

NEW INFORMATION ON THE CHURCHES IN GORNA AND DOLNA VERENITSA IN THE CONTEXT OF AN UNPUBLISHED DOCUMENT

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Abstract: The report is published and analyzed for the first time, the document was found in a study of archival units in the RDA – Montana, which contains information related to issues concerning the overall decoration of churches in Gorna and Dolna Verenitsa. Despite a considerable number of existing scientific publications devoted to the two monuments, a number of significant issues regarding their dating and attribution are still unclear; circumstances capable of transforming the document into the “missing link” in the research. In the new text information is presented in detail and analyzed in comparison with different viewpoints put forward by scientists who have studied both monuments. Due to the historical specificity and territorial dynamics of the Vidin Diocese, the document also contains data leading beyond its current limits.

Key words: Newly discovered document, churches, Gorna Verenitsa, Dolna Verenitsa.

The focus of the following report is an unpublished late document found in November 2014 in the RDA – Montana. The document contains information regarding the churches in Gorna and Dolna Verenitsa. The authenticity of the document requires careful analysis due to the fact that no earlier written records exist. The necessity to research the document stems from our engagement in the full study of the monuments in question by comparing the new data to the existing information related to the dating and attribution of the two churches and their decoration. Our suggested analysis is based upon the data provided in the document in comparison with the different points of view justified by authors in earlier records and notes. The newfound information allows us to shed light on one (or more) of the “missing links” regarding the knowledge of the two monuments. It is key for unraveling the past and history of the churches as well as defining their

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identity and establishing them in the future as monuments of national importance. Publishing the data from the source document contributes to the interpretation of the history of the monuments and its related opinions, suggestions and assessments, as well as the attribution of the mural and carved decoration.



Figure 1: View of the Church in D. Verenitsa.



Figure 2. View of the church in G. Verenitsa.

In scientific literature “St. Nikola” church in Dolna Verenitsa (Fig. 1) is first mentioned by Boris Dyakovich (1868-1937) in a text written in 1902 and later published in a collection in 1904¹. After half-century long draught of information, Asen Vasiliev “breaks the silence” in 1950, publishing findings acquired during a

¹ Boris Boris Dyakovich, *Archeological expedition in the Bulgarian Danube region*, in “Collection of Folklore”, vol. XX, Sofia, 1904, pp. 25-26.

scientific expedition in western Bulgaria². Later, in 1971, Velda Mardi-Babikova³ introduces us to the monument and its overall decoration.

Meanwhile the walls of the old part of the church were covered with whitewash⁴ but above the archway of the widening of the nave can be seen pieces/fragments of the frescos, which at the moment are the focus of our attention. On the narthex of the eastern wall there is a preserved fresco – “Judgment Day”. According to Mardi-Babikova the frescos on the archway are from the 19th century. Those on the narthex, despite being stylistically different, date back to the same period. She identifies the icon-painters as members of the Tryavna School. In her research published in 1983 I. Gergova⁵, dates the creation of “Judgment Day” to the first half of the 19th century or the middle of the century at the latest, drawing her conclusions from the style and iconography. Between 1995 and 1997 M. Koeva⁶ gathered and later published the existing historical and architecture materials in collaboration with other authors in a journal expressing the opinion that the frescos were painted in different periods. Those on the archway date to the 1870s and the “Judgment Day” to the early 19th century. She also adds information about the dating and attribution of the iconostasis in the Dolna Verenitsa church, that it was painted in 1834-1835 by the icon-painter Priest Rade and his son Panayot Popovich.

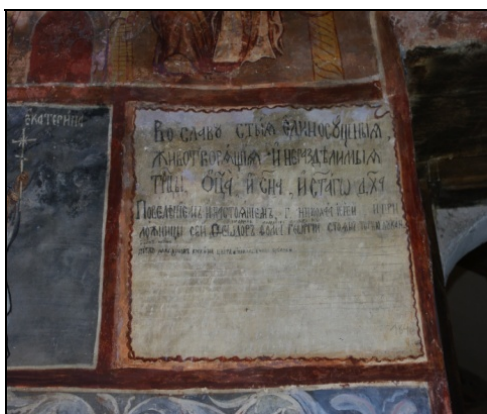


Figure 3. Commemorative inscription in the G. Verenitsa church.

² Asen Vasiliev, *Churches and monasteries in Western Bulgaria*, in “Excavations and research”, vol IV, Sofia, 1950, pp. 91-95.

³ Velda Mardi-Babikova, *Scientifically-justified suggestion for declare cultural monuments the churches “St. Nikolai” in Dolna Verenitsa village and “St. Nikolai” in Gorna Verenitsa village*, National Institute for Cultural Monuments, Mihailovgrad Region, Sofia, 1971.

