



Smiljka Gabelić

*Čelopek. Crkva Sv. Nikole
(XIV i XIX vek)*

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(17 color photographs and a
number of black-and-white
photographs and drawings);
list of abbreviations of used

bibliography; index; summary and list of illustrations in
English

The book of Smiljka Gabelić *Čelopek. Church of St. Nicholas (14th and 19th century)* is the result of her years-long research of the history, architecture, frescoes, icons and church furniture of St. Nicholas in Čelopek – a comprehensive monograph encompassing its diverse and extensive artistic material.

The Church of St. Nicholas in the village of Čelopek near Tetovo, FYR Macedonia, was built and frescoed in the decades around or following the mid-14th century. The medieval edifice received its present-day appearance during the great restoration in the first half of the 19th century. It was then that the long-damaged single nave church with a dome and a narthex underwent significant alterations – the formation of an uninterrupted elongated space and the erection of a blind dome. A new layer of frescoes was painted over the original, partially surviving fresco program, and the church was equipped with a new iconostasis and furniture. For a long time the Church of St. Nicholas remained outside of the research focus of Serbian medieval architecture and mural painting, as well as the art of 19th-century Balkans. The little known history of the church and the lack of written testimonies about how it came to be built and the identity of its ktetor have contributed to this absence of professional and scholarly interest in the 19th and first half of the 20th century. The first descriptions and observations about the Čelopek church and its frescoes were published by Petar Miljković-Peppek and Antonije Nikolovski as part of the results of the field research they conducted in the Tetovo area in 1975.¹ However, most dedicated to the study of this church has been Smiljka Gabelić, a research fellow at the Institute of Art History of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade. In her works on the stylistic² and then iconographic and programmatic characteristics of the original frescoes,³ S. G.

¹ П. Миљковић-Пепек, А. Николовски, *Сосијобитија и валоризација на црковниот сџоменици на културија од XIV век до денес на иерихоријајата на Собранието на оштината Тетово*, Културно наследство 6 (Скопје 1975) 83–92 (88–90) fig. 1–2, 16, 19–20.

² С. Габелић, *Једна локална сликарска радионица из средине XIV века. Дечани-Лесново-Марков манастир-Челопек*, in: *Дечани и византијска уметност средином XIV века*, ed. В. Ј. Ђурић, Београд 1989, 367–378, especially 373–374, fig. 19; ead., *Diversity in Fresco Painting of the Mid-Fourteenth Century: The Case of Lesново*, in: *The Twilight of Byzantium*, ed. S. Ćurčić, D. Mouriki, Princeton 1991, 190–191; ead., *Манастир Лесново. Историја и сликарство*, Београд 1998, 145–147.

³ S. Gabelić, *Rođenje Hristovo u Čelopeku. Funkcionalno modifikovanje predloška freske*, Patrimonium.mk 7–8 (2010) 217–230;

has reliably determined their place in 14th-century Serbian and Byzantine art, suggesting their dating to the fourth or fifth decade of that century. She has recently shifted her academic focus to the various and previously unknown segments of the chronologically younger layer of art in the Čelopek church: the despotic icons and smaller iconostasis icons; iconostasis cross; and frescoes.⁴

