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MEDIEVAL ART AND CIVILIZATION

Cryptography in the Colophons of Old Printed Armenian Books

Marine P. Sargsyan*

Abstract: This article briefly and generally addresses the history of cryptography in Armenian written culture, presenting its most common types. The study then proceeds to analyse several of the more than a dozen ciphers found in the printed colophons of old Armenian books. It is primarily based on the decipherment of ciphers found in manuscript colophons, as well as on a synthesis of the experience of scholars who have worked on the description of old Armenian printed books and have conducted research in this field. Subsequently, an attempt is made to trace in manuscripts the origins of the numerical values attributed to terms found in colophons that denote specific numbers. However, this endeavour has not always been successful. In cases where the material available was insufficient to reach a definitive conclusion, logical analysis proved helpful. For those ciphers that have already been deciphered by others, the relevant sources are cited. In certain cases, it has been necessary to make corrections or propose alternative decipherments that seem more plausible. The absence of a source indicates that the cipher key has been identified by the author of the article.

Keywords: Printed Armenian Book, colophon, cryptography, manuscript, Printing House

Introduction

Encryption or cryptography comes from the Greek words κρυπτός – secret and γραφή – writing. It has an ancient history. Cryptography was used to covertly transmit specific written information in military, diplomatic, religious documents, etc. It has a history spanning around four thousand years. Its prototypes have been found in ancient Egypt, India, and Rome.¹

* Research Fellow, Matenadaran, Mesrop Mashtots Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, 53 Mashtots Avenue, Yerevan 0009, Republic of Armenia.

Email: marinesargsyan1984@mail.ru

¹ Bauer, P. Craig, *Secret History: The Story of Cryptology*, CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group (second edition), 2021, 4-9.

Armenian manuscripts and lapidary inscriptions² contain encoded names, dates and other data on their creation and other related subjects. In the case of manuscripts, this practice is most common in colophons. The old printed Armenian books emerged as direct continuation of manuscripts, therefore, the colophons of books, like those of manuscripts, contain encrypted passages or are entirely coded.

The renowned French Armenologist M. Brosse³ was the first to draw attention to Armenian cryptography, having deciphered Zak'aria Vanec'i's ciphers (17th century). Following Brosse, G. Ter-Mkrtč'yan also addressed the subject of cryptography⁴. H. Ač'aryan was the first to attempt a systematic classification of Armenian cryptography, presenting it comprehensively alongside various decoding keys. This study was published as an appendix to the work *Armenian Scripts* («Հայոց գրերը»), under the title “Armenian Cryptography” («Հայերեն ծածկագրերը») ⁵. Cryptography was also referred to in the works of K. Łafadaryan⁶ and the historian A. Abrahamyan. In his book, Abrahamyan presented various types of cryptographic systems and provided the keys for deciphering texts written in them⁷. Further materials on this topic can be found in other books and articles published by Abrahamyan⁸. Of course various original examples of cryptographic writing are also preserved in manuscript catalogues.

² For cryptography in lapidary inscriptions, see Sałowmyan, Sowren, “Cackagrowt'yownə ew zardagrowt'yownə hay vimagerowm” [“Cryptography and Ornamentation in Armenian Lapidary Inscriptions”], *Lraber hasarakakan gitowt'yownneri*, no. 9 (1979), 61-77; Harowt'yownyan, Ė. Arsen, “Tat'ewi vank'i norahayt cackagirə ew nmanōrinak myows vimagerə” [“A Newfound Cryptogram of Tatev Monastery and Other Similar Inscriptions”], *VĖM hamahaykakan handes*, no. 3 (75), (July-September 2021), 147-162.

³ Brosset, Marie-Félicité., Variétés arméniennes, “Mélanges Asiatiques”, vol. V, St. Pétersbourg, 1868, 65-77.

⁴ Ter-Mkrtč'yan, Galowst (Miaban), “Nersisean cackagir” [“Nersisean Cipher”], *Ararat*, no. 1 (1888), 35-49; Ter-Mkrtč'yan, Galowst, “A'jic' jax growt'yown” [“Right-to-Left Writing”], *Šolakat'*, Book I, Valaršapat, 1913, 137-141.

⁵ Ač'aryan, Hrač'ya, *Hayoc' grerə [The Armenian Scripts]* (Vienna: Mxit'arist Press, 1928), 460-488 (reprinted Yerevan: Yerevan State University Press, 1984, 663-676).

⁶ Łafadaryan, Karo, *Avani erklezvyan cackagir arjanagrowt'yownə [The Bilingual Cryptography Inscription of Avani]* (Yerevan: Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1945).

⁷ Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Haykakan cackagrowt'yown [Armenian Cryptography]* (Yerevan: Publishing House of Yerevan University, 1978).

⁸ Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Haykakan paleografia [Armenian Paleography]* (Yerevan: Publishing House of Yerevan University, 1948); Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Hay gri ew grč'owt'yan patmowt'yown [History of Armenian Writing and Script]* (Yerevan: HAYPETHRAT Publishing, 1959); Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Hayoc' gir ew grč'owt'yown [Armenian Writing and Script]* (Yerevan: Publishing House of Yerevan University, 1973). His articles are listed in Abrahamyan, *Haykakan cackagrowt'yown*, 6.

The Main Types of Armenian Cryptography

Many studies dedicated to cryptography have undertaken endeavours to categorise Armenian cryptography in ancient and medieval written sources. The initial classification was carried out by the linguist H. Ačāryan⁹. This was the subject of a more detailed study by the historian and source specialist A. Abrahamyan.

Armenian cryptographic systems may be categorised based on their formal characteristics and content. In terms of form, they are diverse and include the dot-comma cipher, the ring-dot cipher, the “rod cipher” (*gawazanagir*), the “brother cipher” (*elbayragir*), the “sum cipher”, (*gumaragir*) and others¹⁰. From a content-based perspective, Abrahamyan identifies four distinct categories of ciphers¹¹:

1. **Political** in nature, containing encrypted political information. Although such ciphers are relatively few in number, however, they are of significant value for source studies.

2. **Scribal** cryptography, in which information pertaining to scribes’ names and other bibliographic details, as well as the date of script are encoded.

3. **Artisanal** cryptography. Through **artisanal** cryptography, craftsmen encoded the secrets of their trade¹². In this manner, masters would transmit their specialised knowledge exclusively to their apprentices, as the secrets of the craft were regarded as a family monopoly and passed down from generation to generation. Such encrypted records are primarily found in compilations related to artisanal, chemical, and alchemical subjects. These methods were also used to protect potentially dangerous medical and chemical information from falling into wrong hands.

4. **“Enigmatic” cryptography**. In this manner, calendrical dates are encoded using value-bearing terms employed in the science of chronology, such as *hnptlūwū* (*hobelean*), *ṛhūyūhūn* (Olympiad), *ūnūnu* (*nonos*),

⁹ See not. 5.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of these, see: Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Hayoc’ gir ew grč’owt’yown*, 244–279; and Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Haykakan cackagrowt’yown*, 1978. The connection between cryptography and contemporary art—specifically design—is addressed in A. Ačāryan’s article: see Ačāryan, Ani, “Haykakan cackagrowt’yan grafikakan aṛanjnhatkowt’yownnerə” [“Graphic Features of Armenian Cryptography”], *Telekagir*, no. 2 (Yerevan: 2019), 81–88.

¹¹ Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Haykakan cackagrowt’yown*, 6–10.

¹² An example of such a record is the text preserved in manuscript MM 3609 (Bžškan [Medical Book], 1833), on folios 28r and 49r–51r, which contains a collection of medical prescriptions. The key to deciphering the code is provided by the scribe (49v) (see Manowkian, Tat’ew, Harowt’yownyan, K’nar, “Erkow norahayt cackagir” [“Two New-found Cryptograms”], *Banber Matenadarani*, no. 25 (Yerevan: “Nairi” Publishing House, 2018), 218–231.

թրթաւկ/թրիթաւկ (*t'rt'ak* or *t'rit'ak*) and so on. Old printed Armenian books commonly feature "scribal" and "enigmatic" cryptograms in their colophons.

Cryptographic Colophons in Old Printed Armenian Books

Numerous encoded colophons and various types of text have been published in the works of the aforementioned scholars, in manuscript catalogues, and elsewhere. However, even today, new cryptographic data are still being encountered during the description of manuscripts. The key to some of these is known, while the key to others is not.

The series of ciphered texts found in manuscripts is supplemented by those found in old printed books. Some of them have been deciphered by experts, while others are still awaiting examination. Several of these have been deciphered in the course of this study (see below the texts and their decipherments).

As noted above, names of scribes, dates and places of manuscripts or printed books were encoded in particular. This practice served a protective function, so that those data should not be altered, falsified, erased or replaced with the name of someone else. Therefore, the authors of colophons encoded these details and included cautionary notes addressed to the reader. For example: «...եւ որ ոք յայս յանդգնի եւ ջնջէ, ինքն ջնջի ի կենաց գրոյն...»¹³ (“...and whoever dares to erase this, let he himself be erased from the Book of Life”). The scribe believed that by preserving his name, he would be worthy of the reader’s “mercy” (ողորմիս) — a plea that scribes consistently make at the end of colophons.

According to some scholars, the scribes were also engaging in a form of wordplay through the use of cryptoraphy¹⁴, while encouraging readers to explore and interpret the text. Those who managed to find the key were seen as intelligent, learned and sharp-minded: «Այս է փակագիր, իմաստունն իմանայ, անիմաստն զարմանայ»¹⁵ (“This is a cipher; the wise will understand it, the unwise will be astonished”).

In our opinion, the colophons in old printed Armenian books were mostly encoded by scribes not to conceal data but rather as a poetic device and a unique form of expression, reflecting the author’s intellectual flexibility and

¹³ See *Hayeren jeřagreri hiřatakaraner*, ԶԺ ըր (*Colophons of the 16th-century Armenian manuscripts*), compiled by Xač'ikyan, Lewon, Mat'ewosyan, Artařes, Łazarosyan, Arp'enik, vol. 1 (Yerevan: “Nairi” Publishing House, 2018), 182; also: Harowt'yownyan, Xač'ik, *Hayeren jeřagreri hiřatakaraner* [The Colophons of the Armenian Manuscripts] (Yerevan: “Tigran Mec” Publishing House, 2019), 187.

¹⁴ Abrahamyan, Ařot, *Hayoc' gir ew grč'owt'yown*, 244.

¹⁵ Abrahamyan, Ařot, *Haykakan cackagrowt'yown*, 8.

creative potential. It also made the material more “mysterious”. In other words, these are scribal playful games. In the colophons of old Armenian printed books, cryptograms mainly appear in the form of “enigmatic” cryptography, and they are mostly written in verse.

Several cryptograms found in the colophons of old Armenian printed books are presented below:

1. Թիվ 108, Էջ 81 – **ԵՐԵՄԻԱ ՉԷԼԷՊԻ ՔԷՕՄԻՐՃԵԱՆ:**
ՏԵՂԵԱՑ ՏՆՕՐԻՆԱԿԱՆԱՑ...: Կ. Պոլիս, տպ.՝ Երեմիա Չելեբի
Բյոմնոբյանի, 1678:

Էջ 61 ՅԻՇԱՏԱԿԱՐԱՆ
... ԷՀՊԱՊ Քրիստոսի թուէք
Եւ ՉԱՁ ԻՄ ի հայս յիշեցէ՛ք,
Ի բարեացդ խնդրի բարիքն,
Միշտ զբարին ՅԻՆԷՆ մի՛ խնայէք...
|62|... Ի տուրք Երուսաղէմ սա
Երգեցաւ ՊԷՅԱԶ ընծայեալ...:

No. 108, p. 81¹⁶ – **EREMIA Č'ĒLĒPI K'ĒŌMIWRČEAN;**
TEĻEAC' TNŌRINAKANAC'... [Ordination of Priors]. Constantinople, The
Printing House of Eremia Č'elebi K'yomowrčyan, 1678.

p. 61 Colophon
...Count 1678 of the Christian Era,
And mention 1127 of the Armenian Era,
Good is sought by good,
Always do not spare, 1678, the good...
|62|... This was praised in Holy Jerusalem
As presented [i.e. published] in 1114...

(YIŠATAKARAN

... ĒHPAP K'ristosi t'owēk,
Ew ZAĴ IM i hays yišec'ēk',

¹⁶ This information is taken from the bibliographic *Hay girk'ə 1512–1800 t't'* [*The Armenian Book in 1512–1800*], compiled by Oskanyan, Ninel, Korkotyan, K'narik, Savalyan, Ant'aram, (Yerevan: 1988) (hereafter cited as *Hay girk'ə*): book no. 108 on page 81. I verified the text using a photograph kept in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Department of the National Library of Armenia. The page numbers 61 and 62 are handwritten at the bottom of the photograph. However, the compilers of *Hay girk'ə* indicate that the pages of the colophon are 30 and 31.

I bareac'd xndri barik'n,
 Mišt zbarin YINĒN mi xnayēk'...
 |62|... I sowrb Erowsaḷēm sa
 Ergec'aw PĒYAZ əncayeal...)

In the first quatrain of the colophon, the date is encoded through the words «ԷՀՊԱՊ» (“ĒHPAP”), «ՉԱԶ ԻՄ» (“ZAJ IM”), and «ՅԻՆԵՆ» (“YINĒN”)¹⁷. In this system, each letter corresponds to a numerical value in the Armenian alphabet. Therefore, «ԷՀՊԱՊ» is calculated as follows: Է=7, Հ=70, Պ=800, Ա=1, Պ=800, which totals 7+70+800+1+800=1678. This is the year of Christ, the year we use today; it is counted from the birth of Christ.

The ciphers «ՉԱԶ ԻՄ» and «ՅԻՆԵՆ» signify the same date: Չ=6, Ա=1, Չ=900, Ի=20, Մ=200 (6+1+900+20+200=1127), and «ՅԻՆԵՆ» as Յ=300, Ի=20, Ն=400, Է=7, Ն=400 (300+20+400+7+400=1127). This is indicative of the Armenian Era¹⁸, which equates to 1678 AD (1127+551=1678).

In the second part of the colophon, the Armenian year is expressed by the word «ՊԷՅԱԶ» (“PĒYAZ”), where Պ=800, Է=7, Յ=300, Ա=1, Չ=6. In accordance with the aforementioned principle, the following conclusion can be deduced: 800+7+300+1+6=1114. Adding the difference of the Armenian Era (551) gives the year 1665¹⁹.

The cryptograms «Էխապապ» and «պլխապ» are also make sense in Turkish, meaning "friend" and "white" respectively²⁰.

2. Թիվ 296, էջ 220 – **ԿԻՐԵՂ ԱՂԵՔՍԱՆԴՐԱՑԻ. ԳԻՐՔ ՊԱՐԱՊՄԱՆՑ:** – **ԱԹԱՆԱՍ ԱՂԵՔՍԱՆԴՐԱՑԻ. ԹՈՒՂԹ ԱՌԵՊԻԿՏԻՍՈՆ.** – **ԳՐԻԳՈՐ ՏԱԹԵԲԱՑԻ. ԼՈՒԾՍՈՒՆՔ Ի**

¹⁷ For the key to these ciphers, see Akinean, Nersēs, *Eremia Ć'ēlēpi K'ēōmiwrčean. Keank'n ew grakan gorcownēowt'iwnə. Matenagrakan owsowmnasirowt'iwn*, [Jeremiah Chelebi Keomurchian. *Life and Literary Activity: A Bibliographical Study*] (Vienna: Mxit'aryan Printing House, 1933), 183, from which the following is also taken: *Armenian Book*, no. 108, p. 81, footnote; also see Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Haykakan cackagrowt'yown*, 267.

¹⁸ The Armenian Era begins on July 11, 552 AD and ends on July 10, 553 AD. Therefore, when converting a date given in the Armenian Era to the modern calendar, it is necessary to add 551 (if the date falls after Navasard) or 552 (if it falls before Navasard). However, since Armenian dates are often recorded without specific day and month, it is customary to add 551: see Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Hayoc' gir ew grē'owt'yown*, 112.

¹⁹ This is the year in which Eremia Ć'elepi K'eomowrčyan was in Jerusalem and composed the poems; however, it is part of the colophon.

²⁰ I would like to thank Ani Ž. Avetisyan, a researcher at the Matenadaran, for translating these words.

ՊԱՐԱՊՄՈՒՆՍ ՍՐԲՈՅՆ ԿԻՐՐՂԻ: Կ. Պոլիս, տպագր. Ասվածատուր
Կոստանդնուպոլսեցի, տպ. Ասվածատուր Կոստանդնուպոլսեցու, 1717:

Էջ ԺԴ. ԹԻԲ – Որ ենթ տասին կոյսըն թըլիկ ասացեալ,
Եռ յիսնաբար ընդ հարիւրի շարակցեալ,
Եւ Պորփիւրի ձայնիկն առ հուպ յարեցեալ,
Յեռապատկէն ոչինչ արտաքս ընկեցեալ,
Յորմէ գըտցի թիւ մատենիս տըպեցման:

no. 296, p. 220 – **KIWREL ALEK'SANDRAC'I; GIRK' PARAPMANC'. AT'ANAS ALEK'SANDRAC'I; T'OWLT' AՐ EPIKTIMON. – GRIGOR TAT'EWAC'I; LOWCMOWNK' I PARAPMOWNS SRBOYN KIWRLI** [Cyril of Alexandria, *Book of Scholia*, Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter to Epictetus*, Grigor Tat'ewac'i, *Commentary on the Scholia of St. Cyril*]. Constantinople: Printed by Asvacatowr Kostandnowpolsec'i, Printing House of Asvacatowr Kostandnowpolsec'i, 1717.

p. 14 Year - A number below ten called virgin,
Three multiplied by fifty, added to hundred,
And Porphyry's term added closely,
Nothing omitted from [it], multiplied by three,
By which the date of printing this book will be found.

(ՃԺ. “T'IW - Or ent' tasin koysən t'əwik asac'eal,
Er yisnabar ənd hariwri šarakc'eal,
Ew Porp'iwri jaynikn ar howp yarec'eal,
Yeřapatkēn oč'inč' artak's ənkec'eal,
Yormē gətc'i t'iw matenis təpec'man.)

K'narik Korkotyan interpreted this colophon as follows: in the first line, the number «կոյս» (“virgin”) ²¹ represents 9, and by placing the number 10 (“ent' tasin”) next to it, we get 910. In the second line, the phrase «են յիսնաբար» (“Er yisnabar”) is interpreted as $3 \times 50 = 150$; when 100 is added (“ənd hariwri šarakc'eal”), the result is 250. In Armenian manuscript tradition, the «Պորփիւրի ձայնիկն» (“Porp'iwri jaynikn”)²² is considered to represent the number 5. The phrase «Յեռապատկէն ոչինչ արտաքս ընկեցեալ»

²¹ In medieval Armenian literature, the numerical value of the word «կոյս» (“virgin”) is usually considered to be 7 (see Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Haykakan cackagrowt' yown*, 195, and elsewhere).

²² For the numerical value of the «Պորփիւրի ձայնիկն» (“Porp'iwri jaynikn”), see Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Hayoc' gir ew grč'owt' yown*, 175, and elsewhere.

(“Yerapatkēn oĉ’inĉ’ artak’s ənkec’eal”) means that nothing should be added to the sum of the three numbers; accordingly, $910 + 250 + 5 = 1165$. By adding the difference of the Armenian Era (551), we obtain the printing year, $1165 + 551 = 1716$ ²³.

We propose an alternative, more probable interpretation of this colophon, since the term «կոյս» (“virgin”) has been conventionally accepted in Armenian tradition as the numerical value of 7, rather than 9. A similar colophon is found in manuscript M7758, fol. 214r, in the right margin of the text. This colophon provides the numerical values of the ciphered words. According to this, the line «Որ ենթ տասին կոյսըն թըլիկ ասացեալ» (“A number called virgin below ten”²⁴) should be understood as follows: below the number 10, only 7 is to be taken. The phrase in the second line, «էն յիսնաբար» (“Three multiplied by fifty”), signifies 3×50 , to which 100 is added, which equals 250. Consequently, the calculation is as follows: $7 \times 3 \times 50 + 100 = 1150$. In the lines «Եւ Պորփիրի ձայնիկն առ հույ յարեցեալ, / Յեռապատկէն ոչինչ արտաքս ընկեցեալ» (“And Porphyry’s term added closely, / Nothing omitted from [it], multiplied by three”), (Porphyry’s term) (5) is to be multiplied by 3 (5×3) — without omitting (lit. casting away) anything («յեռապատկէն ոչինչ արտաքս ընկեցեալ» (“Nothing omitted from [it], multiplied by three”). Thereafter, adding this to the previously obtained 1150 equals 1165 of the Armenian Era, i.e./= 1716 AD, the year in which the printing commenced.

3. Թիվ 316, էջ 237 – **ՏՕՆԱՅՈՅՑ**: Կ. Պոլիս, տպագր. և տպ.՝ Սարգիս Դպրի, 1720:

²³ This signifies the date of the beginning of printing. For a deciphering of the year, see Korkotyan, K’narik, *Hay tpagir girk’ə Kostandnowpolsowm* (1567–1850 t’t’) [The Armenian Printed Book in Constantinople (1567–1850)] (Yerevan: 1964), 52–53.

²⁴ The source of this is the following passage of David the Invincible: եւթն թիւդ կոյս յի... Եւ կոյս՝ վասն զի ամենայն թիւ ի ներքոյ տասնեկիդ կամ ծնանի զոր կամ ծնանի յումերէ. իսկ եւթն ոչ ծնանի զոր ի ներքոյ տասնեկիդ եւ ոչ ծնանի յումերէ, որզոն, երկուք ծնանի զչորս ի ձեռն բազմապատկութեան, եւ երեք՝ զինն – “The number seven is called virginal... It is called virginal because all the numbers which are less than the number ten either generate a number or are themselves generated by some number; but seven neither generates any number which is below the number ten, nor generated by any number. For example, through multiplication two generates four and three generates nine.” *Definitions and Division of Philosophy by David the Invincible Philosopher*, translated by B. Kendall and R.W. Thomson (University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies 5), Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983, pp. 112 (Armenian text) -113 (English translation).

Էջ 13 Չնախնի վեհից թիւն առձայնեալ,
Որք հաւատոյ սակս ջոկ կազմեալ,
Տասն արկ ի նա եռապատկեալ,
Եւ մի ընդ քառ յիսունն զուգեալ:
Յորմէ ըստէպ գըտցես խուզեալ
Ըգթըւականն Հայոց կոչեալ,
Չի չէ թաքուն բանիւ ծածկեալ,
Այլ յոյժ դիւրին է յօրինեալ:

no. 316, p. 237 – **TŌNAC'ŌYC'** [Calendar of Feasts].
Constantinople, printed by Sargis Dpir, Printing House of Sargis Dpir, 1720.

p. 13 Calling the first number from the sublime ones,
Which form a group for the sake of faith,
Add to it ten multiplied by three
And joining to it one with four and fifty.
By which, if searched, you will quickly find
The date called Armenian,
For it is not concealed by hidden words,
But is arranged very easily.

(Znaxni vehic' t'iwn ar jayneal,
Ork' hawatoy saks jok kazmeal,
Tasn ark i na erapatkeal,
Ew mi and k'ar yisownn zowgeal.
Yormē əstēp gətc'es xowzeal,
Əzt'əwakann Hayoc' koč'eal,
Zi č'ē t'ak'own baniw cackeal,
Ayl yoyž diwrin ē yōrineal.)

This ciphered colophon was deciphered by the compilers of *The Armenian Book*, as they themselves indicate, with the assistance of A. Abrahamyan²⁵, who considers «Չնախնի վեհից թիւն» (“the first number from the sublime ones”) to be the Minor Armenian Era (or the chronology of Hovhannes Sarkavag) which is 1084. The expression «Տասն արկ ի նա եռապատկեալ» (“Add to it ten multiplied by three”) signifies 10×3 , while «Եւ մի ընդ քառ յիսունն զուգեալ» (“And joining to it one with four and fifty”) corresponds to $1 + 4 + 50 = 55$. Consequently, the total is calculated as

²⁵ See *Hay girk'ə...*, 238:

$1084 + 10 \times 3 + 1 + 4 + 50 = 1169$ of the Armenian Era, which equates to 1720 AD ($1169 + 551 = 1720$), i. e. the year of printing.

