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The Mosaic at the Entrance of the Episcopal Basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis: Its Didactical Sharge and Ritual Impact over the Congregation

Socio-Cultural Essay

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Abstract: *The paper refers to the issue of functional communication of the mosaic executed in the narthex of the Episcopal basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis (turn of the 6th century) in the context of its iconographic, symbolic and aesthetic impact over the faithful. In that regard, we will analyze the: religious, sociological, socio-ideological and painterly role of the depicted arrangement in its endeavor to serve as a didactical instrument in the theological literation of the believers. Considering the complexity in the exposition of the visual elements, the novelties in the iconographic constellation of the ensemble, the coherent flow of references within the symbolic structure of the picture, as well as the lavishly distributed painterly components permeated with a sophisticated sense of optical consistency, we can but acknowledge that the mosaic preceding the entrance to the Episcopacy in Heraclea was conceived as a manual of theological instructions for the congregation. In that regard and having in mind the substantive role of the holy images in the period of ancient Christianity, we dedicate this paper to the explication of the methods of its social, ideological and cultural interaction.*

Key words and phrases: *Early Christian mosaic decoration, art and ritual, symbolic structure, didactic function, ecclesiastic ceremonies.*

*“What the verbal account presents to the ear,
the silent picture reveals by imitation”
(Basil the Great)*

When we discuss the issue of visual transposition of religious messages, we usually have in mind the ritual features of the works of art dedicated to promotion of Christian Dogma in one of the many aspects of its performative criteria. Throughout the many centuries of artistic development of Christianity, the painters have found diversified ways to publicise the notion of its salvational dimension in aesthetic manners most appropriate to their religious zest, ideological orientation, as well as individual creative vision. Since the functional character of religious art, something that severs itself from



Fig. 1. The Mosaic in the Narthex of the Episcopal basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis (panoramic view, drawing by D. Spasova)

empirical reality and thereby from society's practical context, is directly apparent in the aesthetic phenomena, we have to put our emphasis on its visual applicability when examining the multifold significance of Christian pictures. In that regard, starting from the notion that religious art has always been a powerful instrument in creating the "propaganda" of the meaningful existence of creative imagination, one has to admit that the holy images were as powerful as the written scriptures to which they visually referred.

If we accept the ancient idea that the imagination is the essential link between perception and reality, we can acknowledge that in the context of the visual discourse, imagination has the necessary capacity to inventively represent reality. Furthermore, guided by ideology, imagination has always been proving to be a reliable instrument in understanding the actual reality. Since imagination is envisaged as a theoretical integration of emotions and sensations in the sensible tissue of creative invention¹, its role in the proper religious guidance of the believers is by no means unavoidable. Without the creative communication of artistic expression and artistic appreciation, creation lays low in the dungeons of misused imagination, instead of being the core of who the believers are in the religious society. Therefore, the transposition of the religious messages and their reception by the faithful in the process of the creative implementation of visual didactics is the essential element of unbreakable communication between the "mystic lecturer" and "enlighten disciples". One of the examples of such visually abundant establishment is the glamorous mosaic pavement executed in the narthex of the Episcopal basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis.

¹ M. Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination*, Oaksville 2005, pp. 6.



Known for its complex iconography and painterly extravagance, this mosaic is one of the most elaborated artistic ensembles preserved from the period of Early Christianity². Abundant in iconographic details and permeated with refined symbolic messages, it stands out as one of the key examples of sophisticated illustration of the religious dogma in the medium of artistic production. As we have already shown in

