

Elizabeta DIMITROVA

## THE UNPRETENTIOUS CRYPTO AVANT-GARDE OR HOW DID THE EARLY CHRISTIAN PRACTITIONERS ENVISAGE ART (IDEOLOGICAL APPROACH, CONCEPTS, CREATION)

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Faculty of Philosophy – Skopje  
elizabeta@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

**Abstract:** *The paper intends to elaborate the issues of artistic creativity funded upon the early Christian dogma and explicate the ways and manners of iconographic conception of some rare, as well as some less rare visual specimens dedicated to Biblical subjects, inspired by the on-going dissemination of Christian ideas (4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> Century) or designed by unknown substantiates of purely symbolic origin. The examples selected to reveal the diversified creative approaches of the ones engaged in production of the frescoes, mosaic pavements, decorative interventions etc., belong to the catalogue which comprises both most prominent and most elusive artistic achievements in the territory of the Mediterranean world, including the Roman public edifices, Balkans' underground areas of secret worship, paved floors and fresco furnish of Episcopal basilicas in the region of present-day Macedonia. With the simplicity of visual design, yet complexity of iconographic constellation constructed over the fundamentals of the illegal and/or just about legalized Christian ideological framework, the chosen examples testify to the different attitudes towards the artistic imagination highly dependent on the social privileges of the commissioners, political circumstances of the period, as well as historical opportunities generated by courtly and ecclesiastic authorities.*

**Key words:** Early Christianity, fresco painting, mosaic pavements, Heraclea Lyncestis, Niš sepulchre, Stobi, Alexamenos graffito

To investigate Early Christian Art, its ideological platform, significance and symbolism from a stand point of a 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural theorist is as if one tries to imagine how the artistic production, with all its complexities, will look like two millennia from now. Imagination versus exploration is, by all means, an easier process due to the factor of infinite fantasy opposed to the solid and consistent methodological approach applied in theoretical research. However, in the time when Stephen Hawking developed the theory of parallel universes,<sup>1</sup> it is highly unlikely that we can *transport* our minds to the Early Christian past through Professor Hawkings' tunnels and be sure that we are at the *right place*. In other words, by applying the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Hartle, S. W. Hawking, T. Hertog, 2010, 2-7.

means and methods of contemporary scientific approach, we can only *imagine* how our ancestors from the historic past have succeeded to produce artistic works that are overwhelming to our senses even now – in the days of *alternative timeline of our Multiverse*. In that regard, this paper will serve as but an orientation towards the possible ways of explanatory manners related to the following questions:

- what inspired the Early Christian artists and how that inspiration came to be materialized in visual paradigms,
- was there anything else but the ideology of the new found faith transposed into a recognizable or less recognizable image,
- why was the symbolism so important for the visual impression,
- how did the picture come out from the ideological background, i.e. biblical text, patristic thought, religious idea,
- who was the mastermind behind the visualized ideas,

and last, but not least significant,

- to what extent were the images dependent on the state of political affairs and/or social environment of the creation as a manifestation of imagination and skills.

For that purpose, we have selected several examples of artistic expression from the period of 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century, significant for their authentic visual composition, symbolic exposition of theological notions, imaginative transposition of religious ideas, as well as explicatory manner of creative invention in making the ideological content accessible to whoever may be interested in its aesthetic design. Situated in different parts of the Mediterranean Early Christian world, these examples should also point to the role and significance of the “place of execution” for the appropriate function of the “executed images”. This is, of course, due to the inextricable linkage between the place and its social purpose, i.e. the edifice and its meaning for the visitors. Burial chambers or Episcopal palaces, secret places of worship or congregational temples, they all have their functional place as creative isohypses in the unique geographical map of Early Christian *Singleverse*.

- **Example one – the animal-headed Crucifix from the Palatine Museum in Rome**

The first example refers to the graffito found in Rome, dated around the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century,<sup>2</sup> today known as the *Alexamenos graffito*. It was discovered in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as an artefact, i.e. drawing scratched in plaster on a wall of a room belonging to a public edifice discovered in a close proximity to the Palatine Hill.

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<sup>2</sup> H. Wolfgang, 1966, 861-863.

The graffito, executed in a very unskilled manner, yet in a coherent enough technique to clearly show the outlines of the picture, displays a crucifix of a man with an animal head turned to a character dressed in a short tunic and with a clear expression of a religious worship.<sup>3</sup> The image is followed by an inscription in Greek letters: ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΟ ΕΒΕΤΕ ΘΕΩΝ. Although the inscription lacks the proper grammar of the verb used in a misspelled form, it obviously refers to some person named Alexamenos who worships his God. If we accept the already substantiated idea that the individual depicted in a short tunic can be identified as Alexamenos, then the crucified personality shown with an animal head (most probably of a donkey) is to be acknowledged as the worshiped God. Above the Worshiped and the worshiper, there is a Y-shaper cross, extremely rare among Early Christian graphic representations. Interpreted as an example of a mocking expression executed by a pagan character/ characters aimed at the new Christian faith<sup>4</sup> or seen as a visual trail of a Christian novice who left a testimony to his belief,<sup>5</sup> the Alexamenos graffito raises at least two questions: who has made this unattractive imprint of a crucified donkey pretending to be a suffering human being and why it has been executed? Aiming at rational answer of these questions, we should take into consideration several parameters: the location of the scene, the motif which could have inspired it and, by all means, the ideological background that the scene has been founded upon. These will be the methodological matrix for examination of all of the following examples.