4. Թիվ 326, էջ 246 – **ԳԻՐԲ ԱՂՕԹԻՑ**: Կ. Պոլիս, տպագր.՝ Սարգիս դպրի, տպ.՝ Մարտիրոս Սարգսյանի, 1721:

էջ ՄԾԶ. Ի մատենիս աւարտման
Քեզ՝ Միածին աստուածաբան,
Մատուցանեմք յանվախճան
Փառք և պատիւ յաւիտեան:
Թըւական Հայկազեան
Եօթնեակ տասնիկ ի լրման,
Նաև երկեակ յոթելեան,
Տո՛ւր ի հաշիւն հազարեան,
Այն է թըւական Արամեան:
Եւ թէ չկամիս որոնել,
Այլ պարգապէս տեսանել,
Կայ ի սկըզբան անարգել,
Բա՛ց և կարդա՛ ի գիտել:
Ի Սեպտեմբերի ԻԲ. (22): Վերջ:

no. 326, p. 246 – **GIRK' ALŌT'IC' [Prayer Book]**. Constantinople, printed by Sargis Dpir, Printing House of Martiros Sargsyan, 1721.

p. 256. In the end of this book
We offer forever
Endless glory and honour
To you, Only-begotten who speaks the Word of God,
The date of the Armenian Era is:
Altogether seven multiplied by ten,
Also two jubilees,
Add them to the number thousand:
This is date of the Armenian Era.
If you do not want to search,
But just to see,
It is freely placed in the beginning²⁶,
Open and read it in order to know.
On September 22. End.

²⁶ I.e. on the title-page of the book.

(I matenis awartman
K'ez Miacin astowacaban,
Matowc'anemk' yavvaxčan
P'ark' ew patiw yawitean.
T'əwakan Haykazean
Eōt'neak tasnik i ləman,
Naew erkeak yobelea,
To'wr i hašiw n hazarean,
Ayn ē t'wakan Aramean).

The expression «Եօթնեակ տասնիկ» (“seven multiplied by ten”) means 7×10 , «երկեակ յոբելեան» (“two jubilees”) corresponds to 2×50 , and «սուր ի հաշիւն հազարեան» (“Add them to the number thousand”) indicates that 1000 should be added to these values. Consequently, the date is calculated as $(7 \times 10) + (2 \times 50) + 1000 = 1170$ of the Armenian Era, which equates to 1721 AD ($1170 + 551 = 1721$) and is the year of printing.

5. Թիվ 331, էջ 250 – **ԳԻՐԳ ԵՒ ՃԱՌ ՀՈԳԵՇԱԿ**: Կ. Պոլիս, տպագր.՝ Մարտիրոս Կոստանդնուպոլսեցու, տպ.՝ Սարգիս Դարի, 1722:

էջ 488 ... Այն, որ ասի՝ Հայոց թուիկ
Երկեակ բարիւ գրոցի այսիկ,
Թէ գոյ լեալ ոք հազիկ հարիկ,
Ըն եօթնեակ տասն, ամս և երկիկ՝
Ի Փետրվարի ԻԳ. (23): Վերջ:

no. 326, p. 246 – **GIRK' EW ČAR HOGESĀH** [Spiritual/Edifying Book and Sermon]. Constantinople, printed by Martiros Kostandnowpolsec'i, Printing House of Sargis Dpir, 1722.

p. 488 That which is called the year of Armenian Era
Should be found through those two words:
If anyone is thousand and hundred,
With seven multiplied by ten years and two,
On February 23. End.

(... Ayn, or asiundefined Hayoc' t'əwik
Erkeak bariw gətc'i ayswik,
T'ē goy leal ok' hazik harik,
Ən eōt'neak tasn, ams ew erkik
I P'etrvari IG. (23). Verj).

In this colophon, «հազիկ հարիկ» (the words *hauqap* “thousand” and *harpik* “hundred”, with the addition of the suffix *իկ*), represents 1100, and «եօթնեակ տասն» (“seven multiplied by ten”) corresponds to $7 \times 10 = 70$. By adding 2 (“two”), one arrives at 1172 of the Armenian Era, which equates to 1723 AD ($1172 + 551 = 1723$). It is evident that there is a one-year discrepancy between 1723, as indicated in the colophon, and 1722, as stated on the title page, since the title page records the year in which the printing commenced, whereas the colophon refers to the year of its completion.

6. Թիվ 350, էջ 263 – **ՍԻՄԷՈՆ** **ՋՈՒՂԱՅԵՑԻ:**
ԶԵՐԱԿԱՆՈՒԹԻՒՆ: Կ. Պոլիս, տպ.՝ Մարտիրոս Սարգսյանի, 1725:

Էջ 12 ... Տըպիկ սորա ի մերս թըւի
Յեկտի նէնոս հարիւրորդի,
Տասնեակ, ամուլ, յերկ յոբելի
Եվ մի քառեակ վերաբերի:

no. 350, p. 263 – **SIMEON JOWLAYEC'I.**
K'ERAKANOWT'IWN [GRAMMAR]. Constantinople, Printing House of
Martiros Sargsyan, 1725.

*p. 488 ... The printing of this, according to our era,
Is two *nēnos* and one hundred,
Ten, barren, two jubilees
And a four is added.*

(*Təpil sora i mers t'əwi
Yekti nēnos hariwrordi,
Tasneak, amowl, yerik yobeli
Ev mi k'areak veraberi*).

The year is decoded through the following words in the colophon: «Յեկտի» (“*Yekti*”) is commonly accepted as representing 2²⁷, while «նէնոս» (“*nēnos*”) is typically assigned to 480²⁸. The phrase «յեկտի նէնոս հարիւրորդի» (“*Yekti nēnos hariwrordi*”) is thus deciphered as $2 \times 480 + 100 = 1060$. The word «ամուլ» (“*barren*”) is probably equivalent to 0, whereas «յերկ յոբել» (“*two jubilees*”) means 2×50 . The expression «տասնեակ ամուլ

²⁷ See Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Hayoc' gir ew grč'owt'yown*, 175.

²⁸ Ibid.

յերկ յոբելի»²⁹ (“Tasneak, amowl, yerck yobeli”) therefore equals to $10 + 0 + 2 \times 50 = 110$. The phrase «և մի քառեակ վերաբերի» (“Ev mi k’areak veraberi”) indicates that 4 should be added: $110 + 4 = 114$. Consequently, the total calculation is $(2 \times 480 + 100) + 10 + 0 + (2 \times 50) + 4 = 1174$ of the Armenian Era, i.e. 1725 AD ($1174 + 551 = 1725$).

7. Թիվ 368, էջ 279 – **ԵՐԵՄԻԱ ՄԵՂՐԵՑԻ: ԲԱՌԳԻՐՔ ՀԱՅՈՑ:** – **ՎԱՐԴԱՆ ԱՇԽԱՐՀԱԳԻՐ: ԱՇԽԱՐՀԱՅՈՑ:** Կ. Պոլիս, տպ.՝ Մարտիրոս Սարգսյանի, 1728³⁰:

Էջ 576 ... Ոլոմպիաթ թիւրն կալեալ,
Իւրով ինքեամբ լինի կըրկնեալ
Եւ յօնսեայի թիւրն զուգեալ,
Կըրկին զնոսա հոգնապատկեալ,
Թըրիթականով նա միացեալ,
Երրորդեկանն վերա բերեալ:

no. 368, p. 279 – **EREMIA MELREC’I. BAĞGIRK’ HAYOC’**
[*Armenian Lexicon*. **VARDAN AŞXARHAGIR. AŞXARHAC’OYC’**
[*Geography*]. Constantinople, printed by Martiros Sargsyan, 1728.

p. 576 ... The number Olympiad is taken
And multiplied by itself,
And adding the number *yōnseayi*,
Multiplying them once more,
It being joined to *t’ərit’ak*,
Adding three jubilees.

(Olompiat’ t’iwən kaleal,
Iwrov ink’eamb lini kərkneal
Ew yōnseayi t’iwən zowgeal,
Kərkin znosa hognapatkeal,
T’ərit’aknov na miac’eal,
Erryobealeann vera bereal).

²⁹ The term «յոբել» (“yobel”) is an abridged form of «յոբելեան» (jubilee) which means a 50-year period.

³⁰ The year 1728, indicated on the title page, marks the commencement of the printing, while according to the colophon the printing was completed in 1729.

The number «ոլմպիաթ» (“Olompiat”) is accepted as 4^{31} ; «Իւրով ինքեամբ լինի կրրկնեալ» (“Iwrov ink’eamb lini karkneal”) means multiplication by itself, i.e., 4×4 . «Յօնսեա» (“yōnseay”) is equivalent to 3^{32} . The interpretation of the third and fourth lines («Եւ յօնսեայի թիւն զուգեալ / Կրրկին զնոսա հոգնապատկեալ») (“Ew yōnseayi t’iwēn zowgeal, / Karkin znosa hognapatkeal”) is that 3 is to be multiplied by the same 4. In the following line, the term «թրիթակ» (“T’arit’ak”) ³³ corresponds to 1000. In the final line, «երրյոբեան» (“erryobelean”) ³⁴ signifies 3×50 . «Թրիթակնով նա միացեալ» (“T’arit’aknov na miac’eal”) means adding 1000, and «երրյոբեանն վերայ բերեալ» (“Erryobeleann vera bereal”) means adding $3 \times 50 = 150$. As a result, the cipher is deciphered as follows: $(4 \times 4) + (3 \times 4) + 1000 + 150 = 1178$ of the Armenian Era, which equated to 1729 AD ($1178 + 551 = 1729$).

8. Թիվ 398, էջ 310 – **ՏԱՂԱՐԱՆ ՓՈԲՐԻԿ**: Կ. Պոլիս, տպագր. և տպ.՝ Մարտիրոս Մարգարյանի, 1732:

Էջ 152 Չկենդանակերպն երկոտասան,
Եռ երեսնեա զամենեսեան,
Դի՛ր ընդ նոսին և հինգ քըսան,
Բարա՛ ըն-ա ճէ Զա. լըման:

no. 398, p. 310 – **TALARAN P’OK’RIK** [*Little Anthology*]. Constantinople, printed by Martiros Sargsyan, Printing House of Martiros Sargsyan, 1732³⁵.

p. 576 Twelve signs of the zodiac,

³¹ This term entered Armenian literature from the *Chronicle* by Eusebius of Caesarea. It is also found in medieval sources where it simply denotes the number four, Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Hayots Gir yev Grchutyun*, 127.

³² For the numerical value of the cipher «Յօնսեա / յօնսայ / հօնսայ», see Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Hayots Gir yev Grchutyun*, 172, 175.

³³ For the numerical value of the word ‘Tritak / Trtak,’ see Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Hayots Gir yev Grchutyun*, 172, 175.

³⁴ «Երրյոբեան = եռյոբեան» is composed of the roots «երր / եռ» (3) and «յոբեան» (50). For the term «յոբեան» see note [citation] no. 29.

³⁵ As we can see in the colophon, the year of publication is given as «Ռա Ճէ Զա» (“Ra Čē Ja”) (1180 of the Armenian Era, which equated to 1731 AD). In the title, the year 1732 has been retained according to the bibliographic *Hay Girke*, in order to avoid confusion (p. 310). We had no opportunity to verify this, since it is the only copy and is kept in the Mkhitarist Library in Vienna (VML) and does not have a title page. Most likely, an error occurred, since this colophon was also copied by the compilers of the bibliography (p. 311).

Three times thirty [makes] all,
Put with them five times twenty
And make totally one thousand one hundred eighty.

(Zkendanakerpn erkotasan,
Er eresnea zamenesean,
Dir ənd nosin ew hing k'əsan,
W ara' əRa ČĒ Ja. ləman).

So «զկենդանակերպն երկոտասան» (“Twelve signs of the zodiac”) simply denotes, the number 12. Presumably this number is multiplied by 3×30 («եռ երեսնեսա») (“Three times thirty”), and then 100 (“five times twenty” i.e., 5×20) is added, making $12 \times (3 \times 30) + (5 \times 20) = 1180$ of the Armenian Era, which is 1731 AD ($1180 + 551 = 1731$), the year of publication.

9. Թիվ 451, էջ 357 – **ՏԱՂԱՐԱՆ: – ԳԱՆՋԱՐԱՆ:** Կ. Պոլիս, տպ.՝ Աստվածատուր Կոստանդնուպոլսեցու, 1740:

Բ. Էջակարություն, Էջ 144

Թիւ. Չուրն յորելեան երկիցս կրրկնեալ,
Ընդ ՃԷ. գրրին Գիմ մի դասեալ,
Եւ ըԶ. (6) ի վանկն ընդ այնց հաշուեալ,
յԱյբէն ցըՔէն քանի տես լեալ (1189):

no. 398, p. 310 – **TALARAN** [Collection of Odes]: – **GANJARAN** [Hymnary]. Constantinople, printed by Astvacatowr Kostandnowpolsec'i, 1740:

B. Pagination, p. 144

Year. Multiplying eight jubilees by two,
Placing three alongside one hundred and seven,
And counting them with six syllables,
[Multiplied by the letters] from *Ayb* to *K'ē*, see what number this makes (1189).

(Zowt'n yobelea erkic's kərkneal,
Ənd ČĒ. gərin Gim mi daseal,
Ew əZ. (6) i vankn ənd aync' hašoweal,
yAybēn c'əK'ēn k'ani tes leal (1189)).

The first line of the colophon, «Զովթն յոբելեան»³⁶ երկիցս կրրկնեալ» (“Zowt’ n yobelean erkic’s kærkneal”), is deciphered as follows: $8 \times 50 \times 2 = 800$. The second line, «ԾԷ.» (“ČĒ.”), contains two types of ciphers simultaneously: the letter «Ծ» (“Č”) corresponds to its numerical value, 100, while «Է» (“Ē”) does not represent its usual numerical value of 7. Instead, it stands for «Հ» (“H”), which represents 70. This is a type of cryptographic substitution³⁷ in which, instead of the tens value, the corresponding unit from the same series is used. In other words, instead of «ԾՀ» (“ČH”), the colophon has «ԾԷ» (“ČĒ”). Thus, «Ընդ ԾԷ. գրրին Գիմ մի դասեալ» (“Ēnd ČĒ. gərin Gim mi daseal”) signifies $170 + 3 = 173$. «ՅԱյբեն ց’աԿ’են» (“yAybēn c’əK’ēn”), the number of letters in the Armenian alphabet, is 36, which, when multiplied by 6 (“Զ”), gives 216 ($6 \times 36 = 216$). Adding all these together, we obtain the year indicated by the printer: 1189; $(8 \times 50 \times 2) + 170 + 3 + (6 \times 36) = 800 + 173 + 216 = 1189$ of the Armenian Era, which corresponds to 1740 AD ($1189 + 551 = 1740$).

Conclusion

We examined a number of ciphered colophons found in old Armenian printed books. Some of these had been deciphered by experts in the study of old printed books. Where further clarification was required, we proposed alternative decipherments that seemed more plausible. Furthermore, we also tried to decipher colophons that were previously undeciphered.

This study suggests that in Armenian old printed books, which continued the traditions of manuscript culture, the use of cryptography was not chiefly aimed at preserving or concealing information. Rather, it was employed as a creative device—a scribal wordplay. It reflects the flexibility and ingenuity of the creator’s mind, as well as the limits of what is possible; in this way, the topic also becomes more enigmatic.

³⁶ See note [citation] 29.

³⁷ For information on the substitution cipher, see Abrahamyan, Ašot, *Hay gri ew grč’owt’yan patmowt’yown*, 203–206.

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Solar Symbols in the Iconography of the Last Supper: A Case Study of the Kyiv Psalter and Its Analogs

Nataliia Dmytrenko*

Abstract: The goal of this research is to characterize a group of artworks depicting “The Last Supper” that incorporate solar symbols, examined through book miniatures, monumental painting and decorative and applied arts within the context of Byzantine heritage. The chronological framework of the study spans from the sixth to the mid-fifteenth centuries, a period marked by significant theological and artistic developments of Byzantium. Although the iconography of the “Last Supper” has been widely studied, the presence and function of solar symbols have received limited scholarly attention. Previous research has primarily focused on liturgical and Eucharistic interpretations, leaving cosmological and symbolic elements insufficiently explored. This study addresses this gap by analyzing solar motifs as meaningful components of the iconographic programme rather than purely decorative details. The research examines the typology of solar symbols, their symbolic and theological meanings, and the narrative contexts and artistic traditions in which they appear. Particular attention is given to the role of cosmological imagery in Byzantine visual thought and to the adaptation of these motifs across different media and regional artistic environments. The study includes Christian works from both Orthodox and Catholic traditions, as well as selected examples influenced by Jewish visual culture, enabling a comparative analysis of intercultural exchanges shaping the medieval period.

Keywords: iconography; tradition; symbol; fine arts; monumental painting; decorative and applied arts; composition; Byzantium

Introduction

The article reveals a scientific novelty in the sense that, for the first time, several artworks of sacred art were processed and introduced into scientific circulation, by using the example of book miniatures and

* Ph.D, Associate Professor at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, Kyiv, Ukraine, ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1223-8935>, nata_heavy@ukr.net; n.dmytrenko@kubg.edu.ua

monumental paintings, and for the first time, solar symbols were identified and described by means of comparative analysis.

The relevance of the research topic lies in the study of artworks by masters of Kyivan Rus and Byzantine heritage, which allows us to trace not only historical but also cultural and artistic ties that were reflected in the imitation of Greek traditions by artists of Kyiv workshops: in the art of book miniature, monumental painting, and decorative and applied arts. Finding the mutual influences between the artworks will allow us to study their origins and to distinguish their artistic features depending on the places of creation. Thus, the works of Kyivan Rus and Byzantine origin, namely, the territories that were part of the Byzantine Empire or were influenced by it, will be considered: Cappadocia, Istanbul (Turkey), Ubisi, Imereti (Georgia), Phocis (Greece), and Caserta, Bominaco (Italy).

In the study of the iconography of “The Last Supper”, several works containing solar symbols can be seen, which allows us to trace analogues in iconography, as well as in monumental art and book miniature, as evidenced by works as the Kyiv Psalter, works on the example of codices created in the Byzantine Empire, the study of which has been further developed. Some analogues to the above-mentioned symbols were found even in the monumental painting of sacred complexes (Caserta, Bominaco), which belong to the Latin tradition, significantly expanding the understanding of the formation of Christian iconography on the example of the “Last Supper” and allowing us to update further research prospects.

Objectives and methodological framework

The research methodology is based on a set of principles of reliability and scientific comprehensiveness, which contributed to the consideration of internal cultural relations that were considered when analyzing the artworks. The axiological method allowed us to consider and take into account the cultural aspect of artworks of sacred use. The method of semiotics was used to study symbols that were discovered, described, and identified in the course of the study in artistic works. The hermeneutic method contributed to the interpretation of “The Last Supper” in the context of the analysis of individual monuments made in some regions and countries, taking into account the stylistic traditions and iconography of a certain period. The comparative method allowed for a comparison of the iconography of artworks following the Greek tradition.

Analysis of research and publications

The study of the iconography of “The Last Supper” in the context of the development of the art of Kyivan Rus and the Byzantine Empire was made possible by such sources and scientific works as individual studies of

monuments on the example of monastery complexes, churches, and temples, as well as monographs, scientific articles, and conference reports, which characterized individual works aimed at studying the art of the Byzantine heritage.

In general, such research was limited to art historical analysis, attribution, dating, museum description, and interpretation of “The Last Supper” according to the Gospels, which lacked a study of the development of the plot and its symbolism. One of the first fundamental centres of research in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the iconographic school of Nikodim Kondakov¹, an art historian and archaeologist whose research was supported by the works of his followers, such as the byzantologist André Grabar². One of the first major scientific studies devoted to the Last Supper in the context of Gospel iconography was also the monograph by Nikolai Pokrovsky, “The Gospel in the Monuments of Iconography, Mainly Byzantine and Russian” (1892)³. It is in this book that the researcher devoted a separate section of the story entitled: “Part Three. The Final Events of the Gospel Story in the Monuments of Iconography”. Such studies on this topic were presented in the work of Dmitrii Ainalov “Hellenistic foundations of Byzantine art” (1900)⁴. These studies mainly reflected scientific research in the field of early Christian art and iconography, using the example of catacomb painting and the early stages of Christianity. The comprehension of the Passions of Christ was presented in the modern works of Orest Makoida “Passions in the Early Christian Period” (2013)⁵, while the researcher Andrii Lesiv devoted attention to a thorough

¹Kondakov, N. *Istoriya vizantiiskogo iskusstva i ikonografii po miniatyuram grecheskikh rukopisei*. Odessa: Tip. Ulrikha i Shultse, 1876 (*History of Byzantine Art and Iconography Based on Miniatures from Greek Manuscripts*. Odessa: Ulrich and Schulze Printing House, 1876), pp. 56–59.

²Byzance. *L'art byzantin dans les collections publiques françaises*. Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1992, pp. 30–34.

³Pokrovskii, N. *Yevangelie v pamyatnikakh ikonografii preimushchestvenno vizantiiskikh i russkikh*. St. Petersburg: Tipografiya Departamenta Udelova, 1892. (*The Gospel in Iconographic Monuments, Predominantly Byzantine and Russian*, St. Petersburg: Printing House of the Udelov Department, 1892), pp. 267–295.

⁴Ainalov, D.V. *Ellinisticheskie osnovy vizantiiskogo iskusstva. Issledovaniya v oblasti istorii rannevizantiiskogo iskusstva*. In *Trudi Otdeleniya arkhologii drevneklassicheskoi, vizantiiskoi i zapadnoevropeiskoi*. t. 12, vyp. 3–4, kn. 5, 1901, (*Hellenistic foundations of Byzantine art. Research in the field of early Byzantine art history*. ZRAO, Vol. XII, Issues 3 and 4. Works of the Department of Ancient Classical, Byzantine, and Western European Archaeology, book 5), pp. 1–224.

⁵Makoyida, O. *Pasiini shuzhety u rannokhrystyianskyi period: henezys ta osoblyvosti traktuvannia*. Mystetstvoznavstvo 13. Instytut narodoznavstva NANU, 2013 (*Passions in the early Christian period: genesis and interpretative features*. Art Studies '13. Association of Art Critics and Historians. Institute of Ethnology, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 2013). P. 91–102.

study of the iconography and symbolism of Judas Iscariot in Ukrainian art of the XV-XVIIIth centuries in the monograph of the same name (2018)⁶.

It is advisable to compare the symbols used in the works of later examples of “The Last Supper” in easel painting, the materials presented in the scientific catalogue of the National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery” “Iconography of the Thirteenth - Early Twentieth Century” by Serhii Levchenko and Halyna Alavardova (2020)⁷. Among such studies of Christian art, it is worth highlighting the thorough work of André Grabar “Christian Iconography. A Study of Its Origins” (1968), where the author made a significant contribution to the study of “The Last Supper”, allocating a separate section to it in the monograph, where he focuses on the process of formation of this plot as illustrated by early Christian examples, starting with examples of monumental painting of the catacomb period and mosaic art⁸. Liudmila Miliayeva’s research on iconography and the interactions between the art of Byzantium and Kyivan Rus was presented in works such as “Ukrainian Icon of the X–XVIII centuries: from the Sources of Byzantium to the Baroque” (1996)⁹. The early Byzantine iconography was considered by Karin Krause in “Divine inspiration of Byzantium” (2022)¹⁰.

