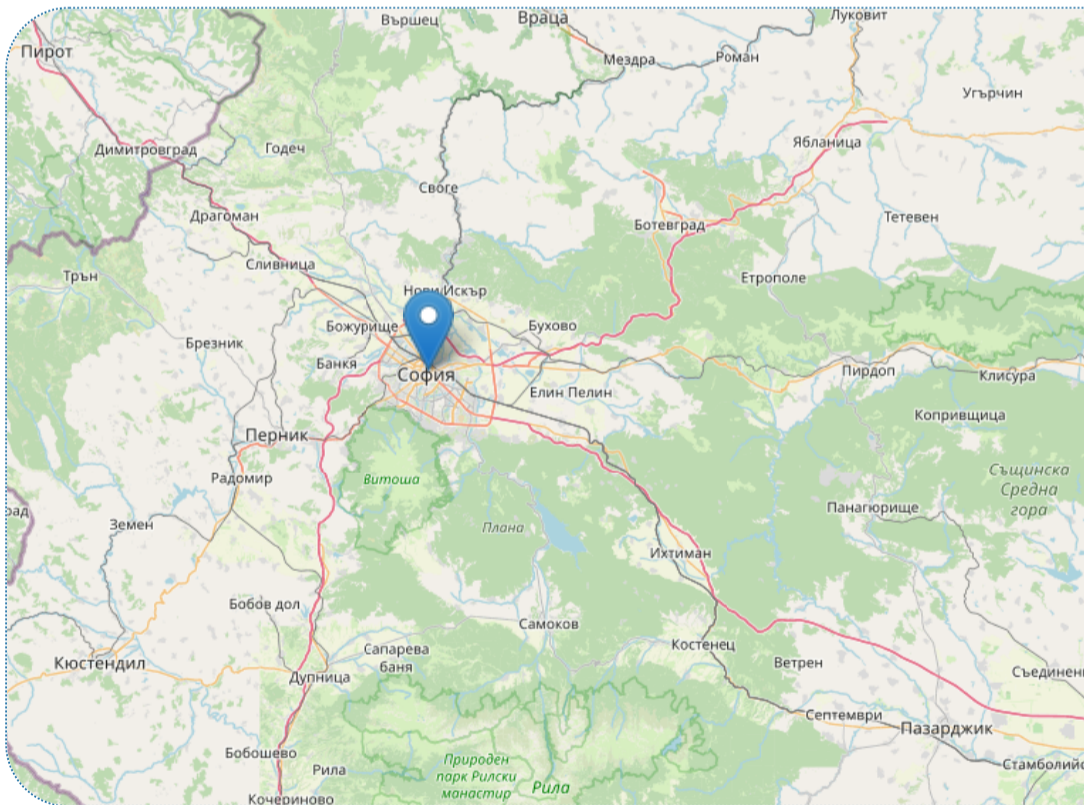


The Icon from Poganovo Monastery



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Description

From the middle of the 20th century onward, the icon from Poganovo monastery has been the subject of research among scholars scientists. It was found in the monastery of Saint John the Theologian near Poganovo. For some time, the icon was kept in the crypt of the Cathedral Church of Alexander Nevsky in Sofia, Bulgaria. It was recently moved to the Archeological Museum in Sofia.

The icon is double-sided object; one side shows the Miracle of Latomos. This composition is very specific and appears only three time in Early Christian and Byzantine visual culture: in the mosaic in the apse of the church of Hosios David in Thessaloniki from the 5th or 6th century, in mural painting in the upper church of the ossuary of the Bachkovo monastery from the 12th century and in the Icon from Poganovo from the 14th century. On the

other side, the icon shows the Mother of God and St. John the Evangelist. The Mother of God bears the epithet *Kataphyge* which means refuge, and John the Theologian.

The votive inscription in Greek on the icon “[Ελένη ἐ]ν Χ(ριστ)ω τω Θ(ε)ω πιστή βασίλισσα” (in Christ God the faithful *basilissa* Helena) written between the figures of the Mother of God and St. John, incited a question about the ktetor’s identity among researchers. According to the title *basilissa* the older generation of researchers, such as André Grabar, Todor Gerasimov, and André Xyngopoulos, considered that the ktetor of the icon was the Byzantine empress Helena Dragaš Palaiologina (r. 1392–1424). Gordana Babić offered a different hypothesis about the ktetor’s identity. According to the inscriptions in documents and frescoes, she came to the conclusion that the title *basilissa* was applied to the wife of the despot. Based on the complex iconography and the Mother of God’s epithet, she argued that the ktetor of the Icon from Poganovo was *basilissa* Helena Mrnjavčević (c. 1349–1405). This interpretation has been accepted among researchers to this day. Based on its stylistic features, the icon was probably painted after 1371 in a workshop in Thessaloniki.

