



PANAGIA TOU ARAKA

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS
DEPUTY MINISTRY OF TOURISM

The church of Panagia tou Araka which was erected around 1191, most probably took its name from the "pea" like so many other appellations of the Virgin Mary in Cyprus deriving from the names of plants.

You are in a single-aisled church of the mid- Byzantine period, with three arched recesses in each of the side walls and a dome over the centre. Externally, the roof of the church is shaped in the form of a cross. A second wooden roof was added much later, around the 14th century, in order to protect the church from rain and snow. The dome of the church is separately covered.

The interior of the church is decorated with wall paintings of outstanding art of the post-Comnenian style and is the most complete set of murals of the mid-Byzantine period on the island. The frescoes were painted with the Commissions of Leon Authentis in December 1192 as indicated below on the wall painting of the Holy Tile above the north entrance. The name of the painter did not survive but has been identified by some as being Theodore Apseudes, the same artist that painted the Enkleistra of Saint Neophytus in Pafos in 1183. It is believed that the wall paintings were made after the second half of 1192, due to the social agitations of that period on the island.

We start from the top of the dome where the Pantocrator is pictured as the fair and mild Judge looking into the space with his eyes shifted to one side. "He looks away from our sins, giving us time for repentance" as the locals say. The Pantocrator is surrounded by a zone with the Preparation of the Throne, the ultimate symbol of the Last Judgement and by angels in medallions. Further down twelve prophets are depicted between the twelve windows of the drum of the dome, foretelling the Christ's coming to earth. They seem to dance with joy as each one proclaims his respective prophesy leading to the incarnation.

The Annunciation of Virgin Mary is then depicted in the two eastern pendentives. In the first one, the Archangel Michael is presented with an almost statuesque figure delivering the message to the Virgin Mary, the future Mother of Christ. His wings and tunic are swirling as he passes through the wind of his descent from heaven. In the opposite pendentive, the Virgin

Mary having turned the head towards the Archangel Gabriel sits calm holding a spindle and red thread in the left hand, while her right hand is raised to her breast in submission to the divine will.

In the two west pendentives, the four Evangelists are expounding their work: Matthew and Marc are in the north-west and John and Luke in the south-west.

Further down, the sword of the Spirit is pictured on the walls of the church.

- The Presentation of the Virgin Mary is depicted on the north wall. We have here the usual Byzantine representation of the theme where Joachim and Anna with the young Virgin, followed by the seven daughters of the Jews, are in front of Zacharias. Especially impressive are the maidens with their colourful garments with embroidered and jewelled borders and with silver ear-rings. At the top of the Byzantine building on the right we see the Virgin seating on the roof, ready to receive food from the hand of an angel.

- The Birth of Christ is painted in the south half of the western vault, in one of the most satisfying compositions of the theme. The Virgin Mary rests on a white mattress with a calm motherly satisfaction while Joseph is seated in a meditative pose. The Magi arrive guided by an angel who points them to the star above the manger. The midwife washing the Christ is a beautiful maiden in contrast to the usual depiction of Salome who doubts the virgin birth.

The Descent into Hades is pictured in the north half of the straight vault.

- The next mural that we acknowledge is the Presentation of the Lord east of the north entrance. This is a compact type of the initial Presentation with Symeon Theodochos, holding the Christ with sorrow, who clutches his tunic to lift up, assigning a rather human approach to the theme. Remarkable is that the young Christ bears a silver ear-ring on the ear and as far as we know this is the oldest surviving representation of this kind.

The rest of the depiction of the Presentation in the Temple does not comply with the existing rules by omitting the representation of the Prophetess Anna and adding Saint John the Baptist, while the Virgin Mary being ready to receive Christ is also missing. Most probably, we must consider the Virgin Mary Arakiotissa on the south wall below the Dormition of Virgin Mary as

the continuity of the Presentation in the Temple. We note that the Virgin Mary Arakiotissa is not sitting on a throne as it should be while the two angels being the symbols of the Passion call to mind the words of Symeon at the time of the Presentation: "And thy own soul a sword shall pierce" . This is the oldest representation of the Virgin Mary of the Passion, a subject which became very popular in the later centuries.

There are indications that the compositions of the Passion as well as the Crucifixion were initially on the west wall, which was demolished in order to extend the church to the west and in the place of Arakiotissa there was an older version of enthroned Virgin and Christ. The replacement with the current Virgin Mary was made during that period with the encouragement of the donor reflecting the change of rule on the island from Isaac Comnenus to Richard Coeur de Lion and the Crusaders.

- In the west blind recess of the north wall is the Baptism of Christ with the usual Byzantine manner of depicting human flesh. Jesus Christ is pictured naked in a calm, blue river with his right hand raised in blessing. Saint John bends to touch Christ's head while three angels lean across from the opposite bank, ready to wipe Christ with the ends of their himatia.

- We continue with the Resurrection on the north side of the west vault, as we have mentioned the Crucifixion did not survive. The Christ shattering the gates of Hades moves to the right pulling Adam with him while Eve stands behind Adam.

- The Ascension comes next, a masterpiece of composition, symmetry and beauty covering the whole of the eastern vault. The imposing Jesus ascends to heaven surrounded by His Aura with the five Platonic circles, symbolism which was part of the ancient mysteries. On the right, David and Solomon are standing on their marble grave while Saint John is behind them. The Apostles divided in two groups are represented as lively and restless figures in contrast to the calm expression of the Virgin Mary and the angel accompanying them.

- The Evangelical cycle is supplemented with the Dormition of the Virgin Mary on the south wall with the usual depiction of Christ standing erect holding his mother's soul as an infant while the Apostles mourn near her. Peter and Paul are at either end of the Virgin Mary and Saint John is bending over her chest as always. The mural is completed with the Saints, the Martyrs, the Hermits and the Prelates who are in their appropriate positions as well.

Proceeding towards the Holy Bema, we observe that the murals in the apse are stylistically different from the other wall paintings of the church and the scholars conclude that most probably, they were made by another painter.

In the conch of the apse is the Virgin Mary with the Christ being henceforth a Divine figure, flanked by the Archangels. Furthermore, we notice that on the semi-circular wall of the apse, the place of the Communion of the Apostles is taken by seven Cypriot Saints in medallions.

The iconostasis and the cross on its top date from 1673, with the exception of the icons of Christ and Saint John the Baptist, which most probably date from the 16th century.