The depiction of solar symbols in “The Last Supper” of the Kyivan Psalter: identification and analogues

Summary of the main material

The Kyiv Psalter of 1397 is rightfully considered a model of exquisite art in the artistic design of book miniatures. Despite the complicated history of the monument, it holds particular value for Ukrainian art history, tracing Kyivan Rus and Byzantine historical and cultural ties, as it remains in the collection of the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg. The plot of “The Last Supper”, which can be traced in the illuminations of the Psalter, has repeatedly attracted the attention of historians, art historians,

⁶Lesiv, A. *Yuda Iskariot v ukrainskomu mystetstvi XV – XVIII st. Ikonohrafiia ta symbolika obrazu*. Lviv: Avanpost-prym, 2018 (*Judas Iscariot in Ukrainian Art of the 15th–18th Centuries: Iconography and Symbolism of the Image*, Lviv: Avangard-prym, 2018), pp. 14–20.

⁷Levchenko, S., Alavardova, H. *Ikony XIII – pochatku XX stolittia ta davnoruske dekoratyvno-prykładne mystetstvo*. Kyiv: Antykvary. Natsionalnyi muzei “Kyivska kartynna halareia” Ukrainykyi kulturnyi fond, 2020 (*Iconography of the 13th – early 20th centuries and Old Russian decorative and applied art*. Kyiv: Antykvary. National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery” Ukrainian Cultural Foundation), pp. 56–60.

⁸Grabar, A. *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, pp. 22–23.

⁹Miliayeva, L. *The Ukrainian Icon. 11th – 18th Centuries. From Byzantine Sources to the Baroque*. Parkstone Aurora, 1996. P.15–16.

¹⁰Krause, K. *The Early Christian Iconography of Divine Inspiration*. In *Divine Inspiration in Byzantium*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 319.

and young scholars. We propose to examine the miniature with “The Last Supper” from the Kyiv Psalter in more detail (**Fig. 1**).

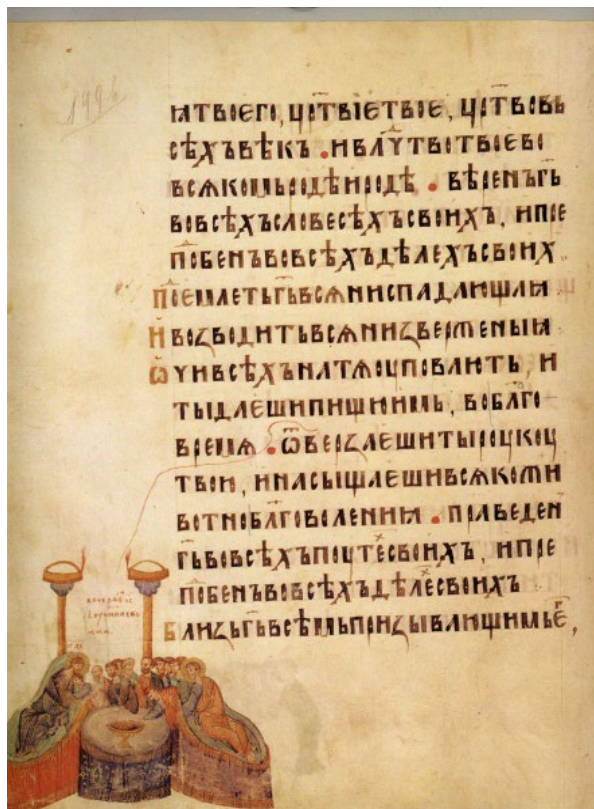


Fig. 1. The Last Supper. The Kyiv Psalter. 1397. Parchment. Miniature. Source: Russian National Library. St. Petersburg, Russia.

The iconography of the illumination, located in the lower left part of the parchment, uses the image of a triclinium, which depicts the figures of Christ and Peter, half-lying-in complex angles and highlighted by golden halos, among others. The favourite disciple of Christ, John, is placed closest to Jesus, near his chest, depicted as a young man. The rest of the apostles are arranged in a certain rhythmic pattern: one, three, one, four, which gives the image additional dynamics. Their faces are turned in different directions, which conveys the impression of an active discussion during the sacrament. The figure of Judas the traitor is highlighted by his crimson clothes and the gesture of his hand reaching for the cup, that is placed closer to the front edge of the table.

A round table is placed in the centre. It is covered with light gray, blue fabrics with embroidery and gold elements that hang down to the floor in bunches. The artist who created the miniature turned to the use of a rich range of colours, which is characterized by the use of light green, blue, crimson, orange, cold pink,

ocher, and brown tones. The detailed elaboration of the faces and hair of Christ's disciples is classic for the zenith of Byzantine iconography. Behind the triclinium are two elongated lamps that resemble columns with rounded elements arranged at the top, each of which has a red detail extending from it. It is important to emphasize that the miniature does not have a sacrificial aspect, as it illustrates the verse 16 of Psalm 144, which emphasizes the following: "You open your hand and fill all living things with your goodness"¹¹.

It is worth emphasizing that in 2015, the art historian Bohdan Skrypka successfully refuted the version of the presence of conventional columns in the background of the miniature. In his thesis, the researcher confidently identified them as Roman oil lamps, where he quite appropriately cites similar analogues from the illuminations of Byzantine codices¹².

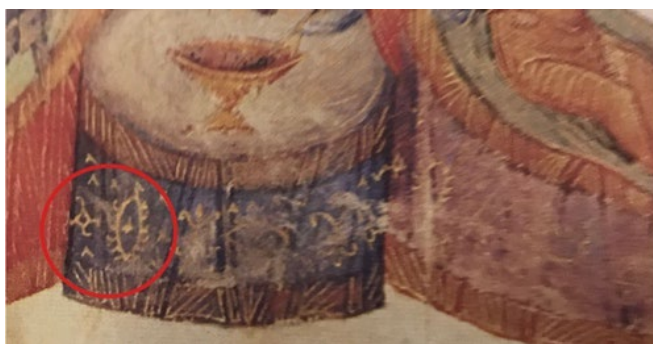


Fig. 2. The Last Supper. The Kyiv Psalter. 1397. Parchment. Miniature. Fragment. Source: Russian National Library. St. Petersburg, Russia.

Let's take a closer look at some of the symbols depicted on the fabrics that cover the triclinium and table. Among them, it is worth highlighting an oval-shaped element with a dot in the centre and short lines around the perimeter. It can be traced twice on the dark blue background of the tablecloth. Separately, we should highlight elements of a smaller form than the previous one, in the form of a small rhombus with four short stylized legs bent at the end (**Fig. 2**).

An interesting observation is that of a similar early Christian symbol in the form of a stylized oval-shaped form, which the researcher Bohdan Skrypka identified as a representation of a fish. A symbol which was identified as an image of a fish placed on a tablecloth covering a table, can be seen on the *korzno* cloaks of Saints Borys and Hlib on an icon from the

¹¹Vzdornov, G. *Issledovanie o Kievskoi Psaltiri*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1978. (Research on the Kyiv Psalter. Moscow: Art), p. 50.

¹²Skrypka, B. *Doslidzhennia miniaturi 'Taiemna vecheria' z Kyivskoho Psaltyria Treti Platonivski chytannia: mater. Mizhnar. nauk. konf., Kyiv, 24 lyst. 2015 r., (Kyiv: Feniks, 2016), (Study of the miniature 'The Last Supper' from the Kyiv Psalter. Third Platon Readings: materials from the International Scientific Conference, Kyiv, November 24, 2015. National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture. Kyiv: Phoenix, 2016), pp. 29–30.*

collection of the National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery”, dated, according to the information in the catalogue of the above-mentioned museum, to the middle of the thirteenth century (**Fig. 3**)¹³.



Fig. 3. Saints Borys and Hlib. Novgorod (?). Mid-13th century. Icon on wood, tempera. Source: National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery”. Kyiv, Ukraine.

Without sharing the opinion of the scholar who suggested that this is an early Christian image of a fish, let us research the sources associated with the mentioned icon in more detail. One of the researchers of the aforementioned icon from the Kyiv museum’s collection was Nikolai Chernohubov, whose scientific research was published posthumously based on archival materials and research preserved by his wife. As the chief curator of the Tretyakov Gallery and an art historian who worked in Kyiv in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the researcher made a significant contribution to the study and interpretation of early Christian iconography and several monuments.

¹³Levchenko, S., Alavardova, H. *Ikonopys XIII – pochatku XX stolittia ta davnoruske dekoratyvno-prykladne mystetstvo*. Kyiv: Antykar. Natsionalnyi muzei “Kyivska kartynna halereia” Ukrainnyi kulturnyi fond, 2020 (Iconography of the 13th – early 20th centuries and Old Russian decorative and applied art. Kyiv: Antykar. National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery” Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, pp. 30 – 35.



Fig. 4. Saints Borys and Hlib. Novgorod (?). Mid-13th century. Icon on wood, tempera. National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery”. Kyiv, Ukraine. Fragment.
Source: Photo by Author, September 2020

Such scientific publications in the context of the study of the iconography of “The Last Supper” are the materials presented by the author in the article “The Icon of Boris and Gleb. The end of the XIII –beginning of the XIV centuries. Kyiv State Museum of Russian Art” (1963), published posthumously, which, within the framework of this study, made it possible to draw analogies in details that can be traced in the symbols used in a particular plot due to the method of semiotics¹⁴. The scientific research reflected in the researcher’s article was published in the collection “Ancient Russian Art of the XV – Early XVI Centuries”. However, in the article, this icon was dated to the end of the XIII – beginning of the XIV century, although the researcher

¹⁴Chernogubov, N. N. *Ikona Boris iGleb v Kievskommuzeerusskogoiskusstva. Drevnerusskoeiskusstvo 15 – nachala 16 vekov. Izdatelstvoakademiinauk SSSR. (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.*

attributed it to pre-Mongol times, as evidenced by archival materials stored in the funds of the National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery”¹⁵.

Chernohubov left a very detailed description of all the technical characteristics of the icon, the base and the pigments, which were further studied by the chemist Varvara Lokhanko in 1939. Nevertheless, Chernohubov did not define the symbols on the *korzno* cloaks which are of particular interest of the study, although he considered a close, similar symbol, calling it “a rhombus set on a corner with lines crossing its side and a dot in its center” (Fig. 4)¹⁶.



Fig. 5. Virgin with a Child and saints Theodore and George. 6th century. Icon on wood, encaustic. Source: Saint Catherine’s Monastery. Mount Sinai, Egypt.

The researcher was able to find analogues of this symbol in other works of art, namely in the mosaics of the 11th century in the Daphni monastery, on a trim of King Solomon’s garment, and in the icon dated to the 13th century depicting Archangel Michael from the Assumption Cathedral in Moscow. Next to these symbols, stylized images of plants in the form of branches with leaves can also be traced.

¹⁵Chernogubov, N. N. *Ikona ‘Boris i Gleb’ v Kievskom muzee russkogo iskusstva*, pp. 287–288.

¹⁶*Ibidem*, p. 289.

In the course of a thorough study of the iconography of “The Last Supper”, it was possible to find analogues of such symbols on the example of several monuments, as follows: in the 12th century frescoes of the Karanlik Church (Cappadocia, Turkey), in monumental paintings of the mid-14th–second half of the 15th centuries in the central apse of the altar in the monastery of Ubisi (Georgia), in miniatures of a 12th century Byzantine manuscript from the collection of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, and illuminations of the 14th century Kyiv Psalter. Later, it was possible to find analogues even in the works of the sixth century, namely on a Sinai encaustic icon of the pre-iconoclastic period depicting the Virgin with Child on the throne between saints Theodore and George. The use of solar symbols can be traced on the saints’ *chlamys*, which are pinned with a fibula on the right shoulder of each saint (Fig. 5).



Fig. 6. The Last Supper. Codex GA 777. Byzantium. 12th century.

Source: Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts.

Thus, the iconography used in the miniatures of the 12th century Byzantine manuscript from the collection of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (Fig. 6; Fig. 7) continued to be used in parallel in Greek examples of the 12th century, as evidenced by a fragment of a

templon's epistylum depicting “The Last Supper” from the Vatopedi monastery on the Mount Athos in Greece¹⁷.



Fig. 7. The Last Supper. Codex GA 777. Byzantium. 12th century.
Fragment. Source: Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts.

Frescoes dating from the 12th century from the Karanlik (“Dark”) Church of Göreme in Cappadocia preserve the image of The Last Supper under the church vault (**Fig. 8**).

It is worth noting that in the background, between two buildings with red roofs, there is an oil lamp, indicating that the sacrament takes place in the evening. Next to the oil lamp there are buildings depicted in reverse perspective.

The figures of Christ and Peter are depicted against a background of stylized Roman beds covered with ornaments. The figures are presented in full length, unlike the other disciples. All of them have halos (Judas, who stretched out his hand to the cup) with red and white backgrounds. Christ has a halo with a cross. The images of the apostles are individualized, the angles

¹⁷Metzger, B. M. *A Lexicon of Christian Iconography*. Church History 45, no. 1. 2003, pp. 5–10.

of each of the disciples, and the tilts of their heads emphasize the lively conversation.



Fig. 8. The Last Supper. The church of Karanlik “Dark”. 12th century. Fresco. Cappadocia, Turkey. Source: Wikipedia

On the rectangular table, there are two elongated bowls, cutlery in the form of knives, and a fish, the symbol of Christ. It is worth noting that the fabric covering the table contains similar symbols in the form of small, rounded elements with four short lines, as in the previously analysed works.

The next site to be studied was the monastery complex in Ubisi, which is located in Imereti. It is a small village in Georgia, where a medieval monastery complex has been preserved, located not far from the city of Kharagauli. The sacred complex in Ubisi consists of the monastery of St. George, built in the 9th century, founded by St. Gregory Khandzta; a four-story tower dating back to 1141; the remains of a defensive wall of the 12th century, as well as some complementary buildings.

The interiors of the monastery featured an exceptional cycle of frescoes of the late 14th century, designed and created by master Damiane and his artisans under the influence of the art of the Palaiologan Renaissance (1261–1453), which illuminated the period of cultural growth in the Byzantine Empire during the reign of the Palaiologan dynasty. St. George’s Cathedral is characterized by a restrained and ascetic style, but the frescoes of the cathedral are artistically refined and exquisite, made in the Paleologian

tradition¹⁸. It is generally accepted that the interior decoration of this ensemble is one of the best monumental paintings in Georgia. The scenes of the Annunciation, The Last Supper, and the Eucharist are particularly noteworthy, but the entire complex, with its majestic monumental paintings, has preserved the name of the author of the frescoes and his artistic style.

The frescoes of the central apse of the church of St. George in Ubisi are quite atypical in terms of the analysis of the location of the scenes and the formation of the temple space, namely the delimitation of parts of the church with the locations of specific scenes and their iconography (**Fig. 9; Fig. 10**).



Fig. 9. Master Damiane. The Last Supper and the Eucharist. Mid-14th – second half of the 15th century. Frescoes of the central apse of the altar. The monastery of St. George's Church. Ubisi, Imereti, Georgia. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

For the first time, it can be seen that the surface of the central apse conveys such plots as The Last Supper, The Eucharist, and the Savior Almighty (Christ on the Throne). It is also worth considering how the artist Damiane executed these scenes¹⁹. The composition of the Savior Almighty is placed in the upper register.

In particular, it is worth noting that for the first time it is possible to trace how the space of the middle part of the central apse of the church was composited, because under the image of the Saviour there is The Last Supper, which is flanked on both sides by the Eucharist, conventionally divided into two independent parts.

¹⁸Amiranashvili, Sh. *GruzinskiikhudozhnikDamiane*. Tbilisi: Khelovneba, 1974 (*Georgian painter Damiane*. Tbilisi: Helovneba, 1974), pp. 23–24.

¹⁹*Idem, FreskiUbisi*: Albom. Tbilisi: Khelovneba, 1987 (*Frescoes of Ubisi*: [Album]. Tbilisi: Helovneba, 1987), pp. 4–7.



Fig. 10. Master Damiane. The Last Supper. Christ and John. The Monastery of St. George. Mid-14th – second half of the 15th century. Ubisi, Imereti, Georgia. The central apse of the altar. Fragment. Reproduction of the work. Source: Fotoload.

The Last Supper is depicted in the centre of a wall with an elongated window opening. In the centre of the composition is Jesus, with his favourite disciple John leaning against his chest, while Judas reaches out to a dish containing a fish, a symbol of Christ. All the apostles are depicted without halos. There is a large amount of tableware, herbs, and loaves of rounded bread with a cross on the top on the table. Along the far side of the table is a narrow, twisted, elongated white tablecloth with dark red stripes, between which one can see symbols that have already been previously discussed on the example of earlier works: in the miniatures of the Kyiv Psalter, frescoes of the Karanlik Church in Cappadocia, in the miniatures of the Byzantine Codex from the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts, an icon depicting Saints Borys and Hlib from the collection of the National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery” in Kyiv – solar symbols and symbols of the so-called sown field that were actively used by Greek enamellers and in the decorative and applied arts of the Byzantine Empire during the 11–13th centuries.

The shape of the table attracts special attention, as it is quite atypical for the Byzantine tradition. The table is long and elongated, low, and rounded on both sides, with a curtain in the foreground, which is attached to the top by rings. The colour scheme is dominated by brown, dark red, and pale green tones.

For an additional study of such symbols in works of decorative art, let us consider the iconography of a paten depicting the Eucharist from the Dumbarton Oaks collection in Washington, DC. Dating from 565–578, it was made of silver in Constantinople, using the techniques of embossing, engraving, blackening, and gilding, and preserved the image of the sacrament. In the centre of the composition, at the table where the liturgy is held, the figure of Christ is placed twice, offering the disciples bread and wine for communion (**Fig. 11**).



Fig. 11. The Eucharist. Paten. 565–578. Byzantium, Constantinople. Silver, gilding, embossing, blackening, engraving. 35 x 35 x 3.2 cm. BZ.1924.5. Source: The Dumbarton Oaks Collection. Washington, DC, USA.

The figure of Jesus is facing a group of six apostles on each side, who bow humbly. Let us pay attention to the background of the paten: behind the figures of Christ, who are placed in the centre of the work, there is a stylized arch, in the centre of which there is an artistic element resembling a shell. On both sides of the figures of Christ there are tall columns that support the architrave, which has rounded oil lamps in the upper part. Their presence

is explained by the fact that the Eucharist is celebrated in the evening. The study shows that the image of the Eucharist is characterized by simultaneity, which emphasizes the liturgical aspect, and the Last Supper, which has a sacrificial meaning and a prophetic basis, since one of the disciples was to betray Christ²⁰.



Fig. 12. The Last Supper. 11th century. Campano-Byzantine school. Fresco. Abbey of St. Michael the Archangel. Caserta, Italy. Source: Time.Graphics.

Speaking of the iconography of the Eucharist depicted in the paten, we should recall “The Last Supper” from the illuminations of the Kyiv Psalter, which depicts Roman oil lamps. It is worth noting that in this plot in the miniature of the Kyiv Psalter, an earlier version of the iconography and images of Roman lamps was used, which was convincingly proved by Bohdan Skrypka²¹, who refuted the statement of art historian Gerold Vzdornov.

²⁰Badzvi, A. *Initiation to Christian Iconography*. In *The Harp* Vol. 17. 2011, pp. 63–100.

²¹Skrypka, B. *Doslidzhenniaminiatiury ‘Taiemnavecheria’ z*

KyivskohoPsaltyriaTretiPlatonivskichytannia: mater. Mizhnar. nauk. konf., Kyiv, 24 lyst. 2015 r., (Kyiv: Feniks, 2016), (*Study of the miniature ‘The Last Supper’ from the Kyiv Psalter*.

Third Platon Readings: materials from the International Scientific Conference, Kyiv, November 24, 2015. National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture. Kyiv: Phoenix, 2016), pp. 29–30.

These symbols, which were examined in the illuminations of the Kyivan Psalter and the analogues found on the example of works of book miniature, monumental painting, and decorative and applied art, confirm that the iconography of the Last Supper used the image of solar symbols, namely, the signs of the sun, earth, and the so-called sun of the underworld in the form of an elongated oval with a dot in the centre and short lines around the perimeter.

It is important to note that a similar use of solar symbols can be traced in the monumental decoration of monastery complexes in Italy of the 12th and 13th centuries, which are characterized by the Latin tradition. Thus, on the example of the Abbey of St. Michael the Archangel in Caserta, one can trace the use of close iconography, which was used by Italo-Byzantine masters of the so-called Campanian-Byzantine school (**Fig. 12**).



Fig. 13. Archangel Michael weighing souls during the Last Judgment. 13th century. Fresco. Oratory of San Pellegrino. Bominaco, Italy. Source: Alto Basso Medioevo.

In the depiction of the Last Supper scene, one can trace the solar symbols that cover the cloth that drapes the lower part of the table, around

which Christ and his disciples gathered, as well as the draperies that descend from the triclinium depicting Jesus and one of his disciples.

Solar symbols, previously discussed in the depiction of such subjects as the Last Supper and the Eucharist, were also used in the iconography of the Last Judgment. Such an exceptional example is the 13th century fresco of the Archangel Michael weighing souls during the Last Judgment from the Oratory of San Pellegrino in the province of Bominaco, Italy (**Fig. 13**).



Fig. 14. Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Byzantium. 11th century. The frescoes of the katholikon. Hosios Loukas monastery. Phocis, Greece.

Source: Raphael Bories.

The planar image with the unwavering face of the archangel Michael, whose long locks of hair surround his face, attracts attention with its exquisite interpretation. There is a halo around his head. The saint is dressed in a *loros* (an element of imperial ceremonial clothing), covered with small ornamental patterns and embroidery. In his left hand, he holds a sphere with the image of a cross and an anchor; in his right hand, a scale in which the souls of the righteous and the sinner are weighed. The scales are depicted in the foreground in front of the altar, which is covered with a light fabric in warm yellow colours with red accents. A closer look at the fabric reveals solar symbols in the form of circles with four lines covering the surface of the fabric between the yellow ornamental elements.

The frescoes from the Oratory of San Pellegrino are an unusual example of the use of solar symbols and iconography. In the Christian tradition, the archangel Michael is not supposed to weigh souls. In the Byzantine tradition, the Archangel Michael is rather a protector and warrior against the forces of evil, the patron saint of cities, but not a judge. In the iconography of the Byzantine tradition, it is rare to see an archangel with a scale. In Orthodoxy, he is considered the patron saint of warriors and the protector of believers, as well as the guide of the souls of the dead. The weighing of souls is more often attributed to St. Michael the Archangel in Western European art and the Latin tradition, in medieval depictions of the Last Judgment. There he holds the scales on which souls are weighed to determine their fate-salvation or condemnation²².



Fig. 15. Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Byzantium. 11th century. The frescoes of the katholikon. Hosios Loukas monastery. Phocis, Greece. Fragment depicting Jewish pilgrims. Source: Raphael Bories.

Extremely unique in the context of solar symbols research was the depiction of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem in the frescoes of the *katholikon* of the Hosios Loukas monastery in Phocis, Greece (**Fig. 14**).

²²Draghici-Vasilescu, E. E. *Development of Eastern Christian Iconography*. International Journal of Cultural Studies 27, no. 3. 2010, pp. 169–185.

According to the iconography of the plot, Jesus is depicted in the centre of the composition, entering the Holy city on a donkey²³. In the background, one can see the figure of a man who has climbed to the top of a tree to see this exciting moment. At the entrance to the city, in the right part of the composition, you can see a depiction of three full-length male figures, behind which you can see another male face. According to the Bible, when Christ entered Jerusalem, namely on Palm Sunday, Jesus was greeted by a crowd, including the residents of the city who spread their clothes on the road and laid branches of a palm tree (John 12:12-19), as well as his disciples and pilgrims who came to the city to celebrate Passover.

In this version of the iconography, we can identify the three male figures mentioned earlier as Jewish pilgrims. This is indicated by the prayer shawl in the form of a *tallit* placed on their shoulders (**Fig. 15**).