#### ❖ *Location*

The graffito was discovered executed on a wall of a room belonging to an educational edifice which in Roman times served as a Paedagogium for young male attendants. It was situated in the corner of the room and has been scratched high on the wall surface, i.e. executed intentionally and left to be seen by the visitors and/or participants of the “boarding school”. In the adjacent chamber of the same schooling facility, there is another inscription, written in a different manner, i.e. by a different handwriting which reads: ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΟ FIDELIS.<sup>6</sup> Hence, two different inscriptions executed by two different characters remained to witness to the attitudes of two young page boys from the time before the legalization of Christianity.

#### ❖ *Inspiration*

Although some scholars refer to the Alexamenos graffito as an inscription dedicated to a pagan deity,<sup>7</sup> it is more than obvious that the crucifix is linked to the

<sup>3</sup> E. L. Cutts, 2004, 200.

<sup>4</sup> O. Marucchi, 1908, 517-539.

<sup>5</sup> T. Mathews, 1995, 50.

<sup>6</sup> M. Hassett, 1909, 718.

<sup>7</sup> B. Hudson MacLean, 2002, 208.

events that happened at Calvary, where the charismatic prophet named Jesus was sentenced to death as a falsely proclaimed king of the Jews. In the period around the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, a date suggested as the most plausible chronological reference for the graffito,<sup>8</sup> symbolic constellation of the graphic messages found in burial chambers and elsewhere were to be expected on a daily bases. Therefore, the head of a donkey placed on the neck of the crucified, although unexpected as an artistic statement, can be easily acknowledged as an element of the symbolic vocabulary of expression characteristic of the era prior to 313. As much as the idea of Th. Mathews<sup>9</sup> of the donkey been the focal point of the representation seems lucid and tempting, the iconographic structure of the scene clearly shows that the animal head is “the visual spice”, i.e. the symbolic nuance that gives the elusive dimension to the, rather, narrative context of the picture.



**Fig. 1.** Alexamenos graffito

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<sup>8</sup> M. Green, 2004, 244.

<sup>9</sup> T. Mathews, 1995, 50.

❖ *Ideological connotation*

It is well known that our “iconographic spice”, i.e. the allusion to the donkey included in the picture of the crucifix, had a certain discernible, yet not precisely determined philosophical connotation within the theoretical thought of the Late Antique epoch. Namely, both Origen and Tertullian support the evidence that Christians, as well as Jews, have been accused of worshipping a deity in a form of a donkey,<sup>10</sup> not disclosing the origin of such allegations. The linkage of Jesus as a saviour entering Jerusalem on a donkey in order to complete his mission of salvation through his crucifixion can, certainly, serve as a starting point for further contemplation on the subject matter. On the other hand, the association of Jesus with the Egyptian god Seth, usually depicted with a head of a donkey,<sup>11</sup> was, by all means, part of the religious syncretism most prominent in the period of the Late Roman Empire. The allusion to Jesus’ *adventus* as the most powerful reference given to the image of the donkey in the theoretical explanation of His soteriological mission, mentioned by Th. Mathews,<sup>12</sup> would surely be helpful if one tends to accentuate Christ’s entry in Jerusalem as an axis of the process of Passion/Resurrection/Redemption.

❖ *Interpretation*

As Giovanni Batista de Rossi pointed long ago, the graffiti played a significant role in the ideological communication between the believers during the period of crypto Christianity, confirmed by the great numbers of inscriptions found in the Roman catacombs and elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Similarly to the present-day graffiti,<sup>14</sup> the ancient ones have been appropriate and effective means of self-expression particularly in times of historic, social and/or political conflicts between divided parties and/or communities. The period of around 200AD, as the most adequate date of the Alexamenos graffito, is the one of severe persecution of Christian believers, who, accordingly, had to “lay low” in relation to their religious orientation. Having in mind the location of the inscription and the unskilled manner of its execution, we have to assume that it has been done by some of the youngsters who were attending the school as a testimony to his attitude towards the prohibited faith. The lack of competence in Greek language, the clumsy handwriting and the high position of the inscription – all speak in favour of the determination of the “author” to express himself no matter what the cost was. Based on the symbolic meaning of the donkey, adopted by ancient philosophers, associated with the potent belief spreading from Jerusalem, the

<sup>10</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, vol. VII, XL., Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, vol. XVI, XII.

<sup>11</sup> L. Bréhier, 1904, 15; S. Morton, 1981, 62-63.

<sup>12</sup> T. Mathews, 1995, 50.

<sup>13</sup> V. F. Nicolai, F. Bisconti, D. Mazzoleni, 2002, 176-181.

<sup>14</sup> On the role and social significance of graffiti see: A. Jeannine, 2006.

image of Alexamenos worshipping the crucified donkey-headed person has to be connected with the martyrdom of Christ on the cross of Golgotha as a fundament of the new religious idea of salvation. In the times of “silent talk” about alternative beliefs, it seems very likely that someone had an urge to express his feelings about the “ludicrous” framework of Christianity. That someone could not have been a Christian himself since the displayed attitude (textual and visual) is highly derisive. However, Alexamenos, true to his faith and the adopted Christian ethical code, addressed the mockery of one of his peers in a very subtle, cooperative and gallant manner; by saying that he is faithful to his God regardless of the political danger, as well as social mockery.