⁴ A few years later frescos from the 17th century are revealed

⁵ Ivanka Gergova, *Bulgarian National Revival Art in Mihailovgrad region*, Sofia, September Publishing State, 1983, p. 7.

⁶ M. Koeva, P. Yokimov, L. Stoilova. *Orthodox temples in the Bulgarian lands*, Sofia, Marin Drinov Publishing House, 2002, p. 59.

In the same work, that describes the church in Dolna Verenitsa, Dyakovich adds a description of the “St. Nikola” church in Gorna Verenitsa. (Fig. 2) He defines it as similar, but smaller. The frescos cover the walls and the archway of the nave and the altar. The comparative approach is also applied by Vasiliev in his research from 1950, giving information about both churches. He mentions for the first time the name Yanachko Stanimirov as the author of the “later” frescos in the church. As a birthplace of the icon-painter Vasiliev points Breze village in the Sofia region. He dates the narthex to 1848 and attributes the iconostasis to Hristo from Koprivshtitsa. In one of his next published works in 1960, A. Vasiliev⁷ dates the portraits of the two Priests/ktetors (from Greek – church donor/benefactor) painted on the side of the west window to 1848 and the rest of the frescos he determines to be later creations and painted by Yanachko Stanimirov. According to Mardi-Babikova the similarities in the style of the mural paintings also point to the 19th century and bases her assumption on the founders notes (Fig. 3) next to the door on west wall of the nave, that also specifies the year 1848. She also distinguishes two different handwritings – of a master and apprentice, that she also attributes to the Tryavna School, just like the church in Dolna Verenitsa.

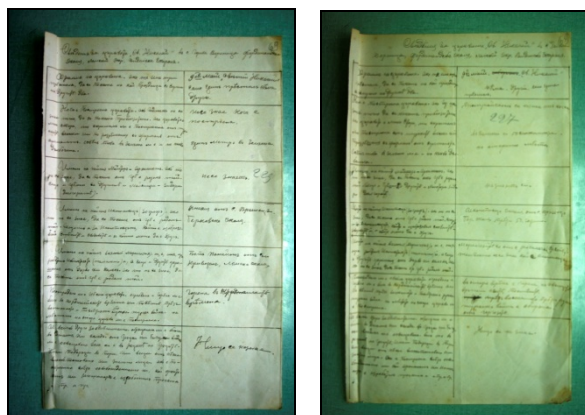


Figure 4. Archival document - RDA Montana.

The handwritten, unpublished document in the Montana archive (Fig. 4) complements the information on the aforementioned questions, by adding new elements useful for the clarification on the dating and attribution of the interior decoration of the two monuments. The document was found in a folder from 1898 in the RDA - Montana, fund No. 101K, a.u. 7. It consists of two pages (68, 69) in the form of a carefully drawn table with questions and answers columns. The table was most likely made by the priest serving the two churches and is handwritten in

⁷ Asen Vasiliev, *Ktetor portraits*, Sofia, Bulgarian Academy of Science Publishing House, 1960, p. 168

ink. The document itself is an inquiry of information about the churches and its creation was probably requested by the Archiereus vicarage in Berkovitsa. This was a common practice among most Dioceses in the years after the Liberation. Despite its comparatively late creation, the document remains the only written source of information capable of changing our view of the churches in Dolna and Gorna Verenitsa. In the document it is noted that the churches had been burned down in “times of old” and in the Dolna Verenitsa church the eyes of the saints were “socketed” into the walls⁸. The icon-painter of both monuments is E(Ya)nakiya from Varshets, Berkovitsa district. In the information about Dolna Verenitsa it is said that the fresco was done 50 years before the document was written. When taking into consideration the date on the document, which is 1898 and subtract the aforementioned time period, the mural paintings were created exactly in 1848. The date from the commemorative inscription in the nave and the date mentioned in the document coincide and can be used as evidence to prove the document's fidelity. It is mentioned that the master woodcarver in Dolna Verenitsa was from Rosomach, Serbia, and the master woodcarver for the church in Gorna Verenitsa is priest Panayot from Krivodol, Lom district.