The tallit is a rectangular fabric, often with dark stripes at the bottom (in the Ashkenazi Orthodox tradition), sometimes with tassels, which in Judaism men wear to cover their heads and shoulders during morning prayer. It is known that during the Second Temple (biblical era), Jewish pilgrims during Passover also wore a tallit, light clothing like a tunic (*ketonet*), and an upper robe (*simla*), before entering the temple. This emphasized the importance of the holiday, the liberation from Egyptian slavery.

Particular attention is drawn to the additional symbols on the tallits, namely geometric elements in the form of a circle from which eight short lines resembling the sun extend. The presence of these symbols is not accidental.

After all, the previously discussed symbols belong to the solar symbols, symbols of sacred geometry, and, in this case, the Kabbalistic symbols and alchemy²⁴. Judaism, as a monotheistic religion, was finally established as such after the fall of the First Temple and the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century. Kabbalistic study is considered to be a mystical reading of the Torah and has become a mystical tradition in Judaism that reflects symbols, numbers, and spirituality. According to the Kabbalistic interpretation of the Torah, each image has its own spiritual and cosmic meaning²⁵.

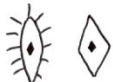
In this case, the symbol used on the tallits is the symbol of the sun of the underworld or the night sun, which reflects wisdom, hidden knowledge, and spiritual light, illumination, which in the alchemical context means a spiritual path that aims to get closer to the Creator and comprehend the higher light. Even in Egyptian mythology, Ra, the sun god, travels through

²³Badzvi, A. *Initiation to Christian Iconography*. In *The Harp* Vol. 17. 2011, pp. 63–66.

²⁴Fishman, T. *A Kabbalistic Perspective on Gender-Specific Commandments: on the Interplay of Symbols and Society*. *AJS Review* 17, no. 2., pp. 199–246.

²⁵Wolfson, E. *The Body in the Text: A Kabbalistic Theory of Embodiment*. *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95, no. 3. 2005, pp. 479–500.

the underworld at night, defeating the forces of chaos. The night sun reflects the symbol of eternal life, the victory of light over death – a hint of resurrection and immortality as a path to light through darkness.

No.	Image	Description	Meaning
1		A circle with a dot in the centre.	Gold, Sun, Resurrection, Celestial body
2		A small rhombus from which there are four short lines, bent at the end and imitating movement.	The Sun
3		An elongated oval with a dot inside, sometimes with short lines added around the perimeter.	Earth, field
4		A vertical line resembling a trunk with five leaves on it.	Tree of life, plants
5		A small circle with a dot in the centre, around which eight dots are placed in a circle, closed in a larger circle; a circle from which there are eight lines, resembling the sun.	Sun of the Underworld, the Night Sun

Tab. 1. Typology of solar symbols used in the artworks with description and meaning.
Source: Table developed by Author, March 2026.

Thus, this symbol, as a sign of a celestial body, can be read as the Sun, the Sun of the Underworld, the Resurrection, the Great Work, and gold (in alchemy). It can be depicted as a circle with a clear dot in the centre – gold, as a circle from which four lines extend – the Ascension, or eight lines – the Sun (**Tab. 1**).

Conclusions

The scientific novelty of this study lies in the introduction into scholarly discourse of a group of monuments containing solar symbols that have not previously been identified, interpreted, or systematically analysed within art historical research. Through the examination of the iconography of

The Last Supper, the study demonstrates that solar motifs function not as decorative elements but as meaningful symbolic components embedded within the theological and visual language of Byzantine artistic tradition.

The analysis of the illuminations of the Kyivan Psalter has revealed the presence of several types of solar symbols, including representations of the Sun, the sown field, and the so-called sun of the underworld, whose visual and semantic parallels can be traced across a wide range of artistic media. Analogues were identified in book miniatures, monumental painting, icons, and works of decorative and applied art produced within the Byzantine Empire and in regions shaped by its cultural influence, including Kyiv (Ukraine), Cappadocia and Constantinople (Turkey), Ubisi in Imereti (Georgia), Phocis (Greece), and Sinai (Egypt).

At the same time, comparable motifs discovered in Latin monuments in Caserta and Bominaco (Italy), particularly within scenes of the Last Supper and the Last Judgment, demonstrate the broader intercultural circulation of symbolic forms between Byzantine and Western artistic environments. These findings expand the understanding of the development of Christian iconography and open new perspectives for further research into cosmological symbolism, intercultural artistic exchange, and the semantic complexity of medieval sacred imagery.

List and sources of illustrations:

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Fig. 3. Saints Borys and Hlib. Novgorod (?). Mid-13th century. Icon on wood, tempera. Source: National Museum “Kyiv Art Gallery”. Kyiv, Ukraine.

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Iconography of Saint Catherine in the Collection of the Monastery of the Same Name in Sinai

Olha Shkolna*

Olha Sosik**

Abstract: The article examines the iconography of Saint Catherine of Alexandria as represented in the collection of the Monastery of Saint Catherine on the Sinai Peninsula. The study focuses on the principal iconographic types of the Saint preserved in the monastery, their visual attributes, compositional structures, and symbolic meanings. Particular attention is paid to the differentiation between Byzantine and Latin traditions, including the Alexandrian and Great Martyr iconographic types, as well as to narrative compositions with hagiographic cycles. The article analyses the evolution of Catherine's iconography from the Early Middle Ages to the modern period, considering stylistic transformations, the introduction of specific attributes of martyrdom, and the role of symbolic objects within the sacred space of the icon. Special emphasis is placed on the interaction between painting and textile media, including embroidered and tapestry icons executed in silk with gold and silver threads, which constitute a distinctive and understudied part of the Sinai collection. By contextualizing the images within theological, historical, and artistic frameworks, the study demonstrates the uniqueness of the Sinai corpus and its significance for the development of Christian iconography.

Keywords: Byzantine canon, composition, plot, iconography, stylistics, painting, fine arts, decorative arts, artistic features, silk embroidery.

The relevance of the problem.

At present, the issue of identifying and systematizing the principal iconographic types within the iconography of the image of Saint Catherine from the Monastery of Saint Catherine in Egypt remains insufficiently defined. A particular focus of the present study is the analysis of the artistic characteristics of those icons that are currently preserved at Sinai, which

* DSc in Art Studies, Professor, Head of Department of Fine Arts, Institute of Arts, Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University, Kyiv, Ukraine. E-mail: dushaorchidei@ukr.net ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7245-6010>

** PhD in Art Studies, Head of Postgraduate Studies, Mykhailo Boychuk Kyiv State Academy of Decorative and Applied Arts and Design Kyiv, Ukraine. E-mail: olhasosik@gmail.com ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2450-1235>

constitute a unique and highly valuable corpus of early Christian and Byzantine visual culture.

Analysis of research and publications.

Among the first scholars to undertake a systematic study of the Monastery of Saint Catherine in Egypt were K. Weitzmann and G. Gale, who in the mid to late 1970s initiated scholarly examination of the earliest artistic heritage of this monastic complex, dating from the 6th to the 10th centuries. In the concise monograph *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. Icons* (vol. 1), published in Princeton, USA, in 1976, the authors addressed the cataloguing of the monastery's art collection. The publication includes up to 160 color and black-and-white illustrations, accompanied by descriptions of saints' vitae, interpretations of iconic representations of Saint Catherine the Great Martyr, and depictions of episodes from her life.¹

Two years later, the first of the aforementioned authors published in New York a chronologically broader catalogue entitled *Holy Images of the Sixth to the Fourteenth Centuries*, which presents an overview of Orthodox iconographic types of Saint Catherine that had become canonical by the Byzantine period, juxtaposed with their Catholic counterparts². Particular attention in the illustrative corpus of the publication is devoted to Vita icons – narrative panels with marginal scenes depicting the life of Catherine of Alexandria in symbolic compositions – as well as to visualizations of her trials, in which the saint's unwavering spirit and steadfast adherence to the tenets of faith are emphatically articulated.

Two years later, in 1980, G. Gale, J. Forsyth, and K. Weitzmann published in Givataim, Israel, the volume *Sinai and the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, in which, across 191 pages, they presented a thorough art-historical survey of the monastery's collection based on detailed visual documentation. The scholars analyzed Christological images and representations of saints, as well as the narrative content of individual icons, including those with hagiographic cycles. At the same time, an attempt was made to systematize the images of the Great Martyr Saint Catherine preserved in the Museum of the Monastery of Saint Catherine according to typological criteria.³

Subsequently, a decade later, further developing and expanding the scholarly achievements of her predecessors, Konstantinos Manafis published

¹ Kurt Weitzmann and John Gale, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The icons. Vol. 1: From the sixth to the tenth century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, XVII, 1976. 107 pp.; 38 colour plates; 122 b&w photos [in English].

² Kurt Weitzmann, *The Icon: Holy Images – Sixth to Fourteenth Century*. New York: George Braziller, 1978. 134 p.: ill. (some color) [in English].

³ John Gale, *Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980. 191 p. ill., map. [in English].

in Athens in 1990 the significant monograph *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*. In this volume of 440 pages, the author succeeded in compiling a detailed catalogue of the collection of the monastery museum. The publication includes substantial visual material accompanied by textual commentaries on icons and their narrative subjects associated with the cults of individual saints, foremost among them Saint Catherine⁴. Six years later, the outlined issues also attracted the attention of K. Muir, who presented a paper entitled “*Researching Iconography: Saint Catherine of Alexandria*” at an international conference in Australia. In her presentation, she focused on the iconographic schemes of the hagiographic scenes of the Great Martyr Saint Catherine⁵.

Another decade later, the collection attracted the attention of the research tandem R. S. Nelson and K. M. Collins, who in 2006 published in Los Angeles the illustrated 304-page monograph *Holy Images, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*. This collaborative work, devoted to a selection of the finest objects from the collection of the Museum of the Monastery of Saint Catherine, foregrounded a range of previously underexplored issues, including the symbolism of specific images and the interpretation of the historical contexts of the depicted figures particularly within the framework of the development of Byzantine iconographic traditions and later artistic periods⁶.

In 2007, a concise study addressing the outlined topic was published in the journal *Muzeinyi Provulok* by Inna Parkhomenko, a staff member of the National Art Museum of Ukraine, who focused on the collection of the institution she represented⁷.

Specific aspects of the iconography of the saint were addressed in 2011 in a short study by I. Sydor entitled “*The Commemoration of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, the Great Martyr*”⁸, as well as in the 376-page monograph by the diasporic scholar N. P. Shevchenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the*

⁴ Konstantinos Manafis, (Ed.), *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*. Publisher: Ekdotike Athenon, 1990. 399 p. [in English].

⁵ Carolyn Muir, “*A Study in Iconography: St. Catherine of Alexandria*.” / Department of Fine Arts, University of Hong Kong. *Religion, Literature and the Arts Project: Conference Proceedings of the Australian International Conference*. 1996. P. 272–280. [in English].

⁶ Robert S. Nelson and Kristen M. Collins, eds., *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications. XVI, 2006. 304 p.: ill. [in English].

⁷ Inna Parkhomenko, “V istyni Khrystovii. Sviata velykomuchenytzia Kateryna [In the Truth of Christ. Holy Great Martyr Catherine].” *Muzeinyi provulok*. 2007. №7 (sichen-cherven). [Museum Lane. 2007. No. 7 (January-June)]. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/namu.museum/posts> (date of access: 15.01.2026) [in Ukrainian].

⁸ Ivan Sydor, “Pamiat sviatoi velykomuchenytzi Kateryny Oleksandriiskoi. [Memory of St. Great Martyr Catherine of Alexandria].” 2011. URL: <https://kpba.edu.ua/novyny/publikatsii/pamiat-sviatoi-velykomuchenytzi-kateryny-oleksandriiskoi/> (date of access: 14.01.2026) [in Ukrainian].

Cult of Saint Catherine, published in 2013 in Burlington, Canada⁹. In the latter work, the author offers a historical and cultural analysis of the emergence and development of the cult of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, interpreting aspects of the Great Martyr's hagiography (Vita icon) in relation to her iconography.

Concluding the review of scholarly publications devoted to the outlined topic, it is necessary to mention the specialized article by M. Zhivkovich entitled "On the Icons of the Sinai and Raithu Martyrs in the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai, with an Overview of the Cult and Iconography of These Saints in Eastern Christian Art." This publication was issued in 2020 at Zographou, the Bulgarian Orthodox male monastery of monks on Mount Athos. The author focuses on the principles governing the selection of saints' figures for the upper registers of group compositions, examines the established canonical features of the image of Saint Catherine, and compares them with the characteristics and attributes of other Sinai saints.¹⁰

In 2020, a Greek-language monograph originally published in 2015 was republished in Thessaloniki in an English translation under the title *The Monastery on Mount Sinai and Its Shrines*, edited by G. Foustieris¹¹. This volume brings together the most valuable painted and printed works, as well as icons of Saint Catherine incorporated into ensembles of decorative and applied art from the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai. Certain aspects of this publication, along with those of the previously mentioned studies, are also addressed in the works *The Life of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*¹², *the Great Martyr* and *The Iconography of Saint Catherine*¹³.

Results.

⁹ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Ševčenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. [in English].

¹⁰ Miloš Živković, "On the icons of Sinai and Raithou martyrs in Saint Catherine's monastery at Sinai, with an overview of the cult and iconography of these saints in East Christian art." *Zograf*, 2020. 44, 101–125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2298/ZOG2044101Z> [in English].

¹¹ George Galavaris, Makarios Myriantheos, and Georgios Foustieris, eds., *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and its Sacristy*. Thessaloniki: HolyMonastery of the God-Trodden mount Sinai, 2020. 257 p.: ill. [in English].

¹² Zhytiie Sv. velykomuchenytzi Kateryny Oleksandriiskoi [Life of St. Great Martyr Catherine of Alexandria]. URL: <https://afanasiy.net/sviataia-velykomuchenycy-ekateryna> (date of access: 12.01.2026) [in Ukrainian].

¹³ Ikonohrafiia sviatoi Kateryny [Iconography of St. Catherine]. URL: <https://hram.lviv.ua/3232-konohrafiya-svyatoyi-katerini.html> (date of access: 14.01.2026) [in Ukrainian].

The key primary sources for the study of the life of Catherine of Alexandria are the records attributed to Athanasius (Anastasius), who is said to have served as the saint's stenographer. Prosopographical sources describing the circumstances of her life also include the testimonies of Symeon Metaphrastes and the work *Encomium to Catherine* by Anastasius Protasikrites. The earliest of these texts is dated to the late sixth–early seventh century. Subsequently, the data concerning her vita were collected, systematized, and interpreted by a wide range of hagiographers, theologians, and art historians^{14 15}.

According to these testimonies, the Great Martyr, who embraced Christianity in 304, and who in time became the patron saint of one of the world's oldest Orthodox monastic complexes, was executed in 307 by beheading. Catherine, whose name is translated as “pure,” originated from a noble and affluent Alexandrian family – her father being Consta, the ruler of the city and received the finest education available in her era.

Veneration of her as a Great Martyr began as early as the fourth century, when her relics – reverently transferred by angels to Mount Sinai were believed to have become incorrupt and to have emitted a miraculous fragrance. Between 527 and 557, by order of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian the Great, the Church of the Transfiguration was erected on Mount Sinai to safeguard these relics. Over time, a monastery developed around this sanctuary, and the ensemble together with the Well of Moses and the Burning Bush was inscribed in 2002 on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a site of outstanding universal cultural value.¹⁶

According to a sixth-century revelation, the venerable head and left hand of the Great Martyr were discovered and solemnly transferred to the newly constructed church of the Sinai Monastery in Egypt. Today, these relics are preserved in a marble reliquary in the monastery's principal church, dedicated to the Transfiguration of the Lord. The holy head of the Bride of Christ is crowned with a golden diadem, while an ornate ring adorns the finger of her right hand, commemorating her mystical betrothal.

Taking into account the uninterrupted flow of pilgrims, the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai has maintained continuous liturgical service throughout its entire existence, without interruption even for a single day.

¹⁴ Carolyn Muir, “*A Study in Iconography: St. Catherine of Alexandria.*” / Department of Fine Arts, University of Hong Kong. *Religion, Literature and the Arts Project: Conference Proceedings of the Australian International Conference*. 1996. P. 272–280. [in English].

¹⁵ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Ševcenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. [in English].

¹⁶ George Galavaris, Makarios Myriantheos, and Georgios Fouteris, eds., *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and its Sacristy*. Thessaloniki: HolyMonastery of the God-Trodden mount Sinai, 2020. 257 p.: ill. [in English].

Owing to this unbroken tradition, it is regarded as one of the most venerated holy sites in the world, a place where countless pilgrims find spiritual consolation. The Alexandrian virgin became the patron saint of learning and scholarship; believers also revere her as a saint who grants hope to unmarried women seeking to find their true destined partner and to establish a family.

It is generally believed that the earliest representations of Saint Catherine emerged in the pre-Iconoclastic period, around the sixth–seventh centuries. From the eighth to the ninth century, the first images of the saint that have come down to us were produced, surviving primarily in later copies dating from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. The hymnography dedicated to the Great Martyr developed in the ninth century, when Saint Theophanes of Nicaea and the monk Babylas composed several poetic hymns in honor of Catherine of Alexandria, which are still performed on the anniversary of her repose (7 December, New Style).

In documentary sources, the name of the Saint is mentioned in the Typikon of the Great Church, dated to the ninth–eleventh centuries.¹⁷ The cult of this Great Martyr, which had taken shape in the former territories of Byzantium conquered by the Arabs from the sixth century onward, remained an integral part of Christian life within the Greek and Coptic Churches. From the period of the Crusades, the cult of Catherine of Alexandria, revered for her steadfastness and devotion to the faith, began to receive particularly strong veneration in Italy, most notably in Venice.

Here, her image adorned the Basilica of Saint Elias, was immortalized in the mosaics of Saint Mark's Cathedral, and appeared on the seal of the Norman count and diplomat at the court of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180), Alexander Gravina. Such widespread popularity of the image of the Great Martyr led to her special veneration in the cathedrals of Western Europe and stimulated sustained interest in the development of her iconography among artists of the Renaissance, Mannerism, and Baroque periods.

Accordingly, in icons of the Eastern Christian rite of the Early (up to the mid-ninth century) and Mature (up to the mid-fourteenth century) Middle Ages, Catherine of Alexandria in Egypt began to be depicted as one anointed by the Lord, endowed with divine power – clad in sumptuous royal garments, wearing a crown or diadem, and holding a cross in her right hand. From the Late Middle Ages (from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries), she is most often shown leaning on the symbol of her torments – the wheel – while another

¹⁷ Kurt Weitzmann and John Galey, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons. Vol. 1, From the Sixth to the Tenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); 107 pp.; 38 colour plates; 122 b&w photos [in English].

attribute of the saint, the palm branch, appears in her hand as a sign of martyrdom and victory¹⁸.

Concurrently, throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, within the Catholic tradition of Italy and the regions of the Northern Renaissance and Mannerism, another iconographic type gained widespread popularity known as the “Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine” or simply the “Marriage of Saint Catherine” gained widespread popularity. This subject became especially prominent in the works of leading European artists, including Fra Angelico (*Madonna and Child with Saints Dominic and Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1435), Giovanni di Paolo (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, 1460), Sandro Botticelli (*Saint Catherine*, 1487), Ambrogio Bergognone (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1490), Piero di Cosimo (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1493), Hans Memling (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, 1479), Pinturicchio (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1492–1496), Gerard David (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, 1505), Lucas Cranach the Elder (*Altarpiece of Saint Catherine*, 1506; *The Martyrdom of Saint Catherine*, 1515), Fra Bartolomeo (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1512), Lorenzo Lotto (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1524), Correggio (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1526–1527), Parmigianino (*Saint Catherine*, 1524; *The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, c. 1527–1531; c. 1529), Paolo Veronese (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, c. 1575), Jusepe de Ribera (*The Holy Family with Saints Anne and Catherine*, 1648; *The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, 1648), and Anthony van Dyck (*The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1618–1620).

Within a new iconographic variant emphasizing the theme of the Great Martyr, works were created by Raphael Santi (*Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1507), Gaudenzio Ferrari (*The Martyrdom of Saint Catherine*, 1541–1543), and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (*Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1598–1599). In these paintings and frescoes, the artists incorporated instruments of torture and symbols of spiritual fortitude, thereby underscoring the steadfastness and inner strength of the Saint.

¹⁸ Ivan Sydor, “*Pamiat sviatoi velykomuchenytsi Kateryny Oleksandriiskoi. [Memory of St. Great Martyr Catherine of Alexandria]*.” 2011. URL: <https://kpba.edu.ua/novyny/publikatsii/pamiat-sviatoi-velykomuchenytsi-kateryny-oleksandriiskoi/> (date of access: 14.01.2026) [in Ukrainian].



Fig. 1. Giovanni di Paolo, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, c. 1460. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 2. Hans Memling, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, Bruges, 1479. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 3. Paolo Veronese, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, c. 1575, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 4. Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio), *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1507, National Gallery, London. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

By contrast, within the Orthodox tradition of the modern period, two principal iconographic types of Catherine of Egypt became the most widely established: Catherine of Alexandria and the Great Martyr. The first type is represented by a rather ascetic and static image of the Saint, executed within the framework of the Greek–Byzantine tradition. The earliest examples of this iconographic type include the eleventh-century icon Saint Catherine and Marina from the collection of the Museum of the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai (Fig. 5), as well as a thirteenth-century replica based on prototypes of the tenth–eleventh centuries – Saint Catherine (with a Blessing Hand) and the Virgin Mary “The Burning Bush” with the Christ Child and Moses from the same collection (Fig. 6).

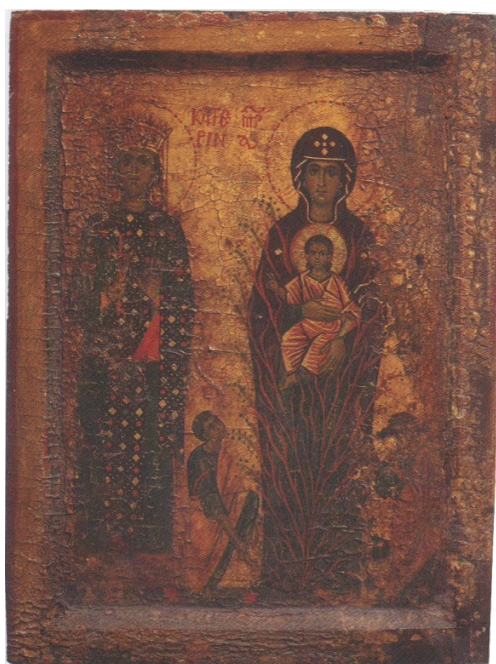


Fig. 6. *St Catherine (with a blessing hand) and the Virgin Mary “The Burning Bush” with the Christ Child and Moses*, pilgrim icon, tempera on wood, thirteenth century. Replica of an image of St Catherine dating to the tenth–eleventh centuries, from the period of the Macedonian and Komnenian dynasties.¹⁹

¹⁹ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Sevcenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. [in English].



Fig. 5. *St Catherine and St Marina*, Eastern iconographic tradition, tempera on wood, eleventh century.

These works were created in accordance with the canonical parameters of Byzantine icon painting characteristic of the periods of the Macedonian dynasty and the Komnenian dynasty. Among the distinctive attributes of the Great Martyr in these images, only a flared, trumpet-shaped Byzantine-type crown without crenellations is present – an element that remained common in the iconography of Catherine of Alexandria until the thirteenth century, when hagiographic icon types began to emerge while in the second example, an additional feature is the blessing gesture of the left hand, turned toward the viewer.

More rarely, the icon of the Saint includes a sword as an attribute – an instrument of execution by which her head was severed after the breaking of the wheel. In her right hand, this sword resembles a spear, an object that, within the Byzantine tradition, was held in icons from the eleventh century onward by female members of imperial Byzantine families, notably Zoe and Theodora²⁰.

