The Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria, from the Church of St. Archangels in Prilep. Iconographical research

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UDC 75.046.3(497.7 Prilep) 12с
75.052.033.2
DOI 10.2298/ZOG1236083C

This text is dealing with a rare thematic innovation that appeared in Byzantine wall painting of the thirteenth century. In particular, the author explores the iconography of the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria as found in the Church of St. Archangels in Prilep around 1270. He argues that this work manifests a key moment in the development of this composition over the course of the thirteenth century. This links the same motif found in Melnik from the beginning of the thirteenth century, and a composition from the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid from 1294/1295. In the end, place of the Vision in the painted program of the western part of the Church of St. Archangels in Prilep is analyzed.

Key words: Vision of Peter of Alexandria, iconography, art of the thirteenth century, Byzantine wall painting

Even amongst the small number of thematically innovative motifs to appear in thirteenth century Byzantine wall paintings, the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria stands out as being of singular importance. The origins of this composition in Byzantine art originated in illuminated manuscripts dating from the end of the tenth century to the beginning of the eleventh century. The incorporation of the motif into the decorative programs of Byzantine churches occurred later, at the time of the beginning of the thirteenth century. In wall paintings of the Palaiologan period, the Vision of Peter of Alexandria is frequently depicted at the altars of Byzantine churches. This tendency continued in the art of the post-Byzantine period, up to the late nineteenth century.1

In this article, I focus exclusively on the depictions of the Vision from wall paintings from the thirteenth century, a period that stands out as being key in the development of this composition. Amongst the well-studied depictions of the Vision from wall paintings from the thirteenth century, the Vision of Peter of Alexandria is frequently depicted at the altars of Byzantine churches. This tendency continued in the art of the post-Byzantine period, up to the late nineteenth century.1

In this article, I focus exclusively on the depictions of the Vision from wall paintings from the thirteenth century, a period that stands out as being key in the development of this composition. Amongst the well-studied depictions of the Vision from the Church of St. Nicholas at Melnik (beginning of the thirteenth century)2 and the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (1294/1295)3, I wish to add the example found in the Church of St. Archangels in Prilep (from around 1270).4 Great in scale, it bridges the historical gap between the compositions from Melnik and Ohrid, and gives us an opportunity to observe the development of iconography.5

At the Church of St. Archangels in Prilep, the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria (figs. 1 and 2) is depicted in the first section of the north wall in the western part of the church, and is separated from the rest of the decoration of this zone with a decorative border. The composition is badly damaged but the surviving parts provide enough information

1 The earliest presentations of this theme in Byzantine art appeared by the end of the tenth century in miniatures and illuminated manuscripts, i.e. miniatures of Basil II (Vat. gr. 1613) and Paris. gr. 580. The characteristics of these first versions of the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria were studied by G. Millet in the study which is still the basic text for this subject (cf. G. Millet, La vision de Pierre d’Alexandrie, in: Mélanges Charles Diehl II, Paris 1930, 103–107). Later presentations of the Vision from the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century, also have their origins in miniature painting, the example with the Constantinople’s liturgical scroll from the Patriarchate of Jerusalem (Staurou 109), cf. A. Grabar, Un rouleau liturgique Constantinopolitain et ses peintures, DOP 8 (1958) 176, 188, fig. 18. About the introduction of this composition into the altar area of the Byzantine church dating from the end of the thirteenth century, and its place in the painting programs from the time of the Palaiologoi, cf. C. Grozdanov, Vizijata na Sv. Petar Alexandriski vo živopisot na Sv. Bogorodica Perivlepta (St. Kliment) vo Ohrid, Godišnji zbornik na Filozofskot fakultet 34 (Skopje 1982) 115–122 (= idem, Studii za Ohridskot živopis, Skopje 1990, 102–107). For the depictions of this composition in the fifteenth century, cf. G. Subotić, Ohridska slikarska škola od XI vek, Ohrid 1980, passim; for the painting of the Vision in the post-Byzantine art, cf. M. Garidis, La peinture murale dans le monde orthodox après la chute de Byzance (1450–1600), Athènes 1989, 228; S. Petković, Židno slikarstvo na području Pečke patrijarhije 1557–1614, Beograd 1965, 56, n. 2,73, 80, 94, 163, 164, 180–186, 191–196, 200–204, 207–208; A. Serafimova, Kućevoški manastir Sveti Arhangeli, Skopje 2005, 47. The vision of St. Peter of Alexandria in the time of the Palaiologan art (the fourteenth and fifteenth century) has been researched by S. Koukiaris, who provides numerous examples, cf. S. Koukiaris, The depiction of the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria in the sanctuary of Byzantine churches, Zograf 35 (2011) 64–65, 69.