Undoubtedly, Yanakiya from Varshets, mentioned in the document is the same Yanachko, attributed by Vasiliev as an author of the frescos in Gorna Verenitsa. Similar coincidence of names in two unrelated sources, would be otherwise impossible⁹. The time period of the painting of the churches also matches the time suggested by Vasiliev and Mardi-Babikova. The former dates part of the frescos to 1848 and Mardi-Babikova bases her date on the commemorative inscription. We know little of icon-painter Yanachko Stanimirov, and most of our information is more or less hypothetical. Asen Vasiliev claims that Yanachko was born in Breze village, Sofia region. He does not give any information about where he studied the craft but thinks that he is responsible for the frescos in the “St. Paraskeva” church in Breze village and part of the frescos in the Iskrets monastery “Virgin Mary”. According to Vasiliev, the icon-painter died in Stubel village, Mihailovgrad region¹⁰. Dora Kamenova mentions the name of Yanachko Stanimirov only to refute (and argue) his authorship of the frescos in the narthex of the Iskrets monastery. She calls the alleged creator of the frescos icon-painter Kiriak, whom she considers even more skilful¹¹. Ivanka Gergova accepts Asen Vasiliev's attribution and furthers it, basing her evidence on a handwritten collection from Breze village, where Yanachko was a teacher and crafting a list of his famous works¹².

⁸ Dyakovich also describes this fact in a publication in 1904.

⁹ Vasiliev gathered this information from the oldest person in the village at the time.

¹⁰ Asen Vasiliev, *Master artisans from the period of the Bulgarian National Revival*, Sofia, Science and Art Publishing House, 1965, pp. 591-592.

¹¹ Dora Kamenova, *Frescos in the Iskrets monastery*, Sofia, Bulgarian Artist Publishing House, 1984, p. 138.

¹² I. Gergova, *The dialogue between the sinner and Virgin Mary*, in “Problems in Art”, no. 1/2012, pp. 11-12.



Figure 5. Fragments from a prophetic fresco in Gorna and Dolna Verenitsa.

All that being said, we can conclude that Yanachko Stanimirov was born in Varshets, and his connection to Breze is plausible, considering that he was a teacher in the same village – a fact proven by Ivanka Gergova. Credit for the frescos in both Gorna and Dolna Verenitsa churches (according to the document as well) should be given to Yanachko. The same becomes apparent by a close stylistic inspection and analysis of the frescos in both churches (Fig. 5). It is obvious, that both churches were painted by the same person.



Figure 6. Detail from the inscription in G. Verenitsa.



Figure 7. Inscription on the Royal Doors - D. Verenitsa.

Therefore, until further evidence are found to refute the previous statement, it is only logical to accept the information in the document as truthful and authentic and attribute the frescos to Yanakiya from Varshets. The exact dating of the frescos in the same document is confirmed by the inscription in the western wall of the narthex in the Gorna Verenitsa church (Fig. 6). In the lower right corner can be seen the following text “Verenitsa Gorna 1848”. At the time when Asen Vasiliev was studying the church, the inscription was clearly seen and he published it in one of his works¹³. Similarly, we should trust the fidelity of the information in the archival document and date the frescos in Dolna Verenitsa to the same year – 1848.

¹³ Asen Vasiliev, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

The only reservation (before another document is found that reaffirms or refutes our statement) is the fact that not the entire fresco from the 19th century is preserved and the scale of what had been painted by Yanakiya remains unknown, that might as well be more than what can currently be found. Therefore it is permissible to guess that the painting of the churches might have taken more than one year, in this case – two subsequent years, which would lead to the dating of the frescos of the Dolna Verenitsa church to either 1847-1848 or the following 1848-1849.

The master icon-painter of Dolna Verenitsa church placed his signature in the lower end of the Royal Doors of the iconostasis – Panayot Popovich and also added the year 1835 (Fig. 7). Atanas Atanasov¹⁴ found that he and his father – priest icon-painter Rade¹⁵ – are the creators of the iconostasis. It is yet to be confirmed whether Panayot Popovich is the same master woodcarver from Rosomach village (Pirost region), mentioned in the Montana document or he was born in Krivodol, Lom region, as noted in the same document about the wood carvings in Gorna Verenitsa. The coincidence here too is enough to suggest, that Panayot is the creator of the carvings in both churches.

In conclusion we can paraphrase the sentence about the boundaries of history in relation of hypothesis and denoting the fact, that thanks to the published by us document we humbly contribute to the entirety of the history of both churches and help shrink the boundaries set by hypothesis. With gratitude to the effort and diligence of the unknown priest, author of the document – a worthy follower of the inscribed in one of the churches ktetors.

¹⁴Atanas Atanasov, *Newly discovered Medieval frescos in the "St. Nikola" church in Dolna Verenitsa, Mihailovgrad region*, in "General overview", National Institute for Cultural Monuments, Sofia, 1989, p. 7.

¹⁵M. Koeva, P. Yokimov, L. Stoilova, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