At the same time, alongside the cross, a book or a ring serves as a sign of the Saint's mystical betrothal to Christ, reinforcing the image of a young

²⁰ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Sevcenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. [in English].

and beautiful maiden sometimes depicted with a wreath of roses on her head as a symbol of the Virgin Mary's love – yet a girl endowed with wisdom and intellect far beyond her years.²¹

As the monastery lay outside the jurisdiction of Byzantium from the seventh century, it preserved twelve encaustic icons painted in the sixth century, which rank among the oldest surviving icons in the world. In the mid-nineteenth century, part of the collection of encaustic icons was removed by Archimandrite Porphyrius and transferred to Ukrainian collections; today, these works are housed in the Khanenko Museum in Kyiv.

The creators of many works in the Sinai collection from the Early Byzantine period up to the thirteenth century including the Syriac-Palestinian heritage of the eighth–ninth centuries were Greek, Syriac, Georgian, and Coptic masters. As a result, a distinctive synthesis of Eastern Christian artistic traditions emerged, whereby certain iconographic types within the collection featuring Saint Catherine display notable stylistic affinities (a characteristic example being the icon known as *The Radiant Georgians*) (Fig. 7).

In addition to the Greek Orthodox clergy who conducted the liturgical services at the Monastery of Saint Catherine, the Saint gradually came to be venerated by Latins as well, in recognition of her unwavering steadfastness, purity, chastity, and wisdom. Over time, this broader devotion led to a convergence of iconographic traditions depicting the Saint across different Christian confessions, in a manner comparable to the iconographic type of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows²².



Fig. 7. “*The Radiant Georgians*,” icon from the Monastery of St Catherine, fourteenth century. From left to right: Peter the Iberian, Hilarion the Iberian, Shio of Mgvime, John the Iberian, Euthymius the Iberian, George the Athonite, David of Gareja, St Constantine (?). Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

However, it should be emphasized that the genre-based, narrative, and more sensuous and narrative compositions of Italian art and the Northern

²¹ Konstantinos Manafis, (Ed.), *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*. Publisher: Ekdotike Athenon, 1990. 399 p. [in English].

²² John Galey, *Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980. 191 p. ill., map. [in English].

Renaissance, dedicated to the glorification of Catherine of Alexandria such as the multi-figure works by Giovanni di Paolo, Hans Memling, and the “painterly” compositions of Paolo Veronese – did not gain currency among the iconographic types of this Great Martyr represented in the collection of the Sinai Monastery.

Thus, single-figure compositions, following the example of Martinus de Villanova’s work of 1387, inspired Raphael Santi’s Saint Catherine of Alexandria and the interpretations by Caravaggio, already incorporate the symbol characteristic of the Catholic variant of the Saint’s iconography – the wheel, an emblem of her torments. Nevertheless, a certain degree of ecstatic expressiveness in the works of one of the “Titans of the Renaissance” was typical of the Italian understanding of Catherine’s martyrdom.

In the collection of the aforementioned monastery, by contrast, there prevail stylistically more restrained images closer to the Byzantine tradition: single, rather ascetic representations of the Saint such as the Catalan altarpiece by Martinus de Villanova, executed in the Gothic–Renaissance period as well as narrative compositions of the Baroque era (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Martinus de Vilanova, Catalan altarpiece image of St Catherine, Catholic iconographic type, tempera on wood, 1387. Photo by O. Shkolna.

The key distinction of Orthodox iconographic types of Catherine of Alexandria, when comparing such images, lies in her static immobility; in some cases, a shield is introduced as a symbol of the Saint's unshakable faith in hagiographic icons of Greek-Byzantine origin (Fig. 9). According to the monuments preserved in the aforementioned monastery, this iconographic type remained widespread at least until the sixteenth century (Fig. 10). Subsequently, from the Baroque period, when heightened emotional expressiveness in imagery was increasingly valued, the iconographic type of the Great Martyr – depicted with the wheel – gained greater popularity in comparison with the Alexandrian type (Fig. 11).



Fig. 9. *The Life of Saint Catherine with Narrative Scenes (with a blessing hand), Sinai, Byzantine iconographic type, thirteenth century.*²³.

²³ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Sevcenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. (p. 34). [in English].



Fig. 10. *St Catherine*, Byzantine “*Alexandrian*” iconographic type, tempera on wood, second half of the sixteenth century. Photo by O. Shkolna.



Fig. 11. *Santa Catalina*, by Jeremias Palladas, seventeenth century, “*Great Martyr*” iconographic type. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

Considering that the Monastery of Saint Catherine (Fig. 12) became the center of the autonomous Orthodox Church of Mount Sinai and possessed a number of monastic complexes in different regions, the iconography of the icons that converged there was shaped accordingly. These complexes were located in Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Lebanon, and Turkey, including Istanbul, and the particular influence of the Athos and Constantinopolitan schools proved decisive in this process.

From the Middle Ages onward, the cult of the monastery's patron saint enjoyed wide dissemination throughout Europe. The collection of icons of the Catherine cycle did not suffer during the period of Iconoclasm, as the monastery lay outside the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire from the seventh century onward.



Fig. 12. “Sinai and Its Holy Place,” icon depicting the Monastery of St Catherine, lacquered tempera on wood, early eighteenth century. Photo by O. Shkolna.

The presence of Western icons of Latin provenance in the monastery is limited and primarily associated with the era of the Crusades and the period of medieval Mamluk Egypt. In this context, Georgians of Orthodox origin – who formed a considerable portion of the Mamluk community – were forced to convert to Islam but retained sympathies toward Christianity and maintained

active commercial ties with Italians and other Europeans, as evidenced by the trade in Cairo-produced carpets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²⁴

Subsequently, the image of Catherine became more widely disseminated in the iconographic type of the “Great Martyr,” depicted with the Crucifix and a palm branch in her left hand, leaning against the wheel as an instrument of martyrdom. Certain icons of Greek origin, primarily from Mount Athos, from the Baroque period onward acquired additional attributes, including books introduced into the iconic space, which the highly educated saint was believed to have read during her lifetime, as well as the image of a circular black sphere representing the “Universe,” whose cosmological structure is permeated by rays of Divine energy.



Fig. 13. *Saint Catherine with scenes of her life and death*, executed in the Byzantine iconographic tradition, “Great Martyr” iconographic type, tempera on wood, 1755. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

The latter constitutes a symbolic, stylized form of the “Wheel of Ezekiel” (Ezek. 1; 10) the wheel within the wheel, an attribute of Divine providence and appears in images of Christ Pantocrator as well as in icons of

²⁴ Ulyana Belnaqita and Olga Shkolna, “Mamluk Carpets in European Painting of the 15th–16th Centuries as a Tribute to the Western and Central Asian Carpets Fashion,” *Paradigm of Knowledge*, no. 5 (69) (2025). P. 5–20. DOI 10.26886/2520-7474.5(69)2025.1 [in Ukrainian].

Sophia, the Divine Wisdom. The luminous intersecting lines within this form convey the idea of God's governance of the world against the backdrop of divine darkness and uncreated light and may be interpreted as Taboric Light and Divine revelation granted to humankind, surrounded by ignorance. As Scripture states: "The Lord said that he would dwell in thick darkness" (1 Kgs 8:12, NRSV) (Fig. 13).

At the same time, the iconographic type that gained popularity in Ukraine during the Baroque period depicting St Catherine in a paired image with St Barbara as two of the most venerated Christian saints was not adopted on Sinai (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. *Saints Barbara and Catherine as Great Martyrs*, 1740s, Northern Left-Bank Ukraine, linden wood panel, gesso, engraving, tempera, oil, silvering, gilding. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine (NAMU).

Photo source: National Art Museum of Ukraine (Facebook).

A distinct iconographic type within the Sinai collection of the Great Martyr is represented by the textile icon "The Epitaph of St Catherine with Hagiographic Scenes and Laudatory Inscriptions" (1805), executed in tapestry technique with silk, gold, and silver threads. This work constitutes a variant of the Dormition of the monastery's patron saint (Fig. 15). The iconography of

the saint crowned here resonates with the iconographic type of her image on the lid of the reliquary (Fig. 16) that houses the relics of Catherine of Alexandria. A distinguishing feature of the latter representation is the scroll held in the saint's hands, reminiscent of the Tablets of the Covenant and alluding to divine revelation mediated through Moses.



Fig. 15. The Epitaph of St Catherine with hagiographic scenes and laudatory inscriptions, textile icon (tapestry), Viennese production, silk with gold and silver threads, 1805.



Fig. 16. Master Prokopios, reliquary with the relics of St Catherine, Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai, eighteenth century. Photo source: Pravlife.org.

Conclusions.

Thus, based on the collection of the Museum of the Monastery of St Catherine, from the Early Middle Ages the saint was depicted as a wise royal maiden, adorned with a crown of roses (a symbol of purity and chastity and an attribute of the Marian cycle), or wearing a crown and imperial garments worthy of Byzantine emperors the anointed rulers on earth (eleventh century). Early iconographic types of Greek (Athonic) origin feature an ascetic, static figure whose sole attribute from the thirteenth century was a shield decorated with a cross, which for her embodied faith (within this image the principal figure is also endowed with a gesture of blessing, with one palm turned outward), while from the fourteenth century onward the sword appears as an attribute marking the end of the Great Martyr's earthly life. Overall, this iconographic type may be defined as the Alexandrian type.

In the Latin tradition, from the fourteenth century onward a more dynamic, Gothic–Renaissance representation of the saint became widespread. Its iconography derives from the image attributed to the Catalan school master Martinus de Vilanova (Fig. 9), in which the crown takes the form of a structure with sharp rays, while the left hand rests on the wheel – the symbol of endured torments holding the Crucifix. This iconographic type may be defined as the “Great Martyr.” It was further developed in the works of Raphael Santi and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Its seventeenth-century subtype, represented by the work of the artist Santa Catalina, Jeremiah Palladas, preserved in the above-mentioned museum collection, additionally includes the sword and became the most canonical model for subsequent reproductions of the iconography of St Catherine.

Although in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries another iconographic type known as the “Mystic Marriage of St Catherine” or simply the “Marriage of St Catherine” gained wide popularity within the Catholic tradition of Italy and the regions of the Northern Renaissance and Mannerism, as attested in the works of leading European artists such as Fra Angelico, Giovanni di Paolo, Sandro Botticelli, Ambrogio Bergognone, Pinturicchio, Piero di Cosimo, Hans Memling, Gerard David, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Fra Bartolomeo, Lorenzo Lotto, Correggio, Parmigianino, Paolo Veronese, Jusepe de Ribera, and Anthony van Dyck, this iconographic type was not adopted on Sinai, most likely due to the overly hedonistic interpretation of the saint's image.

Instead, within the experimental pursuits of the Baroque period, artists from various European Christian schools developed new iconographic types in printed graphics, painting, and decorative and applied arts that ultimately did not achieve broad dissemination. A notable example is the iconographic composition Sts Barbara and Catherine as Great Martyrs (1740s), produced in the northern Left-Bank region of Ukraine (linden wood panel, gesso, engraving, tempera, oil, silvering, gilding) and preserved in the collection of the National Museum of Ukrainian Art. In this work, the saints hold a palm

branch and a cross in their left hands, without the wheel or the black sphere symbolizing the Universe and Divine Providence. In effect, the artist attempted to synthesize the two most widespread iconographic types of St Catherine – the Alexandrian (static, Orthodox) and the Great Martyr (dynamic, Catholic). However, such images are not represented in the Sinai collection.

By contrast, at the beginning of the nineteenth century the Sinai collection was enriched by the textile icon “The Epitaph of St Catherine,” woven in silk with gold and silver threads, featuring a central scene of the Dormition of Catherine surrounded by hagiographic scenes. This work resonates with the eighteenth-century creation of a new reliquary by the master Prokopios. In the latter, the principal figure depicted on the lid holds a scroll that resembles a testament addressed to future generations a motif consistent with the saint’s veneration by unmarried and childless women who believe in her intercession and assistance in forming a family, as well as by scholars and all those devoted to learning and the pursuit of knowledge.

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²⁵ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Ševčenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. (p. 34). [in English].

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

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The Facial Lappet of the Great Beast in Viking Art: Comparative Anatomy Solves an Art History Mystery

Philip J. Senter*

Abstract: A common motif in Scandinavian and related art from the Viking age is the image of a quadruped that modern scholars call the Great Beast. The Great Beast is usually depicted with a facial lappet, the anatomical significance of which has been enigmatic before now. Modern scholars sometimes call it a lip-lappet, due to the impression that it seems to emanate from the upper lip. Here, I show that it is a stylized representation of part of the nose. Specifically, it represents the alar fold of the rhinarium, the hairless nasal appendage of mammals.

Keywords: Great Beast, lappet, Viking art, Scandinavia, rhinarium, anatomy.

Introduction

Scandinavian and Scandinavian-derived art of the Viking age (8th–11th c.) underwent a progression of styles that modern scholars now call the Oseberg style (c. 800–c. 875), Borre style (c. 850–c. 950), Jellinge style (c. 900–c. 950), Mammen style (c. 950–c. 1000), Ringerike style (c. 1000–c. 1050), and Urnes style (c. 1040–c. 1170)¹ (Fig. 1). Art of the Mammen through

* Philip J. Senter, PhD, Professor, Department of Biological and Forensic Sciences, Fayetteville State University, Fayetteville, North Carolina, USA. E-mail: psenter@uncfsu.edu

¹ David M. Wilson, Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, Ithaca, Allen and Unwin, 1966; Signe Horn Fuglesang, “Stylistic Groups in Late Viking and Early Romanesque Art”, *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia, Serie Altera in 8°*, Vol. 1, 1981, pp. 79–125; Signe Horn Fuglesang, “Early Viking Art,” *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia, Serie Altera in 8°*, Vol. 2, 1982, pp. 125–173; David M. Wilson, “The Development of Viking Art”, in Brink, Stefan (ed.), *The Viking World*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 323–338; Jane Kershaw, “Viking-age Scandinavian Art Styles and Their Appearance in the British Isles. Part 2: Late Viking-age Art Styles”, *Finds Research Group Datasheets*, Vol. 43, 2010, pp. 1–8; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2021. The dates given here are a combination of those from David M. Wilson, “The Development of Viking Art”, *op. cit.* and James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art, op. cit.* Cf. dates in Michael Müller-Wile, “Tierstile des 8.–12. Jahrhunderts im Norden Europas. Dendrochronologie und kunthistorische Einordnung”, in Müller-Wile, Michael, Larsson, Lars Olaf (eds.), *Tiere, Menschen, Götter: Wikingerzeitliche Kunststile und ihre neuzeitliche Rezeption*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2001, pp. 215–250 (in which the date of

Urnes Styles includes numerous images of a quadrupedal creature that is often shown entangled with one or more serpents. Modern scholars often call this quadruped the Great Beast, a term that Johannes Brøndsted introduced for it in 1924.² The Great Beast usually sports a moustache-like appendage that is sometimes called a lip-lappet³ (Fig. 1f–l). The anatomical significance of the appendage has thus far been obscure, and scholars who note its presence typically do so without advancing a hypothesis as to what it represents.⁴ An exception is Anne-Sofie Gräslund, who called it a *nosfliken* (Swedish for “nose flap”), thereby advancing a hypothesis that the lappet represents part of the nose.⁵ The lappet’s location often suggests mammalian whiskers or the chemosensory barbels of certain fishes, e.g. carp or catfish, but potential hypotheses as to what it represents have not yet been investigated. Here, I present an investigation into the anatomical identity of this lappet.

Anatomy of the facial lappet

The earliest recognizable Viking representation of the Great Beast occurs on the Jelling Stone, a Mammen style monument of the Danish king Harald Bluetooth, (Fig. 1f), who reigned c. 958–986.⁶ The beast’s snout bears a facial lappet that starts at the snout’s anterodorsal (upper front) corner and extends dorsally over the nostril, then turns ventrally (downward) and terminates at the edge of the upper lip (Fig. 1f). A similar facial lappet occurs on an animal rendered in the Jelling style on a silver cup from the burial

1060–1070 for the later ‘Urnes’ style may refer to art of the ‘Urnes-Romanesque’ style of other authors).

² Johannes Brøndsted, *Early English Ornament*, London, Hachette, 1924, pp. 284–295, 302–303.

³ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, “Dating the Swedish Viking-age Rune Stones on Stylistic Grounds”, in Stocklund, Marie, Lerche Nielsen, Michael, Holmberg, Bente, Fellows-Jensen, Gillian (eds.), *Runes and Their Secrets: Studies in Runology*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006, pp. 117–139; David M. Wilson, “The Development of Viking Art”, *op. cit.*; Jane Kershaw, “Viking-age Scandinavian Art Styles...”, *op. cit.*, p. 5; Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012, p. 69; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 132.

⁴ David M. Wilson, Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, Ithaca, Allen and Unwin, 1966, pp. 69, 96–99, 104, 112, 120–121, 125, 147, 151, 154, 157, 159; Richard N. Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England*, London, Collins, 1980, p. 55; Anne-Sofie Gräslund, “Dating the Swedish Viking-age Rune Stones...”, *op. cit.*; David M. Wilson, “The Development of Viking Art”, *op. cit.*, p. 332; Jane Kershaw, “Viking-age Scandinavian Art Styles...”, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 2, 3, 5; Anne-Sofie Gräslund, “The Late Viking Age Runestones of Västergötland. On Ornamentation and Chronology”, *Lund Archaeological Review*, Vol. 20, 2014, pp. 29–53; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 83, 85, 89, 99, 119, 122, 127, 133, 141.

⁵ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, “Runstenar om Ornamentik och Datering II”, *Tor*, Vol. 24, 1992, pp. 177–201.

⁶ Johannes Brøndsted, *Early English Ornament*, *op. cit.*, pp. 282–287; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 94–98.

chamber of King Gormr, Harald Bluetooth's father, in Jelling⁷ (Fig. 1e). The facial lappet on the Jelling cup beast starts at the snout's anterodorsal corner, extends dorsally over the nostril, then turns posteroventrally (rearward and downward). It terminates at the edge of the upper lip, as in the lappet of the Jelling Stone beast. The facial lappet of the Great Beast on the Bamberg and Cammin reliquaries, which are rendered in the Mammen style, also starts at the snout's anterodorsal corner, extends dorsally over the nostril, and continues posteroventrally.⁸ It extends ventrally a little beyond the edge of the upper lip (Fig. 1g, h), unlike the Jelling examples. The lappets on the two reliquary beasts are clearly homologs of those of the Jelling Stone beast and the Jelling cup beast, differing mainly in that the lappets of the two reliquary beasts are exaggerated in length.

Comparison with animal heads in Oseberg and Borre style art reveals that the facial lappets in the above examples are exaggerations of the alar fold of the rhinarium. The rhinarium, the hairless external body of soft tissue around the nostrils, is a feature unique to mammals. The part of it that curls dorsally and laterally around the nostril is the alar fold (Fig. 1a). The rhinarium, including its alar fold, is prominently and realistically depicted on the faces of wooden animal-head posts from the Oseberg ship burial, a burial that occurred in 834.⁹ The two that have been nicknamed the "Academician's animal-head post" and the "Carolingian animal-head post" are relatively realistic portrayals of predatory mammals, complete with diagnostically mammalian pinnae (ear flaps) (Fig. 1b, c). The "Carolingian" post even sports a diagnostically mammalian division of the dentition into incisors, canines, and molariform cheek teeth. The heads' morphology is too generic to precisely identify as that of a specific predatory species, but the prominence of the alar fold in both heads matches that of members of the Canidae (dog family) and Ursidae (bear family) in that the fold curls so far around the side of the nostril so that it borders the nostril's entire lateral side. This differs from the situation in the Felidae (cat family), Phocidae (seal family), Otariidae (sea lion family), and most members of the Mustelidae (weasel family), in which the alar fold borders the nostril mainly dorsally and not laterally. It is therefore plausible that the heads were meant as dog, wolf, or bear heads, if not generic predatory mammal

⁷ Torsten Capelle, "Zum Silberkelch von Jelling", *Acta Archaeologica*, Vol. 55, 1986, pp. 199–200.

⁸ David M. Wilson, Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pl. LIV, LVI; Lennart Karlsson, *Nordisk Form om Djurornamentik*. Stockholm, Statens Historiska Museum, 1983, fig. 78, 79; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

⁹ Niels Bonde, "Dendrochronological dating of the Viking Age ship burials at Oseberg, Gokstad, and Tune, Norway", in Sinclair, Anthony, Slater, Elizabeth, Gowlett, John (eds.), *Archaeological Sciences 1995: Proceedings of a Conference on the Application of Scientific Techniques to the Study of Archaeology*, Oxford, Oxbow, 1997, pp. 195–200, at p. 197.

heads. Whether or not this is the case, it is at least evident that the morphology of the rhinarium in both cases was modeled after that of a canid or bear.



Fig. 1. Lappets in Viking art of the Oseberg style (b, c), Borre style (d), Jellinge style (e), Mammen style (f–h), Ringerike style (i, j), and Urnes style (k, l), including depictions of the Great Beast (f–l), with yellow indicating the alar fold of the rhinarium and its iconographic homologs, and with blue indicating the jowl and its iconographic homologs. (a) Domestic dog. (b) “Academician’s post,” from Oseberg ship burial, early 9th c. (c) “Carolingian post,” from Oseberg ship burial, early 9th c. (d) Wooden carvings from Gokstad ship burial, c. 900. (e) Jelling cup, late 10th c. (f) Jelling Stone, late 10th c. (g) Bamberg reliquary, late 10th c. (h) Cammin reliquary, late 10th c. (i) Heggen vane, early 11th c. (j) Söderala vane, early 11th c. (k) Urnes stave church portal (currently on the north side of the building), late 11th c. (l) Urnes stave church west gable, late 11th c.

Each of these two animal-head posts also sports an additional lappet that extends posteriorly from near the rhinarium and appears to represent the jowl, the whisker-bearing part of the muzzle (Fig. 1b, c). This lappet is narrow and is strongly curled at the posterior tip in the “Carolingian” head. On both heads, it is immediately dorsal to a smooth area that represents the gingiva (gum), which supports the hypothesis that it represents the jowl.

Further stylization of both kinds of lappets occurs on artifacts from the Gokstad ship burial, a burial that occurred between 900 and 905.¹⁰ Artifacts from the burial include several carved wooden animal heads of the Borre style.¹¹ On the snout of each is a rostral lappet that starts at the snout’s anterodorsal corner and curls dorsally over the nostril, which identifies it as a stylized homolog of the alar fold (Fig. 1d). Each head also bears a narrow lappet that extends posteriorly from the muzzle and is curled at the tip in some cases. It appears to be a posteriorly displaced homolog of the jowl lappet in the animal-head posts from the Oseberg ship burial.

The facial lappet of the Jelling cup beast and of the Great Beast on the Jelling Stone is clearly the homolog of the lappet that represents the alar fold in the Borre style carvings, and not of the lappet that appears to represent the jowl. The facial lappet of the Great Beast on the two Mammen style reliquaries is also a homolog of the alar fold lappet and differs from that of the Jelling cup beast and the Jelling Stone Great Beast mainly in that it is exaggerated in length (Fig. 1f, g). All of this indicates that the facial lappet of the Great Beast in Mammen style art is a stylized depiction of the alar fold of the rhinarium. The term “lip-lappet” is therefore a misnomer, and it could be more accurately called a nasal lappet, a snout lappet, a muzzle lappet, or—with more generic wording—a facial lappet.

The Great Beast’s facial lappet evolved further in subsequent styles. In the Ringerike style, it is often rendered such that it terminates in two posteroventral lobes instead of one (Fig. 1i, j), and it may be narrow and elongated¹² (Fig. 1j). In the Urnes style, the narrowness and elongation of the lappet are taken to the extreme, and its tip usually extends posteroventrally beyond the ventral edge of the upper jaw¹³ (Fig. 1k, l). In all Viking styles, the facial lappet begins at the anterodorsal corner of the snout and arches over the

¹⁰ Niels Bonde, “Dendrochronological dating...”, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹¹ Nicolay Nicolaysen, *The Viking-ship Discovered in Gokstad in Norway*, Oslo, Cammermeyer, 1882, pl. VI, XI.