² Г. Цветковиќ-Томашевиќ, *Мозаикой на њодој во нарѡексој на ѡлемайѡ базилика во Хераклеја Линкесѡидска*, in *Хераклеја III* (1967), pp. 9-65.; eadem, *Une mosaïque du Ve siècle de Hérakléa Lyncestis et la question de la formation du style de l'art médiéval. Symbolisme et son reflet sur le style*, in *Actas del VIII Congress internacional de arqueologia cristiana, Barcelona 1969* (1972), pp. 567-580.; eadem, *Mosaïques paléochrétiennes récemment découvertes à Hérakléa Lyncestis. Notices préliminaires, La mosaïque gréco-romaine*, in *Colloques international II, Vienne 1971* (1975), pp. 385-399.; eadem, *Mosaïques figuratives d'époque paléochrétien découvertes à Hérakléa Lyncestis dans la lumière de la cosmologie antique*, in *Actes du XIVe Congress international d'études byzantines III, Bucarest 1971(1976)*, pp. 457-463.; eadem, *Рановизантијски њодни мозаици. Дарданија, Македонија, Нови Ејир*, Београд 1978, pp. 29-38.; Е. Димитрова, *Пољед врз мозаикой од нарѡексој на Големайѡ базилика во Хераклеја*, in *Културен живот 3-4* (1995), pp. 48-52; eadem, *On the Narthex of the Great Basilica in Heraclea*, in *Macedonian Review, Vol. XXV, 2-3* (1995), pp. 105-112.; eadem, *Есхајолошкиѡ ѡораки на ранохристијанскайѡ умејносѡ во Македонија*, in *Религиите и религиските аспекти на материјалната и духовната култура на почвата на Република Македонија, Скопје 1996*, pp. 150-152.; eadem, *In Throuhg The Inner Door (the mosaic in the narthex of the large basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis)*, in *Niš & Byzantium IV* (2006), pp. 179-188; eadem, Е. Dimitrova, *From the Image of the Cosmos to Painted Dogma. Heraclea Lyncestis-Mosaic Pavements*, in *Македонско наследство 27* (2006), pp. 7-12, eadem, *Colored Dogma: the Mosaics of Heraclea Lyncestis, a New Interpretation*, in *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies (London 2006), Vol. II, Abstracts of Communications, London 2006*, pp. 314.; eadem, Ремек-дела на ранохристијанското уметничко творештво во Македонија, in П. Кузман, Е. Димитрова, Ј. Донеv (Ed.) *Македонија. Милениумски културно-исѡориски факѡи*, Скопје 2013, pp. 1407-1412.

some of our previous papers³, its visual constellation is strongly nuanced by didactic functionality with the purpose of guiding the believers through the main phases of their ritual exposition to Christian sacraments. Within the very carefully elaborated manner comprised by the structural constellation of the proportional iconographic axis, the aesthetically luxurious Heraclea mosaic ensemble reveals the complex arrangement of the symbolic elements into a unified picture of a profoundly visualized theological essence. Edged by a frame allusive to the water barrier that the narthex symbolizes, anticipating the baptismal significance of the waters of the River of Jordan, the three main elements of the composition are joined by scenery peculiar to the representation of the Garden of Eden. The scene to the right symbolizes death, while the other to the left is represented as a symbolic allusion to the transience from earthly death to immortal life in Heaven, acquired through the benevolent sacrifice, redemption of the sins and the resurrection. The central motif, which sublimes the symbolic aspects of the entire composition through the complex illustration of King David's Psalm 42 magnificently visualizes the rebirth, the beginning of the true and everlasting life, achieved through baptismal purification and earned by mystical unity with the Savior in the ritual of the Holy Eucharist⁴.

Such an elaborated and skilfully articulated iconographic concept of the mosaic ensemble executed in the narthex of the Episcopal temple in Heraclea is, by all means, marked by functional configuration associated to its religious, as well as social context. Its location in the chamber anterior to the sanctified space of the naos, as well as the division of the iconographic structure of the ensemble in visual constituents aligned with the direction leading to the interior of the edifice, can certainly be acknowledged as features of its functional position at the entrance of the main body of the church where the faithful gathered for the rituals. Hence, as the believers entered the basilica through the narthex on their way to the naos in order to take part in the ritual of communion prepared in the sanctuary, they were granted with unique opportunity for illumination with the conception of the substantial significance of Baptism as a crucial prerequisite for their participation in the sacred rite of Eucharist⁵. Enlightened by the symbolic messages of salvation and encouraged to embrace the faith through the cleansing “downpour” of baptismal water, as well as their encounter with the simulacra of Saviour's benevolent sacrifice in the Holy Eucharist, the candidates were methodically transformed from catecumens into neophytes, from religious illiterates to Christian followers, from “freelance” pagan believers to dedicated members of the

