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ЦВЕТАН ВАСИЛЕВ, *Гръцкият език в църквите със смесени надписи от XVII век в България – епиграфски репертоар, езикови особености, механизми на писане* [CVETAN VASILEV, *The Greek Language in the Churches with Mixed Inscriptions of the Seventeenth Century in Bulgaria – Epigraphic Repertoire, Language Features, Writing Methods*], Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, София 2017, pp. 498.

The book of Cvetan Vasilev should not go unnoticed in the fields of art history and wall painting inscriptions in the Byzantine tradition. It is based on his doctoral thesis which received the highest evaluation of the scientific jury. There are at least three reasons to call the book special: firstly, studies on non-classical epigraphic monuments are quite rare in Bulgarian scholarly literature. One may recall the names of Ivan Galabov, Stefan Smyadovski, Kazimir Popkonstantinov, Hristo Andreev or Emmanuel Moutafov, whose works, in different measure, concern Bulgarian medieval or later fresco inscriptions and their Bulgarian-Greek linguistic aspects. The second reason to praise Vasilev's monograph is the in-depth exploration of a specific theme: the Greek wall-painted inscriptions mixed with Slavonic ones from seventeenth century churches in regions with a predominantly Bulgarian population – western and northwestern territories in modern-day Bulgaria. Although the research is limited to a specific region and time frame, herein is the third point of its value. It additionally contributes to the broader subject of cultural interactions during the period of Ottoman domination in the Balkans.

In addition to the information given in the sub-title of the book, one should note that the study is also closely associated with art history, which constitutes another special merit. The linguistic aspect of the inscriptions is beyond the proficiency of the reviewer, there-

fore the emphasis will be laid mostly upon the art-historical importance of the monograph.

The study consists of a foreword, four chapters, and a conclusion. Each chapter has several sub-divisions, making the text logically structured and well-organized in spite of the complex nature of the investigation. The end of the book consists of the obligatory references for the 'genre': *Bibliography*, *Index inscriptionum*, *Index locorum*, *Index of iconography*, and *Supplement*, containing colour plates¹, documenting all the inscriptions.

In Chapter One, *Bilingualism: Historical Context and Function* (p. 23–49), Vasilev exposes the historically determined phenomenon of bilingualism in the Balkans and characterises its three functions: functional bilingualism in a bilingual milieu; asymmetrical bilingualism when the inscriptions in the second language – the Greek one – are of a lower level; fictitious bilingualism, attested mainly for sixteenth and seventeenth century churches in Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia. Chapters Two, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Churches with Mixed Inscriptions* (p. 51–303) and Three, *Inner Characteristics of the Inscriptions' Language* (p. 305–355) contain the essential linguistic data and detailed analysis of the Greek inscriptions. Chapter Four, *Outer Linguistic Characteristics of the Inscriptions* (p. 357–390), is most beneficial for art

¹ Regretfully, printing affected the quality of some photographs.

history and socio-cultural studies. Here the author relates the peculiarities of writing (spelling) to the language culture of the painters, showing how a linguistic analysis can establish similarities along with stylistic ones. The inscriptions and their parallel texts, as far as they are identifiable, create a model for the mechanism of wall painting not only in Bulgarian seventeenth century monuments, but also in the whole Balkan region. In the same chapter, Vasilev reveals the methods of writing: transcribed inscriptions, that is, copied from source texts, mainly from a *hermeneia*; inscriptions created from memory – usually these are often repeated liturgical readings; compilation inscriptions composed from memory but hard to identify. An astute observation of the author is that the supralinear graphemes, most often with incorrect orthography, had ornamental rather than lingual usage.

Particularly valuable for the general concept of the book is the short sub-chapter *Function of the Inscriptions* (p. 376–378). It touches on the subject of literacy of both artists and audience at a time of its relative decline, and the evidence, gathered by Vasilev, confirms a situation, recognized by other scholars as ‘decorative function of the words’² or ‘transformation of the text into image or into image-words’³. In Vasilev’s assessment, the process of degradation of the written text resulted in the murals to inspire *the more abstract idea of sanctity of the spiritual message based on the Byzantine iconographical tradition and its indisputable authority* (p. 378). In other words, Greek texts from the murals were more word-images to inspire than inscriptions to be read.

