

Differences in the Iconography of the Plot the Last Supper in the Illuminations of the Gospels and Psalters of the 10th – 14th Centuries Created in the Byzantine Empire

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study is to find and highlight the most striking pieces of the Last Supper in the examples of the Gospels and Psalters created on the territory of the Byzantine Empire in the 10th – 14th centuries, as well as to analyse the iconography and trace the development of the plot over the centuries. The study reflects the following aspects: how the early Christian sources influenced the formation of this plot and how long they continued to exist, what sources the masters employed to create these works, and how individual artistic details and elements pass from one work to another.*

Keywords: The Last Supper; Gospel; Psalter; miniature; iconography; semantics; Byzantine Empire

Introduction

The plot of the Last Supper has quite often attracted attention among researchers from all over the world, but it has never been specifically reflected in a single monograph that could explore this topic as part of the development of the art of the Byzantine Empire and the countries influenced by it or which are part of it. There are two main questions set by this article: (1) How was the iconography of the Last Supper formed in relation to its geographical location and (2) What was the role of the pagan art of the catacombs in the formation of the Last Supper iconography and semantics during the rule of Byzantine Empire? This article considers examples of the miniatures depicting the Last Supper starting with the iconoclastic period; for example, I start with the prominent piece of art such as Chludov Psalter from the State Historical Museum in Moscow collection and I end with the classic

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ones which formed the Byzantine period of miniatures of the late 13th century – the example of the Last Supper from the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

Research Methodology

The study was based on the documentary approach, historical research while the data collection method was descriptive, and I used the research papers of the Byzantinists, the official websites of museums and travel. All available data and previous research on the subject matter were used for the proper analysis of the topic. In this research, the iconography, semantics and style of the Last Supper plot were considered through different geographical locations and sources during the Byzantine period. This was also studied through two groups of sources including holy texts, research papers with a comparative approach, along with such factors as historical and geographical context, in particular, the place of creation. Cultural boundaries were also thoroughly explored.

The classic examples of the early iconography of the Last Supper plot include such works as the Rossano Gospel and the Gospel of St. Augustine, dating back to the 6th century. The Gospel of Saint Augustine from the collection of the college library Corpus Christy in Cambridge allows tracing a sample of the earliest, not yet formed iconography, as evidenced by the miniature on the folio 125. Here, Christ is depicted as a beardless youth with his disciples. The plot is flanked by the scenes from the Passions of Jesus: Palm Sunday and Agony in the Garden. Rossano Gospel from the Archbishop's Treasury of the Cathedral in Rossano has a different iconography. According to the Roman tradition, Christ eats with his disciples in the triclinium, a formal dining room in the Roman Empire. Symbolically depicted, two lunar phases with crescents indicate that the sacrament takes place in the evening. The images of birds in the form of peacocks are generously used, in the miniature indicating the incorruptibility of Christ's body. This plot is combined with the plot of The Washing of the Feet (Maundy) and with the depiction of the Old Testament kings¹.

The Chludov Psalter from the collection of the State Historical Museum in Moscow, dating back to the middle of the 9th century, is considered to be the first work created after the period of iconoclasm (**Fig.1**).

¹ N. V. Dmytrenko, *Sources of Iconography of the Last Supper in the Monuments of the Early Christian Era* // Ukrainian Academy of Arts. Vol. 28, 2019, pp. 98-108. (Dzherela ikonoghrafiji szuzhetu Tajemna večerja v pam'jatkakh rannjokhrystyjanskoji doby).