- Example two - **the silent world of the Niš Sepultura**

One of the most exciting and, by all means, oldest painted burial chambers in the territory of the Early Christian Balkans is the sepulchre in the so called “Jagodin Mala” in Niš, discovered by accident in 1953.<sup>15</sup> It has been painted entirely (all four walls and the vaulting), yet only some portions of the ensemble are preserved in the National Museum of Niš. The fresco ensemble of this mysterious, as well as unfortunate, tomb consists of three structural elements depicted on the eastern and western walls and on the surface of the vaulting, while the side walls (northern and southern) were embellished with a symbolic motif of a decorated fence, which in the period of Early Christianity was often use as a visual metaphor of the barrier screen of Paradise.<sup>16</sup> The lower portion of the screen also appears on the eastern and western walls, placed beneath the anthropomorphic images. The two figures on the eastern wall are situated sideways of the entrance to the tomb and are represented in graceful postures and gestures of blessing. The one depicted in the northern portion of the wall holds a folded scroll in his left hand.<sup>17</sup> Both of them are placed aside of the Monogrammatic cross depicted above the entrance, enclosed in a wreath and laid on palm branches. The monogram of Christ in a form of a cross, which unites the martyr device of Golgotha with the initials of His name, belongs to the so called “Constantine type”, known to be frequently used in the decoration of monuments and sepultures from the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century until the end of Late An-

<sup>15</sup> Л. Мирковић, *Старохришћанска*, 1974, 5-24; Л. Мирковић, *Да ли на фрескама*, 1974, 35-43; М. Ракоција, *Нова сазнања*, 2013, 122; М. Ракоција, *Архитектура*, 2013, 183-184; М. Ракоција, *О њаравијној њлочи*, 2013, 207-208.

<sup>16</sup> J. Wilpert, 1903, Abb. 121, 134, 143.

<sup>17</sup> The open book (one holds a scroll and the other open book) mentioned by L. Mirković and re-mentioned by later scholars could not been seen by the author of this article. Due to the symmetrical arrangement of the scene, one can only expect the concept of “mirror images” with all the aspects of Early Christian visual design, which, by all means, imply that both characters should hold similar, if not identical items.

tiquity.<sup>18</sup> Similarly designed motif of Christ's monogram can be seen in the decoration of the "mirroring" western wall, flanked by another two characters, only this time, they are empty handed. The vault of the tomb is embellished with a branching vine and doves feasting on the nectar of the grapes - motif known well enough from the decorative arrangement of Early Christian sepultures and mausoleums as a visual allegory of the Eucharist and its role in the redemption.<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 2. Niš sepultura, eastern wall



Fig. 3. Niš sepultura, western wall

<sup>18</sup> Е. Димитрова, 1995, 29-31.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 137-141.

❖ *Location*

The sepulture is located in the heart of an Early Christian necropolis which encompassed burial chambers covered with a barrel vault, as well as such vaulted by one or two domes. According to the investigations undertaken so far on the territory of this cemetery, there are a total number of 230 tombs, as well as 30 burial chambers dated in the period 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> The significance of the site as a burial place for the Christian congregation in the city of Niš is confirmed by the discovery of six churches, one of which is considered to be a basilica with a martyr.<sup>21</sup> The location of the sepulchre suggests that it was situated in the centre of the necropolis, fairly close to two of the mentioned churches.<sup>22</sup> As the construction of the chamber itself shows, it most probably served as a resting place for three individuals, the remains of whom have never been discovered. The fresco painting which has been designed to embellish the sepulchral site was executed across the entire interior of the chamber, covering the wall surfaces, as well as the barrel vaulting.

❖ *Inspiration*

As we are well familiar with the iconographic constellation of images in the decoration of Roman catacombs and other funerary chambers from the period of the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, being the chronological reference to the frescoes in our sepulchre,<sup>23</sup> it is obvious that the represented imagery suggests the scenery of Heaven, where the souls of the deceased enjoy the benefit of eternal life. On the other hand, the absence of inscriptions and signatures is obstructive enough element in regard to the recognition of the personages depicted on the eastern and western wall of the tomb, situated in the “landscape of paradise”. In that sense, the different theories related to the issue of who might have been represented there have collapsed in an unsolved smash-up.<sup>24</sup> Both theories are highly inconclusive due to the fact that they have been grounded on the formal similarities between the Niš individuals and the ones depicted in the catacombs (costumes, stances, accessories). The evidence of the four represented characters opposed to the three graves that constitute the funereal structure of the chamber is strong enough to refute the idea of the images being executed as portraits of the deceased individuals who have been buried at the site. The identification of the fresco figures with four apostles, two of them been St. Peter and St. Paul, simply because they seem to have certain hairs and beards, does not hold water, as well. Since in the course of Early Christianity, the symbolic as-

<sup>20</sup> Lj. Zotović, N. Petrović, P. Petrović, 1967, 115-116; Г. Милошевић, 2013, 155.

<sup>21</sup> Г. Милошевић, 2013, 157-173.

<sup>22</sup> M. Rakocija, *Paleobyzantine Churches*, 2013, 135-138.

<sup>23</sup> V. F. Nicolai, F. Bisconti, D. Mazzoleni, 2002, 82-130.

<sup>24</sup> Дж. Бошкович, 1959, 144-147; Л. Мирковић, *Да ли на фрескама* 1974, 35-43.

pects of the depictions were the leading criteria in creation of the visual manifestation of the doctrine, maybe the number of four represented characters would be much more helpful for their disclosure than their outfits and accessories. At this point, we can only say that whoever they might be, they have been represented in the chamber with the buried individuals as guardians of the faith, embodied in the shape of a monogrammatic cross symbolizing the victory of the new religion.

❖ *Ideological connotation*

If we accept the idea that the palm branches, depicted as structural frames of Christ's monogram, as well as the four depicted characters in the Niš sepulchre, are the official symbolic emblem of the city in the course of the 4<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>25</sup> it becomes clear that the construction, as well as decoration of the sepulchre was an integral part of the public burial activities taking place within the urban life of the settlement. As a visual allegory of the triumph of eternal life over death, the palm branches were associated with the power of resurrection manifested by Christ in the aftermath of his sufferings at Golgotha.<sup>26</sup> The palm branches were also considered as a symbolic pre-figuration of Christ's resurrection and therefore depicted as mandatory elements in the scene picturing the Entry in Jerusalem (visualized according to Mathew: 21, 8-9 and John: 12, 12-13),<sup>27</sup> the event that marks the beginning of the Passion Week. Therefore, the palm trees (or palm branches) were frequently represented in the art of Early Christianity as symbols of victory of everlasting life over the transient destiny of human existence.<sup>28</sup> In that regard, the execution of palm branches as landscaping component in the fresco arrangement in the Niš sepulchre should, by all means, refer to the serene commodity of heavenly spheres, where the souls of the deceased enjoy the eternal bliss. Whether the palm branches should also be associated with the role of Niš as a *martyropolis*, as suggested by some schol-



Fig. 4. Monogrammatic cross

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<sup>25</sup> A. Јовановић, 2003, 43-45.