The essential part of Vasilev’s work is the catalogue of 228 Greek inscriptions (Chapter Two), taken from 18 churches. This is the first ever representation, if Bulgarian art historical practice is considered, of Greek fresco inscrip-

tions according to higher standards for the publishing of Byzantine monumental painting. Each catalogue entry strictly follows the seven precisely formulated parameters of description: disposition in the church; iconography of the scene/figure; general information about the inscription; reference to the *Corpus of the Seventeenth Century Wall Paintings in Bulgaria*⁴; copy of the original text accompanied by paragraphs describing in detail the orthography and supplying the reader with a transcription; identification of the text source and its meaning; and, linguistic characteristics. In this way Vasilev was able not only to correct many of the inscriptions as documented in the *Corpus* but to also add unregistered ones. All typical errors and the often-encountered cases of dialphabetism – the term is his – are meticulously analysed in the sub-chapter *Linguistic Peculiarities and Errors Depending on the Mechanisms of Writing* (p. 368–374).

Also notable, on p. 92 in paragraph 5.1, one can see the limitation of the Cyrillic font in the rendering of an inscription. This is further evidenced in paragraph 5.2 which contains a description of the orthographic features. For instance, in inscription MP 9, line 4, the word *TOMEË* has the acute accent above the inverted circumflex upon T instead of on O, and the second acute accent, on M, is placed so high that it links with the letter above (p. 92). Similarly, in inscription MP 10 in *СѢМОИ* (line 3) the acute accent upon C is omitted, as is the case with the inverted circumflex above the ligature AV in *PAVДо* in line 4 (p. 93).

A precious tool for any further epigraphic and art historical investigations is the table of the identified primary sources for the inscriptions on the scrolls held by the depicted religious figures and their corresponding texts in the painters’ manuals (p. 379–389). Earlier in the monograph Vasilev has pointed out that these prescribed texts are secondary reference materials, between the original ones and the inscription *in situ*.

² А. РНОВУ, *Interactive Inscriptions: Byzantine Works of Art and Their Beholders*, [in:] *Пространственные иконы. Перформативное в Византии и Древней Руси*, ed. А. Лидов, Москва 2011, p. 319.

³ С. СМЯДОВСКИ, *Светци, свитъци, книги. Посланията на текста в иконографския репертоар*, София 2003, p. 104.

⁴ *Корпус на стенописите от XVII век в България*, ed. Б. ПЕНКОВА, Ц. КУНЕВА, София 2012.

In the *Conclusion* some of the above-mentioned results are summed up and the author lays stress upon the evidence that the travelling teams of painters – a typical phenomenon of seventeenth century art making – dealt mostly with standardised and memorised texts. Their education did not exceed a specific set of knowledge and skills necessary for practicing the craft (p. 399). What they gave to the recipients – the commissioners, the clergy, the congregation, the local population of predominantly Bulgarian origin – is symptomatic of their social and cultural profile: they had limited knowledge of Greek, were unable to read it fluently and, consequently, unable to apply adequately corrective measures during the writing process. This situation is most apparent in monuments with evident discrepancies between the content of the Greek texts and the respective images⁵.

The members of the painters' teams – travelling workshops, or groups of painters summoned on demand – often remain unknown to-date. They could have included Slavs, Greeks, and Albanians mixed together or teams of a single nationality. However, even the most perfect analysis of the orthography would not be able to prove with absolute certainty the origin of these artists. Errors in orthography or syntax may have been made equally by a Slav with insufficient knowledge of the Greek language or by a Greek with a low level of literacy. The linguistic evidence revealed by Vasilev gives new perspectives to researchers. Very promising are the cases where his results coincide with assumptions already made by art historians. Thus, not only is new light cast on the methods of work of these painters, but the whole picture of cultural interactions in the period becomes more vivid.

Though based on linguistic evidence and guided by linguistic analysis and a methodology of editing epigraphic monuments, the book of Cvetan Vasilev is a significant contribution and an indispensable companion to any study in the field of the seventeenth century Balkan culture, literacy and art history. His observations are especially valuable for the reconstruc-

tion of the artistic processes and the composition of painters' teams. Moreover, in Bulgarian scholarly literature the question of correspondence between some seventeenth century mural paintings and the much later painter's manuals has largely not been addressed. In this regard, exceptionally valuable is Vasilev's idea that the longer the inscriptions are and the closer they are to the *hermeneia* prescribed texts, the greater the probability is that earlier secondary sources were used instead of rote memory.

Vasilev's interdisciplinary approach to specific epigraphic material is led by the awareness that philological training alone, however excellent it may be, with a lack of knowledge in the subjects of liturgy, iconography, palaeography and sociolinguistics would be an insufficient instrument for the intended research. His book is an impressive result of a strictly followed, sound methodology. With its English summary, one would hope it will reach, and inform, a much larger audience.


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Elissaveta Moussakova (Sofia)*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2552-1975>

⁵ See *Conclusion*, p. 497–498 in the English summary.

* Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Art Studies