Fig. 1 Last Supper. Chludov Psalter. Constantinople. c. middle of the 9th century.
State Historical Museum, Moscow

This work is recognized as one of the most famous creations of the Byzantine miniature book of the Middle Ages. Vukol Mikhailovich Undolsky was the first to publish a description and interpretation of the Psalter in the middle of the 19th century, suggesting that the Psalter could have been created on Athos. Later archimandrite, Bishop Amphilochius, an expert in Greek palaeography, published his studies based on the study of the Psalter. It is on the basis of his scientific research that the creation of the Psalter is usually attributed to the middle or the end of the 9th century, while repainting the miniatures – closer to the 12th century. At the end of the 19th century, F. I. Buslaev, researcher on ancient Russian art, analysed in detail the miniatures of the Chludov Psalter in his monography “General Concepts of the Russian Icon Painting”, and also made suggestions to a more accurate dating of the work. In his research, he also makes analogies with ancient art, referring to images of the natural forces and allegories.

In 1878, N. P. Kondakov published his research on the miniatures of the Khludov Psalter, sharing the opinion of F. I. Buslaev that the Psalter was created after the end of the iconoclastic period². Previously, the French art

² N. P. Kondakov, *Miniatures of a Greek Manuscript of a Psalter of the 9th Century from the Collection of A. I. Khludov in Moscow* // Proceedings of the Moscow Archaeological Society.

historian G. Millet contributed to the description and interpretation of individual scenes³. It should be noted that the Chludov Psalter is often compared with the Barberini Codex №217 (Cod. Barb. gr. 217), which allowed for a more detailed analysis and comparison of miniatures of different works. The Psalter was first published in a facsimile edition in 1977 in Moscow thanks to the research of the palaeographer M. V. Shchepkin, who provided comments and translations of the holy texts accompanying each miniature. The researcher J. J. Tikkanen also emphasized that some miniatures contain polemical texts carrying the “polemic tone of the church struggle”⁴.

Although, according to the Byzantine scholar Igor Shevchenko, this edition does not contain all miniatures and texts, a part of the Psalter is still on Mount Athos. On page 40, we can notice that the two plots are in close proximity to each other, in particular: Judas Iscariot, who conspires with the high priests to betray Christ, illustrating Verses 8–9 of Psalm 40 and the Last Supper below illustrating Verse 10, Psalm 40.

The right spread shows a deer near the well, next to a praying David illustrating Verse 2 of Psalm 41. The illustrations emphasize the sacrificial line and the theme of betrayal which unites all three miniatures. Speaking of the iconography of the Last Supper, it still gravitates towards the early stages of the iconography development varying in details, such as the figure of John who is distinguished from other disciples by being placed next to Christ and highlighted by a halo. The figure of Judas is also highlighted, as he is placed on the other side of the table reaching out to the dish with fish. An important detail is the tripod lamp on the left side of the composition⁵.

Trebizond Gospel from the collection of the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg is dated between the late 9th – early 10th centuries, according to the research of V. D. Likhacheva (**Fig. 2**) which is quite relevant for the comparison of iconography with the earlier works of art, such as the Rossano Gospel.

T. VII. 1878, p. 169-183. (Miniatury grecheskoy rukopisi psaltyri IX veka iz sobraniya A. I. Khludova v Moskve // Trudy Moskovskogo arheologicheskogo obshchestva.)

³ G. Millet, *L'art byzantine*. A. Michel, *Histoire de l'art*, I, Première partie, Paris, 1905, pp. 241-248.

⁴ J. J. Tikkanen, *Die Psalterillustration im Mittelalter*, I, Byzantinische Psalterillustration, Helsingfors, 1895, pp. 99-148.

⁵ M. V. Shchepkina, *Miniatures of the Chludov Psalter. Greek Illustrated Codex XI century*. Iskustvo Publishing House, Moscow, 1977, pp. 8-23. (Miniatury Khludovskoy psaltyri. Grecheskiy illyustrirovanny kodeks XI veka.)