¹² David M. Wilson, Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, fig. 61, 62; Lennart Karlsson, *Nordisk Form om Djurornamentik*. *op. cit.*, fig. 80, 82, 95; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 132, 140.

¹³ David M. Wilson, Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, fig. 66, pl. LVIII, LIX, LXIX; Lennart Karlsson, *Nordisk Form om Djurornamentik*. *op. cit.*, fig. 107, 108; James Graham-Campbell, *Viking Art*, *op. cit.*, pp. 151, 152, 161, 162.

nostril, in keeping with its origin as an exaggerated representation of the alar fold of the rhinarium.

Concluding thoughts

Biological disciplines and concepts can be useful in the study and interpretation of the animal iconography of past cultures. As shown here, the zoological discipline of comparative anatomy can be used to solve such mysteries as the origin of the Great Beast's facial lappet. The realization that the lappet was meant as part of a nose and not a lip changes the way we view the face of the Great Beast in the art of the Vikings, bringing us a step closer to understanding the beast as it was understood by those who produced and used the art that incorporates its image.

List and sources of illustrations:

Fig. 1. (a) Domestic dog (photo by author). (b) "Academician's post," from Oseberg ship burial. Source: photo by Kirsten Helgeland on Wikimedia Commons (WC), CCA-Share Alike 4.0 ([link](#)). (c) "Carolingian post," from Oseberg ship burial. Source: photo by Kirsten Helgeland on WC, CCA-Share Alike 4.0 ([link](#)). (d) Wooden carvings from Gokstad ship burial. Source: Nicolaysen 1882, pl. XI fig. 2 and 3, pl. VI fig. 1b and 2a (public domain). (e) Jelling cup. Source: photo by John Lee on WC, CCA-Share Alike 4.0 ([link](#)). (f) Jelling Stone. Source: Brøndsted 1924, fig. 198 (public domain), with inset drawing by the author. (g) Bamberg reliquary. Source: drawing by Stefan Bollmann on WC, Free Art License ([link](#)). (h) Cammin reliquary: Source: drawing by Stefan Bollmann on WC, Free Art License ([link](#)). (i) Heggen vane. Source: photo by Kulturhistorisk Museum, UiO on WC, CCA-Share Alike 4.0 ([link](#)). (j) Söderala vane. Source: photo by Jens Mohr on WC, CCA-Share Alike 4.0 ([link](#)). (k) Urnes stave church portal (currently on the north side of the building). Source: photo by Micha L. Reiser on WC, Free Art License ([link](#)). (l) Urnes stave church west gable. Source: drawn by the author after photo by Peter Andreas Blix on WC (public domain) ([link](#)).

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Medieval Solar Carved Decor Motifs in Churches of Western Ukraine

Roman Odrekhivskyi *

Vitalii Kozinchuk **

Ruslan Kundys ***

Oksana Lan ****

Mariana Pelekh *****

Abstract. The purpose of our article is to initiate a complex research of the meaning of cosmological symbols in decoration of Ukrainian churches in Western Ukrainian (Galicia Region). The academic novelty of the research lies in the fact that the article is the first one to cover the issue of the meaning of cosmological symbols in decoration of religious buildings. We have also tested materials of our own scientific research expeditions in the territory of Galicia. Nowadays, we evidence a growing awareness of the necessity to research the reflection of solar cosmological symbols as a holistic phenomenon of the Ukrainian sacral philosophy and culture. In our opinion, it is one of the most important current problems in the sphere of esoteric and religious cosmology. Mythology played a crucial role in traditions of perception of cosmological symbols by our ancestors. Namely, the mythology mainly shaped the image and perception of the transcendental and endless Universe by our forefathers. In ancient times, when the world seemed to be overarching, gods were so easily accessible. However, after the collapse of pagan beliefs about the world, the meaning of many cosmological symbols was lost (star, sun, moon, rosette, etc).

* Doctor of Art Studies, Professor of the Department of Choreography and Art History, Ivan Boberskyi Lviv State University of Physical Culture Lviv, Ukraine; Email: odre2010@ukr.net
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3581-4103>

** Doctor of Art Studies, Professor at the Department of Art Studies and Art Education, Kyiv State Academy of Decorative and Applied Arts and Design named after Mykhailo Boichuk, Kyiv, Ukraine. Email: vitaliikozinchuk@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8518-5686>

*** Candidate of Art, Associate Professor Department of Directing and Choreography Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine. Email: ruslan.kundys@lnu.edu.ua
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6374-4811>

**** PhD of Culture and Art, Associate professor of Department of Directing and Choreography, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine. Email: oksana.lan@lnu.edu.ua ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7550-7269>

***** Candidate of Art, Associate Professor of Department of Graphics and Book Art, Lviv Polytechnic National University, Ukraine. Email: marjanna.peleh@gmail.com ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0009-0000-5780-9650>

Cosmological symbols in churches are pictured on walls, in carved and painted decorations of icons, in compositions of icons. However, closer to the beginning of our era their meaning in people's memory faded more and more. And it's really a pity, because their interpretation presented a unity of art and life, a deep symbolics of space.

Renewal of knowledge about the symbolics of cosmological symbols in ancient residential and religious buildings will give us the possibility to better understand the meaning of our life. It is worth explaining the meaning of these symbols and stylization of their artistic presentation in more detail. They are carved or painted on walls of residential or religious buildings, on ancient icons, crosses, etc.

Keywords: solar symbols, symbol, ornamentation, Christianity, art culture, development of religion, carved decor.

Introduction

Cosmological symbols were a part of life of the ancient Ukrainians since olden times. With the advent of the Christianity, they became a decoration in Christian churches. As time passed, people started to perceive these symbols and their meaning simply as a decorative element. In our time, there is a growing interest in understanding their symbolics.

The interest in this problem was sparked in the 1990s. We can see an attempt to interpret the meaning of separate cosmological symbols in the collective monograph "Culture and Household of the Population of Ukraine" (1991)¹. As we can understand from this paper, cosmological symbols traditionally followed Ukrainians on walls of residential and religious buildings, as decorations of household items, etc. Separate issues of interpretation of symbolics of cosmological symbols were examined in articles by R. Odrekhivskiy: "Solar Symbols in Decorative Carving of Churches in Galicia"², "Ancient Christian Symbolic Elements in Decorative Carving of Church Interior in Galicia"³. However, the problem still remains insufficiently researched. Therefore, the purpose of our article is to start a complex research on the interpretation of these ancient images. Separate references to the use of solar signs in sacred decoration in Ukraine are given in the article "The Art of Sculpture and the Development of Christianity in Ukraine" (Odrekhivskiy, 2024)⁴.

¹ *Culture and Household of the Population of Ukraine*, Kyiv: Lybid, 1991.

² Roman Odrekhivskiy, "Solar Symbols in Decorative Carving of Churches in Galicia." *Visnyk kharkivskoi derzhavnoi akademii dyzainu i mystetstv*, Kharkiv, Volume 3, 2011, pp. 128–130.

³ Roman Odrekhivskiy, "Ancient Christian Symbolic Elements in Decorative Carving of Church Interior in Galicia." *Visnyk kharkivskoi derzhavnoi akademii dyzainu i mystetstv*, Kharkiv, Volume 4, 2010, pp. 130–132.

⁴ Roman Odrekhivskiy, "The Art of Sculpture and the Development of Christianity in Ukraine." *Anastasis*, Iași, Volume XI, No.1/May 2024, pp. 203-210.

1. Methodology and theoretical framework includes systematicity, accuracy, historicism and consistency. The choice of research methods and specifics of sources were determined by the range of problems raised in this article. In the course of examination of research sources, the generally accepted analytical research method was applied. For the purpose of holistic analysis of motifs of cosmological decoration and its meaning in the sacred culture of Galicia people, the complex research method was used.

2. Results of the research

2.1 Dynamics of sacral culture of Ukrainians

The Christianity that replaced paganism met the whole hierarchy of the magi and artistic carving traditions on the Ukrainian lands. What did the world-view beliefs of masters, creators of pagan idols, fetishes, abstract images based on? In the ideological sense – primarily on mythological traditions, in the formal sense – on still understudied high art traditions of artistic wood, stone and bone carving, etc. Therefore, myths played an important role both in the pre-Christian and Christian art, which we will discuss further in the analysis of a range of plots. According to K. Stanislavska, "... a myth is not only the historically first form of culture and the oldest system of values, knowledge and visions of the world. The essence of the myth is the unconscious interrelationship between a human and forces of nature or society"⁵.

For example, the mythological world outlook essentially influenced the character of white-stone carving of churches in the Principality of Galicia-Volhynia. M.Fihol, the well-known researcher of ancient Galicia, notes that "In the 10th-12th centuries, after the adoption of Christianity, new criteria of public conscience were established in the territory of the Ancient Rus – those related to adoption of the Christian faith. However, even before the adoption of Christianity the Slavs that populated Rus had historically shaped moral-ethical and aesthetic standards that were reflected in the ancient folklore. Their mythological and religious world outlook, visions of the world, nature, universe, good and evil were reflected in the ornamental arts and sacred works, the motifs of which – the tree of life, symbolized birds, animals, fish, dragon that had traditional for pagans symbolics and colours (yellow, white, blue, red, black) – later became an organic part of the Christian art."⁶.

⁵ Kateryna Stanislavska, "The artistic and spectacular features of modern television advertising." *Visnyk natsionalnoi akademii kerivnykh kadrov kulturyi mystetstv: nauk. Zhurnal*. Volume 1, 2011, p. 101.

⁶ Mykhailo Fihol, *The art of Halych XII - XIV centuries (History, Typology, Artistic features)*: extended abstract of dissertation in support of doctor of science for Art History, specialty: 17.00.05, Kyiv, p. 12.

Although we know almost nothing about the ancient Galician carved woodworks, objects of white-stone carving art give us insight into the fundamental world outlook of the individual creative work of masters of sacral carving in the pre-Renaissance period. As we can assume from the analysis of research of M. Fihol and others, it is primarily represented by the idiom of local masters of Galicia. In times of ancient Rus the level of arts, particularly architecture, icon-painting, sculpture, art of metalwork etc. was “very high”⁷. The masters of Galicia entered into the Christian culture and art with their own traditions of carving methods, plot interpretation etc. Evidently, this was a basis of fundamental world outlooks of the idiom of both folk and guild masters, creators of religious carving traditions in the region. Consequently, the dynamics of sacred culture and cultural memory was based on deep ancient local traditions. In this situation, we perceive the culture of carving masters as a reproductive and creative activity on the basis of our own age-old traditions, inasmuch as creative skills, plots etc. were passed on from generation to generation.

It should be mentioned that the iconographic repertoire of church carving, as well as pictorial art, played a crucial culturological, informational and edutainment meaning, especially in times when many people were not able or did not have a possibility to read books. An example of such meaning is cited by Y. Sabadash: “This is a start of the division of cultures that existed even in the Middle Ages: between those who were able to read manuscripts and, therefore, to critically comprehend religious, philosophical and scientific problems and those who were educated exclusively with the help of icons in a church – selected and processed by their authors”⁸. Thus, symbols and signs played a significant role as a phenomenon of the sacral culture of Ukraine. In the historical continuity of preservation and transmission of cultural values the meaning of certain symbols and techniques of their carving were passed down for generations of masters. This resulted in considerable ontological and axiological importance of church carving and the important role of its creators in Ukrainian culture.

The character of these old solar symbols varies: a simple circle, a rosette flower in a circle or without it, a circle with a sidelong cross in the middle etc. It should be specified that apart from the above-mentioned symbols, we can meet other symbols on the ceramic ware of Cucuteni-Trypillia culture (7th-4th century B.C.): crosses, various rhombuses, semi-circles, triangles, volute-like scrolls etc.⁹. As the researchers believe, geometrical motifs originating from the ancient pagan beliefs and cults are

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁸ Yuliia Sabadash, “Leisure in the mass culture of the modern world (on the example of Umberto Eco's works).” *Visnyk natsionalnoi akademii kerivnykh kadrov kulturyi mystetstv: Nauk. Zhurnal*, Volume 2, 2013, p. 43.

⁹ Iryna Kodlubai; Oles’Noha, *Ancient Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainski tekhnolohii, 2000, p. 97.

the oldest ones among these symbols. The rhombus-meander pattern is considered to be one of the most ancient motifs that symbolized the mammoth in Late Palaeolithic art. It is a graphical reproduction of dentin on the section of the tusk of this animal. Re-conceptualized with the course of time, this motif served as an ideogram of fertility in land cults¹⁰.

2.2 Creativity of solar signs in sacred culture

Separate researchers of the Ukrainian history believe that the main ornamental motif in the Trypillia culture was represented by the cross (that in our opinion has a cosmological origin) and assert that artefacts of Trypillia ornaments still remain a sample of the highest pictorial art for future generations. According to this theory, the subsequent form-making that already lasts for nearly five thousand years knows nothing similar among ceramic painted graphical shapes except the repetitions (reproductions) of the well-known Trypillian one¹¹.

Many researchers noted the closeness of symbolics of Trypillia ornaments with cosmic cataclysms. And not only the Trypillia culture, but other cultures of the Copper and Bronze Ages could reflect perceptions of the past cataclysm in the history of mankind¹². Probably, it was a source of inspiration for mythology and above-mentioned ornamentation with cosmological components.

The system of pagan symbols survived in the Christian art. As P. Herchanivska justly notes, "Pagan symbols create firmly established connotative associations that were formed and fixed in the people's consciousness in the course of centuries. The system of Christian symbols that organically entered into the folk Christian art is not only an artistic and stylistic notion, but also a world-view notion connected with peculiarities of mythological thinking of people and determined mythological world outlooks and world perception. It expands the boundaries of the Christian text connecting it with folk traditions. Folk masters integrate traditional elements into the Christian symbolics in their own way... In particular, the pagan paradigm is connected with the idea of a circle in the folk Christian art - a symbol of the sacralised space, image of the world that was established in the spatial-plastic and pictorial form. It should be noted that the centric form was always associated in the people's memory as something related to world creation."¹³.

¹⁰ *Culture and Household of the Population of Ukraine*, 1991, Kyiv: Lybid, p. 185.

¹¹ Orest Khmelovskiy, *Theory of creation of character*, Lutsk: Lutskiy derzhavnyi tekhnichnyi universytet, 2000, pp. 200-201.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 196.

¹³ Polina Herchanivska, "Sign-symbolic nature of folk christian culture," *Kultura i suchasnis*, Volume 2, 2010, pp. 94-95.

Cross-like circles and rosettes symbolized fire and sun god in the ancient times. With the course of time the solar essence of the cross was reinterpreted – it became a symbol of the Christianity¹⁴. The simplest geometrical shapes as the horizontal line and undulated line most probably symbolized the earth and water (ib.). Carved motifs on facades or in interiors of houses performed protective anthropic functions¹⁵. Naturally, this is also the case of sacral buildings. A vivid example of this is the entrance facade of the church from Kryvky village of Lviv region¹⁶ decorated with various flat-and-carved motifs – indentations, rosettes, crosses in circles etc. Entrance doors of some churches have peculiar decorations: “herringbone” in the Church of Saint Michael the Archangel (1832) in Turynske village (Sanok County, Lemkivshchyna, nowadays – Podkarpackie Province, Poland), “rhombic ornament” with a vertical cross in the central rhombus in the Church of Saint Michael the Archangel (1754) in Komarno town (Horodok district, Lviv region) and other churches. There is an interesting decoration on side (northern) doors of the Church of the Annunciation (1927) in Hrebeniv village.

It is decorated with a multi-petal rosette flower in the middle and a panel with a rhombus-like layer of elements in the bottom part. However, sometimes the carving of entrance doors reflects a variety of carved plots of the Christian symbolics similar to the decoration of the holy gates, like on the entrance doors of the Church of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary from Stryi or the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity (1904) from Drohobych (the beginning of the 20th century).

Thus, the upper panels of the doors of the above-mentioned Stryi church are decorated with a realistic relief sculpture with motifs of grape vine, bunch of grapes and grape leaves, while two bottom panels are decorated with incised carving in the style of the decorated graphics of the beginning of the 20th century: there is a four-petal rosette flower in the middle with a wide leaf on the background on all four sides having an equilateral cross in a circle on every of its four edges. On two upper panels of the main entrance doors of the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Drohobych there is a typical motif of the ancient carving of the holy gates – a high-relief carved cup encircled by low-relief motifs of leaves with the Eye of Omniscience underneath.

However, as researchers believe, with the lapse of time the ornamentation of folk art nearly lost its original meaning and its decorative

¹⁴ Ivan Krypiakevych, *History of Ukraine*, Lviv: Svit, 1990, p. 185.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 186.

¹⁶ Located on the premises of Lviv Museum of Folk Architecture and Rural Life (Ukraine).

function became the most important one¹⁷. Thus, for example, the multi-petal rosette already serves as an abstract image of a flower¹⁸.

In the late 19th century - the beginning of the 20th century, solar symbols in a number of iconostases, especially those made in the Ukrainian style, are presented in the traditional manner of Hutsul or Boyko flat carving. Some vivid examples are the iconostases of the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Drohobych or the Church of the Mantle of Our Lady from Ivano-Frankivsk (Kniahynyn), as well as other items of the church interior, in particular the icon-case with the painted icon "Jesus Christ" from the same Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Drohobych. The *rosette* is one of the most widespread solar symbols of Galician sacral carving of the second part of the 19th century – the first half of the 20th century.

Rosette, a symbolized image of a flower, is one of the most popular motifs of the floral ornament that is probably related with the cult of the Sun¹⁹. These solar symbols were very popular with Slavs: they were used in the decoration of houses, furniture, household items and lingered on in art, having lost their original symbolic meaning²⁰. As researchers believe, with the strengthening of the Christianity pagan cults (including cults of the heavenly bodies) gradually disappeared, however, their symbolic images continued to exist; moreover, the same images in the art of the Kyivan Rus could have both decorative and symbolic meaning²¹. Carved rosettes decorate the sarcophagus from the Church of the Tithes (the first part of the 11th century). Each rosette is placed in the centre of a circle-like element of the ornament. Rosettes also decorate various slates in the Cathedral of St. Sophia²². Whirling, cross-like and flower-like rosettes are present in all these decorations.

The presence of cross-like rosettes can be seen as an interpretation of their interrelation with the Christian cult, since the origin of the cross is similar to the origin of solar symbols. This is particularly noticeable in the analysis of carved plates of parapets of the choir loft of the Cathedral of Our Saviour in Chernihiv. The basis of the carved composition of the plate is formed by a rhombus with inscribed rosettes. Four big rosettes are located at the corners of a rectangular plate. Two of them are cross rosettes. Therefore, the circle, the cross and the rosette were combined in a single element in the ancient Ukrainian art. Undoubtedly, this element could have the old meaning of the solar symbol, and now is used simultaneously with the cross, a symbol of the Christianity.

¹⁷ *Culture and Household of the Population of Ukraine*, 1991, Kyiv: Lybid, p. 185.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 186.

¹⁹ *Applied and Decorative Arts: Dictionary: in 2 Volumes*, 2000, Lviv: Afisha. V. 2, p. 175.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 231.

²¹ *The history of Ukrainian art: in 6 volumes* (head. Ed. M. P. Bazhan), Kyiv, URE, 1966–1970. V. 2, p. 231

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 230–233.

According to the published data, the rosette, cross, circle-like rosette and other variations of these elements were present on the Trypillia-Cucuteni ceramic ware (over 4 thousand years B.C.)²³, therefore they existed in the territory of Ukraine already in the pre-Christian period. After the Middle Ages, solar symbols in Ukrainian art revived in the decorative graphic framing of pages of printed publications, carving of icon-cases which received picturesque icons in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Thus, decorative carved ornamentation of icon-cases is sometimes aligned with the graphics of Ukrainian books of the 16th-18th centuries – it is sufficient to compare the ornamentation of framing of Ukrainian icons in the 15th-16th centuries²⁴ and framing of graphical portraits of Basil the Great from the *Ordinarius* as of 1604 from Striatyn²⁵ or St. Calista from the frontispiece of the *Didactic Gospel* as of 1606, from Krylos²⁶. Separate ornamental motifs of this framing resemble the carved motifs of not only icon-cases, but also of the holy gates in churches of Galicia in the 17th century²⁷ or the holy gates from Sopit village²⁸.

A peculiar feature of both above-mentioned engravings is the decoration in the form of the rosette flower in the bottom part. The character of the ornamentation of these printed books is distinguished by an attempt to emphasize the three-dimensional plasticity of the rosette. In the engraving that pictures the face of Basil the Great, the round rosette flower is complemented by images in both bottom corners of the semicircular rosette flower, the same as in the composition of the decorative carving of icon-cases “in the Ukrainian style” of the beginning of the 20th century, in particular in the decoration of the icon-case with the central image of Jesus Christ from the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Drohobych, in Lviv region. Thus, the decorative Ukrainian-style carving of church interior items of the early 20th century is interconnected not only with the Ukrainian decorative graphics of the early 20th century, as written before, and ornamental and compositional systems of the traditional folk art, but also with the graphics of the Ukrainian old printed books, in particular with the graphic image of Basil the Great from the Ordinal from Striatyn of the early 17th century.

It should be emphasized that compositional elements in the form of a circle or semi-circle decorate corners of graphical framings of a number of other engravings of that time, similar to the above-mentioned *Saint Calista*.

²³ Iryna Kodlubai and Oles’Noha, *Ancient Ukraine*. Lviv: Ukrainski tekhnolohii, 2000, p. 97.

²⁴ Yakym Zapasko, *Art of book on Ukraine in XVI–XVIII of century*. Lviv: Vydavnytstvo Lvivskoho Universytetu, 1971, p. 15.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

²⁷ Mykhailo Drahan, *Ukrainian decorative carving in the XVI–XVIII centuries*. Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1970, p. 34.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

All four corners of the engraving are decorated by animalistic compositions in a circle. Therefore, on one side the circle is still used as one of the transformed solar symbols (rosette flower, sun etc.) and on the other side the internal filling with animalistic elements continues traditions of the animal-like style popular in arts of other nations and the Ukrainian Middle Ages.

Solar symbols, usually in the form of a rosette flower or head of a flower, were widely used in the sacral carving in the territory of Galicia in Renaissance or Baroque ages in the same places as in ancient books – i.e. in corners. In the decoration of icon-cases they are usually situated above or under columns or pilasters that flank the painted image, as, for example, in a number of icon-cases from Galician Lemkivshchyna: from Banytsia village (1735) and others that are a part of the collection of the regional museum in Nowy Sącz (today – Lesser Poland Province, Poland²⁹). A bit later, the rosette motif in this place was replaced by the *sunflower* motif³⁰. The increasing popularity of the sunflower motif in the church decorative carving went hand in hand with the graphics. Thus, the crucifixion figure on the frontispiece of the Book of Devotions (1646) is flanked with painted compositions framed by sunflowers³¹, similar to painted medallions on the holy gates. Flowers from the page of Kyiv *Apostolus* (1722) closely resemble the sunflower³².

The motif of the rosette flower and sunflower was used in Baroque decorative carving of the holy gates in the 17th-18th centuries. A typical example is illustrated by the holy gates of the first half of the 17th century³³ from Horodok (Lviv region). The rosette flower decorates the centre and the edges of the cross located on the leaves of the gates between painted oval medallions. In the 18th century, rosette flowers interwoven into the fine open-work of both leaves of the holy gates adorn the gates from Dolyna (Ivano-Frankivsk region)³⁴.