³ E. Dimitrova, *In Throuhg The Inner Door (the Mosaic in the Narthex of the Large Basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis)*, pp. 179-188.; eadem, *Colored Dogma: the Mosaics of Heraclea Lyncestis, a New Interpretation*, pp. 314; eadem, *Art and Ritual in the Episcopal Centers of Macedonia Paleocristiana. The Floor Mosaics and the Illustrated Dogma*, in *Atti del XV Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana. Episcopus, civitas, territorium, Cita del Vaticano 2013*, pp. 1052-1053.

⁴ E. Димитрова, Ремек-дела на ранохристијанското уметничко творештво во Македонија, pp. 1407-1412.

⁵ E. Dimitrova, *In Throuhg The Inner Door (the mosaic in the narthex of the large basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis)*, pp. 188.

congregation. In that regard, the article will pinpoint the main components of this inventive, inspiratively creative and highly imaginative didactical process, which comprised four distinctive horizons of instruction: religious, social, aesthetical and cultural.

First horizon

objective: *religious identification*

goal: dedication to faith

By default, religious person is somebody who subjectively defines him/herself as being devoted to the faith and who actualize that self-perception in some positive/affirmative way, usually through membership or participation in a religious institution⁶. Christian religious belief and practice can be manifested in a variety of ways, yet, the believers are united in the same mind and judgement through the mutual participation in the holy rituals defined by the church organization. Although the religious identity is not really accessible by argument, the devotion to religion's doctrines is the major prerequisite for an individual to build up a sense of belonging to the faith. In that regard, the participation in church's ceremonies becomes a spiritual journey through the main stages of religious consciousness established by personal involvement in the doctrine. As much as possible for contemporary individuals to make distinction between identity as part of the Christian religion culturally and collective identification following the doctrinal components of the faith⁷, in Early Christianity such a divergence in the acknowledgment of self-involvement in the creed was not on the menu. On the contrary, being put in a position to accept a notion so attractive in its essence, yet so different from the pagan ideological concept to which they used to belong, our Christian ancestors from the ancient times were not given an option to choose the "variant" of their religious orientation. Since the new faith they were drawn to by the passion of their ideological expectations was abundant in comprehensive novelties, they had to learn fast in order to be eligible for admission in Christianity. The learning process comprised two categories of didactics: verbal (by the power of speech invested in the priests by God and his arguments in the Scripture) and visual (by the creative imagination of the artists who transfigured the speech into aesthetical panoramas of symbolical substance). Both ways were, by all means, fertile and highly efficient, yet only the later is preserved for our archaeological evidence, as well as theoretical investigation.

As some of the scholars engaged in analysis of the functional dimension of Early Christian art have already stated⁸, visual representations served as a highly sophisticated, literate and eloquent mode of theological expression. Given the role of "transparent"

⁶ For an extensive insight into this issue, see: J. W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, San Francisco 1981.

⁷ Ch. Davis, *Religion and the Making of Society: Essays in Social Theology* (Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion), Cambridge 1994, pp. 244-255.

⁸ R. M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, London and New York 2000, pp. 3.