After the author's Introduction (p. 9–12), the first part of the book entitled *History* (p. 13–32) offers an overview of the history of Polog (9th–19th century), a region that became part of the Serbian state after the first southern conquests of King Milutin (1281–1321) in 1282, and remained within its borders throughout the following century. Among the diplomatic and administrative-legal documents discussed in the chapter *Geographical and Historical Framework* (p. 13–21) as relevant sources for learning about Gornji and Donji (Upper and Lower) Polog – an important territorial and administrative division in the time of the kingdom, empire and co-rule, the charter of King Dušan to the Virgin of Htetovo Monastery (issued sometime between spring 1343 and the end of 1345) stands out as particularly noteworthy. It is in this charter that the first and only (albeit indirect) reference to Čelopek has survived. The village where the Church of St. Nicholas was erected was probably situated on the border between the two Polog regions, a delineation line that has proved very difficult to determine clearly. Having introduced the reader to the Late Antique heritage of the Polog valley (*Archeological Sites in the Village and its Area*, p. 21–23), the author confidently suggests that the Antique stela in white marble bearing a Greek inscription, built into the floor in front of the Royal Doors in the Church of St. Nicholas, was in fact transferred from its immediate surroundings, possibly during the restoration of the church. Despite the lack of written evidence about the identity of the founder and the dating of the church, in the following chapter (*Founding the Church*, p. 23–28) the author of the monograph strives to establish a more reliable timeframe of this ktetorial endeavor by drawing on the available sources and historical-artistic evidence. Also, she cautiously discusses the hypothesis about the possible ktetor of St. Nicholas in Čelopek. Based on the appearance of the building, she assumes that the church was erected between the fifth and eighth decade of the 14th century by a member of the nobility and infers that there is just one personage that could potentially be associated with Čelopek and the Church of St. Nicholas: Grgur, probably a member of the lower nobility, who is mentioned as the lord of Polog under King Vukašin (1365–1371). Although this hypothesis seems the most credible, the impossibility of its verification nonetheless follows as the inevitable conclusion. The closing chapter of the historical part of the book (*The Newer Period*, p. 28–32) discusses the period from the Turkish conquest of Polog (last decade of the 14th century) to the mid-19th century. It presents and

ead., *Првобитно сликарство цркве Св. Николе у Челопеку код Тетова*, in: *Византијски свет на Балкану II*, Београд 2012, 481–501.

⁴ S. Gabelić, *Ikonoostas crkve Sv. Nikole u Čelopeku*, Patrimonium.mk 11 (2013) 251–266; ead., *Ikonoostasni krsii iz crkve Sv. Nikole u Čelopleku*, Ниш и Византија 13 (2015) 425–436; ead., *Св. Хараламјије и св. Ђорђе Нови*, Ниш и Византија 14 (2016) 511–522; ead., *Свети Пејка – двојни иорјирей*, ЗЛУМС 44 (2016) 25–40.

systematizes selected information about the events that marked the history of the entire surrounding area. Although there is little evidence to corroborate the existence of Čelopek in the fifth decade of the 14th century except the abovementioned charter of King Dušan to the Virgin of Htetovo Monastery, the first reliable mention of this village appears in Turkish documents dating from the mid-15th century. In the 16th century it was part of the *nahiye* of Nagoričane (Kumanovo) in the Sanjak of Kyustendil; from 1568 on it belonged to the *nahiye* of Tetovo in the Sanjak of Üsküp (Skopje). In terms of church art production, the region of Tetovo flourished in the period of the restored Patriarchate of Peć (1557–1690). A noteworthy period from the time of the Ottoman administration of these areas is the rule of the pashas of Tetovo (18th and first half the 19th century), which saw the revival of church life at St. Nicholas in Čelopek.

The second part (p. 33–54) extensively discusses the architecture of the church, including both its original and restored appearance. A separate chapter (*The Original Edifice, 14th Century*, p. 33–42) offers a typologically precise reconstruction of the older part of the building, analyzing its plan, spatial concept and elements. The shaping of the interior and the most relevant features of its façade treatment are given no less attention. Since this is the first in-depth academic assessment of the architecture of the Čelopek church, well-founded suggestions of similar architectural solutions, decorations and building methods provide a sound basis for reliable conclusions about the possible place of this edifice in the rich corpus of Byzantine monuments from the Palaeologan period. Typologically, the Church of St. Nicholas in Čelopek belongs to a compact variant of a single-nave church with a dome, whose closest counterparts are a few churches in the Skopje area, dating from the mid-14th or third quarter of the 14th century (the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin at the Matka Monastery; St. Nicholas of Šiševo; and St. Nicholas at Markov grad). A distinctive feature of the solution implemented in Čelopek is the condensed cubical space below the dome; according to the author, this feature makes it closest to an older example from Prilep – the Church of Archangel Michael (c. 1280). The present-day condition of this building suggests that it has undergone major changes. The original walls have survived roughly to the middle of their total height, while the upper zones of the church have been completely remodeled. However, the building method in alternating rows of stone and brick can still be clearly discerned, as is the case with the original concept of the diverse decorative system on the façades, with the three-arched blind arcade with wreaths in the form of jagged brickwork. The wide horizontal rows of decorative brickwork also belong to the repertoire of architectural decoration on churches from the Palaeologan period. Similar sculptural ornaments are found at the churches of Virgin Peribleptos and St. John at Kaneo in Ohrid; St. Nicholas in Prilep; St. Demetrios in Veles; and the Zaum Monastery. The execution of its altar apse also places the Čelopek church among the group of monuments dating from the Palaeologan period, primarily those in Ohrid and its area, Thessaloniki, and Epirus (Holy Archangels in Štip, Ljuboten, Lesnovo, Marko's Monastery, Church of the Parigoritissa in Arta, Panagia

