ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

Authoring : *Agrevi Maria*
Translation : *Πανουργιά Κλειώ*
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Summary :

The impressive gate survives in the western part of the West Church of the Alahan monastic complex in Isauria, having been the central entrance from the narthex to the nave. The decoration consists of relief floral and geometrical motifs and a number of scenes. It has been dated mainly due to stylistic elements, to the mid-5th century, and represents a fine example of the high-level sculpture in this area of Isauria.

Date

mid-5th c.

Geographical Location

Isauria

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1. Location – Preservation

The gate survives in situ in the western part of the "West Church" (also known as the "Church of the Evangelists") of the Alahan monastic complex in Isauria, having been the central entrance from the narthex to the nave. It is made of stone, as is the rest of the building and it consists of a lintel (0,50 m. high, 3 m. wide and 0,40 m. thick) and two pilasters (visible height 3,25 m., 0,50 m. wide and 0,40 m. thick). Despite the damage it has suffered with the passing of the centuries, as it was never covered by earth, its relief decoration is preserved in good condition. The four low relief portraits on the edges of the lintel and on the pilasters, as well as the figure of the archangel Gabriel on the interior surface of the northern pilaster have been the mostly damaged.

2. Description of the decoration

2.1. Floral and geometric themes

The gate bears decoration on all sides except the eastern one. Six bands of variable wide and with different ornaments run along the western surface: on the lintel, from out to the center, the first two bands bear continuous bay and acanthus leaves within round panels; a wider, non-decorated band, one with a trefoil motif, one with bay leaves joined together in pairs so as to form angles, and one last band of astragals. The same bands with the same themes continue vetically on the pilasters; however, here the non-decorated band of the lintel is adorned by continuous rinceaux.

2.2. The vision of Ezekiel

The abovementioned motifs frame the scene of the apocalyptic vision of Ezekiel, which extends on the western side and the interior surface of the lintel.[1] A bust of Christ, frontal, is depicted in a medallion in the center of the western side; Christ's his long hair fall symmetrically onto his shoulders. The medallion is supported on either side by two flying angels, their bodies parallel to the ground.

The representation continues in the centre of the lintel's interior surface with the depiction of the four symbols of the Evangelists on two levels: the lower level is taken up by the winged ox on the right, the eagle in the centre and the winged lion on the left, turned three-quarters towards the centre of the scene, while the upper level is taken up by the frontal angel, who covers the three animals with his spread wings. Two trees with large heart-shaped leaves flank the tetramorph. A male figure wearing a long chiton and himation stands at a short distance from each tree; the figure on

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the left holds a codex and is identified as the prophet Ezekiel, while the figure on the right holds a scroll and is identified as the prophet Isaiah.

2.3. The archangels Michael and Gabriel

Archangel Michael is preserved in a better condition of the two archangels Michael and Gabriel represented on the inner surface of the south and north pilasters respectively. Both have been placed beneath shallow foiled niches supported by capitals of acanthus leaves; on each one stands a bird, possibly a partridge, turned three-quarters to the east.

The two archangels are frontally depicted standing full length, with their large wings spread behind their backs. Their military tunics are knee-long and folds are carved only on their lower part. The details on the upper part of the tunics and the wings have been probably painted and have thus not survived.

The archangels hold in their right hands orbs of the world, and in their left hands staffs, diagonally against their bodies. Two female portraits facing three-quarters to the east wearing the common Phrygian hats are depicted under the feet of each archangel; they represent Christ's enemies defeated by the archangels in this symbolic representation of the victory of the Church over paganism.

2.4. Busts

The decoration of the gate is complete with the busts of four male figures, two at the edges of the western surface of the lintel and two lower down on the pilasters. Their facial characteristics have suffered extensive damage because of their position and their constant exposure to the weather. Only the bust on the right-hand edge of the lintel used to survive in better condition; it has been described as depicting a bearded man with long hair which falling symmetrically onto his face. The existence of these male bust in connection with the presence of the tetramorph on the lower section of the gate's lintel led to the conclusion that the church was dedicated to the four Evangelists.[2]

3. Stylistic remarks

The differences in the rendering of the garments of the figures on the lintel and of those on the pilasters have been noticed already during the first year of excavations in the church, in 1955. For example, the garments of the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah, which survive in better condition being protected on the interior surface of the lintel, form large surfaces over the legs and let the figure show with such a plasticity that suggests the intense influence of Hellenistic art. On the contrary, and despite the extensive damage they have suffered, the archangels on the pilasters clearly demonstrate the decline of the Hellenistic tradition: their clothing is characteristically un-plastic and antinaturalistic, while the violent detachment of the figures from the background reveals the sculptor's interest in their simple, two-dimensional rendering.