Fig. 2. The Mosaic in the Narthex of the Episcopal basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis (detail, illustration of the Psalm of King David 42)

mediators between faith and its followers, religious pictures were highly welcomed to embellish the walls and/or pavements of the sacral edifices with a painterly programme permeated with symbolic or narrative references to the Bible. As the most luxurious decorative manner, the execution of mosaics was given a primary role when Episcopal buildings were in question due to the necessity of exhibition of representative and attractive, as well as power-reflecting arrangements of images to the eyes of the beholder⁹. The case of the Episcopal basilica in Heraclea is no exception in that regard; lavishly distributed in the spacious interior of the main edifice and the annexes, the mosaic decoration glows with creative imagination, iconographic invention, as well as sophisticated artistic mastery. However, the mosaic arrangement executed in the narthex was the one chosen as a main transmitter of the religious substance to the faithful and therefore structured as a “theological pamphlet” for education of the congregation. The education was, by all means, dedicated to the religious training and guidance of the believers with the main purpose of them being properly introduced and appropriately guided through the sequence of ecclesiastic rites.

In that regard, the central motif, which illustrates the text of King David’s Psalm 42, is depicted in its most elaborate version, subliming the baptismal, Eucharistic,

⁹ E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making. Main lines of stylistic development in Mediterranean Art 3rd – 7th Century*, London 1977, pp. 81-94.

soteriological and eschatological allusions of the biblical text¹⁰. The basic iconographic matrix (deer flanking a cantharos), which symbolizes the catechumens at the Well of the Water of Life and thus represents the candidates who are prepared for Baptism, reflects the idea of religious fervor directed towards the baptismal regeneration as a main prerequisite for their participation in the ecclesiastic ceremonies. Yet, this iconographic cliché, which illustrates the baptismal initiation of the candidates, in Heraclea is complemented by the grapevine stemming from the chalice, associating the Old Testament poetics with the notion of Christ's benevolent sacrifice on the cross and its salvational dimension for the sinful humanity¹¹. Inspired by the verses explicated in the Gospel according to John the Evangelist (15:1, 15:5) that announce the salvational mission of Christ through his affiliation to the notion of the true vine (*I am the true vine and my Father is the husbandman; I am the vine, you are the branches*)¹², the branching grapevine symbolizes Jesus' blood shed on the hill of Golgotha, mystically commemorated by the believers in the Eucharistic ritual. In that context, the images of the doves hovering above the chalice are depicted as an allusion to the celestial exaltation of the righteous souls, while the peacocks crowning the scene appear as mystified emblems of immortality, nuancing the illustration of the Psalm with the triumphant tone of the idea of eternal life, acquired through baptismal regeneration and Eucharistic offerings¹³. Thus, by interaction of the iconographic components, the illustration of the Old Testament verses in the central part of the Heraclea mosaic arrangement was configured as a symbolic image of the Christian church, which, through the ritual of the holy sacraments, grants immortal life to the believers. Such a visual configuration of the notion of salvation, permeated with the energetic sparks of religious initiative supported by the church institution, reflects the message of ultimate devotion to the belief as a precondition for their spiritual exaltation. Dedicating themselves to become faithful followers of the doctrine through their participation in the ecclesiastic rituals explicated within the mosaic ensemble, the catechumens were benevolently transformed into expectants of the well-deserved entrance to everlasting heavenly rejoice in the arms of the church organization.

Second horizon

objective: *social interaction*

goal: affiliation to the group

The social interaction is an exchange of energy, ideas, concepts, thoughts etc. between the individuals and is the essential "material" for building a solid block of any

¹⁰ Е. Димитрова, *Четиресет и првиот Давидов Псалм - иконографска парадигма на христијанската антика*, in Patrimonium.Mk, 1-2 (2007), pp. 75-76.

¹¹ Е. Dimitrova, *From the Image of the Cosmos to Painted Dogma. Heraclea Lyncestis-Mosaic Pavements*, pp. 8-10.

¹² cited according to the *Holy Bible. Old and New Testaments in the King James Version*, Nashville 1972.

