

**The Monastic Cave of Letmi (Librazhd)****Archaeology**

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**Abstract**

In this study the author has made a presentation on one of the most interesting monuments of the medieval period as it is with the monastic caves of Letmit in Librazhd. The idea of this study consists in the identification of data for this monument, also, a description of its current state given that the description and identification of its situation was made several decades ago, during the Communist regime.

Also the author has made a detailed description of the painting found and stored in the cave and he gives us more information about the context and reason for painting at such a height as it was found in the cave that is not only in Librazhd.

**Introduction**

The way I chose to realize writing of this article is based on data from previous authors, also I visited the site of the cave and saw closely Letmi's current state in which for long ago nobody did do a visit.

Besides the theoretical description of the painting that is in the cave, I made a detailed description of the cave entrance, the function that has had, and to the cave painting which was fairly well preserved, even though it is painted centuries ago.

Issues that characterize it, as well as a given idea for its protection are an important part of the cultural and material heritage of Albania.

So in this article I have tried to highlight all that I said above, and I hope to bring something new.

**A Monastic Cave on the Letmi Rock**

Among the medieval monuments of Albania are included also the Eremite medieval monastic caves of the Christian cult of pictorial works, that some of them are kept in good condition until today. In our country, despite the Islamization of most of the population, there are still retained a number of monastic caves. So far in our country were found 13 such monastic caves that preserve fragments of paintings or drawings.

In general, these caves meet across the slopes of the craggy mountains, among high rocks, in rivers and lakes, in such positions that make it difficult for the man to climb on them. This has been one of the main reasons that these caves have been adjusted up to the present time in Letëm (Cermenikë) and the other located in Skroskë. In Librazhd there are two monastic caves belonging to the medieval period. One is located in the village called Skroskë and the other located in the village called Letëm.

On the south side of the Letmi rock, at an altitude of about 300 m from the river named Sodal, the right hand part of Shkumbin, just above the neighborhood called the Koshorisht of Letmi (Çermenikë) is a monastic cave which the locals call it "Cave of the Church"<sup>28</sup>.

The entrance of the cave is toward the south and is exposed to the morning sun from the east to the west (Figure 1). This cave is a natural rock cavity which has the shape of a chamber 7 x 5 m., and with a nozzle which runs approximately 15 x 8 m. From one side can be seen walls that kept the entrance, the cave once had been closed with a wall. It is concluded that on the front the cave must have been paved with planks, as it can be evidence by a piece of remaining joist and pits on the rock where heads of the joists were stuck. On both sides of the entrance holes are clearly seen where these joints have been supported.

On its high rock ceiling which is plastered (which height has made it possible paintings to resist to the time), two very ancient paintings are stored within medallions. Saint Maria with Emmanuel and with the family of Ktitor in miniature and Christ Pantokrator.

Christ Pantokrator, who is painted from the chest above, it is included within a medallion and presented in the frontal position, blessing with his right hand and holding the gospel with his left hand, wearing blue maphor and red himation, with the corona of gold crossed with lines which form the cross, less open with the ones where they are jointed with the surrounding line of the corona.

Pantokrator's head comes in supernatural size (fig.2), with wrapped hair in linen, which are released from the back, with big eyes and high eyebrows, with straight nose, with mustache and small beard. Parts of his face are evenly lit<sup>29</sup>. The hands come too large in proportion to the face.

Saint Maria appears in the so-called Oranta type, with open hands, with the praying stance to the waist, wearing a red maphor and with the trey jet of virginity, with golden corona, under maforin around the head with a light blue color. Her face appears oval shaped with thick and high eyebrows, with big but washed eyes, with straight but piercing nose, with surrounding and dark facial line, stretching as simfature about its center.

Parts of the face are evenly illuminated and her hands are smaller in proportion to the face. She holds Emmanuel into her chest, who is wrapped inside a medallion, that is worn with a white dotted stihar which have the color of the tile, with crossed corona, blessing with her right hand, and with ilitarion in her left hand<sup>30</sup>.

Down to the right wing of St. Mary onto mafori are painted seven persons in miniature, and under the left wing one person. The first three persons starting from the right are women, five

<sup>28</sup> POPA Theofan. *Pikturat e Shpellave Eremite në Shqipërti*. Studime Historike.p.70.

