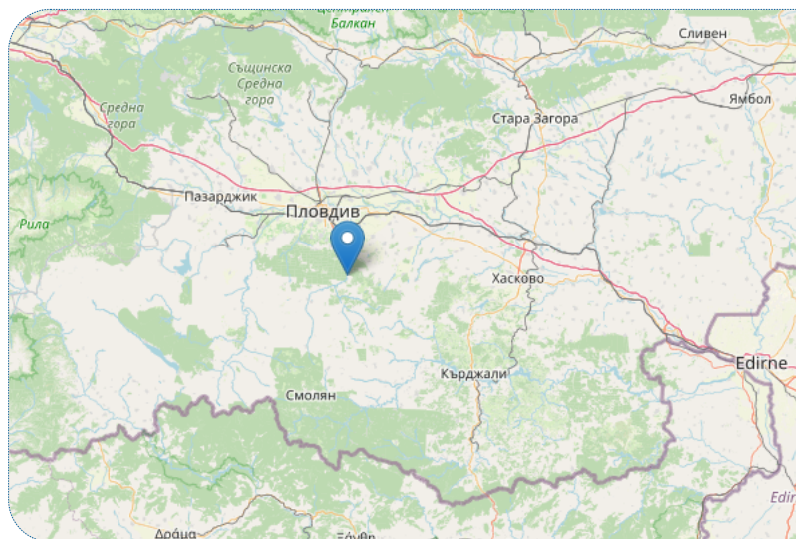


The Ossuary of the Bachkovo Monastery



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Description

The Bachkovo Monastery, known in the past as the Monastery of the Holy Mother of God Petritzonitissa, was founded in 1083 by Gregorios Pakourianos (d. 1086), a high-ranking Byzantine military official (*meġas domestikos*) of Georgian origin. Situated not far from the city of Plovdiv, ancient Philippoupolis, it remains, to this day, one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Bulgaria. The oldest monument of the Bachkovo Monastery that survives in its original form is the monastic ossuary. It is not known whether it was built at the time of the monastery's foundation because the Typikon does not mention it. It is possible that the ossuary was constructed after a few years, at the end of the 11th century, when a small burial ground became insufficient for the lack of space, or perhaps, on account of its frescos dated to the 12th century, even later. If the latter hypothesis is correct, it might be that its original pictorial program was planned in advance, together with the specific architectural design.

The Bachkovo Ossuary is a rectangular two-story building raised outside the walls of the monastery on a steep slope of a hill next to the cemetery. The convenience of the two levels enabled the construction of a funerary chapel above a crypt designed to hold the earthly remains of the monks after bodily decomposition was completed. Therefore, the funerary service was performed in the chapel, whereas the bones were stored in the fourteen-floor openings of the crypt. It is also interesting that both spaces are preceded by the originally opened narthexes that were eventually walled up in the 14th century. While the Bachkovo Ossuary is not the only surviving monument of its kind (e.g. the two-story mortuary of St. Luke in the Nea Mone Monastery on Chios from the 11th century), it is the only ossuary that preserves a painted program.

Significance

Though being the *meġas domestikos* of the western armies of the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118), Gregorios Pakourianos founded the monastery with an exclusively Georgian monastic fraternity. Trying to protect the monastery from annexation, he forbade the acceptance of Greek monks in the monastic community by inserting this prohibition in the Typikon. Therefore, the employment of the 12th-century master painter of Georgian origin (John Iviropoulos) is not unusual, as well as the inclusion of a few Georgian saints in the pictorial program of the Bachkovo Ossuary.

However, the care with which the program was devised is best perceived through the lens of performative and cognitive studies that problematize the relationship between viewer and image. The crypt is particularly interesting in that regard. A monumental representation of the Deësis dominates the apse in the east and it is confronted by the fresco of the *Resurrection of Dry Bones* in the west – a vision witnessed by prophet Ezekiel. While virtually nothing is preserved of the painted prophets on the vault, fragments of heavily damaged standing figures of saints on the north and the south walls still remain. The compositional plainness of the scene of Ezekiel's vision emphasizes the prophet together with the transparent figures that rise from the heap of bones. Taking into account that the earthly remains were gathered in the floor openings creating heaps similar to the painted one, the image on the west wall was conceived as a spatial extension of the crypt, transforming the whole

place into the Valley of Dry Bones from the biblical prophecy.