¹³ Е. Dimitrova, *In Through The Inner Door (the mosaic in the narthex of the large basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis)*, 182-183



Fig. 3. The Mosaic in the Narthex of the Episcopal basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis
(detail, symbolic image of the Resurrection)

society (religious, cultural etc.), usually involved in establishing the coherence of larger social groups. By interacting with one another people design rules, institutions and systems within which they seek to live together¹⁴. Symbols are used to communicate the expectations of a given society to those new to it. With symbolic interactionism, reality is seen as social developed interaction with others. Depending on the system of mutual interaction, the illusion of a shared social order can be created despite the possibility of people not understanding each other fully and having differing perspectives. This ultimate goal can be achieved if the following is established: the strength of bonds between group members, i.e. unity of the group, the degree to which members coordinate their efforts to successfully follow the objectives, the shared sense of group identity, as well as the sense of personal responsibility to the group effort. Hence, the social interaction can be put in a motion to function as a tool for production of: heightened sense of belonging, desire to be active and enthusiastic about the group, as well as willingness to work harder together towards the same goal. Furthermore, the cohesion, which arises when the above mentioned is achieved, motivates the members to sacrifice their own individual desires for the benefit of the group, since they are all united in the pursuit of a common goal. Thereupon, a *Social Identity* is built as a result,

¹⁴ J. H. Davis, *Group decision and social interaction: A theory of social decision schemes*, in *Psychological Review* 80/2 (1973), pp. 97-125.

i.e. a common identity which is greater than the sum of the individuals¹⁵. The interaction is cooperative and coordinated and therefore the success of the group cooperation results from a collaborative interdependence that develops through practice in which the norms, roles and communication patterns are explicitly stated.

As we already know, the church rituals in the course of Early Christianity were organized for the different categories of candidates/believers who gathered in groups in order to participate in the official ceremonies. Their place within the architectural arrangement of the sacral edifices during the liturgical services was strictly defined by their affiliation to a certain class of worshippers to which they belong by their knowledge of the doctrine¹⁶. Although the renowned scholar of Early Christian culture Thomas Mathews denies the existence of solid arguments regarding the appropriate situation of the catechumens in the church while the liturgy was performed in the altar space¹⁷, he admits that the term *catechumenate* refers to a particular location within the architectural plan of the edifice where the candidates were gathered to follow the ecclesiastic services. Considered to be unacquainted with the tenets of the Christian faith, the catechumens needed to be separated from the ones who have already been familiarized with the dogma, i.e. from the group of individuals conversant with the belief, as well as with its operative form - the liturgical practice. In order to become educated in the matter and thereupon join the “advanced” group of the faithful as their main objective, the candidates had to undergo “a literacy course” adapted to their “schooling” level. Since the believers were situated in the naves of the church as disciples of the Christian teachings who have already mastered the skills of the creed, the catechumens, who still had to follow the basic instructions of their primary religious education, were, by all means, situated in the antechamber of the sacred classroom, i.e. in the narthex of the temple.

In the cases of Episcopal churches, this was even more so due to the social significance of the ecclesiastic rites performed for the congregation¹⁸. As they gathered to worship and partake in the services, they had to follow the social etiquette of their belief and exemplify the manners to the candidates for membership in the religious community. Therefore, both groups were expected to fulfill the requirements of their corporate belonging through ways of social demeanor appropriate to their religious status. In other words, the believers had to perform in manners adequate to their advanced religious education, while the candidates had to learn in order to gain the knowledge needed for their advancement. Since the two groups belonged to two different religious ranks, they could only have internal interaction, which implied separate spatial “facilities” for their

¹⁵ J. C. Turner, *Social Identity and the Self Concept*, in H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*, Cambridge 1982, pp. 17-21.

¹⁶ В. Лилчиќ, *Ранохристијанска црква*, Скопје 2003, scheme no. 20.

¹⁷ Th. F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople. Architecture and Liturgy*, University Park and London 1971, pp. 125-130.

¹⁸ E. Dimitrova, *Art and Ritual in the Episcopal Centers of Macedonia Paleocristiana. The Floor Mosaics and the Illustrated Dogma*, pp. 1051-1508.