Olimpiotissa, Church of St. Catherine in Thessaloniki, etc.). Having provided a compelling analysis of all segments of the architecture of the church and its many analogies, S. G. concludes that the concept of its appearance was most profoundly influenced by the architecture of the Despotate of Epirus – an influence that deeply affected the church architecture of northern Macedonia. Based on the building method and quality of the church's execution, the author hypothesizes that the Church of St. Nicholas was built by local masters, who were commissioned by a member of the ruling class in the middle or third quarter of the 14th century – the period when the region of Polog was part of medieval Serbia.

The first part of the chapter *The Restored Church* (19th century) (p. 42–54) discusses the question of the second ktetor (p. 42–48), who is identified in oral tradition as Cile of Čelopek (Cile Čelopečanin), later renamed Alil-aga – a prominent personage from the first half of the 19th century and a member of the oldest Muslim family of ethnic Albanians in Čelopek. The layer of the legend concerning his wife, a Greek woman whose purported efforts in favor of this ktetorial endeavor are particularly emphasized in the story, is very interesting. Curiously, historical and artistic analysis of the building confirms the first half of the 19th century as the timeframe for the restoration of the church. The restoration of the building and its frescoing, as well as icon painting and woodcarving works at the Church of St. Nicholas, have been dated to the period between the second or third and fifth decade of the 19th century. The later added parts of the church are discussed in the second chapter *Restorations and Changes* (p. 48–52). Despite the obvious intention to preserve as much of the old edifice as possible, the much simpler construction effort of the 19th century, as well as the type and color of used stone, allows us to clearly differentiate between the two chronological layers of the building. The walls of the nave and narthex were extended upward, and the newly formed uninterrupted elongated space was given a gable roof. Other major architectural changes include the new blind dome and iconostasis in the eastern, and the wooden gallery in the western part of the church.

The longest chapter of the book is dedicated to the paintings in the Čelopek church (*Wall Paintings*, p. 55–134), and discusses the thematic program, iconography and style of the first fresco layer dating from the 14th century (p. 55–90) and the more recent paintings created in the 19th century (p. 90–134). It provides a detailed description and interpretation of the subjects depicted on the heavily damaged medieval frescoes in the space below the dome. These few frescoes show selected scenes from the cycles of the Great Feasts and the Passion of Christ, which are arranged to form a coherent thematic and iconographic ensemble. The traces found beneath the younger fresco layer, painted fragments and numerous analogies were used to reconstruct some of the themes depicted in the naos, and to determine the basic disposition of themes in the sanctuary. The author's focus on elucidating the conceptual underpinnings of this small yet iconographically and programmatically noteworthy ensemble of paintings has yielded valuable results. Consistently applying her methodology, S. G. considers the symbolic and multi-faceted theological meanings behind