On the other hand, the standing figures of saints on the side walls, from holy bishops and deacons in liturgical garments to the simply garbed holy monks, were conceived as to mirror the actual performance that took place in the crypt, i.e. prayer for the dead. This notion of the active participation of the painted figures in the service can also be attested in the naos of the upper chapel where the representations of All Saints are rendered on the side walls to the east. Finally, remembering that the Deësis is a succinct image of the Last Judgment, frescos of the crypt's pictorial program were thematically interconnected, making a unified compositional whole that encompasses the physical space between them. Hence, the crypt was visualizing the Valley of Dry Bones, the place of resurrection of the Chosen People who will approach the seat of the (benevolent) Great Judge soon enough. Even before entering the crypt, monks became aware of its identity as the place of the elect because the entrance from the narthex is defined as the gates of paradise toward which the painted procession of saints is heading.

On account of the profound complexity of the program, it is possible to suppose that the monks of the Bachkovo Monastery were gathering in the crypt after vespers on the Saturday of Souls before the Meatfare Sunday. That is the day reserved for the general commemoration of the dead and the Meatfare Sunday is a feast devoted to the Last Judgment. Thus, the Saturday service would have introduced monks to the Sunday feast, allowing them to relive the Judgment Day in the most direct way, while simultaneously allowing them to perform their duty of caring for the deceased brethren. It is also possible that the creation of the pictorial program was influenced by the theological concerns instigated by the rise of the Bogomil heresy in the region of Philippopolis (ancient Plovdiv) in the 12th century. Because the Bogomils challenged the doctrine of bodily resurrection, the Bachkovo Ossuary offered to its inhabitants the reassuring experience of "reliving" Ezekiel's vision.

In the 14th century, the opened narthexes of the ossuary were walled up through the patronage of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander (r. 1331-1371). Newly formed niches received ktetor portraits without interfering with the original conception of the pictorial program, but rather visually emphasizing particular individuals worthy of intercessory prayer. In the lower narthex were painted in pairs Gregorios Pakourianos with his brother Abasios and the two monks Georgios and Gabriel (most probably donors of the very ossuary), whereas the portrait of Tsar Ivan Alexander was placed in the upper narthex.

The Bachkovo Ossuary testifies that visual programs of sacral monuments in the Byzantine world were carefully staged in order to instigate and define distinct experiences. Furthermore, they can be used as the relevant primary sources in revealing specific functional and performative aspects of church spaces, otherwise unobtainable from the written records.

Further Reading

Bakalova, Elka, ed. *The Ossuary of the Bachkovo Monastery*. Plovdiv: Pygmalion, 2003.

This is the monograph on the Bachkovo Ossuary accompanied by a detailed overview of its conservation and restoration. It also offers a comprehensive overview of the monastery's history, cultural importance, and connections with medieval Georgia, as well as an account on the founder's life and persona.

Đorđević, Jakov. "Experiencing Resurrection: Persuasive Narrative of the Pictorial Program in the Ossuary of the Bachkovo Monastery." *Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 3 (2017): 95–124.

This article analyzes the pictorial program of the Bachkovo Ossuary by relying on the performative and cognitive studies trying to reconstruct the perception and experience of the original viewers in encountering this funerary space. It also contextualizes the program in the particular historical circumstances of the second half of the 12th century.

Planchette, Yoanna. "Le cas des 'églises sépulcrales bulgares': vers une reconsidération du concept d'André Grabar?" *Art Studies Quarterly* 1 (2019): 22–31.

This article presents a critical reconsideration of the Grabarian concept of "Bulgarian sepulchral churches" discussing, among other medieval two-story churches in Bulgaria, the architectural features of the Bachkovo Ossuary.

Jordan, Robert, trans. "Pakourianos: Typikon of Gregory Pakourianos for the Monastery of the Mother of God Petritzonitissa in Backovo." In *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders' Typika and Testaments*, edited by John Thomas and Angela Constantinides Hero, 507–563. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2000.

This is the translation of the Typikon of Gregorios Pakourianos together with a brief analysis.

This contribution was sponsored by the [International Center of Medieval Art](#) through the 2021 Advocacy Seed Grant.

Citation:

Jakov Đorđević, "The Ossuary of the Bachkovo Monastery," *Mapping Eastern Europe*, eds. M. A. Rossi and A. I. Sullivan, accessed October 14, 2023, <https://mappingeasterneurope.princeton.edu>. 