Fig. 4. The Mosaic in the Narthex of the Episcopal basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis
(detail, symbolic image of the Sinners)

educational improvement. The coherent visual arrangement of the mosaic elements in the Heraclea narthex, the spatial consistency of the compositional design of the decoration, the firmly organized optical structure of the painterly components, as well as the cohesive distribution of the symbolic references of the picture appears as more than a substantial testament to the intention for constitution of a spatial enclosure for catechumenal advancement. Gathered as a coherent group of eager-to-learn candidates and guided through the religious education by a consistent system of visual messages, they had to undergo a specially designed “cluster” tutorial before entering the sacred space of the “universal knowledge”. Having the unique opportunity to share the visually attractive type of didactical instructions while engaged in observation of the mosaic in the Heraclea narthex, the catechumens simultaneously learned to interact with each other as members of the group, i.e. class, as well as with their “academic” mentors. In that regard, their religious interaction grew up into a kind of social collaboration, while their social distinctions were overpowered by the didactical super-powers of common religious devotion.

Third horizon

objective: *aesthetical valorization*

goal: visual identification of the symbolism

The valorization of a piece of art is inconceivable without the knowledge of the characteristics of the work, both from the esthetic and ideological point of view. Since

every art work is a complex system, an integrated approach must be involved when one has or wants to encounter with a certain aesthetic product. The complexity of a visual image or compositional structure has its references in space and in time: the spatial complexity refers to the multiplicity of elements and shapes, each of which has its own morphological properties, while the temporal complexity is related to the transformations that the work of art undergoes during time due to interactions with the environment¹⁹. Moreover, this intrinsic complexity of the art work is accompanied by an extrinsic complexity that is linked to the interactions with the observer, which is another complex subject. The two dimensions of each and every piece of art's complexity configure its aesthetical horizon, the role of which is to communicate with the beholder. This communication that involves diversified methods of visual interaction, such are: symbols, metaphors, narrative, optical illusions, numeric or graphic codes etc.²⁰, encompasses the necessity to develop a universal language of understanding, as well, since the substance matter of the artistic work is by default inspired by the desire for aesthetical communication and created to be shared with the observers i.e. to be actively involved in a permanent dialogue with the "public". Therefore, the works of art that are serving as aesthetic instruments for a visual dialogue with the beholder, have the significant role of transmitters of the "constructed reality" of the picture to the audience for which the picture was created in the first place, i.e. the picture has to achieve its function in both spheres: aesthetical sensation and educational excitability.

In that regard, by interaction of the iconographic components within the visual structure of the Heraclea mosaic, the illustration of the Old Testament verses in the central part of the composition was promoted into a symbolic image of the Christian church, which, through the ritual of the holy sacraments, grants immortal life to the believers²¹. This eschatological connotation of the ensemble could be acknowledged through association of the central motif with the scenes depicted in the side parts of the mosaic: the one symbolizing corporal death by the allegoric image of a panther devouring an antelope, as well as the sequence illustrating the victory of life by the encounter of the sacrifice and the resurrection, both visualized with the help of aesthetically attractive zoomorphic symbols²². The utilization of the symbolic images of the grapevine, the antelope, the lion and the bull, the panther and the wild goat, once associated with the cult of Dionysus, the pagan victor over death²³, enabled the

¹⁹ L. D'Alessio, *Knowledge and Valorization of Cultural Heritage: A New Challenge to Complexity*, in *Conservation Magazine* 25 (1013), pp. 29-32.

²⁰ On the symbolic language of Early Christianity and its reproductive variations, see the highly controversial, yet inventive study of Th. F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Princeton 1995.

²¹ E. Dimitrova, *In Through The Inner Door (the mosaic in the narthex of the large basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis)*, pp. 182-186.

²² on the issue of Early Christian zoomorphic symbolism, see E. Dimitrova, *Християнски симболи*, Скопје 1995.

²³ R. Graves, s. v. Dionysos in *The Greek Myths*, Harmondsworth 1972, coll. 103-111.



