен образ Пантократора в восточной части потолка пещеры, с надписью под ним. Ко второму слою принадлежал образ Богородицы Влахернитиссы в восточной части второго этажа внутри пещеры, от которого сохранилась фигура Христа, и ростовое изображение архангела на замурованном входе в пещеру с наружной стороны. Образ Христа Пантократора заключен в раму. Темно-оливковые тени на Его лице и руке, моделировка объема, оттенки цвета, хорошо прорисованные мягкие складки одежды, — все это напоминает соответствующие образы палеологовской живописи первой половины XIV в., в основном, в Македонии. От изображения Богородицы Влахернитиссы в нише сохранился только Христос в медальоне в форме раковины. Эта форма соответствует медальонам в росписях XV в. и раннего поствизантийского периода. В целом, тип славы, окружающей Христа, его поза, широкий и яркий лик, как и одежда соответствуют северогреческим и македонским образцам. Младенец из образа Влахернитиссы внутри пещеры и архангел на наружной поверхности скалы могут быть отнесены к XV в., возможно, к первой половине столетия.

Ключевые слова: палеологовская живопись 14–15 века, Нил Эрихиот, Эпир, Теспотия, Гиромери, скит Св. Нила



Ill. 55. Christ Pantokrator (detail). Hermitage of Saint Neilos. Photo by I. Chouliaras

Ill. 54. Christ Pantokrator. Hermitage of Saint Neilos. Photo by I. Chouliaras



Ill. 56. Christ's figure from the representation of the Virgin Vlachernitissa. Hermitage of Saint Neilos. Photo by I. Chouliaras



Ill. 57. Archangel Michael (?). Hermitage of Saint Neilos. Photo by I. Chouliaras