Significance

Basilissa Helena Mrnjavčević (c. 1349–1405), the nun Euphemia, is the most often mentioned in historiography and literature as the first Serbian female poet. Helena was very educated and talented, according to the poems she wrote. She had a very tragic destiny. First, she lost her only son Uglješa Mrnjavčević, who died at a very young age (d. b. 1368–1371). He was buried in the *katholikon* of Hilandar monastery at the place where Helena could never go. Soon after she lost her son, she lost her husband despot John Uglješa Mrnjavčević (r. 1364/65–1371) on 26th of September 1371, at the Battle of Černomen in the valley of the Marica River. After the defeat of the Serbian army, Helena lost her home too and moved to Thessaloniki. During the Early Christian period, there was a monastery dedicated to the Mother of God *Kataphyge* in Thessaloniki where the cult of the Virgin *Kataphyge* was extremely developed. Apparently, Helena encountered with this cult and the story of the Miracle of Latomos in Thessaloniki.

Finally, she went to the court of Prince Lazar (r. 1373–1389) in Kruševac and lived under his protection for several years until his death at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. After that, Helena took the monastic vows, becoming nun Euphemia. She probably spent her last days in Ljubostinja monastery.

These tragedies that forever marked Helena’s life were reflected in her votive gifts. Due to her personal fate and the tragedy that connects her with the Mother of God, she symbolically represents the reflection of the Mother of God on earth. Her personal faith and tragedy are reflected through the composition of the Miracle of Latomos and the depiction of the Mother of God *Kataphyge* on the icon from Poganovo, which Helena commissioned as the votive gift for her protector and intercessor, the Mother of God.

The story about the Miracle of Latomos can be traced back to the end of the 3rd century AD, and it is closely related to the city of Thessaloniki and to princess Theodora, the daughter of August Galerius (r. 305–311). This composition tells the story about the miraculous transformation of the image of the Mother of God into the image of Christ Emmanuel that happened according to God’s will. In the mosaic in the apse of Theodora’s palace, Christ Emmanuel is seated on a rainbow encircled by the mandorla and four animals – the symbols of the four evangelists flanked by the figures of two prophets. The palace was burnt to the ground, but the mosaic stayed preserved by God’s will. The place where the palace stood was named Latomia, according to the Greek word for stone, because the whole palace was built of stone. In 1921, the church was dedicated to the local saint Hosios David. Today, in the apse of this church Theodora’s mosaic can be seen. The iconography of this composition indicates that it is a scene of the Second Coming of Christ.

The Miracle of Latomos on the icon from Poganovo is depicted in a different way from that in the mosaic in Hosios David. Christ Emmanuel, dressed in a golden chiton is depicted enthroned on a golden rainbow, surrounded with the mandorla composed of seven blue rings. He is encircled with the symbols of the four evangelists. His arms and feet bear marks of the Crucifixion. Around him is the inscription: “ὁ ἐν το Λατόμου θαύμα” (the Miracle of Latomos). The inscription around Christ’s head and torso directly connects this icon with the mosaic from Hosios David. In the lower zone of the icon, below Christ is a mountainous landscape with a water basin, where seven fish swim. Two prophets, Ezekiel and Habakkuk flank this composition. They saw God in the form of light surrounded by the four tetramorphs which are symbols of the four Evangelists. The composition depicted in this way can be interpreted at the same time as Theophany and as Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ. As we have already mentioned, the whole composition is slightly different from that in Hosios David. On the icon, Christ is depicted with wounds on his hands and feet, while in the mosaic he does not have wounds. Given the fact that Christ is depicted in this way, this scene indicates the moment after the Crucifixion. The seven rings of the mandorla and seven fish that swim in the water basin point to the symbolism of the Last Judgment. During the Revelation of John the Theologian, God showed himself to John in the form of light on a

throne, surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists.