the appearance of some motifs and gestures that have no direct analogies, determining the liturgical and literary background of some themes such as the juxtaposition of the birth and death of Christ (the Nativity scene) or depicting emotions (the Virgin in the Crucifixion scene). Her iconographical analysis reveals similarities between the unusual elements or the entire concept of the scenes comprising the Passion of Christ (Pilate's Court, Road to Calvary, Crucifixion) and solutions found in geographically or chronologically close monuments (Hilandar, St. Niketas, Staničenje, Dečani, Kučevište, Lesnovo, Pološko, Marko's Monastery, Konče, etc.). Iconographical analogies are recognized as one of the indicators that provide a wider timeframe for dating these paintings to the period from the fifth to the eighth decade of the 14th century. The chapter section on style (p. 81-90) discusses the painting method, stylistic idiosyncrasies and artistic value of the surviving medieval frescoes in the Church of St. Nicholas in Čelopek. The author argues that the church was frescoed by two painters who shared the same artistic views but were unequally skilled. Both fostered the expressionistic stylistic language typical of Byzantine art of the Palaeologan period. She also expands on previously suggested conclusions about the ties between Čelopek and Lesnovo, Unjemir, Lipljan and Marko's Monastery and, to a lesser extent, Dečani. The author notes and provides arguments in favor of major similarities (and even uniformity) between them in terms of artistic treatment of subjects, typology of images, understanding of space, etc. However, she also concludes that the fragmentary nature of painting programs in some of these monuments precludes us from establishing a chronological timeline within the group. Exercising caution due to the incomplete state of artistic evidence, the author places the paintings of Čelopek in a wider timeframe, with the earliest date of their production spanning the period from the frescoing of the naos at Lesnovo and narthex at Dečani to the frescoing of Marko's Monastery, e.g. from the fifth to the eighth decade of the 14th century.

The restoration, including architectural interventions as well as remodeling of the interior and frescoing the entire Čelopek church, was launched around 1830, in a period which, in the wider context of socio-historical circumstances in the Balkans, represented a time of increased freedom and economic progress of the Orthodox population in the Ottoman Empire. The chapter discussing the younger fresco layer identifies, comprehensively describes, and interprets the 19th-century frescoes. These new paintings, programmatically conceived in the spirit of their own time, have survived only partially (p. 93-126). They cover the sanctuary, the space above the missing register of standing figures, two lost central zones, and some areas in the western part of the church. Adapted to correspond to painters' handbooks of the new age, the traditional thematic program of the church covers the dome (Christ Pantokrator, the Evangelists) and the sanctuary (Virgin Platytera, Officiating Bishops, holy deacons St. Stephen and possibly Romanos the Melode, Abraham's Sacrifice, Ladder of Jacob, depictions of *Asomatoi*). A number of Baroque themes of a liturgical-theological and didactic-moralizing nature were included in the prothesis (Christ *Fons Pietatis*), the diakonicon (Christ the

Good Shepherd) and the vault in front of the altar conch (Lord God of Sabaoth). These iconographic and thematic choices are also found in other painted programs dating from the same period in western Macedonia, especially in the circle of Dičo Krstević and his successor Avram. According to S.G., the Čelopek illustration of the Gospel verses about Christ the Good Shepherd belongs to the oldest known paintings of its kind in 19th-century art in the territory of Macedonia. The remaining part of the thematic program includes individual representations, the selection and arrangement of which the author believes was influenced by their popularity and the content of saints' cults, e.g. their celebratory texts in synaxaria. The most prominent saints from the group of prophets, warriors and bishops includes the new Balkan martyr St. George of Kratovo, as well as the famous healer and protector against the plague St. Charalambos, and the protector of sick children St. Stylianos, with these two singled out in the program. The identification of the unusual image of a female saint which represents the iconographical counterpart to Saint Paraskevi (Paraskeva, Petka) has elucidated another example of the appearance of dual portraits of the saint, with the Čelopek fresco following other post-Byzantine models. In regard to the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the younger fresco layer in Čelopek (p. 126-134), the author observes considerable differences in the artistic sensibilities and merit of some parts of this group of paintings. The most successful of them (the scene in the dome and the individual representations of saints) have been attributed to a late *zographos* (painter) called Hristo of Debar, who seems to have been the same trained artist who executed the throne icons in 1830. The remaining surfaces are dominated by paintings that have been described as much less successful works reflecting traditionalist views on art. They could have been painted by a single workshop, whose style indicates the *zographic* painting from western Macedonia. The closest analogy for these Čelopek frescoes was found in the much younger third layer of wall and icon paintings (1879) in the Virgin's Church of the Lešak Monastery, whose ktetorial inscription records that the paintings were produced by Mihail and Pane Đurčinov of Galičnik.

