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Saint Nicholas the New Martyr of Vounena and His Two Faces

According to the legend, Saint Nicholas the New Martyr was a 10th-century soldier, tortured and murdered in Vounena (Thessaly) by barbarians. Despite attempts to frame him as an active defender of Christianity according to new standards in mid-Byzantine hagiography, it seems that he originally failed to gain wider popularity. His earliest image known to us was painted by the team of Panselinos in Protoaton on Athos. The identification of his images is complicated due to a mistake made in a later depiction of the saint in Staro Nagoričino, where a painter unfamiliar with the iconography of the obscure saint painted him using the pattern for Saint Nikallos (also called Nicholas), one of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste. As a result, for several centuries, there persisted two different types of Nicholas's physiognomy. While local painters followed a traditional form of young, beardless Nicholas, masters connected with courts of local rulers repeated the mistakenly painted fresco from King Milutin's foundation. This dual iconography persisted until the mid-16th century, when popularity of the saint started to grow.