Literary Evidence for the Dating of the Bačkovo Ossuary Frescoes

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The “ktitor’s typicon” for the monastery dedicated to the “Mother of God of Petritzos” (near the present day Bulgarian village of Bačkovo) has not survived in its original form. The extant MSS are later copies, probably not earlier than the thirteenth century and disagree on several crucial details concerning the nationality of the founders Gregory and Apasios Pakurianoi (Bakurianis-dse). They are, however, unanimous on all points of detail concerning the establishment and administration of the monastery. Any attempt to date the building of the ossuary must begin by asking whether this ossuary can be identified with any of the buildings mentioned in the typicon.

The physical description of the monastery and the mention of the component buildings offered in the typicon are laconic and somewhat confusing. If we omit such buildings as the three hostels (ξενοδοχεία) for travellers, the seminary and the other buildings which are clearly located outside the monastery, the following picture of the monastic structures emerges. The centre of the complex was occupied by “three churches” dedicated to the Virgin, (τῇ ὑπερευλογημένῃ μητρὶ Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ ήμῶν τῇ ἀειπαρθένῳ Μαρίᾳ), to John the Baptist and Saint George. Some monastic cells were constructed and there was an outer wall. There is no specific mention of a refectory, kitchen or library, but their existence is implied in several places in the typicon. There is also mention of a tomb containing the body of Apasios Pakurianos. The entire monastery was built in a field (ἄγραν) at a place called "Ιππονομος."

The ossuary as it exists today, is a separate two-storey structure found some 400 metres outside the present monastic walls (Plate 8). At each level at the eastern end is a semi-circular apse; the lower contains a Deesis, the upper, an enthroned Madonna and Child between two standing archangels. Is this building one of the three churches or a possible place for the tomb of the founders? Since the typicon specifies the Koimesis as the principal feast of the monastery, critics have been unanimous in identifying the catholicon as dedicated to this feast. Petit and Ivanov mention a principal church of the “Assumption” and two minor churches dedicated to John the Baptist and Saint George. The ossuary has been identified as one of these minor churches and the choice fell on Saint George.

While the typicon mentions three churches and specifies their individual dedications, in other places it speaks of the monastery with its one church. In chapter 1.3 the three churches are referred to as one building for the honour and glory of the Virgin, John the Baptist and Saint George. The Chios Georgian MS of the typicon is even more specific. It refers to the building of the three churches as a cathedral to the glory of God. This distinction is made even more apparent in the chapter on the illumination of the church. Icon lamps were to be lit near the main altar, in front of the icon of John the Baptist at the doors to his chapel and near the icon of Saint George. Chapter 27 specifically mentions the chapel of John the Baptist. A priest was to be appointed ἐν τῷ εὐκτηρίῳ τοῦ ἄγιου...
From this it appears that the catholicon was built as a single building with a main altar dedicated to the Virgin and two chapels with separate altars dedicated to John the Baptist and Saint George.

The archaeological evidence from the 1955 excavations of Bačkovo supports this conclusion. The foundations of only one church were discovered (directly underneath the present catholicon) with evidence for three separate apses: a main apse at the east end and separate apses on the lateral sides. The principle of multiple dedications and separate altars within a single church is found in other examples such as Constantine Lips and Skripou. In the ossuary crypt, on a blocked-in arch on the north wall of the narthex is a fourteenth century depiction of the Pakurianoi holding a model of a single domed church with two side chapels. Could this be a depiction of their church of the Koimesis, with its chapels of John the Baptist and Saint George?

Petit does not identify the tomb mentioned in the typicon with any surviving building. Ivanov mentions the existing ossuary but is uncertain of its date and regards all the frescoes as belonging to the fourteenth century. He does not associate the ossuary with the tomb in the typicon and mentions that Apasios' remains were brought into the monastery. André Grabar, who visited Bačkovo in 1920, mentions the ossuary and identifies it with the one described in the typicon as containing the tomb of the founders. Other scholars followed his example. Recently this position was challenged. It was argued that the tomb of the founder, following the tradition of Byzantine family tombs, was placed within the main church and the ossuary was built for the remains of the monks at some later unknown date.

The typicon is not specific about the location of the founder's tomb. This is despite the fact that the establishment of the monastery seems to have been spurred on by the thought of creating a final "resting place" that would aid in the deliverance of the patron's soul. Pakurianos states this in the introduction to his typicon:

"... the founder of this most blessed, newly built monastery and ossuary for my resting place ... set up for my succour, redemption and deliverance and also for that of my own blessed brother the magistros Apasios".

The setting up of a monastery with these pious thoughts in mind, was commonplace in the royal and upper circles of Byzantine society. In typica there appears to be a distinction drawn between the tomb for the founder and the ossuary for the monks. Normally the words τάφος or τύμβος refer to the tomb of the patron, while κοιμητήριον is used for that of the monks. In the Pantocrator monastery (Zeyrek Camii) typicon (1136) it is mentioned that between the two major churches was built a small church to serve as the royal family tomb ὄνοματος τοῦ ἄρχιστρατηγοῦ Μιχαήλ, ἐν ὃ καὶ τῶν τάφων ἠμῶν τεθήκατο διεσπασμένον. The κοιμητήριον, for the non-royalty who died in the monastic hospital and for the monks, was built in the monastery opposite, that of Midikarios. The typicon of the monastery of Our Lady τῆς βεβαιας ἐλπίδος...