<sup>26</sup> J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant, 1982, 745.

<sup>27</sup> W. R. Farmer, 1952, 62-66.

<sup>28</sup> R. M. Jensen, 2000, 59, 109.

ars,<sup>29</sup> is still a pending issue. If the suggested dating of the frescoes in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century is accepted as their correct chronological framework, the probability that certain local martyrs have been buried there, would have no substantiated background whatsoever.

❖ *Interpretation*

The iconographic constellation of the fresco decoration in the Niš sepulchre fits the spatial configuration of the chamber almost perfectly: the eastern wall of the tomb mirrors the western displaying four individuals – two by two framing the monogram of Christ as a symbol of the victorious character of the new belief. Since all four of the depicted personages are represented without nimbi, one should firmly accept the date of the 4<sup>th</sup> century as a time frame of the execution of the frescoes; however, the iconographic construction of the vistas, as well as the stylistic expression, should also be taken into account for a more precise dating of the decoration. Namely, the symmetrical arrangement of the visual elements, the fine *contrapposto* in the execution of the figures, the tendency to give the images some individually designed facial features, as well as the attempt to nuance the surface of the garments by using darker red lines parallel to the original drawing – all point to the Late Constantinian period in the development of Early Christian art.<sup>30</sup> The clumsiness in the depiction of some of the anatomic features of the represented characters (over-sized hands, deformed fingers etc.) should be, by all means, attributed to the low-skill painterly execution of the author; however, the cardboard of his iconographic procedure is more than coherent: four characters represented in the Garden of Eden safeguard the souls of the buried individuals with the authority of their saintly intervention. The quadruple exposition of saintly images maybe alludes to the four evangelists, but the common attributes of Christ's biographers did not find their place in the picture. The fact that only one of the represented figures holds a scroll is a surprising factor which cannot be ascribed to the carelessness of the painter alone; the attentive depiction of the beards as distinctive facial features of the four images supports this to a great extent. The bearded faces of the pictured saints and/or the manner of execution of their figures and garments can find their closest analogies in the unidentified characters depicted in the central space of the first hall in the corridor H in the catacomb of Via Latina in Rome from ca. 350.<sup>31</sup> The stylistic concurrence between the two monuments should slightly shift the dating of the Niš sepulchre towards the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century; in the same regard, the depicted monogrammatic crosses of the "Constantinian type" should confirm this chronological re-

<sup>29</sup> M. Ракоција, *Нова сазнања*, 2003, 122.

<sup>30</sup> E. Kitzinger, 1977, 7-30.

<sup>31</sup> A. Ferrua, 1960, 68, tav. LX, LXI, LXII.

ference as a more than reliable iconographic factor. Hence, it is quite possible that in the period when the bishop Gaudentius, after participating in the Council of Serdica (343.), has returned to Naissus altogether with some dignified church authorities from abroad,<sup>32</sup> the cultural and artistic life in the city flourished more intensively than before. As a part of that bloom,<sup>33</sup> the Niš sepulture was erected and decorated in the manner common for the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century with a fresco ensemble permeated with triumphant visual metaphors: protected by the new found faith embodied in the monogrammatic cross symbolizing the Saviour and enclosed by the warm embrace of the palm trees in Paradise, the deceased individuals rest peacefully, watchfully safeguarded by the yet not known guardians.

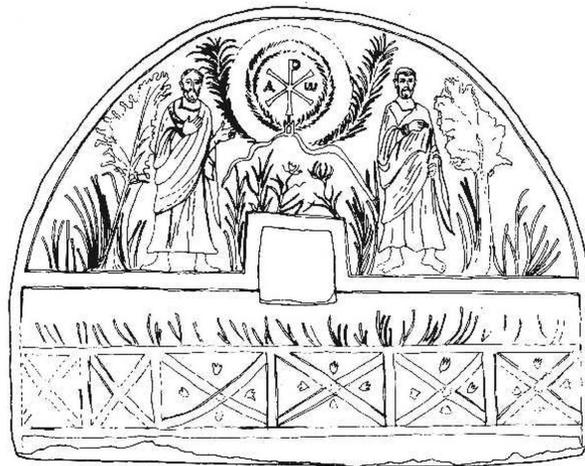


Fig. 5. Niš sepultura, western wall, drawing (Originally published by M. Rakocija)

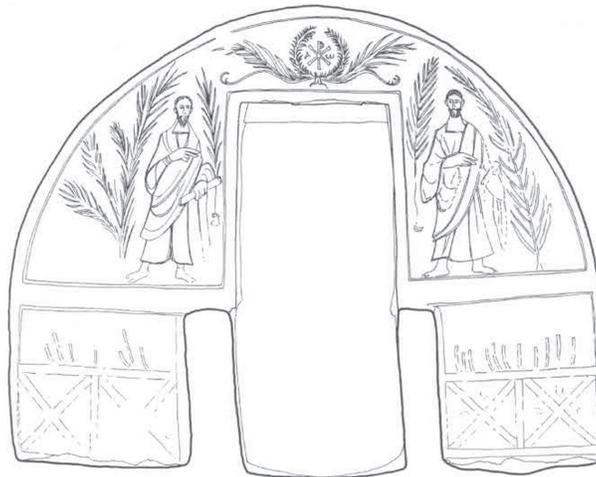


Fig. 6. Niš sepultura, eastern wall, drawing (Originally published by M. Rakocija)

<sup>32</sup> J. Zeiller, 1918, 229.