2 I. Akrabova Zhandova, Dve predstave na sv. Petar Aleksandrijski v Bǎlgariya, Izvestiia na Bulgarskiia arheologicheskii institut 25 (1946) 26–28, obr. 17–18; L. Mavrodinova, Tvrkata Sv. Nikola pri Melnik, Sofia, 1975, 24–26, il.19–20.

3 Grozdanov, Vizijata, 115–122 (= idem, Studii, 102–107).

4 This depiction of the Vision of Peter of Alexandria is only mentioned in: Prilep i prilepisko niz istorijata, Prilep 1971, 101 (P. Miljković-Pepić); S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, Vizantijska Makedonija, Skopje 2006, 145.

5 In his article on the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria in the Byzantine monumental art of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries S. Koukiaris notes the Church of St. John Kalybites at the island of Eubea dated at the year of 1245, or little later. But the author himself notes that the composition is destroyed to such a degree that important iconographical features can not be observed. Cf. Koukiaris, op. cit., 64–65.

6 The bibliography on the church is not extensive because it has not yet been thoroughly researched. To date, scholarly interest has focused on specific scenes or cycles in the church. Most of the attention has been spent on the cycle of the Archangels depicted in the highest zones in the western part of the church. Cf. P. Miljković-Pepić, Beleški za ciklusot sceni posvećeni na svete Arhangels, Glašnik na Institutot za nacionalna istorija II/1 (Skopje 1958) sl. 1–4; S. Kukiaris, Dve predstave srednje vekovnog arhandjela Mi-haila u monastiru srednjeg vekovnog Arhandjela u Prilepu, Zograf 12 (1981) 54–57, sl.
that one may discern the general structure of the scene. In the middle part of the composition the holy throne is depicted covered with a purple cloth that is decorated with golden crosses. A young Christ once stood on the throne of which only the right foot and small part of the left remain.

Saint Peter of Alexandria is shown standing on the left of the holy throne. Little of this figure survives but is identifiable by parts of his green phelonion, his light rose omophorion and the epitrachelion under the phelonion, as well as small parts of his head – his white hair and the ocher nimbus that are visible in the upper part of the composition (fig. 2). Saint Peter faces the holy throne on which the young Christ stands and the wrinkles of his phelonion indicate that his hands were raised chest-height and gestured toward Christ. In the lower right part of the composition we can see a bended figure of the heretic Arius. The remaining part of the decoration of the first zone in the eastern portion of the northern wall consists of a prophet or apostle holding an open scroll in his hand (figs. 1 and 2). The western portion of the same wall shows the holy monks (fig. 5).

If one carefully compares the iconographic program of the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria from Prilep to the versions of this theme in Melnik and Ohrid, the importance of the former within the art of the thirteenth century, becomes evident.

As previously noted, the composition in St. Archangels in Prilep, is depicted in the first zone of the north wall. In the middle part of the scene there is a representation of Christ standing on the holy throne with Saint Peter of Alexandria to one side, and the heretic Arius below. The significant damage to the central part of the mural prevents us from knowing if the space was defined, i.e. have the master zografs who painted it strictly followed the hagiographic text from the saint’s Vita, which described where this event took place, i.e. the prison of Alexandria. Due to its being located in the first section of the north wall, the composition from Prilep, links to the earliest known presentation of the Vision in Byzantine wall paintings: the Church of St. Nicholas in Melnik (beginning of the thirteenth century), where the Vision is depicted on the lowest section of the north–east pillar of the altar space (fig. 3).7

Considering the Vision from Prilep while keeping the rest of the decorative program of the north wall in mind, one cannot claim for sure that the Vision was painted next to the altar; however, given the fact that St. Nicholas, who was al-