The fourth part of the monograph consists of several chapters (p. 135-166), each of them discussing a different segment of church furniture made as part of the restoration effort in the 19th century. Only one fragmentary work dates from a previous period (late 16th or early 17th century) – one side of the Royal Doors (p. 135-137). The installation of a new wooden iconostasis – a simple structure with two passages and modest woodcarvings – has been directly associated with the year 1830 – the same year that saw the painting and donation of the despotic icons (p. 137-139). The execution of these furnishings is assumed to have been entrusted to Mijak artists, and the author remarks that the small group of surviving woodcarvings suggests that they were not done by leading woodcarvers of the Debar region. In the section dedicated to the despotic icons of the Čelopek iconostasis (p. 139-144), the author includes quotes and readings of all dedicatory inscriptions, which include the names of the church's donors and the signature of Hristo of Debar; she also discusses the iconographic and stylistic aspects of the

contents of three icons (Virgin Eleousa with the infant Christ, Christ Pantokrator; and St. John the Forerunner 'of Christ'). The methods applied here expand our knowledge about another underexplored painter from the famous so-called Debar school, whose emergence predated that of the most prolific workshop of 19th-century western Macedonia lead by Dičo Krstević (1818-1872/3). The works of Hristo zographos tend to employ accurate drawings, pure shapes and simplified coloring, which received its most successful expression in the classicist framework. According to S. G., his new stylistic views – certainly removed from the popular painting model – could have been one of the reasons that relatively few works can be attributed to him. The double row of small icons on the Čelopek iconostasis forms a separate group of a much lesser artistic value (p. 144-154). Compositions on the epistyle icons have been described as a mix of 'traditional contents and modernized iconography,' which embody the naïve notion of beauty rooted in folklore. According to the author, the closest stylistic views to these are found in works attributed to the Đurčinov guild, although this analogy hardly provides enough grounds to accept the proposed attribution as a fact. The closing sections of the monograph offer the first publication and comprehensive discussion of the Royal Doors (p. 154-156), katapetasma (p. 156-158), iconostasis cross (p. 159-165), and isolated icons (p. 165-166).

The concluding remarks (p. 167-168) summarize the most important conclusions stated in previous chapters. The book includes a summary in English (p. 169-185), as well as a critical apparatus with cited bibliography (p. 187-205) and an index (p. 207-211). At the end of the book, the comprehensive analysis of the oldest part of the monument as a whole is supplemented by techni-

cal documentation by architect Blagota Pešić. The first appendix includes architectural studies and reconstructions of the Church of St. Nicholas, while the second provides drawings of surviving 14th-century frescoes. The illustration part of the book contains 57 black-and-white and 17 color photographs.

This monograph on the Church of St. Nicholas in Čelopek offers many new results and findings, finally giving this underexplored late medieval endowment of Serbian nobleman and its later fate a well-deserved scholarly treatment. Discussing a series of problems by applying consistent methodological approach, S.G. offers reliable and academically sound answers that elucidate all chronological layers of the monument. Despite the lack of written sources, applying the historical-artistic method, the author has reliably dated the architecture and fresco paintings of the Čelopek church, placing it in the context of Serbian and Byzantine art of the 14th century. Using the same method, above all comprehensive iconographical and stylistic analyses, she has determined the place of the Church of St. Nicholas in Čelopek in the development of zographic painting among the Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman Empire in the wider region of the Balkans between 1830 and 1870. In addition, her research of the younger fresco layer in Čelopek has yielded the first information about the zographos Hristo from Debar, and has increased the number of works that can be attributed to artists from painting and woodcarving workshops in Macedonia and the Balkans. The wide chronological scope and multi-faceted nature of this monograph will surely be useful to scholars of medieval art as well as researchers whose academic interests lie with 19th-century art.

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