With the course of time, the holy gates were more often decorated by heads of the sunflowers, similar to pilaster stands and icon-cross columns, what can be interpreted as further transformation of the rosette as a solar symbol. This is, first of all, the case of the holy gates decorated by the motifs of the Tree of Jesse, like the holy gates of the Church of Saint George (1874), Leshchativ village (doors from the 18th century) of Sokal district, Lviv region. Portrait sculptures of the kings and Virgin Mary with the Baby in the upper part are coming from the horizontally located head of sunflower. The similar location of the sunflower can be seen in the composition of the holy

²⁹Roman Odrekhivskiy, *Carving of Lemkivshchyna*. Lviv: Spolom, 1998, pp. 21, 24, 25.

³⁰*Ibidem*, p. 22.

³¹Yakym Zapasko, *Art of book on Ukraine in XVI – XVIII of century*, Lviv: Vydavnytstvo Lvivskoho Universytetu, 1971, p. 120.

³²*Ibidem*, p. 207.

³³*Ibidem*, p. 61.

³⁴*Ibidem*, p. 62.

gates in the Church of the Holy Trinity (the 20s of the 18th century) from Zhovkva (Lviv region). In Baroque times, the sunflower motif became popular, namely in the decoration of holy gates with the motif of the Tree of Jesse³⁵.

The sunflower motif became especially popular in the period of imitation of historical styles in the late 19th century – the early 20th century. One of the examples is represented by the holy gates from the Church of the Assumption of Mary (1904) from Stryi (Lviv region). Sunflower heads elegantly fit into the harmonic variety of other symbols (grapes, wheat ear etc.). The stylization of the sunflower in the ornamentation of these gates is very generalized and is approached to understand the rosette flower as a traditional solar symbol. The sunflower motif is powerful in the decoration of the holy gates (early 20th century) of the iconostasis of the Onuphrius Church in Lviv (**Fig. 1**).



Fig. 1. *The iconostasis of the Saint Onuphrius Church in Lviv (fragment),*
Photo: Roman Odrekivskyi.

The general principle of the gates composition vaguely resembles the ornamentation of the holy gates in the Church of Saint Paraskeva (1758) from Busk, Lviv region. The floral motif with an interwoven head of the sunflower goes vertically and straight up from the cup.

³⁵ The Tree of Jesse is a traditional image of the family tree of Jesus Christ from Adam to Joseph.

Traditions of adornment of column or pilaster stands with the solar symbol of the rosette flower, as in the decoration of icon-cases of the 17th- the 18th century, survived until the turn of the 20th century, when they were mostly used in the decoration of stands under columns that flank the holy gates or icons of the iconostases or the icon inserted into the icon-case, as in the iconostasis and some icon-cases from the Church of the Assumption of Mary (1901) in Slavske, Skole district, Lviv region. The prevalence of this ornament in the whole territory of Galicia is evidenced by the analysis of iconostases from churches of other regions of this area, for example the same parts of the iconostasis in the Church of Michael the Archangel from Yaremche (Dora) of Ivano-Frankivsk region. By its generalized forms and emphasized silhouette of the circle, the stylization of the rosette flower resembles the iconostasis from Slavske.

In view of the sculptural presentation of iconostases, the interpretation of the rosette flower in both rosettes is distinguished by the high relief of the plastics. Therefore, the rosette flower that decorates the same parts of the iconostasis in the Church of the Assumption of Mary in Yaremche is more planar, the same as the sculptural presentation of the whole carved ornamentation of the iconostasis in this church.

Solar symbols, principally in the form of a rosette, decorate a number of handmade crosses of the late 19th – the early 20th century, primarily the front side with the image of the Crucifixion, as on the handmade cross from the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Sanok. There are also cases of such decoration of the reverse side of the cross with the image of the Virgin Mary, not Jesus Christ. Consequently, cross rosettes decorate all four corners of the reverse side of the handmade cross with the image of the Virgin Mary from the Church of the Transfiguration in Volosianka village of Skole district of Lviv region.

Images of solar symbols prove the interrelation with traditional plots of icons, where solar symbols in stylized forms of the sun, moon and similar symbols were pictured in the upper part of a number of icons, flanking the plot of the Crucifixion³⁶. Evidently, this composition of the icon influenced the composition of the corresponding part of the seven-pointed cross from Maniava analyzed above (**Fig. 2**). The middle part of the Crucifixion image is flanked by the sun on the right and the moon on the left³⁷.

Two opposite heavenly powers - the Sun and the Moon - are pictured on the cross. The problem of their interaction excited the imagination of humans since olden times. As researchers note, these are the symbols and

³⁶ The Crucifixion from Vovche village of Lviv region. End of the 16th century. National Museum of Lviv. Ind. No. 25366/1-1730 and a number of other icons.

³⁷ As on the icon "The Passion of Christ" from Skole, the first half of the 17th century (National Museum of Lviv) No. 36609/i 2278 and many others.

natural forms of the duality in the society – a man and a woman³⁸. Semantics of these and other cosmological symbols and their association with social philosophy present topics for future scientific research. The cult of cosmological symbols could not exist by itself. It had to be connected to the social life, to traditions and laws of everyday life.



Fig. 2. Cross from Maniava. Photo: Roman Odrekhiivskyi.

Planking of the upper part of a composition by symbols of the sun on the right and of the moon on the left side from Jesus can be found in ancient Ukrainian books, in particular on the illustration in “Book on the Priesthood” (1614)³⁹, where the Crucifixion on the cross is flanked by four figures of the Standing, the same as in the carved ornaments on handmade wooden crosses of the second half of the 19th century – the early 20th century. In compositions of handmade carved crosses of the 17th century – the 18th century, the image of the Crucifixion was surrounded by way more figures than on engravings. A typical example is the handmade cross (1683) from the Castle Museum in

³⁸ Orest Khmelovskiy, *Theory of creation of character*, Lutsk: Lutskiy derzhavnyi tekhnichnyi universytet, 2000, p. 197.

³⁹ Yakym Zapasko, *Art of book on Ukraine in XVI – XVIII of century*, Lviv: Vydavnytstvo Lvivskoho Universytetu, 1971, p. 93.

Łańcut⁴⁰. The figure of Jesus Christ in the composition of this cross is flanked by a great number of figures of the Standing. These figures are so schematic that it is difficult to carry out any specific analysis and identify each one of them in accordance with the Gospels. Most of the figures are located behind the row of the front figures. We can see only upper parts and nimbi of figures from the back rows. This diversification is additionally underlined by the height of the relief: the back figures with only upper parts of heads visible are performed in the lower relief.

This versatility and creation of the effect of a great number of people by the difference of heights between the front row and the back row of figures is practically absent in handmade crosses of the second half of the 10th century – the first half of the 20th century. In separate cases, the figure of the crucified Jesus in compositions of handmade crosses from the 17th-18th centuries was flanked only by two figures of the Standing. However, this scene was complemented by multi-figure scenes of the Standing with diversified heights of the relief on other edges of the cross, as for example on the cross from 1678 in the museum of Przemyśl Land⁴¹. In crosses of the second half of the 19th century - the first half of the 20th century, figures in such scenes were pictured more ornamentally and, as a rule, either on the same height or on different heights of the relief as compared to the figure of the crucified Saviour.

Solar symbols also decorate carved crosses on the memorial carved ornaments of Galicia of the late 19th – the early 20th century. Mostly, only the objects of stone carving from that period survived until now. For example, the distinguishing feature of crosses with the Crucifixion from Brusno in Lubaczów County (today Podkarpackie Voivodeship of Poland) is the absence of the traditional cartouche in the upper part of the cross with the inscription INRI⁴². Instead, the cross rosette is pictured in this place having either the bold relief projecting above the background in some cases or the concave relief deepened into the background⁴³. In rare cases, similar to carving of separate handmade wooden crosses, solar symbols in the memorial carving decorate the cross not only above the Crucifixion, but also under it, as on the cross belonging to the same Brusno stone-cutting school (1908, Bobiatyn village, Sokal district, Lviv region). Concave carved rosettes adorn the cross: one – under the figure of the Crucifixion, and two – below the Crucifixion, flanking the cup decorated with the bold relief carving⁴⁴. Therefore, the ancient solar symbols – primarily in the form of the rosette,

⁴⁰ Castle Museum in Łańcut. Ind. No. 12030 (Poland).

⁴¹ Museum of Przemyśl Land. Ind. No. 1534. (Poland).

⁴² Roman Odrekhiivskiy, "The Village of Brusno as a Centre of Stone Crafts." *Mystetstvoznavstvo* 2000. Lviv, 2001, p. 91.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, pp. 61-62.

⁴⁴ Roman Odrekhiivskiy, "The Memorial Stone Sculpture of Sokal Region, Late XIXth – Early XXth cc." *Narodoznavchi zoshyty*. Iviv. Volume 2, 1999, pp. 252-253.

sun, moon, head of a flower – were widely used in the decorative carving in Galicia in the second half of the 19th - first half of the 20th century.

2.3 The value of the character system

Ancient cosmological symbols accompanied both the everyday life and the religious cult of Ukrainians. They contained a deep philosophical symbolism and symbolized, as we assume, the well-being and success in endeavours. Their anthropoid and other functions are also under-investigated. We share the opinion of other researchers that with the course of time the ornamentation of these symbols lost its ancient meaning and their decorative function came out on top⁴⁵. Thus, images of the star, moon, sun, cosmic nebula have already been perceived as purely decorative elements, although they appeared as cosmological symbols with many above-mentioned meanings and properties and, as we assume, with the applied cult meaning.

Evidently, since the time of origination of the Christianity symbolic symbols (including former cosmological ones) underwent a certain evolution of development. At the early stage of their existence, Christians used secret symbols that “pagans did not understand” hiding from persecutions⁴⁶. Among them there were symbolic hidden crosses (anchor, ornaments with a cross, and cross on the Eucharistic bread)⁴⁷. The cross in pre-Christian images was assessed as a solar symbol, and therefore a cosmological symbol.

These symbols re-emerged in the church carving of the 19th century – the early 20th century, such as the image of the anchor and laurel wreath on the side wall of tetrapods or altars in a number of cathedral (tetrapod - the Church of the Assumption of Mary from Boryslav (Mrazhnytsia), Lviv region, 1929, altar - the Church of Saint Nicholas in Lviv of the early 20th century and others.

At the turn of the 20th century the images of the *anchor*⁴⁸ and *laurel wreath* can be also met in the cemetery memorial carving of many places in Galicia. Thus, hidden Christian symbols from the catacomb times were reproduced at the turn of the 20th century.

After 313 year A.D., i.e. after the official recognition of the Christianity in the Roman Empire, these hidden symbols were no longer necessary (Krekhovetskyi, 2000, p. 45)⁴⁹, and Christians started to use open images, such as the fish, the lamb, the image of Jesus Christ as the God-man,

⁴⁵ *Culture and Household of the Population of Ukraine*, Kyiv: Lybid, 1991, p. 187.

⁴⁶ Orest Khmelovskiy, *Theory of creation of character*, Lutsk: Lutskiy derzhavnyi tekhnichnyi universytet, 2000, p. 35.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

⁴⁸ Anchor - the hidden cross of Jesus as a symbol of resistance in faith (a boat symbolized the church) from the catacomb times of the Christianity (Krekhovetskyi, 2000, p. 28).

⁴⁹ Orest Khmelovskiy, *Theory of creation of character*, Lutsk: Lutskiy derzhavnyi tekhnichnyi universytet, 2000, p. 45.

as well as the image of the Crucifixion that was not used until the 4th century⁵⁰. In the 4th century, relief carved works and statues with the image of Jesus Christ - the Good Shepherd - appeared in addition to fresco paintings⁵¹.

As P. Herchanivska rightfully mentioned, “in the communicative and transmitting process, the folk Christian culture presents a symbolic system that helps to exchange the religious information between individuals in the spatial-temporal system of coordinates, as well as the connection between a believer and the transcendental reality (God).

This is an open dynamic system that originated and developed on the basis of religious consciousness which contains the Christian, pagan and household components. Syncretism of the Christian and pagan symbolics, generalization and abstractness of meaning of symbols, polysemanticism of their comprehension are the main peculiarities of the symbolic system in the cultural traditions of the Ukrainian people. Notwithstanding certain transformations of separate elements of the symbolic system that took place in time of transfer from one system of coordinates to another, the symbolism as a property of the folk Christian culture remains invariant”⁵².

Conclusions

Thus, cosmological symbols that traditionally adorned the interior and exterior of the Ukrainian churches had a deep symbolical meaning. As a consequence, we can conclude that a number of pagan symbols were gradually, harmonically and organically included into the everyday Christian symbolics, whereas while being in the church an individual stayed in the holistic world, not in the chaotic and controversial one that existed outside the church. In our next research we will provide insight into the interpretation of symbolics of cosmological symbols for the agricultural, hunting and other rituals of the ancient Ukrainians and characteristics of the graphic forms of their images.

List and source of illustrations:

Figure 1. The iconostasis of the Saint Onuphrius Church in Lviv (fragment). Photo: Roman Odrekhivskyi

Figure 2. Cross from Maniava. Photo: Roman Odrekhivskyi.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁵² Polina Herchanivska, “Sign-symbolic nature of folk christian culture,” *Kultura i suchasnis*, Volume 2, 2010, p. 35.

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MEDIEVAL CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

The Inverse Perspective – from Byzantine Iconography to the Modernist Avant-Garde

Alexandru Șerbănescu *

Abstract: In this paper I propose to explore the evolution throughout the history of arts, of the dogmatization, theorization and the reappearance in modernity of what we call Reverse Perspective – a technique of visual representation that structures the pictorial space towards the viewer, instead of having one or more vanishing points, in the distance, somewhere on the horizon. Starting with Byzantine iconography and European medieval art, I would like to point out, how this reverse perspective did not result as a lack of technical skills, but as a sophisticated theological tool designed to create a “sacred space”. By integrating several simultaneous points of view and parallel constructions, the icon invited the viewer's liturgical participation and represented divine eternity, not earthly illusion. We further note how modernist movements, especially Cubism and the Russian avant-garde adopted these methods of medieval spatial representations. Although the techniques of fragmented planes and simultaneous viewpoints have been preserved, they have been reinvented to serve secular, epistemic and aesthetic purposes. A comparative analysis shows that although both the Byzantine and Western-Medieval and Modernist representations of spatiality reject the Renaissance linear perspective, they do so for divergent purposes: one to reveal sacred presence, the other to explore the mechanics of perception and temporal simultaneity.

Keywords: Perspective, Reverse Perspective, Byzantine iconography, medieval perspective representation, modernism, avant-garde, cubism, divergent perspective.

Introduction

Perspective is a fundamental concept in art, which allows artists to create the illusion of depth and three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional

* Associate Professor Alexandru Șerbănescu PhD, Faculty of Arts, “OVIDIUS” University from Constanța, ORCID: 0009-0002-2844-4060, alex.serbanescu@live.com, alexandru.serbanescu@365.univ-ovidius.ro

surface. It is the technique used to represent objects as they appear to the eye, taking into account their size, position and distance from the viewer.

Understanding Perspective is crucial for artists because it allows them to accurately describe space, proportion, and scale in their artworks.

Essentially, Perspective is based on the principle that objects appear smaller and closer together as they retreat into the distance. This concept is derived from the way our eyes perceive the world. When we look at objects in the distance, they appear smaller and less detailed compared to objects that are closer to us. Artists use Perspective to recreate this visual phenomenon on a flat surface, such as a canvas or piece of paper.

The history of perspective in art is a complex and ever-evolving topic that has fascinated scientists and artists alike over time. In traditional Western art, the concept of Perspective was predominantly understood in terms of Linear Perspective, which aimed to create the illusion of depth and space on a two-dimensional surface. However, in certain non-Western cultures and artistic traditions, such as Byzantine iconography, a different approach known as the Reverse Perspective was used.

The use of Perspective in art has a long and fascinating history. This can be traced back to ancient civilizations such as ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, where artists began to experiment with depicting objects in a more realistic manner. However, during the Renaissance period in Europe, Perspective really flourished as a technique.

Perspective plays a crucial role in creating realistic and believable works of art. Without an understanding of Perspective, artists would strive to accurately represent the spatial relationships between objects, resulting in flat, unrealistic images. Perspective allows artists to create depth, dimension, and a sense of realism in their work, thus making it an essential skill for any aspiring artist.

The study of Perspective opens up a wide world of possibilities for artists. It allows them to create compelling landscapes, architectural drawings, still life compositions, and even abstract artwork. By understanding the principles of Perspective, artists can manipulate space and create dynamic and visually appealing compositions. The perspective also provides a solid foundation for exploring other artistic techniques and styles.

Far from being an “incorrect” or “primitive” precursor of Renaissance Linear Perspective realism, reverse perspective turns out to be a coherent and assumed visual language.¹ Organizing the image to provide a different kind of experience – one based on participation, not merely observation. This system allows for the simultaneous presentation of multiple facets of an object or multiple moments in time, creating a “divine simultaneity” that overcomes the limitations of human optics/perception.

¹ Pavel Florensky, “Reverse Perspective” in *Beyond Vision*, 2002, p. 202.

Inverse or Reverse Perspective deviates from the principles of Linear Perspective by projecting space outwards towards the viewer, creating a sense of intimacy and connection between the viewer and the artwork. This unique perspective thus challenges Western concepts of spatial representation in art and opens up new possibilities for interpreting cultural and artistic meanings. The exploration of Inverse Perspective in art history sheds light on the diversity and multiplicity of visual modes of representation in different cultures and periods, highlighting the richness and complexity of artistic expression.

In the early twentieth century, this system was rediscovered and theorized by researchers such as Pavel Florensky², who presented it as a superior metaphysical system compared to the “deception” of linear perspective³. This theoretical bridge allowed modernist artists, especially within Cubism, to adopt non-perspective spatial strategies for their own experiments in fragmentation and simultaneity. This paper endeavors to punctuate this trajectory, focusing on the transition from the theological participation of the icon to the secularized explorations of the modern avant-garde.

The Geometry of the Sacred: Reverse Perspective in Byzantine and Western-Medieval Art

Throughout Art History, the representation of space and depth has been a central concern for artists. An interesting aspect of this exploration is the concept of Inverse Perspective, a technique designed to challenge the traditional rules of Linear Perspective by reversing the direction of convergence of parallel lines. While Linear Perspective creates the illusion of depth by having parallel lines converge towards a single vanishing point, Reverse Perspective pushes objects away from the viewer, giving the impression that space is expanding. This unique approach to spatial representation has been used in different cultures and periods, often serving aesthetic, symbolic, or spiritual purposes. By examining examples of Reverse Perspective in iconography and art history, we can have a deeper understanding of the ways in which artists have manipulated visual elements to create dynamic and engaging compositions.

The history of Artistic Perspective is often presented as a technological evolution towards the refinement of linear perspective, a system formalized during the Renaissance to simulate the optical experience of the depth of space. However, this narrative overlooks a deeply entrenched

² Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky Russian polymath, (1882 –1937) Russian Orthodox theologian, priest, philosopher, mathematician, physicist, engineer, inventor.

³ Vasile Cristescu, “The reverse perspective in the orthodox iconography according to P. Florenski a dogmatic perspective”, *European Journal of Science and Theology*, March 2009, Vol.5, No.1, p. 41-50.

alternative: the Reverse Perspective. “The term *Umgekehrte Perspektive* (Inverse Perspective) was introduced by Oskar Wulff at the beginning of the twentieth century.” Found predominantly in Byzantine iconography and European medieval art, the reverse perspective organizes the pictorial space in such a way that the vanishing lines and planes seem to concentrate or converge towards the viewer.

In exploring the origins of Reverse Perspective, it is essential to delve into its historical evolution in the visual arts. Attempts at Perspective can be traced back to ancient Greek and Roman art, where the emphasis was on creating a sense of depth through divergent lines that recede into the distance. However, it was not until the Byzantine and medieval periods that Reverse Perspective began to emerge as a distinct technique in iconography, especially in religious art. The shift to the use of Reverse Perspective allowed artists to convey a more symbolic and spiritual interpretation of space, aligning with the metaphysical concepts prevalent in religious narratives. This unique approach to Perspective challenged traditional methods, providing a fresh and innovative way to represent the world around us.

The roots of inverse perspective lie in the artistic traditions of Late Antiquity, where symbolic representation often took precedence over naturalistic depiction. Early Christian art inherited a preference for hieratic scale, flattened space, and frontal figures from Roman and Near Eastern traditions. Cyril Mango notes that early Christian artists “sought not to imitate nature but to reveal spiritual truth,” a principle that would shape Byzantine art for centuries.⁴

The Iconoclastic Controversy (726–843) played a decisive role in defining the theological and aesthetic principles of iconography. Iconoclasts rejected images as idolatrous, while iconodules defended them as essential expressions of the Incarnation. After the Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843, the Church articulated a theology of the icon that emphasized its role as a window to the divine, not a naturalistic representation of the material world.² This theological framework encouraged an artistic style that avoided illusionism, which could imply that icons were mere imitations rather than manifestations of divine presence.

By the Middle Byzantine period (10th–12th centuries), inverse perspective had become a stable and codified convention. Manuals such as the *Hermeneia* of Dionysius of Fournas⁵ preserved the rules of iconographic composition, ensuring continuity across centuries and regions.

Byzantine and medieval icons use a visual system that organizes the pictorial space towards the viewer, allowing for multiple simultaneous planes

⁴ Cyril Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, Columbia University Press, 1986.

⁵ Dionysius was the first painter of the post-Byzantine period who wrote an artists’ manual for the Eastern Orthodox painting art: he recorded and described in his treatise ‘*Hermeneia of Art Painting*’ the materials and construction techniques of the 18th century Christian painting.

of visibility. This strategy is fundamentally related to the inherent, theological nature of the icon, which prioritizes the creation of the sacred presence at the expense of the illusion of reality.

Features of reverse perspective include the use of lines that do not converge to a single internal vanishing point, be it central or lateral. Instead, these lines are often divergent, making objects such as buildings, thrones, or chairs appear wider in the far plane than in the foreground⁶. This produces an effect of expansion towards the viewer, effectively “wrapping” the image around the viewer's space, instead of retreating to a distant and inaccessible horizon.

Key technical elements include: Planar construction – Icons often use “additional planes”⁷ or “simultaneous planes”⁸ that allow multiple points of view of an object to be readable at once. This allows the artist to show the top, front, and sides of an object simultaneously, providing a perspective that is not limited by a single human point of view, but is “ubiquitous.”

Multiple vanishing points: Instead of a single point of convergence, the icon can present multiple vanishing points that relate to different elements of the composition, creating a fragmented but unified space that opposes the interpretation of the Renaissance perspective.

Scale and proportion: Figures and objects are often depicted on scale according to their theological importance (hierarchical scale) rather than physical distance from the viewer. A saint may appear larger than a mountain or a building to signify spiritual domination over the physical world.

One of the key concepts in drawing and painting in Perspective is the idea of creating the illusion of depth on a flat surface. This is achieved by using lines, shapes, and vanishing points, which help create the sense of space and dimensionality in an image. There are two main types of Perspective used in art: Linear Perspective and Atmospheric Perspective. Linear Perspective therefore involves creating the illusion of depth by using convergent lines that recede into the distance, while Atmospheric Perspective uses changes in color and value to suggest depth and distance in a painting.

The theological function of these techniques/strategies is to make the sacred accessible to the viewer, the mortal. Reverse perspective cancels out the viewer's inner process of self-centering, preventing him from being a detached observer of a distant scene. Instead, it invites participation, where the viewer enters the sacramental present of the represented reality Fig.1.

By rejecting the “realistic way” of showing what exists, the icon combines the material element with abstract representation through the action

⁶ Clemena Antonova. “On the Problem of “Reverse Perspective: Definitions East and West” *Leonardo*, Vol. 43, No. 5, 2010, p. 464.

⁷ Pavel Florensky, “Reverse Perspective” in *Beyond Vision*, 2002, p. 201.