<sup>29</sup> POPA Theofan. *Pikturat e Shpellave Eremite në Shqipërti*. Studime Historike. Figura 1.p.70.

<sup>30</sup> POPA Theofan. *Pikturat e Shpellave Eremite në Shqipërti*. Studime Historike.p.70.

others are men. (fig.3). From the men, the first one who comes after women holds the model of a church.

From the observation, I think that here appears the ktitor of the cave painting that must have been a representative of the local rich layer of the people in that time. Other persons after ktitori are likely to be his wife and daughters, but those in front can be the boys. All these figures are presented with hands raised in prayer position.

In no art painting of these miniature figures there was a certain formalism. I think that they are presented here as to tell the ktitors that the eremit prays for them. Interestingly, here it appears the women clothing, with himationes hanging from the back, like sleeves of our villagers.

Between the face and the right arm of the Saint Mary is kept the Greek inscription which is translated, as follows:

*It was painted (this) divine temple for the sacred Theotokos with my own hand of Stanos.*<sup>4)</sup>

It turns out well that the parklis is dedicated to St. Mary, and secondly that the painter who has painted it had been called Stano.

The features of these paintings of this cave, as the big eyes, the piercing nose, hands in disproportion to the face, smaller at Ornanta, bigger at Pantocrator, evenly lighting of the facial parts, simplicity with which the figures are worked, which amounts to formalism, all of these are the evidence of a very ancient work, perhaps for a painting dating from the period of the Makedona and Komnena dynasty, which after the victory over iconoclasm (the second half of the ninth century) and ranges up to century XII century. According to the features it has, I think Letmit cave paintings should be considered as of the XIth century, maybe even to a little earlier period.

Presentation in miniature of ktitor's family under the St. Mary mafor, I think that it gives us an argument to assert that asceticism or eremitism of that time was supported by the wealthy and aristocratic country.

The very rugged terrain which makes it impossible to easily climb to the cave has preserved fairly well the painting that is in the cave. The only way to climb to that cave was being dragged with hands across the rocky site with bushes. But even though the difficulties are great to climb still this cave could not escape from the reach of the wrongdoers, who without knowing its value have shot straight to the drawing, and as I've noticed, traces of bullets were not difficult to distinguish.

Also, another problem was the construction of nests from swallows that was also a serious problem, because the surface of the painting was at risks, weather conditions were also another factor that directly affected to the degradation of the painting. If nobody will help in its restoration as soon as possible, this painting, which is one of the most characteristic in Albania, will be gone, leaving behind only its history. Not wish something like this happens, it will lose a fortune

Librazhdi area and all Albanians. I wish not something like this to happen, because Librazhd area will lose a fortune and all Albanians, too. For this we should all feel guilty.



Photo 1. The Cave of Letmi

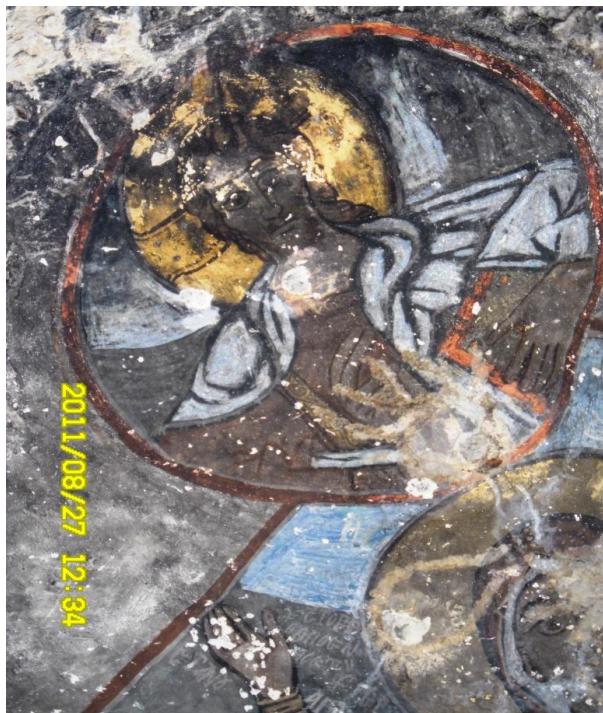


Photo 2. The Cave of Letmi. Christ Pantocrator



Photo 3. Th Cave of Letmi. Damages from bullets.

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