Fig. 2 Last Supper. Trebizond Gospel. 10th century. 33 x 36.5 cm. Russian National Library, Saint Petersburg

In this case, we can be sure that the iconography used by the artists in the 6th century continues to exist until the end of the 10th century. Artists keep using the image of the triclinium where Christ and his disciples are placed. Unlike Rossano Gospel, the figure of Judas is highlighted on the right side of the composition next to the bowl placed on the table. The colour of the miniature differs from the previous works by the active use of pale pink, white and golden tones, contrasting with a dark spot in the centre of the composition. It should also be noted that the Last Supper plot is in the close proximity of the miniature *Marriage at Cana*, emphasizing the sacrificial basis of the plot, similar to the frescos from the ensemble of St. Sophia's Cathedral in Kyiv⁶.

It is noteworthy that among the miniatures of the Kyiv Psalter, created in 1397 and researched by G. I. Vzdornov, this miniature does not

⁶ V. D. Likhacheva, *The Byzantine Art of the 6th – 15th Centuries*, Leningrad, Iskusstvo Publishing House, 1981, pp. 123-126 (Iskusstvo Vizantii IV–XV vekov).

emphasize the sacrificial aspect, but it rather illustrates the Verse 16 of Psalm 144: “Thou openest thy hand, and fillest with blessing every living creature”⁷. The images of beds with the figures of Christ and Peter highlighted by halos among the other apostles are used in miniature iconography (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Last Supper. Kiev Psalter. 1397. Parchment. Russian National Library, Saint Petersburg

The figure of Judas is still distinguished by the gesture of a hand reaching for the sacrificial bowl. The beloved disciple of Christ, John, is placed the closest to Christ. The art historian B. V. Skrypka confidently refuted the suggestion about the presence of conventional columns in the background. B. V. Skrypka identified them as the Roman oil lamps and readily provides similar analogies with other Byzantine miniatures discussed earlier in the article⁸. An interesting observation is that, according to B. V. Skrypka, a similar early Christian symbolism in the form of a stylized image of a fish placed on a tablecloth covering the table can also be seen on the clothes of Saints Boris and Gleb on the Novgorod icon from the collection of

⁷ G. I. Vzdornov, *Research of Kyiv Psalter*, Iskusstvo Publishing House, Moscow, 1978, pp. 50-51 (Issledovanie o Kievskoy Psaltiri.)

⁸ B. V. Skrypka, *Study of the Miniatures of Kyiv Psalter* // Third Platon Readings: Theses of the Reports of the International Science Conference, Kyiv, Feniks Publishing House, 2016, pp. 29-30. (Doslidzhennja miniatjuri Tajemna vecherja z Kyjivskogho Psaltyrja // Treti Platonivjski chytannja: Tezy dopovidej Mizhnarodnoji naukovoji konferenciji Kyjiv Lystopad 2016.)

the National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery”, dating back to the middle of the 13th century, according to the information contained in the latest catalogue of the National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery”⁹.

One of the researchers of this icon was N. N. Chernogubov, whose research was published after his death and based on the materials and research documents kept by his widow. These studies were reflected in the article by N. N. Chernogubov entitled: *The Icon “Boris and Gleb” in the Kiev Museum of Russian Art* and published in the collected works *Ancient Russian Art of the 15th – early 16th Centuries*. However, the icon was dated between the late 13th – the early 14th centuries in the article, although the researcher dated the icon as belonging to the pre-Mongol period, as evidenced by the author's archival materials from the holdings of the National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery” in Kyiv. The author of the article described in great detail all the technical characteristics of the icon, the pigments, the base and most importantly, the symbols that can be traced on their cloaks. We are interested in the mentioned symbol. N. N. Chernogubov does not specify this particular symbol, although he considers the neighbouring one similar in shape calling it “a rhombus set at an angle with dashes crossing its sides and with a dot in its centre”. Nevertheless, the researcher managed to find analogies of the last symbol in the history of art in other artworks, namely in the 11th century mosaics in the Daphni Monastery (in the trim of Solomon's clothes) and in the 13th century icon depicting Archangel Michael from the Assumption Cathedral in Moscow¹⁰.