<sup>33</sup> M. Ракоција, *Нова сазнања*, 2003, 126.

- Example three – **the unexpected rodents in the Episcopal basilica at Stobi**

Among the fresco representations executed on the walls and the pillars of the Old Episcopal basilica at Stobi, one can see a scene in which a furious rat is lurching a little mouse in a ready to attack position. Executed with a sketchy drawing and left with no elaborated modelling of the forms or a colouring pigment, the rat is surrounded by nonchalant strokes of dynamic character executed with the same instrument used in the configuration of the rodent.<sup>34</sup> The reddish drawing fills the entire rectangular field in the upper zone of the pillar, the surface of which is divided in two portions arranged along its vertical axis. The lower one has been left blank, although its margins, as it has been prepared for fresco painting, are still clearly visible. The upper part, as we have already pointed out, is “decorated” with curved lines of abstract drawing in the frames of which one has “put” the infuriated rodent prepared for a hunt. In the left upper corner of the preserved surface of the rectangular field (the upper part of which has been lost), there is a little mouse in a lying position. If we associate the two creatures, one should picture a scene in which the rat is depicted as if it has prepared itself in a ready to jump position towards the little mouse facing the opposite side of the pilaster completely unaware of the deadly danger hanging over it. Since the upper part of the rectangular field containing the images of the rodents has been broken off, we cannot presume what was depicted there or better to say, if anything was depicted in that lost portion. However, the preserved part of the “composition” is interesting enough for further analysis. According to the investigation undertaken so far, the scene has been dated in the last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup> It has been kept in the National Museum of Stobi since its establishment.

❖ *Location*

The scene of “the rat and the little mouse” has been executed on the northern side of the western pilaster erected with its counterpart on the eastern side with a purpose of reinforcement of the east and west walls alongside the colonnade of the basilica. This has been done in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century as the last building intervention in the interior of the edifice,<sup>36</sup> thus enabling the last painterly intervention in the spacious temple prior to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. If one observes the location of the scene, their first conclusion should be that its position is very close to the entrance, i.e. exit of the church, since the western pilaster is the last supporting element of the building structure of the basilica both chronologically and spatially. That means

<sup>34</sup> E. Dimitrova, *The Painterly Horizons*, 2012, 30-31.

<sup>35</sup> S. Blaževska, M. Tutkovski, 2012, 16; E. Dimitrova, *The Painterly Horizons*, 2012, 30.

<sup>36</sup> S. Blaževska, M. Tutkovski, 2012, 16.

that this scene in which the furious rat is aiming at its pray is also the last picture within the fresco programme of the church both chronologically and spatially.



Fig. 7. The Stobi rat

❖ *Inspiration*

In pursuit of the inspiration that has motivated some of the Stobi fresco painters to produce the picture of the rat and the mouse, we have come to a dead end. This is due to the fact that it is the only depiction of that kind in the painterly vocabulary of Early Christianity. Although the rat and the mouse may have had certain symbolic significance in the beliefs prior to Christianity<sup>37</sup> in which they were associated with chthonic concepts, in the period that represents the dawn of the new era in regard to the Christian faith and its iconography, these creatures are nowhere to be found. Being a sole example of a nonchalant, yet highly picturesque depiction of an accidental and unwanted “visitor” of the church, the raging rat “found” in the Episcopal basilica of Stobi that prowls around the mouse as if it protects the space against the little intruder, can be easily seen as a genuine picture of animalistic

<sup>37</sup> J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant, 1982, 196, 968.

character, unrepeatable in the iconography of the entire Late Antiquity.<sup>38</sup> It may be an exclusive, highly unexpected and vivacious painterly testimony to the ways and manners of spontaneous creation of an authentic, although not visually attractive, sight of a church's interior "wild life". What was the background of such an approach is very difficult to determine since only the author of this "unexpected rodent that went astray among the holy images" should have known the "inexplicable" reason.



Fig. 8. The Stobi rat, detail

#### ❖ *Ideological connotation*

If one searches through the chapters of the Bible, they may find mentions of a mouse (as in Isaiah: 66, 17 - "*They that sanctify themselves, and purify themselves in the gardens behind one tree in the midst, eating swine's flesh, and the abomination, and the mouse, shall be consumed together, saith the Lord*").<sup>39</sup> However, this verse does not allude to a possible symbolic meaning of the rodent, rather points to its unclean animal nature. Unlike other animals significant to Early Christian metaphors due to their dignified virtues and noble character (lion, lamb, dove, eagle, phoenix, dog etc.) or phantom-like powers (snake, serpent, dragon etc.),<sup>40</sup> the rodents have never gained their place among the members of the symbolic menagerie of Christian theoretical thought and iconography. In the second case, this is simply due to the fact that the rodents did not appear as creatures with allegoric significance in the religious literature; less important, but should not be "omitted from the case" – they did not appear as visually (painterly, artistically, aesthetically) attractive images at all. Although mice appeared as characters in pre-Christian mythologies,<sup>41</sup> they have not been adopted by the religious system of Christianity as the previously mentioned animals; thus, the rat and the mouse depicted in the Episcopal basilica in Stobi

<sup>38</sup> E. Dimitrova, *The Painterly Horizons*, 2012, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Citation according to: *The Holy Bible*, 1972, 816.

<sup>40</sup> On the issue of animals and their symbolic meaning in Christian art, see: B. Rowland, 1973.

<sup>41</sup> R. Brown, 2006, 58-60.

could not have been chosen on the grounds of their symbolic significance and/or metaphoric references.