1–4; S. Gabelić, Ciklus Arhandjela u vizantijskoj umetnosti, Beograd 1995, 42, 74, 83, 88, 103; eadem, Vizantijski i posvazantijski ciklusi arhandjela XI–XVIII vek, Beograd 2004, passim; P. Kostovska, Nepoznata pretstava od Arhangeljskot ciklus vo manastirit Sv. Arhangel vo Varoš kaj Prilep, Zbornik Srednjevekovna Umjetnost 4 (2003) 7–22, sl.1; for the donor’s composition and the donor John, the megas chartoularios, cf. B. Babić, Tri grečka fresko natpisa na zidovima crkava srednjevekovnog Prilepa iz druge polovine XIII veka, ZLUMS 5 (1967) 26–29, sl.1; V. J. Đurić, Vizantijske freske u Jugoslaviji, Beograd 1974, 16, n.12; for the portraits of the king Vukan and king Marko v. S. Radović, Portreti srpskih vladara u srednjem veku, Skopje 1934, 62–64; for the portrait of St. Kliment of Ohrid cf. S. Cvetković, Novootkrieniot portret na Sv. Kliment Ohridski vo Sv. Arhangeli-Prilep, Kulturen život 1 (Skopje 1994) 37–38, sl.1. For the church’s architecture, the phases of its development, as well as the stylistic features of the wall paintings, cf. Korunovski, Dimitrova, Vizantinska Makedonija, 144–145; P. Kostovska, Figurite na monastite vo Sv. Arhangeli Mikhail, Varoš: prilog kon nivnata identifikacija, Patronim. Mk 9 (2011) 80–95; S. Korunovski, A contribution to the study of the monastery of St. Archangel Michael in Prilep, Zograf 35 (2011) 111–116.

7 Akarbova Zhandova, op. cit., 26–28, obr. 17–18; L. Mavrodinova, op. cit., 24–26, il.19–20; for the new dating of the frescoes at Melnik between 1204 and 1207. cf. B. Todić, The symbolical investiture of archbishop Basil of Bulgaria at Melnik, Zograf 32 (2008) 59–67.
ways painted in the altar area, is found here on the southern wall implies that he likely functioned as a counterpart to the Vision.8

If the space in which the Vision occurs is still not defined at Melnik (fig. 3), and the figure of Christ floats and projects Himself into the area in front of the holy throne, in the representation from St. Archangels in Prilep, the further development of the position of Christ is notable. He no longer hovers over the holy table, but is depicted standing on throne, which in fact is a significant iconographic development (figs. 1 and 2) that brings the composition closer to a Eucharistic context.

Another important aspect of the depiction of the Vision from St. Archangels in Prilep is the presentation of the heretic Arius. Beginning with the earliest example of the motif at Melnik, Arius was regularly depicted and definitely enters into the iconographic scheme of this composition. At times, he would be presented in novel iconographic settings, especially in post-Byzantine art.

The development of the Vision from Prilep is comparable to the older presentation from Melnik, with one crucial distinction: Christ now stands on the holy table, which happens here for the first time in the evolution of this subject. This announces the next, final stage in this motif’s formation, that occurs at the end of the thirteenth century with the presentation of the Vision from St. Virgin Peribleptos (1294/1295) in Ohrid.9

At Ohrid, the scene is shown inside the altar for the first time, i.e. the second section of the prothesis on the southern wall.10 The fresco is completely preserved, and depicts Christ as a youngster who stands on one pillar next to the holy table on which a closed Gospel has been placed. Saint Peter of Alexandria is represented standing in front of the throne with his hands raised pointing at Christ, and in the lower part, under the holy throne, one finds the bended figure of the heretic Arius. The pictorial space has been clearly defined with architectural buildings, a portico and columns (fig. 4). The placement of the Vision in the altar area was an important innovation which fixed its location for the art of the fourteenth century and throughout the whole post-Byzantine period. However, given that Christ is shown standing on a little pillar at Ohrid reveals that the iconography of the Vision had not yet achieved it final form where Christ stands on the holy throne as we already saw happening at St. Archangels in Prilep, circa 1270.

Another important feature of the Vision from Ohrid is the unique defining of the space where the Vision of the Alexandrian Episcopate occurs. Michael Astrapas and Eutychios made a composition which has no analogies in the older presentations from Melnik and Prilep, nor in the later presentations of the Vision in the art of the Palaiologan dynasty. They defined the space strictly following the text of Saint Peter’s Vita, and located the event inside the prison of Alexandria. It was here that Saint Peter had a vision when, during a service, Christ addressed him with his chiton torn apart, giving Saint Peter a symbolic premonition of the future danger from Arius and his teaching.11

At the end of the chronological line of development traced above, we would add the Vision of Peter of Alexandria.