We managed to find similar symbols in other artworks depicting the Last Supper, namely in the frescoes of the 12th century in the Karanlik Church (Cappadocia, Turkey), in the frescoes of the mid-14th – second half of the 15th century by the artist Damiane in the monastery in Ubisi (Georgia), located in the central apse of the altar, as well as in the 14th century miniatures of the Kyiv Psalter¹¹.

⁹ *Icons of the 13th – early 20th centuries and ancient Russian decorative and applied art*. National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery”: catalogue / S. Levchenko, Gh. Alaverdova, Kyiv, Antykar Publishing House, 2020, pp. 30-35. (Ikony XIII – pochatku XX stolittja ta davnjorusjke dekoratyvno-prykładne mystectvo. Nacionalnyj muzej “Kyjivsjka kartynna ghalereja”).

¹⁰ N. N. Chernogubov, *Icon of St. Boris and Gleb at the Kiev Museum of Russian Art* // *Russian Art of the 15th – early 16th centuries*, USSR Academy of Sciences Publishing House, 1963, pp. 285-290. (Ikona “Boris i Gleb” v Kievskom muzeje russkogo iskusstva // *Drevnerusskoe iskusstvo 15 – nachala 16 vekov*. Izdatelstvo akademii nauk SSSR.)

¹¹ N. V. Dmytrenko, *Formation of the Iconography of the Last Supper in the Byzantine Mural Decorations of 10th–14th centuries* // *Current issues of the Humanities: Interuniversity digest of scientific works of young scientists of Drohobych State Pedagogical University named after Ivan Franko*. Vol. 33, T. 1, 2020, pp. 40-51. (Formuvannja ikonohrafiji szuzhetu Tajemna vecherja u vizantijskij khramovij dekoraciji 10-14 stolitj // Aktualni pytannja ghumanitarnykh nauk: Mizhvuzivsjkyj zbirnyk naukovykh pracj molodykh vchenykh Droghobycjkogho derzhavnogho pedaghoghichnogho universytetu imeni Ivana Franka.)

Starting with the 11th century, we can trace certain changes that began to appear in the Last Supper iconography. A miniature with the Last Supper from the Gospel of the Apostle of the 11th century, kept in the Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos is a strikingly eloquent example in this case (**Fig. 4**).



Fig. 4 Last Supper. Gospel and Apostle, 11th century, Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece

Here we can see that the figure of Christ is still predominant, reclining on the couch, but the disciples are depicted already sitting around the table. The artist conditionally distinguished each of them not only colouristically and by the difference in their clothes, but also with different signs showing their age. A symbolic image of architecture, which appears in the miniature as united by the red cloth called velum is a distinctive feature of the miniature depicting this plot. This symbolic image would continue to be actively used in the icon painting in the future.

The exceptional examples of the Armenian miniatures are very interesting to consider, having in view the iconography development and the tracing of its changes in the example of the Last Supper plot in the Gospels and Psalters created on the territory of the Byzantine Empire. Armenia came under the rule of the Byzantines after the partition of the Greater Armenia in 387, when part of the country became part of Byzantium (High Armenia, Sophene, part of Arzanene) while the rest of the Armenian territory passed to

Sasanian Persia. Then Armenia was divided for the second time, and the borders of the empire expanded. This situation led to the Arab invasion, when the Byzantines created the Armeniac theme as a military and political unit. At the end of the 9th century, the independence of Armenia was restored under the rule of Bagratuni Dynasty and only some parts of the historical Armenia remained part of Byzantium.

The Armenian miniatures of the 14th century, in particular the Gospel of Artsakh depicted the Last Supper plot (**Fig. 5**).



Fig. 5 Last Supper, Gospel Artsakh, 14th century, Matenadaran, MS 316, Erevan, Armenia

The Gospel is kept in the Matenadaran, which is the St. Mesrop Mashtots Matenadaran Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, a research centre under the Government of the Republic of Armenia in Yerevan. It is one of the largest repositories of manuscripts in the world and the largest repository of the ancient Armenian manuscripts.