The disregard for correct articulation and rendering of the space is also shown by the fact that the capitals of the niches stand alone, without their columns, thus giving the impression that they hover, as they are not supported by any architectural element. Moreover, the acanthus leaves adorning them appear stylisized and unnaturalistic, as do the ornaments on the gate's western surface.

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Such differences noted in the stylistic approach of the decorative motifs, must be considered as the result of the work of more than one sculptor rather than as the result of more than one phases of gate's decoration at different periods.

4. Chronology

The motifs and themes chosen to decorate the gate are common in religious art from the 5th to the 14th century, which makes them more difficult to date.[3] More evidence is offered by a study of their style, despite the damage they have suffered in the course of time. The gate's decoration must have been carried out at the same time with the erection of the church. Two inscriptions found in the monastic complex and mentioning the years 461 and 462, offer a *terminus ante quem* for its foundation, placed in the mid-5th century,[4] and, by extent, for the decoration of the gate as well.

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1. *Ezek.*, I.5-14, and *Rev.*, IV.6-8.

2. Gough, M., "The Church of the Evangelists at Alahan", *Anatolian Studies* 12 (1962), p. 174.

3. For a presentation of the symbols of the Evangelists in Byzantine monumental art see Panselinou, N., «Τα σύμβολα των Ευαγγελιστών στη βυζαντινή μνημειακή τέχνη. Μορφή και περιεχόμενο», *Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας* 17 (1993-94), pp. 79-85, which also includes previous bibliography on the subject.

4. For the inscriptions found in the monastic complex at Alahan and their date see Harrison, M., "The Inscriptions and Chronology of Alahan", in Gough, M. (ed.), *Alahan. An Early Christian Monastery in Southern Turkey Based on the Work of Michael Gough* (Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto 1985), p. 21ff., which also includes previous bibliography on the subject.

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http://www.artandarchitecture.org.uk/images/conway/b1aaed9a.html

Glossary :

acanthus

Herbaceous plant with prickly leaves; popular motif in architectural decoration.

anta or pilaster, the

A shallow rectagular feature projecting from a wall, having a capital and a base and architecturally treated as a column.

astragal

A decorative motif that consists of half-round surfaces alterating with flat planes (fillets). It occurs oftenly on architectural elements, relief, under an ionic or lesbian cymation.

capital

The uppermost part of a column or pillar crowning the shaft and supporting the entablature. The decoration of the capital characteristizes the ancient greek orders of architecture. In Doric order the capitals are decorated with abacus and echinus, in Ionic with spiral scrolls (volutes), while the corinthian capitals are composed of small corner volutes and a basket-shaped body decorated with rows of acanthus leaves.

chiton, the

Item of clothing consisting of a square woollen textile seamed on both sides.

codex

Manuscript of papyrus, parchment or paper bound according to the form of a today book. The most common type of book during the medieval period. In the 4th century it replaced the roll thanks to its facilities: the codex could be easily opened to any page, the text could be written on both sides of the sheet and was better perserved.

himation, the

Rectangular woolen (mainly) cloth that was worn over the *chiton* (cloak). It could be wrapped around the shoulders and the body in different ways and was fastened with a belt or with brooches.

in situ (lat.)

in the initial position.

lintel

The upper section of a gate.

low relief, the

Sculptural structure in which the figures do not protrude much from the carved surface.

medallion

In byzantine painting the term indicates the circle containing representations of the busts of holy figures, floral or geometrical patterns as well as inscriptions.

naos (nave)

The main part of the temple, between the *narthex* and the *bema*. It was the place where the congregation took part in the liturgy.

narthex

A portico or a rectangular entrance-hall, parallel with the west end of an early Christian basilica or church.

niche

Semi-circular recess on the surface of the wall.

panel

section of space or floor.

scroll

A long and narrow parchment rolled around a wooden pole.

stylisized

rendered in a conventional way.

symbols of the four Evangelists

The four parts of the Tetramorph in Ezekiel's vision, that is, an angel, a lion, an eagle and an ox, each associated with one of the four

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Gospels from the 2nd century onwards and at some point considered as the symbols of the four Evangelists (Matthew - Angel; Mark - Lion; Luke - Ox; John - Eagle).