8 Examples of medieval art survive in which St. Nicholas is depicted in the western parts of the church, further from the altar, between representations of the holy monks and other saint. However, in these cases he is not depicted as hierarch, but as monk wearing monks robes, as for example in the Church of the Transfiguration in the monastery Zrze [painted in 1368/1369; cf. Z. Ivković, Živopis iz XIV veka u manastiru Zrze, Zograf 11, (1980) 77; V. J. Djurić, Les docteurs de l’eglise, in: Euphómenos, Ἀπίσταρχος ἐν τοῖς Ἑρωμάτοις Ἰάκχικου Ι, Athens 1991, 130–133, 135], or in the painted program of monastic refectories (cf. Djurić, op. cit., 131, 135).

9 Before I proceed to the composition from the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid, which actually marks the final phase of the definition of this theme and its iconography, it is appropriate to note the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria from the cave church “Pismata” in Ivanovo (cf. A. Vasiliev, Ivanovoštke stenopisi, Sofiia 1953, 19, tabl. 14–15). According to the published photographs and the descriptions of Asen Vasiliev, one is led to believe that the longed figure of young Christ stands on the holy throne under the high baldachin. Asen Vasiliev does not date this composition, but later L. Mavrodinova who sites iconographical proximity as well with the same presentation from Melnik and the presentation from Ivanovo dates it at the first decades of the thirteenth century (Mavrodinova, op. cit., 26). Unfortunately the condition of the Vision at Ivanovo is very poor due to its long exposure to the weather and the loss of pigmentation and therefore the painted layer does not permit stylistic analysis that could lead to a chronology and dating of the work. For that we only marked the composition in Ivanovo, which by its formal characteristics, would belong to the group of older depictions of the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria.

10 Grozdanov, Vizija, 115–120, sl. 40, crl. 19. If the dating of the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria from the church St. John Kalýbites in Eubea is reliable, than it turns out that by the middle of the thirteenth century the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria enters the altar area (cf. Koukiaris, op. cit., 64).

11 Millet, op. cit., 103–108.
The holy throne is not depicted on the composition in Arilje, Christ therefore hovers in the air and the heretic Arius is depicted directly under Christ’s mandorla. Whether the painters from Arilje, who were likely from the circles of the Thessalonica workshops, had some older composition for a model, or whether they just followed the two iconographic versions of the Vision, which developed in Byzantine art of the thirteenth century, must remain an open question.

Returning to the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria in the Church of the St. Archangels in Prilep, I would like to point out a few specifics concerning its location as well as the program concept in which it is placed. The Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria is actually the only narrative composition depicted in the first zone of the western side of the church.

For now, I will continue with listing of the saints’ figures, which alongside the Vision, complete the painted program of the first zone of the western part of the church. On the left-hand side of the Vision a section of the wall has been severely damaged including the depiction of a saint. The only visible remnants of the figure is the Greek letter “Θ”, as a part of his inscription. Saint Joseph the Hymnographer stands to the right of the saint. He is shown as an old man with a white beard wearing monastic dress and bearing an analavos on his chest. He holds an open scroll in his left hand and a cross in his right. After Saint Joseph the Hymnographer one finds the figure of Saint Theodore Graptos depicted in a similar fashion as Joseph, even in the near-identical typology of their faces. He also holds an open scroll in his left hand and a cross in his right (fig. 5). After Theodore Graptos one finds a representation of Saint Theodore of Sykeon, depicted identically as the previous two of the hymnographers. The last of the holy monks on the northern wall unfortunately cannot be identified because of damage to his inscription; however, he was undoubtedly also was a holy hymnographer, because like the rest of them, he carries a scroll with a text on it and a cross in his hands.

On the northern side of the western wall, there is representation of the donor, John the megas chartoularios of the west, with a model of the church in his hand (fig. 7). Then on the southern side of the western wall next to the entrance door, the row of holy monks continues with depictions of Arsenius the Young, Stephen Sabaites, John the Kolovos, Sisoes, Maximos the Confessor, Onuphrius, one unidentified monk, Stephen the Younger, and St. Nicholas, who we already saw to be depicted across from the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria (fig. 6).