In the centre of the composition, there is a table in the form of an Armenian cross decorated with ornaments in the form of weaving. The cross is arranged in a circle around which we see the apostles who are densely placed. They are depicted as black-haired bearded heads with golden halos.

On the left side, there is a throne with a sitting Christ in pale pink himation. With his right hand, he is facing the disciples, the half-length figure of Judas leaving the Last Supper is separately depicted on the right side of the composition, in the lower corner.

In Byzantine miniature, this is perhaps the only example of iconography where Judas leaves the Last Supper. As an alternative and later example, it is worth recalling the frescoes of the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Lublin (Poland), where the departing Judas is similarly depicted, only with the devil sitting on his shoulders. The composition is built on warm pink, crimson tones contrasting in dark accents with the heads of the apostles around the table. There is a stylized arch around the perimeter of the entire miniature filled with the geometric shapes of triangles, squares and rhombuses in soft green, blue and pink, which also serve as striking elements.

If we consider the miniatures of the Gladzor Gospel dating back to approximately 1300 (14th century) from the collection of the Charles Young Research Library in Los Angeles, we will see that the iconography of the Last Supper is very similar to the miniature described above (**Fig. 6**).



Fig. 6 Last Supper. Gladzor Gospels, c. 1300, Charles E. Young Research Library, Los Angeles, USA

The differences include the detailed elaboration of the images of each of the apostles and the appearance of a conditional architectural background. An interesting detail is the throne, similar to a blue mandorla, with sitting Christ. Judas in this miniature is depicted as a profile image, not in the lower right corner, but between the other disciples of Christ, reaching out to the sacrificial calf on the table. It should be noted that the iconography of these two works enriches the first Byzantine works of decorative and applied sacred art devoting to topics created by combining Roman samples with the prominent talent of the Greek jewellers. A striking proof of this is the cloisonné enamel depicting the Last Supper on a late 9th – early 10th century discos from the Louvre collection. Nevertheless, in the Armenian miniature of the 11th century, artists used the iconography of the Western model involving the image of a conditional oblong refectory table, placing all students in a row against the background of a conditional interior.

On the example of miniatures from the Tarkmanchatz Gospel dating back to 1232, we can trace the full moon and stars in the sky for the first time depicted in the iconography of the Last Supper (**Fig. 7**).