❖ *Interpretation*

Placed on the surface of the west pilaster, executed on the plaster covered by a neutral ecru tone and defined only by a drawing that looks done in a free style rather than carefully designed in a canonical manner, the scene of the rat hunting a little mouse overwhelms the spectator with its spontaneity, as well as primitive energy of expression. Being painterly undefined and left in a stage of an anatomic study of a highly unwanted, yet almost unavoidable creatures in the interior of the church edifices, the “Stobi rat” and “his little friend” are anything but a religious depiction of a symbolic character or, as some may suppose, a very rare picture of diabolic, chthonic or eschatological nature. On the contrary, the depiction of the animals in their natural inter-dynamic constellation (the bigger chasing the smaller), the biologically naturalistic approach in the execution of their postures (the rat is furious, the mouse is nonchalant), the lack of structural components in the configuration of the picture (no precise forms, lack of shades, monochromatic colours, absence of hues) and particularly the location of the “scene” right next to the entrance (open and accessible on a daily base, in other words: anyone and “anything” can enter through the gate) could be associated to a spontaneous drawing of a “genre sight”, which has no parallels in the artistic world of Early Christianity. It seems that having done the commissioned work for the day, the master painter working in the Episcopal temple in Stobi has been engaging himself in some “extracurricular” activities by observing and painterly reflecting an ordinary scene with two rodents going on in front of his eyes. Hence, he has left the depicted sight in a stage of a simple, yet highly vivacious drawing that has accidentally survived almost eighteen centuries. The lack of analogies in the fresco ensembles from the period of Late Antiquity, as well as the nonchalant, jovial and unconstrained manner of painterly execution, speaks in favour of the exclusive appearance of this “motif” as a unique picture of a secular character in the entire world of Early Christian artistic production.

• **Example four - the colourful “Journey to eternal life” in the Episcopal basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis**

In the last volume of *Folia Archaeologica Balkanica*, my contribution to the archaeological journal referred to the issue of functional interaction of the mosaic pavement in the western portion of the Episcopal temple in Heraclea with the belie-

vers as they participated in the religious rituals.<sup>42</sup> In this occasion, I will focus solely on the socio-cultural background of its origin, as well as the global religious notion which inspired its execution. Namely, the Heraclea narthex is paved with one of the most representative Early Christian mosaic decoration, dated at the turn of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>43</sup> It displays the most elaborated version of the illustration of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm of King David (42:1) in the entire Early Christian artistic production.<sup>44</sup> In that regard, the central part of the composition represents the chalice (i.e. the Source of Life) with two trunks of vine (symbolizing the sacrificial blood of Christ shed on the cross and transformed into Eucharistic wine) flanked by a deer and a doe (i.e. catechumens), accompanied by the peacocks as visual metaphors of eternal life and flying doves as allusions to the saved souls rejoicing in paradise. The central oval of the picture which illustrates the 1<sup>st</sup> verse of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm of King David is associated with subsidiary components encompassed by scenery of heavenly vegetation: an animal hunt as an elusive sight of earthly, i.e. corporal death in the southern portion, as well as a bold conflict of two animals (lion and bull) joined in a vista of the desired resurrection in the northern part of the monumental scene.<sup>45</sup>

#### ❖ *Location*

The described composition has been executed in the narthex of the Episcopal basilica in the antique city of Heraclea Lyncestis - one of the most important Episcopal sees in the territory of the Roman province of Macedonia Prima. The dimensions of the urban settlement, its architectural structure and most of all the number of sacral edifices – all testify to the important religious role of Heraclea, confirmed by the participations of its bishops in the work of Ecumenical councils.<sup>46</sup> The narthex of the temple, as a location of the composition, in other words its western, i.e. entrance, portion has been shaped as a narrow rectangular inner space the width of which was identical to the dimension of western wall of the church. As it looks from the ground plan of the basilica,<sup>47</sup> this has not been done by accident, rather to keep the inter-communication between the temple and its narthex at a perfect scale. On the account of that, one had to erect additional chambers sideways of the narthex in order to enable the functional maintenance of the basilica (with all its

<sup>42</sup> E. Dimitrova, 2015, 203-217.

<sup>43</sup> Г. Цветковиќ-Томашевиќ, 1967, 9-65; G. Tomašević, 1972, 567-580; G. Tomašević, 1976, 457-463; Г. Цветковић-Томашевић, 1978, 29-38; E. Dimitrova, 1995, 105-112; E. Dimitrova, *In Through the Inner Door*, 2006, 179-188; E. Dimitrova, *From the Image of the Cosmos*, 2006, 7-12; E. Dimitrova, *Colored Dogma*, 2006, 314; E. Димитрова, 2013, 1407-1412.

<sup>44</sup> E. Димитрова, 2007, 75-76.

<sup>45</sup> E. Димитрова, 1995, 48-52.

<sup>46</sup> E. Dimitrova, 2013, 1052-1053.

<sup>47</sup> I. Mikulčić, 2007, Fig. on p. 112.

complex activities – baptismal and others) as much as possible. In that context, the mosaic composition was arranged in the manner of execution appropriate to the move of the visitors who could see all its elements on their way to the nave of the church.