Fig. 5. The Mosaic in the Narthex of the Episcopal basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis
(detail, symbolic image of Death)

catechumens to correlate their previous knowledge of mythological categories with the recognizable visual forms of the symbolic Christian iconography; hence the familiar images of catechumens' pagan past have become elements of a new and profoundly elaborated idea of a symbolic vision of the Christian salvation, transmitted to the believers through the meticulously arranged painterly allusions to baptism, Eucharist and resurrected life. Uniting the crucial sacraments of the dogma in a visual unity of Christian symbols, the Heraclea mosaic in the narthex of the Episcopal basilica becomes an aesthetic oratory dedicated to the notion of redemption. It is a master-piece of painterly achievement that through genuine artistic virtuosity luxuriously visualizes the doctrinal idea of everlasting life in Heaven, granted to the faithful through their participation in ecclesiastic rites.

“As the hart panteth after the water brooks” from the verses of the Book of Psalms (42: 1), so panteth the believers to participate in the sacramental majesty of the church rituals within the symbolic exposition of the Christian Dogma in the lavishly executed mosaic panorama in the narthex of Heraclea's Episcopal temple. From the purifying essence of Baptism through the commemorative festivity of Eucharist, to the promised exaltation in the resurrected life, leads the path of the blissful destiny for those who took the beneficial nectar of the doctrine in the sanctity of the Ecclesiastical rites²⁴.

²⁴ E. Dimitrova, *Art and Ritual in the Episcopal Centers of Macedonia Paleocristiana. The Floor Mosaics and the Illustrated Dogma*, pp. 1053

The baptismal configuration of the Biblical messages, the Eucharistic allusions to the synoptical chapters and the soteriological notions from the Gospels, encompassed by the eschatological connotation of the faith, have been united in a didactical idiom to explicate the fundamentals of the religious thought in the area of symbolic visual expression. The luxuriously elaborated iconographic context of the arrangement, the complex symbolic configuration of the ensemble, as well as the extraordinary invention in the painterly structure of the composition, reveal the power and passion of metaphoric expression in the spiritual spheres of creative magnificence.

Fourth horizon

objective: *cultural alliance*

goal: unity of thought

If we start from the notion of some of the most renowned scholars that religion, as a socially sustained system of transmitted beliefs, values, norms, symbols and practices, can be conceived as a form of culture²⁵, we can acknowledge that the affiliates to one religious concept can be envisaged as a kind of cultural allies. Since religion is often an element that contribute to define the cultural identity, one can presuppose that by its social dimension, religion always includes cultural elements which can be transmitted into the religious practices. In that regard, culture, with all its aspects, becomes a social reference to the religious system and marks the religious consciousness of the entire group involved in the established religious practices. This interaction between religion and culture, which, even nowadays enables us to define the contemporary inter-relation of spiritual milieu and modern life, can be acknowledged through investigation of the ideological concepts of the cultural heritage produced in a certain stage of development of the religious thought. The alliance between secular rule and ecclesiastic institutions throughout the entire Christian era was the essential bond that enabled the necessary control over the socio-cultural dimension of the artistic production through the persistent collaboration of the producers and the “reproducers”. This particularly refers to the Late Antiquity, when the church institution was established and continuously supported by the political opportunism of the secular authorities²⁶.

On the level of cultural identification, didactical instruments applied by Early Christian church organizations had manifold significance and consequences. First of all, the learning process was not only crucial for believers’ religious configuration, but also for their ability to define themselves as members of a coherent social group united by the idea of intellectual acquisition²⁷. Second of all, the knowledge transmitted to them by ways of visual recognition of religious messages was no less instructive

²⁵ V. Saroglou, A. B. Cohen, *Psychology of Culture and Religion*, in *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42/8 (2011), pp. 1310.

²⁶ R. Lim, *Christian Triumph and Controversy*, in G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown, O. Grabar (Ed.), *Interpreting Late Antiquity. Essays on Postclassical World*, Cambridge and London, 2001, pp. 201.

²⁷ P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Cambridge and London, 1993, pp. 66-67.