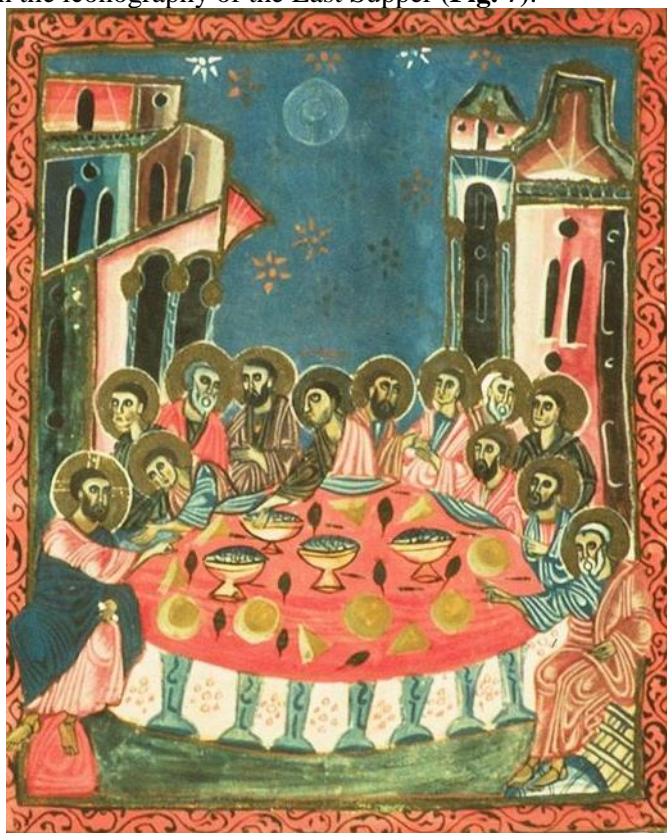


Fig. 7 Last Supper, Tarkmanchatz Gospel, circa 1232, Armenia

In the miniatures depicting the Last Supper in *The Art of Bulgarian miniatures*, we can see how the influence of catacomb art was preserved right up to the 14th century. This is evidenced by the iconography of a plot from the Gospels of Tsar Ivan Alexander, created in 1355 – 1356 in Tarnovo and held at the British Library in London. It should be noted that Veliko Tarnovo was the capital of Bulgaria in the 12th – 14th centuries and it is well known as the capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire. In this Gospel, the miniature with the Last Supper is encountered three times with a completely different iconography. It is noteworthy that the subject of the Eucharist is shown in another miniature on a separate page. The number of miniatures with the Last Supper logically corresponds to the number of the Gospels (except for the fourth Gospel of John). First of all, we are attracted by the iconography of the Last Supper, in which there is a figure of a servant who came out of a nearby building carrying a dish in her hands (**Fig. 8 – a**).

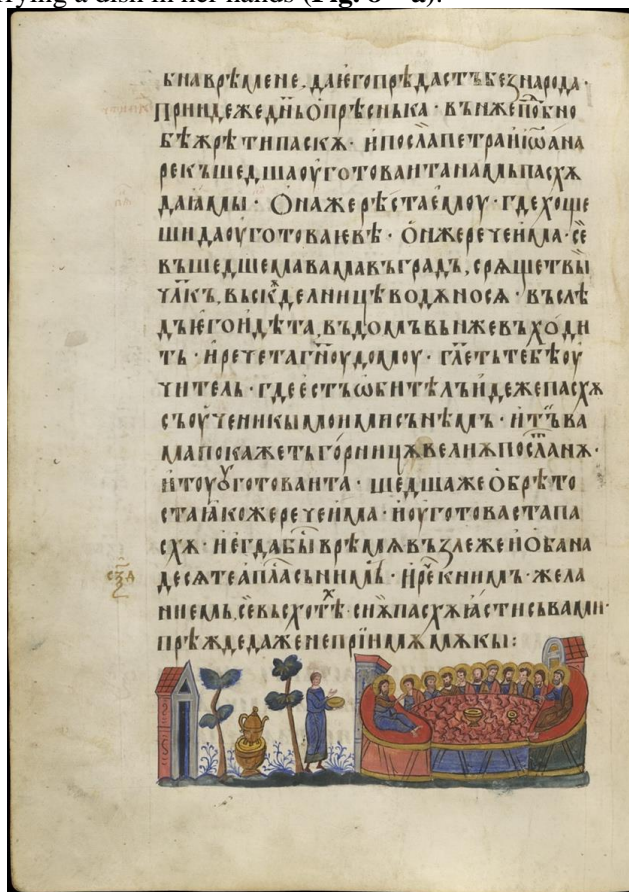


Fig. 8 – a The Last Supper, Gospels of Tsar Ivan Alexander, 1356, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, British Library, London

There is a vessel on a tripod – standing between two trees and a conventional landscape on the right from her. On the right of the miniature, there is a table at which Christ's disciples are sitting. On either side of the couches, there are Jesus and Peter. Ten disciples are sharing the sacred moment of the Last Supper. All of them have halos over their heads. In the next miniature, we can already see twelve disciples present, one being Judas reaching for a bowl placed in the centre of the table, he is depicted without a halo above his head (**Fig. 8 – b**).