Fig. 9. Heraclea Lyncestis, mosaic (drawing by D. Spasova)

#### ❖ *Inspiration*

The illustration of the first verse of King David's Psalm 42 is the most commonly represented symbolic scene in the Early Christian artistic production. Its iconography, although dependent on the Old Testament poetry, has gained different visual configurations in the course of the continuous process of enrichment of iconographic matrixes.<sup>48</sup> During the period 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century, one can notice that when observing the illustration of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm – the greater the significance of the decorated edifice – the more complex the iconography of the executed scene. Starting with the simplest version of all, showing the deer by the water spring as a modest decorative arrangement of funereal chambers,<sup>49</sup> through the up-grated variants with Eucharistic allusions (includes the vine trunk), soteriological meaning (substitutes the chalice with the cross or the tree of life) and eschatological symbolism (includes the representations of pigeons, peacocks, lions etc.),<sup>50</sup> to the most elaborated spectacle as executed in the Heraclea narthex, the Psalm of King David 42 is the most substantial iconographic reference to the most significant role of the new faith. Namely, as the baptismal version accentuates the necessity of initiation, the Eucharistic one points to the mystical unification with the Saviour through the ritual of Communion, the soteriological – denotes Christ's role in the redemption, while the eschatological variant refers to the faith as a save pathway to resurrection. When combined together, the four aspects of the religious idea of salvation generate a profound instruction to the believers united in a complexly stratified picture of the Psalm, visually elaborated beyond the original textual context of the Biblical verse – as it is the case in Heraclea.

<sup>48</sup> Е. Димитрова, 2007, 67-75.

<sup>49</sup> Е. Dimitrova, *The Vinica Mystery*, 2012, 149-157.

<sup>50</sup> Е. Димитрова 2007, 68-74.



Fig. 10. Heraclea Lyncestis, detail

❖ *Ideological connotation*

In regard to the fact that the illustration of King David's Psalm 42 refers to baptism and acceptance of the new belief, it is also a symbolic image of the soul that has already become a part of the heavenly bliss through baptismal initiation. When combined with the representation of the vine stemming from the water spring (i.e. kantharos), the picture gains a more solid biblical fundament through association with the verses from the Gospel According to John (15:1; 15:5).<sup>51</sup> Inspiring the religious meditations of Early Christian apologists, these verses facilitate the transformation of the grapevine into a powerful symbol of Christ's messianic role and his fruitful sacrifice for the salvation of humanity. In that sense, the sacramental character of the grapevine in the context of the symbolic significance of the wine in the Eucharistic ritual alludes to the unity of the believers with their Saviour whose blood was shed on the cross of Golgotha. Thus, the motif of the vine depicted as a central element of the painterly exposition of King David's psalm 42, as it is shown in the narthex of the Episcopal basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis, actually transforms the baptismal water from the divine source into a vine with fruitful bunches of grapes, representing a vivid metaphor of the Eucharistic ceremony. After creating the main core of the composition through association of the Old Testament allegory with New Testament parables, it was quite easy to enrich such a powerful visual concept with additional symbolic elements of eschatological character (doves, peacocks),

<sup>51</sup> "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman"; "I am the vine, ye are the branches..."

since the rituals of baptismal initiation and Eucharist were considered as main steps on the pathway to salvation envisaged as an acquisition of eternal life in the Heavenly Kingdom.<sup>52</sup>

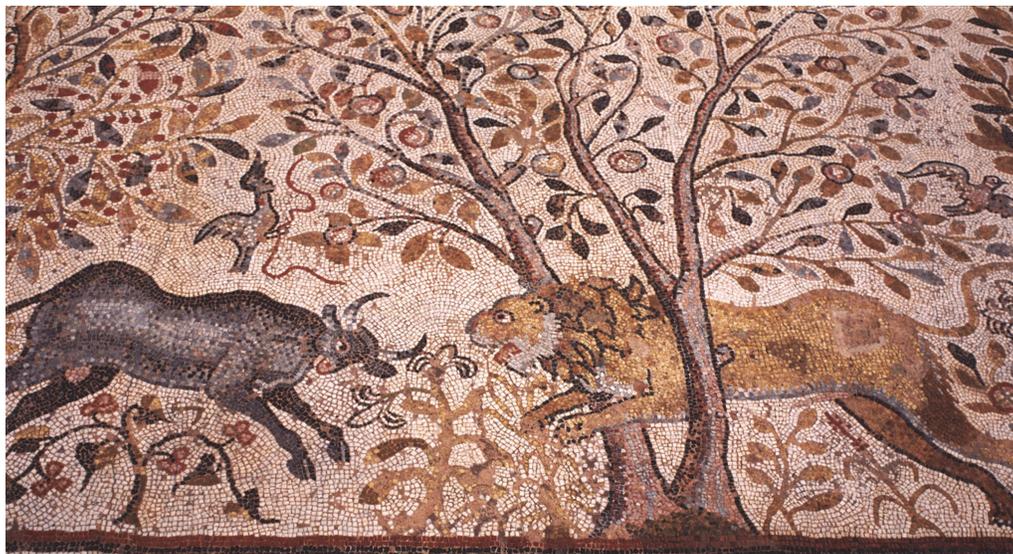


Fig. 11. Heraclea Lyncestis, detail

❖ *Interpretation*

If one comes to the temple in order to participate in the church rituals, keeping in mind that that is happening in the first centuries of Christianity, they have to enter the edifice through the narthex and then walk along the building on the way to the altar. On that short pathway, which symbolically rationalized the journey from outside (pagan childhood) to the sacred space of the sanctuary (Christian adulthood), the narthex was considered but a barrier between those two stages of religious education.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, the narthex was the structural part of the church, where the “ideological” preparation for religious transformation of the catechumens should take place in a form of an appropriate “didactical intro” to the novices. Hence, instead of an ordinary lecture on the benefits of Christianization, the Heraclea church authorities have probably decided that a powerful visual representation would have been much more effective for the senses of the candidates, particularly if they had the opportunity to hear the doctrinal lessons and to see their compelling visual dimension, at the same time. In that regard, the perfectly symmetrical oval in which the deer, the doves and the peacocks, encompassed by the branchy grapevine, quench their thirst approaching the kantharos as a symbol of the faith, must ha-

<sup>52</sup> Е. Димитрова, 1996, 152.