⁸ Clemena Antonova, *Space, Time and Presence in the Icon*, p. 114.

of divine grace. It expresses “divine simultaneity”, where events and people exist in a state of timeless eternity, rather than in linear, historical time. This creates a sacred space in which the image looks back at the viewer, facilitating a dialogue with the prayerful viewer.⁹

Leonid Uspensky states that the icon “makes present what it represents,” cancelling the distance between the earthly and heavenly worlds.¹⁰

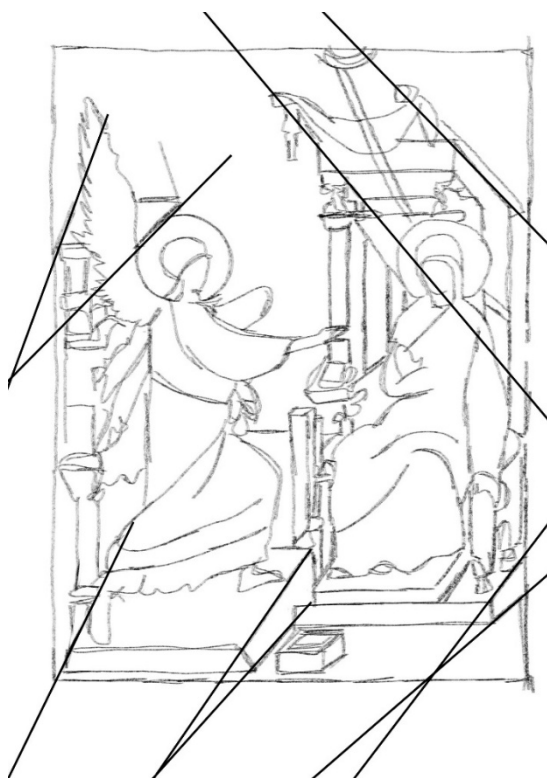


Fig. 1. Sketch after a Byzantine icon, perspective directions.

The reverse perspective is one of the mechanisms by which this presence is visualized. Instead of drawing the viewer into a closed pictorial world, the icon projects its space outwards, inviting the viewer to a participatory encounter with the divine.

Leonid Uspensky states that the icon “makes present what it represents,” cancelling the distance between the earthly and heavenly worlds.¹ The reverse perspective is one of the mechanisms by which this

⁹ Pavel Florensky, “Reverse Perspective” in *Beyond Vision*, 2002, p. 264.

¹⁰ Leonid Uspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, vol. 1 (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), p.45.

presence is visualized. Instead of drawing the viewer into a closed pictorial world, the icon projects its space outwards, inviting the viewer to a participatory encounter with the divine.

Sacred Geometry: Pavel Florensky

An emblematic figure in this technique is the Russian polymath Pavel Florensky, whose seminal work “Reverse Perspective” (1920) created a conceptual bridge between Byzantine dogma and modern aesthetics. Florensky's theory combined mathematical rigor, including non-Euclidean geometry, with patristic theology to define the icon as a metaphysical window. This theoretical framework significantly influenced the avant-garde of the early twentieth century.

Florensky used his experience in advanced mathematics to argue that linear perspective is an artificial convention that is based on a “monocular” principle, which does not reflect the live experience of human vision. He linked the spatial structure of the icon to non-Euclidean geometry, suggesting that the space of the icon represents a more complex and “true” reality than the three-dimensional Euclidean space of Renaissance art.¹¹ A central example in Florensky's metaphysics was Andrei Rublev's icon of the “Trinity” Fig.2. He famously remarked, “Rublev's trinity exists, so God exists”, framing the icon as the core of his symbolic concept and metaphysics of reverse perspective. For Florensky, the existence of such a perfect spiritual form was empirical proof of the divine reality it represented. The drawings that illustrate Florensky's reverse hand perspective reveal his deep commitment to the formal peculiarities of the icon as a superior art form.¹²

His theoretical framework combined mathematical description, patristic theology, and symbolic aesthetics. He described the geometry of the icon in terms of “additional planes” that allow several viewpoints to be readable simultaneously, a geometric formalism meant to correspond to the theological content of the icon. This was not a simple stylistic choice, but a systematic way of recording theological statements about eternity and the viewer's relationship to the sacred image.¹³

His work at the VKhUTEMAS (Higher State Art-Technical Studios) in Moscow allowed him to teach these spatial theories and Perspective to a new generation of artists. This position as an official in art conservation allowed him to make the connection between medieval theology and modern industrial/artistic workshops.¹⁴

¹¹ Clemena Antonova, “Non-Euclidean Geometry in Russian Art History: On a Little-known Application of a Scientific Theory”, *Leonardo*, vol. 53, no. 1, pp. 88-92, 2020.

¹² Oleg Tarasov, *How Divine Images Became Art*, Open Book Publishers, 2024, p.121.

¹³ Pavel Florensky, “Reverse Perspective” in *Beyond Vision*, 2002, pp. 201, 203, 206.

¹⁴ *Idem*, *Beyond Vision*, 2002, pp. 71-75.

In the early twentieth century, modernist artists found deep affinities between the medieval “simultaneity” of icons and their own experiments in fracturing pictorial space. Florensky's theoretical language provided a conceptual framework that allowed artists to “read” medieval images through the lens of modern aesthetics.



Fig. 2. Andrei Rublev, “Holy Trinity”, Moscow 1420s, Levkas and tempera on wood 142x114 cm. Tretyakov Gallery.

This unique approach to describing space opens up a dialogue between artist and audience, prompting a deeper engagement with the artwork. As suggested, Reverse Perspective can be seen as a form of visual storytelling that transcends cultural boundaries, providing a universal language that speaks to the complexity of human perception. Through its

departure from traditional artistic conventions, Reverse Perspective has the power to evoke a sense of wonder and contemplation, inviting viewers to explore new ways of seeing and understanding the world around them.

Exploring iconography and symbolism in Reverse Perspective reveals a rich tapestry of visual stories that challenge traditional spatial constructions. By intentionally distorting the conventional rules of depth and distance, artists are able to imbue their compositions with layers of hidden meaning and symbolic significance. In the context of religious art, this technique can be particularly powerful, as the manipulation of Perspective invites the viewer to engage in spiritual storytelling in a more engaging and contemplative manner.

Comparison with Western Medieval and Renaissance Art

The contrast with Western art is instructive. By the 14th and 15th centuries, Western painters increasingly pursued naturalism, culminating in the mathematically precise linear perspective of Brunelleschi and Alberti. This approach assumes a single, fixed viewer and a world organized around human perception.

Eastern iconography, by contrast, maintained a symbolic, multi-perspectival approach. Space in icons is often constructed from several viewpoints simultaneously, reflecting the idea that divine reality cannot be contained within a single human vantage point. Inverse perspective is one expression of this broader principle.

Inverse perspective in medieval Eastern Orthodox iconography is far more than an artistic quirk. It is a visual theology—a way of expressing the relationship between the human and the divine. By reversing the rules of naturalistic space, icons create a world that reaches out toward the viewer, inviting participation rather than observation. This technique embodies the core Orthodox understanding of icons as windows not into a distant past but into the living, active presence of God.

Icons often employ stacked or overlapping planes rather than deep recession. Mountains fold open, buildings tilt forward, and thrones expand outward. These distortions are symbolic, not naturalistic. Manolis Chatzidakis notes that the icon “abolishes the tyranny of natural space in order to reveal the freedom of spiritual space.”¹⁵

In this sense, inverse perspective is not merely a stylistic choice but a profound statement about the nature of spiritual reality: the Kingdom of God is not receding into the distance but drawing near.

Western Medieval art initially shared with Byzantium a symbolic and didactic function. Romanesque frescoes and Gothic stained glass often

¹⁵ Manolis Chatzidakis, *Studies in Byzantine*, Art. Pindar Press, 1985.

exhibit hierarchical composition, flattened space, and theological narrative emphasis.

However, Western art gradually incorporated greater naturalism, influenced by scholastic interest in the material world, Aristotelian philosophy, the rise of universities, increased attention to human emotion and narrative detail.

By the 13th century, artists such as Giotto introduced volumetric bodies, spatial depth, and emotional realism. This marked a decisive departure from Byzantine abstraction.

The Renaissance redefined the purpose of art. Humanist philosophy placed the human being at the centre of intellectual inquiry. Consequently:

Linear perspective (Brunelleschi, Alberti) created mathematically ordered space.

Anatomical accuracy (Leonardo, Michelangelo) reflected empirical study.

Chiaroscuro and sfumato modelled bodies in natural light.

Art became a means of exploring nature, individuality, and human emotion, rather than revealing the divine.

While still religious in subject, Renaissance art shifted toward: narrative realism, psychological depth, the beauty of the created world.

This contrasts sharply with the Byzantine insistence that beauty is spiritual, not naturalistic.

The comparison between Byzantine iconography and Western Medieval/Renaissance art reveals two fundamentally different conceptions of the image. Byzantine art is rooted in theology, liturgy, and the metaphysics of presence, aiming to reveal the divine. Western art, especially from the Renaissance onward, is grounded in humanism, naturalism, and empirical observation, aiming to represent the visible world.

These divergent paths illustrate how art reflects broader cultural and philosophical orientations. Byzantium sought the unchanging truth of the heavenly realm, while the West pursued the changing truth of the human experience.

Transition to Modernism

The transition from traditional-dogmatic to modern spatial experimentation is often studied through the work of Paul Cézanne¹⁶. Although Cézanne did not explicitly set out to reproduce Byzantine icons, his intuitive search for a way to represent the “truth” of perception led him to similar geometric solutions.

¹⁶ Paul Cézanne (1839 –1906) French Post-Impressionist painter whose work introduced new modes of plastic representation, influenced the avant-garde artistic currents of the early twentieth century, and created a bridge between nineteenth-century Impressionism and twentieth-century Cubism.

We note Cézanne's use of "perspective wedges" to represent depth. In works such as *Still Life with Apples* Fig.3, he eschewed classical methods of rendering depth, emphasizing instead vanishing points that seem to advance towards the viewer. This approach creates a "new space" that reflects a *trompe-l'œil* effect, where objects are represented from several slightly different angles to capture the sensation of spatiality, of three-dimensionality.¹⁷



Fig. 3. Paul Cézanne, "Still Life with Apple Basket" 1890-94.

Cézanne's techniques of representing space served as a bridge towards Cubist fragmentation. By breaking the perspective, the single point, and allowing the pictorial structure to become more explicit, he paved the way for modernism, which treats the plane of painting as a place of structural experimentation, not as a window.

¹⁷ Ivana Marcicic and Marijana Paunović, "Inverse perspective in Cézanne's art," *FME Transactions*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 301–308, 2017.

Cubism and the fragmentation of the object

A significant shift in artistic representation has occurred with the evolution of Reverse Perspective in art. This innovative technique, unlike traditional Linear Perspective, presented a unique way of describing depth and spatial relationships in a composition. One such example is Pablo Picasso's *Birds in a Cage*. The adoption of Reverse Perspective in artistic works challenges the viewer's perception and generates dynamic visual experiences. In iconography, this unconventional approach can convey symbolic meanings or spiritual messages by distorting and redefining the viewer place (point of view) in relation with the subject of the icon. Thus in cubism the viewer sees "all" whereas in byzantine iconography the viewer becomes part of / in the middle of "all".



Fig. 4. George Braque, "Violin and Jug", 1910.

Cubist artists such as Picasso¹⁸ and Braque¹⁹ used fragmented planes and multiple observation points to represent objects from time and space in a single pictorial plane (Fig.4). Although often discussed in terms of analytical or synthetic reconstruction of objects, these strategies share a formal line with the “simultaneous planes” of the Byzantine icon. Cubist painters used reverse perspective to represent multiple facets of an object simultaneously, while also showing the hidden parts. They thus advocated a form of stereoscopic vision that approached how people actually process visual information—as a series of integrated perspectives, not as a single frame or moment²⁰.

Analysing the cultural significance of Reverse Perspective, it becomes apparent that this artistic technique has far-reaching implications beyond its visual appeal. The Reverse Perspective challenges traditional Western notions of depth and space, providing a new Perspective that is more in line with Eastern artistic principles. By undermining the conventional rules of Perspective, artists can convey alternative narratives and emotions, inviting viewers to question their preconceived notions of reality.

The Cubist movement fully embraced the logic of multipoint inherent in the inverse perspective. Cubism synthesized different points of view in order to access new dimensions of existence and represent objects more completely than linear perspective would allow.

Both Byzantine and Western-Medieval iconographic representation, as well as the modernist one, use multiple points of view and coexisting and fragmentary flight of planes. Both project space to the viewer, creating a dynamic field of view.

A fundamental aspect of understanding Reverse Perspective in art lies in the field of interpretation and perception. The way viewers perceive a work of art can have a significant impact on their experience and understanding. When encountering a piece that uses Reverse Perspective, viewers may find themselves challenged to reconsider their traditional notions of depth and space within composition. This redefinition of spatial relationships can lead to a change in interpretation, causing viewers to interact with the artwork in a more active and attentive manner.

¹⁸ Pablo Ruiz Picasso, (1881 – 1973) Spanish painter, sculptor, ceramist, set designer. One of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, known as a co-founder of the Cubist movement.

¹⁹ Georges Braque (1882 – 1963) one of the greatest French painters, collaguenists, graphic designers and sculptors of the twentieth century. His most notable contributions were to the Fauvist movement and to the role he played in the development of the Cubist movement.

²⁰ Pavel Florensky, *Metaphysics and Reverse Perspective Beyond Vision*, 2002, p.169.

Conclusions

Reverse perspective represents a fundamental alternative to the Western tradition of linear perspective, offering a visual system based on participation and simultaneity. In the Byzantine and medieval periods, these techniques were theologically essential, creating a “sacred space” that allowed the divine to interact with the human viewer. The return of this system in the twentieth century, mediated by the theoretical works of Pavel Florensky, provided a crucial conceptual basis for the avant-garde of the early twentieth century.

Art historians have noted the prevalence of the Inverse Perspective in different cultural contexts, emphasizing its significance in changing conventional modes of representation. As artists experimented with spatial manipulation and deviated from traditional techniques, the evolution of Reverse Perspective in art presents a departure from established norms and a reimagining of visual language. Further studies could delve into the cultural implications and stylistic innovations associated with the adoption of Reverse Perspective in different art movements.

By theorizing “dogmatic perspective” and the “iconographic space”, Florensky allowed modern and contemporary artists to rediscover the power of the non-perspective or neo-perspective image. Although modernists secularized these techniques, they retained the essence of the icon and its ability to challenge the limits of human perception. The history of reverse perspective thus reveals a continuous, albeit transformed, search to represent realities that exist “beyond sight”, demonstrating that the flat surface of the avant-garde icon or canvas is often deeper and more complex than the most sophisticated illusion.

Additionally, the interpretation of Reverse Perspective can vary between individuals, influenced by factors such as cultural background, artistic knowledge, and personal experiences. Understanding how viewers perceive and interpret Reverse Perspective in art is essential for researchers and art historians trying to uncover the complexity of this technique and its impact on artistic expression.

Through a critical analysis that incorporates these Perspectives, it emerges that the Reverse Perspective serves as a powerful mechanism for challenging traditional ways of viewing and understanding visual art, leading viewers to engage with the artwork in a more dynamic and challenging manner.

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Fig. 1 Sketch after a Byzantine icon, perspective directions.

Fig. 2 Andrei Rublev, Holy Trinity, Moscow 1420s, Levkas and tempera on wood 142x114 cm. Tretyakov Gallery. Image accessed at 8.04.2026 - https://www.tretykovgallerymagazine.com/sites/default/files/illustrations/art_02_01.jpg.

Fig. 3 Paul Cézanne, „Still Life with Apple Basket” 1890-94 Image accessed at 8.04.2026 - <https://www.paulcezanne.org/still-life-with-basket-of-apples.jsp>.

Fig. 4 George Braque, Violin and Jug, image accessed at 8.04.2026 - <https://mrgntmthy.wordpress.com/2014/02/08/george-braque-violin-and-jug/>

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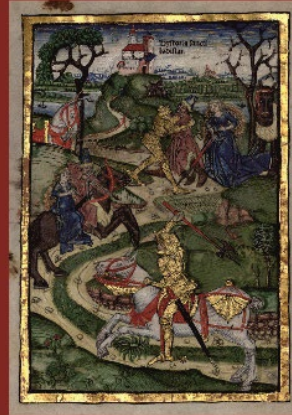
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BOOK REVIEWS

New Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Saint Ladislaus

Ana-Magdalena Petraru*

Athleta Christi–Athleta Transylvaniae: reprezentări ale Sfântului Ladislau în artă și în literatură/ Athleta Christi–Athleta Transylvaniae: Representations of Saint Ladislaus in Art and Literature, ed. by Susana-Monica Tapodi and Valentin Trifescu, Editura Muzeului Național Brukenthal, Sibiu, 2024, 100 pages



Athleta Christi - Athleta Transylvaniae

Reprezentări ale Sfântului Ladislau
în artă și în literatură

Ediție îngrijită de
Susana-Monica Tapodi și Valentin Trifescu
Editura Muzeului Național Brukenthal

The present volume contains two main studies on Saint Ladislaus and a Romanian translation from Hungarian of a poem on his legend, with an enlightening preface, a comprehensive bibliography and a rich list of illustrations.

According to the prefacer, art historian Valentin Trifescu, the book contributes to a better communion between Romanians and Hungarians in Transylvania; he argues that openness towards alterity is required in the context, along with mutual knowledge which needs constant maintaining through a series of translations from a language into another. V. Trifescu was astonished that besides few specialists¹, Romanians were unaware of Ladislaus I (1040-1095), king of Hungary and saint of the Catholic Church, buried in

* Lecturer, PhD, Faculty of Letters, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. E-mail:

alina.petraru@gmail.com.

¹ For more details, see Vasile Drăguț: „Legenda «eroului de frontieră» în pictura medievală din Transilvania”/ “The Legend of the ‘Border Hero’ in Medieval Painting from Transylvania”, in *Revista Muzeelor și Monumentelor*, series *Monumente istorice și de artă*, tom 2, 1974, pp. 21-38. Other more recent studies were authored by Dragoș-Gheorghe Năstăsioiu, Elena Dana Prioteasa, Doina Elena Crăciun, Anca Gogăltan and Vladimir Agrișoroiu.

Oradea, who fought for the defense of the inter Carpathian territory and Christianity against migrating pagans. This is the motivation that led to the current research, for Romanian readers to become acquainted with the saint in his literary and artistic Hungarian/ Szekely dimensions. The saint was present in the daily lives of Romanians living in the old Hungarian kingdom as certain elite members gave their children his name and ordered paintings depicting him; this is the case of the churches in Ribița and Crișcior, Hunedoara county where the monarch is portrayed at the beginning of the 15th century along St. Stephen and St. Emeric in the scene of the Three Hungarian Saints. He was also mentioned by our Moldavian chroniclers as 'Laslău' and several Hungarian localities bear his name (pp. 5-6).

V. Trifescu also capitalizes on the importance of the studies in the volume, the text of professor Susana-Monica Tapodi from Sapientia University of Miercurea Ciuc, distinguishing itself through the overview of the life and posterity of the saint and analysing, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the medieval legends, chronicles and artistic representations. The reputed Hungarian art historian Mihály János managed to accomplish an inventory of murals showing St. Ladislaus from the Szekely land which, according to the prefacer, is useful for both researchers and tourism. A poem on the legend of the saint by 19th century Hungarian author János Arany was also published in the Romanian translation of Elena Dumitru, Hungarian literature professor. This is part of a translation project at Sapientia University of Miercurea Ciuc in which Lenke-Tímea Timár researched translation problems in studies of art history, focusing on the murals of St Ladislaus in the Szekely land (pp. 6-7), a topic of interest to all Translation Studies scholars aiming at a deeper understanding of R. Jakobson's intersemiotic translation that allows the transposition of language from an art such as literature, for instance, into another one, like painting (in our case, murals).

Susana-Monica Tapodi labels St. Ladislaus as the most popular Hungarian saint, a medieval *Athleta Christi*, summarizing his life and heroic deeds (pp. 9-11), stressing that after his death, he became an instrument of divine justice (p. 12). His figure is depicted by medieval chronicles and in approximately 60 churches from the Carpathian area (p. 13). He is also portrayed in a duel in 20th century paintings (Pál Molnár C., 1942) and in Romantic literature (Mihály Vörösmarty's epic poem, *Cserhalom*, 1825) (p. 14). Then several chronicles and legends are overviewed, underlining that the legends on St. Ladislaus are the richest in Hungarian folklore (p. 17). Then the church representations are discussed, the saint leaving from the citadel, his blessing by the bishop, the duel, the colors of horses overtly symbolizing the fight between good and evil. Moreover, professor Tapodi informs us that murals showing St. Ladislaus are carried out in the present, giving the instance of a fresco by Márton Barabás in Sâncrăieni, Harghita county which was

completed in 2017 showing the king surrounded by Hungarian saints and martyrs of the 20th cent. (p. 21). All illustrations are included at the end of the book. Reliquaries, coins and statues also bear the figure of St. Ladislaus, the author expressing her regret that the golden statue of the king by Martin and Gheorghe from Cluj, also depicted by the 15th cent. poet Janus Pannonius in his *Abiens valere iubet sanctos rege, Waradini*, was destroyed by the Turks in 1660 when they occupied the land; raised in 1380 at Oradea, it must have been a masterpiece of European art (p. 23). There is also a European project which gave birth to 'The Road of St. Ladislaus'² crossing 49 Transylvanian, Hungarian, Slovakian, Croatian, and Serbian localities linked by the personality of the knightly king that strengthens these ethnical communities and leads to the reinstatement of cultural heritage (p. 24).

Mihály Jánó's study on the murals showing the legend of St. Ladislaus in the churches of the Szekely land accounts for the presence of the king in battle; these representations portray the famous duel between him and the enemy, kidnapper of a beautiful Hungarian girl, possibly the daughter of the bishop of Oradea (p. 27). The author notes that the saint's presence in the churches here has been studied since the 19th cent. (p. 28). Unfortunately, what we can admire nowadays, also testified thanks to the illustrations included in the volume, are remains of the murals from the past that suffered the wear and tear of time (p. 30). Luckily, archeological exploits afford the partial recovery of works from the past, as in the case of the reformed church of Pădureni/ Sepsibesenyő (p. 31); this also holds true for the medieval murals from Ghelintă/ Gelence severely damaged by the 1802 earthquake (p. 32). Other murals discussed are those from Dârjiu/ Székelyderzs, Moacșa/ Maksa, Mugeni/ Bögöz, Mártiniș/ Homoródszentmárton, Filia/ Erdőfüle, Chileni/ Sepsikilyén, Dârjiu/ Székelyderzs, Misentea/ Csíkmindszent, Mihăileni/ Csíkszentmihály, Ghidfalău/ Gidófalva, Crăciunel/ Homoródkarácsonyfalva, Chichiș/ Kökös, Târgu Mureș/ Marosvásárhely, Ocland/ Homoródoklánd, Saciova/ Szacsva and Daia/ Székelydália mostly white coated in the 17th century and uncovered in the 19th century by the art teacher József Huszka, this leading to further research. It is worth noting that sequences of paintings showing St. Ladislaus culminate with his triumph over the pagans and the kidnapped girl's rescue, as Christ is crucified to save the world (p. 45). Regarding Daia/ Székelydália, it is mentioned that the 19th century research contributed to an interest from the specialists and the larger public in the beauty of the paintings on the cupola and the church sanctuary. József Huszka made excellent watercolor copies of the cupola embellished with flower motives and the coats of arms of Hungarian and Transylvanian towns which have been preserved (p. 65).

² For more details, see <https://regelecavaler.org/ro/regele-cavaler/>.

Thus, we recommend this volume to all those interested in the language of art and literature in their interdisciplinary dimensions, specialists in visual arts, old book history and legends, Translation Studies or cultural tourism. It is our belief that such studies as the ones included in the volume are needed for a deeper understanding of past mechanisms leading to present and future admiration of literature and the arts.

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