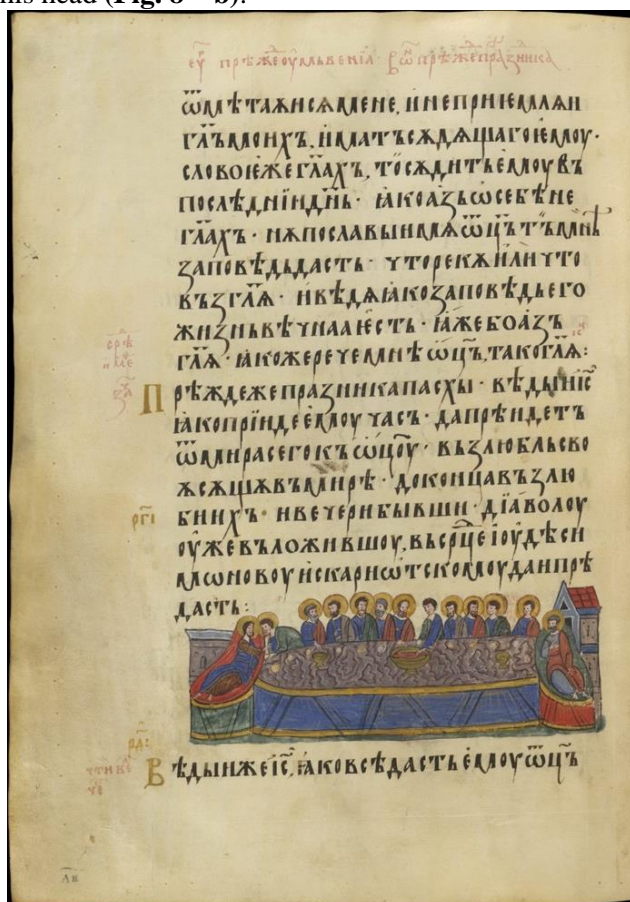


Fig. 8 – b The Last Supper, Gospels of Tsar Ivan Alexander, 1356, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria. British Library, London

The third miniature is identical to the previous one, with its composition and iconography separated from the architectural details which are absent in the right corner (**Fig. 8 – c**).

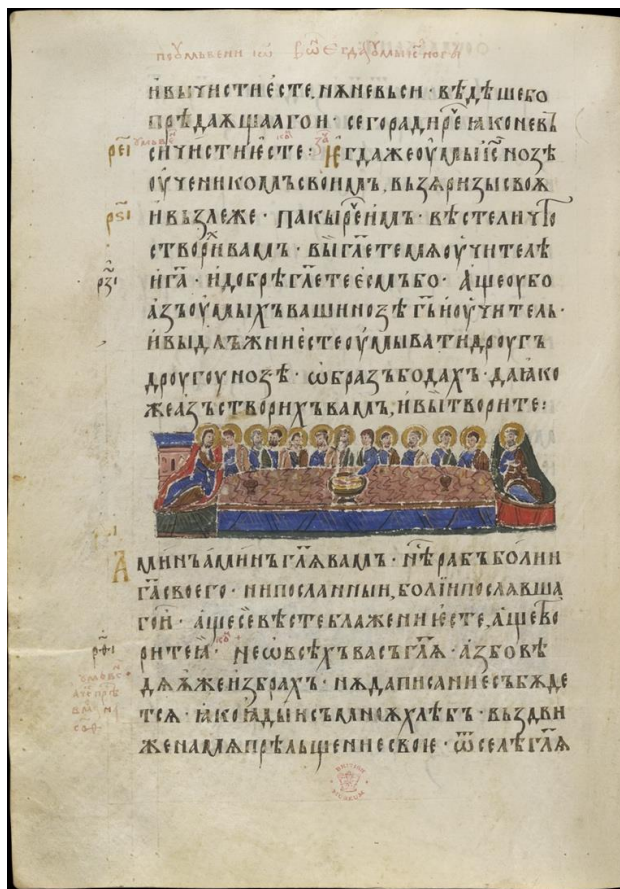


Fig. 8 – c The Last Supper, Gospels of Tsar Ivan Alexander, 1356, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria. British Library, London

In all three miniatures, John is distinguished by being placed the closest to the Teacher, who is stretching out his right hand to him. The colour in all three miniatures is rich, vivid, based on the spectral triad of red, blue and green colours. However, it is obvious that the miniatures were created by three different masters, which is evident by the different artistic level of the works. The most exquisite and well-preserved miniature is the first one that we considered. Apparently, it was performed by the head master of the workshop who was also the author of the miniature with the Eucharist¹².