<sup>53</sup> В. Лилчиќ, 2003, 58; В. Лилчиќ, 2004, 77-80.

ve had the role of visual simulacrum of the Christian church, established amidst the on-going and all-going happenings in life.<sup>54</sup> The ravages and tragedies (panther devouring an antelope), the sins (the wild goat), the struggles for survival (lion attacking a bull) and death (Cerberus) are represented aside of the central motif which dominates over the subsidiary components with its perfectly harmonious form and execution. As a painterly design, it may seem too complicated for the ancient believers to comprehend, yet, if one yearns for the faith in order to deserve the salvation and the eternal life that comes with it, than they would, by all means, try to learn how to gain the privileges. In that context with the help of a spoken word or a painted representation, possibly best if combined, the neophytes in Heraclea's Episcopal temple received their essential training in order to gradually come closer to the desired destination, i.e. the chance for an everlasting life in Heaven. Or, so we imagine trying to relate with our ancestors from the early dawn of Christianity.



**Fig. 12.** Heraclea Lyncestis, detail

As the universe expands through space and time,<sup>55</sup> so expands our perception of artistic creativity from different periods of human history. Approximately a millennium and a half after the mentioned art works in Rome, Stobi, Niš and Heraclea have been created, we are still puzzled by the messages they comprise within their

<sup>54</sup> E. Dimitrova, *In Through the Inner Door*, 2006, 187-188.

<sup>55</sup> S. Hawking, 1988, 47-62.

iconographic arrangement and/or visual context. The multi-fold symbolic significance, the complex theological layout, the encrypted visual symbolism as well as the sophisticated allusions to fundamental religious ideas, encompassed by the iconographic arrangement of the artistic works in Early Christianity, witness to the intention of them being accessible only to those competent in the new faith. As the Christian belief developed, the artistic product became more and more complicated as visual paradigms, yet, the ones produced in the period 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century are anything but simple and decipherable. The authentically sardonic Alexamenos graffito, the unidentified guardians of the deadly silence in Niš, the unexpectedly vivid “visitors” climbing the pilaster in Stobi and the multi-coloured ritualistic panorama resounding through the mosaic in Heraclea Lyncestis are only some of the examples speaking in favour of the visual, ideological, iconographic, symbolic, metaphoric, as well as aesthetic complexity of early Christian artistic production.

Елизабета ДИМИТРОВА

## НЕПРЕТЕНЦИОЗНАТА КРИПТО АВАНГАРДА ИЛИ КАКО ХРИСТИЈАНИТЕ ОД РАНИТЕ ВРЕМИЊА ЈА ЗАМИСЛУВАЛЕ УМЕТНИЧКАТА КРЕАЦИЈА

### Резиме

Иако ранохристијанската уметност, позната од декоративниот аранжман на гробниците, погребните одаи, мозаичните павименти, саркофазите и останатите форми на ликовно творештво, е релативно добро позната од аспект на нејзините идеолошки, иконографски и симболични аспекти, некои од примероците на творештвото од раните времиња на развојот на христијанството, сè уште збунуваат со своите неконвенционални визуелни димензии и, особено, со начинот на транспозиција на верските пораки. Меѓу нив особено се истакнуваат:

- Таканаречениот *Графий* на *Алексамен* од Рим (почеток на III век), кој, поради структуралните карактеристики и пејоративното значење на иконографскиот концепт, според нас, треба да се преименува во *Графий* за *Алексамен* – невешто дело наменето за јавен потсмев на крипто-христијанските верници,
- Декоративниот фрескоаранжман во Нишката гробница, кој, според иконографските обележја и стилските карактеристики на изведбата, би требало хронолошки да се помести кон средината на IV столетие – фунерарен ансамбл со триумфална симболика и сотериолошка порака за вечниот живот во Рајот,
- Претставата на „неизбежните мали посетители“ во Епископската базилика во Стоби (доцен IV век) со исклучително возбудливо прикажување на глодари во црковен ентериер - инвентивна и вешта скица на еден жанр мотив зачуван како сведоштво за „незадолжителната“ страна на раната христијанска уметничка практика,
- Раскошната мозаична панорама изведена во нартексот на Епископската базилика во Хераклеја (доцен V - ран VI век) со прикажување на најелaborираната визуелна слика на четириесет и првиот Давидов псалм во историјата на ранохристијанската уметност – гламурозна ликовна илустрација за симболичното значење на еклесијастичните церемонии и на нивните сакраментални димензии.

Избирајќи ги наведените примери, репрезентативни поради нивната автентична визуелна констелација, симболичната експозиција на теолошките замисли, имагинативната транспозиција на религиозните идеи, како и експликативниот манир на креативната инвенција на нивните автори, влеговме во вртлогот на разрешување на прашањата околу различните постоечки теории, поврзани со нивното значење и/или во празниот амбис на непостоечките теории. Ситуирани во различни делови на медитеранскиот свет, познат по својата богата мапа на ранохристијански уметнички достигнувања и значајни креативни изохипси, наведените примери упатуваат на важните параметри при истражувањето кои можат да ја определат нивната попрецизна идеолошка амплитуда: местото, времето и начинот на изведбата, околностите на настанувањето, визуелната констелација и нејзиното влијание врз гледачот. Ова, се разбира, се должи на нераскинливата врска помеѓу локацијата на делото и неговата социјална цел, т.е. линкот меѓу зданието во кое делото е изведено и неговата јавна или тајна функција. Погребните простории или епископските храмови, скриените места или соборните цркви, подземните гробници или приватните мавзолеи – сите имаат своја сопствена функционална улога како креативни микро-галаксии во колосалниот *Мултиверзум* на христијанското творештво. Делата изведени во нив, пак, се монументални, блескави ѕвезди во бескрајната творечка сфера на христијанскиот космос.

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