On the front side, the Mother of God *Kataphyge* and John the Theologian are painted. In the lower zone between them is in quite damaged condition the donor's inscription printed in red: "In Christ God the faithful *basilissa* Helena". This votive inscription replaces Helena's portrait on the icon. The Mother of God stands on the left side, dressed in a blue maphorion, her head is lowered, and she is in deep sorrow. Special emphasis in this depiction is on the Mother of God's human suffering and mourning for her son. Mother of God and Helena had the same tragic fate, they survived the loss of the only son and that unites them.

Next to her head is the inscription written in red, *Kataphyge*. The icon from Poganovo is the last known example where this epithet was used in visual culture. The epithet *Kataphyge* also closely links the Mother of God and Helena. Helena identified her grief for little Ugljesa with the Mother of God's grief for Christ. Through the Mother of God, Helena was searching for refuge, *kataphyge*, in this life. Through this depiction and epithet Helena identified herself with the Mother of God and became her reflection on earth.

Next to the Mother of God, John the Evangelist is depicted. He is signed as John the *Theologian* and shown as an elderly man, as the author of the Revelation. With his right hand he gestures to the other side of the icon. The Battle of the Maritsa River took place on the 26th of September. On this day, the church celebrates the Metastasis of John the Theologian. John Uglješa shares the name of the patron saint, and he died on the saint's day.

The icon from Poganovo, Helena's votive gift, represents a unique example in the visual culture of medieval Serbia, and Byzantium more broadly. Through this icon, Helena was praying for salvation for herself and her loved ones. The icon has an eschatological character. The composition of the Miracle of Latomos expands the legend of the healing power of the place where it happened, and it could be interpreted as a wish of the ktetor to find peace and refuge after personal tragedy. The Second Coming of Christ represents salvation for her. During the Resurrection of the dead, she will be reunited with her husband and son in the dwellings of the righteous of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

Further Reading

Babić, Gordana. "Sur l'icône de Poganovo et la vasilissa Hélène." In *L'art de Thessalonique et des pays Balkaniques et les courants spirituels au XVIe siècle*, edited by Dinko Davidov, 57–65. Belgrade: Institut des Études balkaniques, 1987.

The study analyses the complex iconography of the Icon from Poganovo monastery. She is the first among researchers who concluded that the ktetor of the icon was Helena Mrnjavčević, based on the complex iconography and the inscription on the icon. According to the iconography she argued that composition of the Miracle of Latomos represents Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ.

Grabar, André. "À propos d'une icône byzantine du XIVe siècle au Musée de Sofia (Notes sur les sources et les procédés des peintres sous les Paléologues)." *Cachiers archéologiques* 10 (1959): 289–304.

André Grabar has written one of the first articles about the Icon from Poganovo monastery. He considered that the ktetor of this icon was Roman empress Helena Dragaš Palaiologina. Based on the iconography and the figures of the prophets Grabar concluded that the composition Miracle of Latomos represents *Traditio Legis*.

Pentcheva, Bissera. "Imagined Images: Vision of Salvation and Intercession in Double-Sided Icon from Poganovo." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000): 139–153.

This article provides an extremely important overview of earlier research about the Icon from Poganovo and its interpretations. The author argues that this double-sided icon represents Vision of Salvation and Intercession.

Vinulović, Ljubica. "Poems and Votive Gifts of the Nun Jefimija as an Expression of Human Tragedy." In *Death, Illness, Body and Soul in Written and Visual Culture in Byzantium and Late Medieval Balkans*, edited by Vlada Stanković, 91–111. Belgrade: Faculty of Philosophy, 2021.

The author of the article offers a new interpretation of the poems and the votive gifts of the basilissa Helena Mrnjavčević, nun Euphemia. Her poems engraved or embroidered on her votive gifts represent a unique expression of the maternal pain and human tragedy which shaped the visual culture and literature of the Roman Empire and medieval Serbia.

Vinulović, Ljubica. "The Miracle of Latomos: From the Apse of the Hosios David to the Icon from Poganovo, The Migration of the Idea of Salvation." In *Migrations in Visual Art*, edited by Jelena Erdeljan, Martin Germ, Ivana Prijatelj–Pavičić, Marina Vicelja– Matijašić, 175–186. Belgrade: Faculty of Philosophy, 2018.

The main preoccupation of this study is iconographical analysis of depictions of the Miracle of Latomos and its historical background from the Thessaloniki to the medieval Serbia. The author was focused on the iconography and the question of ktetorship of the Icon from Poganovo monastery.

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