In the miniatures of the 13th century from the collection of The J. Paul Getty Museum, specifically depicting the Last Supper and created in the

¹² R. Milner-Gulland, *Review of The Gospels of Tsar Ivan Alexander by Ekaterina Dimitrova*, The Slavonic and East European Review, Modern Humanities Research Association and University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies. Vol. 74, No. 2., 1996, pp. 302-304.

territory of modern Turkey, namely in Nicomedia or Nicaea (?) at the end of the 13th century, we can see the pride and development of the Byzantine manuscript miniatures and the final formation of the Last Supper iconography, in which there is a dynamic between the disciples of Christ at the table as well as the individual distinctive features of each. The established features that remain are Christ and Peter depicted with halos and the figure of John placed the closest to all, as a beloved disciple of Christ (**Fig. 9**). It should be noted that N. P. Kondakov published an extended research based on the Greek miniatures and their impact on Byzantine culture¹³.



Fig. 9 Last Supper. Unknown. Byzantine. Nicaea or Nicomedia, Turkey. late 13th century. Tempera colours and gold leaf. Ms. Ludwig II 5, fol. 65v. Leaf 20.6 × 14.9 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, USA

¹³ N. P. Kondakov, *History of Byzantine Art and Iconography from Greek miniature manuscripts*. Notes of the Imperial Novorossiysk University. T. XXI. Odessa, 1876, pp. 250-254. (Istoriya vizantiyskogo iskusstva i ikonografii po miniatyuram grecheskikh rukopisey // Zapiski imperatorskogo Novorossiyskogo universiteta.)

Among the interesting observations, it should be noted that in the Armenian miniature of the 14th century the Last Supper was combined on one folio with such a plot as Jesus Walking on Water.

Conclusion

Thus, we can trace the development of the Last Supper in the art of book miniatures of the 10th – 14th centuries created on the territory of the Byzantine Empire, or influenced by the art of Byzantium in particular Constantinople, Kievan Rus (Kyiv), Greece (Athos), Great Armenia (Yerevan), Bulgaria (Tarnovo) and Turkey (Nicaea, Nicomedia). Each of the described works of art has its own distinctive features, and also common details that confidently support the conclusion that the principles of the early Christian iconography, as well as the art of the catacombs continued to influence the masters of Byzantine miniature right up to the 14th century.

Over the centuries, the Last Supper has undergone various changes associated with geographical and political changes of the Byzantine Empire, and it was gradually and continuously formed by the end of the 13th century. Emphasizing the pagan art basics and early Christian art in association with political invasions and cultural impacts, finally it acquires artistic and truly unique features different in comparison with other countries.

Liste et source des illustrations

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Fig. 2 Last Supper. Trebizond Gospel. 10th century. 33 x 36.5 cm. Russian National Library, Saint Petersburg, *from Byzantine Art of 6th–15th*. 1981, p. 123-126. (Iskusstvo Vizantii IV–XV vekov.)

Fig. 3 Last Supper. Kiev Psalter. 1397. Parchment. Russian National Library, Saint Petersburg, *from Research of Kyiv Psalter*. 1978, p. 50–51. (Issledovanie o Kievskoy Psaltiri.)

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Fig. 9 Last Supper. Byzantine Empire. Nicaea or Nicomedia, Turkey. late 13th century. Tempera colours and gold leaf. Ms. Ludwig II 5, fol. 65v. Leaf 20.6 × 14.9 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, USA. *Photo: The J. Paul Getty Museum*

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