Fig. 6. The Mosaic in the Narthex of the Episcopal basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis (detail, symbolic image of the Underworld)

than the one imposed by sermons and liturgical offices. Third of all, the results of the interactive methods of religious training were, by all means, more attractive, as well as effective than the static and highly pretentious ecclesiastic lecturing. Therefore, the teaching techniques involving visual symbolism of religious images became one of the most appropriate and efficient methods of schooling, similar to contemporary utilization of illustrated Bibles. In that manner, the educational care of the church officials for the religious candidates, i.e. catechumens, came to be associated with the forms of visual expression belonging to the horizon of cultural legacy. United by notion, as well as by vision, they were more likely to identify themselves as disciples of the new faith through cultural recognition, than through religious only.

Since the recognition of cultural references is associated with objectification of individual, as well as collective goals²⁸, the articulation of common objectives through social activities brings sustainable content to the parties involved. The acquisition of ideological knowledge that brings them closer to the notion of salvation, as a primary determinant of their religious feasibility, makes the bonds within the community of catechumens enduring for further, more complex initiatives. Hence, the amalgamation of the candidates through their participation in the religious training provided by the iconographic arrangement in the Heraclea narthex, was intended not only towards

²⁸ D. B. Kronenfeld, *Culture, Society and Cognition. Collective Goals, Values, Action and Knowledge*, Berlin 2008, pp. 6-7.

fraternization of the individuals into a mutual group of religious disciples; moreover, it was a way of intellectual inclusion of the applicants into the community of Christians, united by the sophisticated bonds of their cultural identity. The illustration of the most complex version of the Psalm of King David, the association of the Biblical verses with the dynamic iconography of pagan symbolism, the distribution of religious messages through the exciting vocabulary of metaphoric expression, as well as the breathtaking visualization of the crucial aspects of the doctrine, place the mosaic master-piece executed in the Heraclea narthex on the pedestal of one of the most explicable Christian textbooks in the domain of cultural heritage. With the remarkable power of its artistic expression, as well as the refined, yet energetic articulation of the religious thought, it seems to have majestically helped the catechumens to walk the path from their ignorantly mischievous pagan childhood to the “golden age” of their cultivated Christian maturity.

Мозаикот во Нартексот на Епископската Базилика во Хераклеја: Дидактички референци и културолошкото значење

Есеј за социо-културните одлики на ансамблот

Резимé

Познат по својата комплексна иконографија и по ликовната екстравагантност, мозаичниот павимент во нартексот на Епископскиот храм во Хераклеја претставува еден од клучните примери на софистицирана илустрација на религиозната догма во сферата на ранохристијанската уметничка продукција. Неговата визуелна констелација, изнијансирана со дидактичката функционалност на водење на верниците низ главните фази од нивната ритуална експозиција на христијанските сакраменти, се манифестира во четири одделни хоризонти: религиозен, социјален, естетски и културен. Првиот хоризонт има за цел да ја пренесе пораката за целосно предавање на верата како предуслов за спасот на верниците, преку религиозната идентификација на катихумените со догматските постулати на христијанското учење (илустрација на Давидовиот псалм 41 во неговата најкомплексна иконографска варијанта). Вториот хоризонт е насочен кон создавањето на кохерентна група на верници, преку социјалната интеракција на катихумените, лоцирани во нартексот за време на одвивањето на литургиската служба (конзистентната иконографска амплитуда на аранжманот, просторно адаптирана на строго дефинираниот план на припратата). Третиот хоризонт цели кон прецизна визуелна идентификација на иконографската симболика, преку ликовната валоризација на изведениот ансамбл (симболичната интеракција на христијанските ликовни елементи и паганската иконографија). Четвртиот хоризонт треба да го обезбеди единството на верата преку создавање конзистентни релации меѓу катихумените со помош на можностите за нивна културна идентификација, т.е. интелектуална инклузија на кандидатите во христијанската заедница (утилизација на иконографскиот аранжман на мозаикот за религиозна обука, а со тоа и за културна социјализација на катихумените во нивната нова општествена заедница).