



CHURCH OF PANAGIA TIS ASINOU OR OF PANAGIA PHORVIOTISSA

CYPRUS TOURISM ORGANISATION

The church of Panagia tis Asinou is a vaulted church covered with a second timber roof, situated near the village of Nikitari; it is what remains from the Monastery of Panagia of the Phorbia, and therefore its name: Phorbiotissa. We draw the information about this appellation from the present inscriptions on the wall paintings of the church.

The Virgin Mary is called "Phorbiotissa" in one of these inscriptions that is read on a wall painting above the entrance of the church leading from the narthex into the nave.

The Monastery of Panagia of Phorbia was therefore founded in 1099 by the magistrate Nicephorus Ischyrios, who later became a monk under the name of Nicolaos and received the divine message for the construction of the church after his wife's death.

We gather much information on the Monastery, its construction and its illustration from the wall paintings that are found in the church.

The church consists of the narthex to the west and the nave.

We stand to the west of the church in order to enter through the western entrance, which is situated almost in the centre of the side of the narthex. The windows are very few, one in the western side and three in the eastern side in the apse of the Sanctuary.

As you must have realised when in the external part of the church, the only surviving building from the Monastery is the church that we are describing.

This is therefore a rectangular, vaulted and single-aisled church. Once you are in the inner part of the nave you will see that this is covered by a vault which is supported by the south and the north wall.

The walls of the church are entirely built with stones of irregular shape from the Troodos range of mountains and were covered with plaster on the external part (with the exception of the narthex). Fragments of the plastered surfaces survive in various parts of the external wall.

As testified by the dedicatory wall painting the narthex was added at the end of the 12th century and is covered by a calotte.

There were three entrances at the beginning; the main one must have been in the western side, one in the northern and another one in the southern side, which was closed and was decorated with wall paintings shortly after its reconstruction.

The narthex was painted after the reconstruction at the end of the 12th century. A part of this initial illustration was covered with the wall paintings of the 14th century, like the mural of the mounted Saint George in the southern aegis of the narthex. The round shield of Saint George is decorated with a crescent and a cross in a starry sky.

The oldest mural in the narthex is the Virgin Mary Phorbiotissa with the Christ in a medallion in front of her.

In the conch of the apse is depicted the Virgin Mary with donors.

The Last Judgement covers a big part of the narthex, and the Apostles are depicted in the pendentives.

In the west arch above the entrance the Virgin Mary is pictured with donors.

In the west arch above the entrance is the Preparation of the Throne and on its left side are Adam and Eve. In the north arch are the choirs of the Prelates, in the aegis are the alterations of the land and the sea and further below the Paradise, with Saint Peter the Apostle holding the key of Paradise. In the south arch we have the punishments of the sinners.

The Virgin of Mercy is depicted to the north of the entrance, between the narthex and the nave; Christ the Almoner is to the south and in the east arch the Prophets Zachariah and Isaiah.

In the narthex we meet various wall paintings of dedicatory character, as well as frescoes of Saints.

Part of the original church was rebuilt after destructions and deteriorations that it suffered occasionally and therefore certain parts differ from the initial construction, like for example the enlargement and support of the apse of the sanctuary and the reconstruction of the original timber roof in 1959, which covered only the nave, while today it also covers the narthex.

We must say that as far as the very impressive painting of the church is concerned, it must have been done in various periods by different painters.

When you look at the dedicatory inscription on the wall painting of Saints Constantine and Helen in the south-west recess of the wall, on the right of the west entrance of the nave, it is quoted that the church was painted in the 12th century and precisely in the year 1105/6 with a donation of Nicephorus Magistros. You can see the murals of this period on the west and east wall, in the western and eastern section of the south and north wall, and in the vault above them.

We must mention that some of the first wall paintings have been covered by newer ones or have been repainted.

Some of the murals of the 12th century survive in the Sanctuary, such as the Communion of the Apostles, various Prelates like Gregory the Theologian, John the Chrysostom, the Saints Barnabas and Epiphanius, the Ascension of Christ, the Annunciation of Virgin Mary, bishops and busts of Prelates on medallions among others, excellent samples of Comnenian painting reflecting the Art of Constantinople from where, as believed, the painter originated.

Certain of the first murals were destroyed, when the temple was repaired for better support.

In the conch of the apse of the Holy Bema is depicted the Virgin Mary Pantanassa flanked by the two Archangels Michael and Gabriel.

The Sacrifice of Abraham and Saint John of Damascus were painted on the front of the apse in the 14th century.

In the east arch Jesus Christ is painted and on the right and left the Annunciation of Virgin Mary. We see Saint Anna below the Archangel Gabriel and Saint Joachim underneath the Virgin Mary. In the inner part of the arch there are frescoes dating from the 14th century with the prophets David and Solomon and below a decorative pattern and Saint Helen.

In the southern half of the vault we have the iconographic programme from the life of Christ, with four scenes: the Birth and the Presentation of Christ in the Temple at the top, and below the Baptism and the Transfiguration.

In the central blind arch above the entrance, we see a fresco with the owner of the church Nicephorus dedicating the church to the Virgin Mary, who is leading him to the Christ being depicted as enthroned and, surrounded by angels. On the mural is the dedication of the donor Nicephorus to the Virgin Mary, who offered him all the goods that he enjoyed in his life, as well as his invocation to her to protect him on the Day of Judgement. Behind the owner Nicephorus his daughter Yephira is pictured. Underneath the dedicatory fresco is the south entrance, in the east side of which is portrayed the Virgin Mary holds the infant Christ, and the Archangels are on her left and right.

On her west side is Saint George.

In the inner part of the arch various Saints are painted, with the 3 Confessor Saints among them. In the centre of the arch there is an eight-radiated stone cross and the Saints Anargyroi in the inner part of the south entrance's arch.

In the north half of the vault's central section one more part of the iconographic programme from the life of Jesus is represented, and more precisely the Betrayal, the Via Crucis, the Crucifixion and the Entombment

In the central north arch are pictured the Myrrh Bearers in front of the Empty Tomb and the Descent into Hades.

These wall paintings stylistically differ in designs and colours from those of the narthex. The influence from the West is obvious on them.

Further, in the centre of the arch, is depicted a number of Saints dating to the 14th century. On the left stanchion, Saint Nicephorus dates from a later period.

In the centre of the east side of the west arch is the Holy Mandylion, in the south half is Moses and further down depictions of Saints.

In the inner part of the arch are the Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah.

In the west section of the vault are the Pentecost and the Preparation of the Throne in a medallion in the centre.

On the south side further down are the Raising of Lazarus, and below the Saints Constantine and Helen.

On the north side of the vault is the Washing of the Feet and in the west recess of the north wall are the Forty Martyrs. On their left are Saint Sabbas and Saint Nicetas on their right.

At the top of the west wall are the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem and the Last Supper and below the Dormition of Virgin Mary.

In the Holy Bema underneath the mural of the Presentation of Virgin Mary we have a unique wall painting of the 17th century representing the Christ Emmanuel inside a Holy Chalice.

Inside the church the wood-carved iconostasis of the 16th century survives, as well as the icons of the Saints dating from the same period which are by the door of the Holy Bema. The four important icons of the Church of Asinou are those of Saint John the Baptist (12th century), the Virgin Mary (13th century), Saint John Lampadistis (14th -15th century), and Saint Peter the Apostle (15th century).

During your visit in the Church of Asinou it is worth examining closely each wall painting/depiction, as you will be impressed by their style and colouring.