One must now ask oneself if the decision to place the Vision within such an iconographical program was informed by other concepts. Examples of the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria from Melnik, the Church of St. John Kalybites on Eubeia, as well as the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid, clearly indicate an effort to locate this composition near or within the altar program in the area of the prothesis. In the example of the Church of St. Archangels, we find no indication that the program’s painters or planners intended to follow prior examples and place the scene of the Vision close to the altar. The only way we can connect the representation of the Vision with the altar area is through its relation to the figure of St. Nicholas depicted on the opposite

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12 D. Vojvodić, Zidno slikarstvo crkve Svetog Ahilija u Arilju, Beograd 2005, 103–104, 143–144, 299, crt. 44.
13 Kostovska, op. cit., 90–91.
14 Ibid., 90
15 Babić, op. cit., 27–28.
16 Kostovska, op. cit., 82–84.
wall, close to the altar area (fig. 6). Links may be drawn between the depiction of the Vision at the Church of the St. Archangels in Prilep with the depiction of the holy poets, i.e. their poetic works as well as the canons and the sermons that they wrote specifically for the celebration of St. Peter of Alexandria that took place on November 25th. In particular, one should focus on the part that celebrates the Vision of St. Peter, which pointed to the heresy of Arius and the debates within the church that would last for few centuries.

Some scholars have already noted the possibility that the appearance of some of the holy monks may have been inspired by the hymnography compositions of St. Joseph the Hymnographer and St. Theodore Studites. Monastic figures such as St. Arsenius the Young, St. Sisoes or St. John the Kolovos were rarely depicted and their inclusion here is notable.17 In addition to the Vita of St. Peter of Alexandria and the Menonion for November, the night before the celebration of the saint’s feast, his Vision is mentioned in the third hymn of the seventh ode of Theophanes Graptos (the ninth century). Other hymns for this day celebrate the struggle of St. Peter with Arius as well as his later exclusion from the body of the church. In addition, the hymn of St. Theodore Studies is sung on the Orthodox Sunday during the litany of the icons.18 The Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria is mentioned in the third hymn of the first ode and the seventh of the sixth ode. Furthermore, on the sixth Sunday after Easter, the feast of the 318 Fathers Confessors of the Faith who constituted the First ecumenical Council, there is a reference to Peter’s Vision in the second hymn of the Great Vespers.19

Finally, one may conclude that the iconographic program of the first zone of the western part of the Church of the St. Archangels in Prilep is amongst the most unusual found in fresco paintings in churches belonging to the Ohrid archbishopric dating from the third quarter of the thirteenth century.

17 Ibid., 88, 90, 94–95.
18 Koukiaris, op. cit., 64. Although the depiction of St. Theodore Studies is not preserved, we may recognize his presence in the completely ruined figure next to the Vision (only the letter Θ is preserved of the original inscription). The last monk on the northern wall whose inscription is completely obliterated, was a depiction of St. Theophanes Graptos.
19 Cf. Ibid., 64.

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Визија светог Петра Александријског у цркви Светих арханђела у Прилепу. Иконографска истраживања

Сашо Цветковски

Међу ретким тематским новинама у византијском зидном сликарству XIII века пажњу привлачи композиција Визије светог Петра Александријског. Иако се та представа у минијатурном сликарству среће и ранје, у менолозима и литургиским свицима XI века, она прилично касно, тек почетком XIII века, улази у сликане програме византијских цркава.

У тексту је пажња посвећена композицији Визије светог Петра Александријског у цркви Светих арханђела у Прилепу (око 1270) и прочувању њене иконографије, као и утврђивању њеног значаја у целокупном развоју те представе у византијском сликарству XIII века. Сцена је насликана у првој зони северног зида западне цркве Светих арханђела и представља јединствену композицију, уз коју су, у продужетку, насликани ликови светих монаха. И поред велике оштећености фреске, на њој се још могу уочити свети престо на којем стоји млади Христос, по том лик јеретика Арија, повијеног испод светог престола, као и светог Петра Александријског, који стоји поред престола и рукама указује на Христа.

Представа из Светих арханђела заузима важно место у историји развоја те композиције, оно које се налази између слике у цркви Светог Николе у Мелинку с почетка XIII века, најстаријег досад познатог приказа теме о којој је реч, и композиције у цркви Богородица Пери вленте у Охриду из 1295. године. У Мелинку је Визија светог Петра Александријског представљена у првој зони једног од стубаца уз олтарску преграду; на њему се виде ликови Петра Александријског и младог Христа, који лебди испред светог престола.

Композиција у Прилепу насликана је у првој зони северног зида, а данас због преградње цркве и оштећености тог дела сликаног програма не можемо поуздано утврдити да ли је то било у близини олтарског простора, мада неке програмске особености говоре у прилог таквој претпоставци. Поред тога, на представи Визије у Прилепу Христос стоји на самом престолу, што је, у ствари, кључни момент у уобличавању иконографске схеме композиције и што касније, у уметности Палеолога и сликарству поствизантијске епохи, постаје редовна појава. Тиме се истиче литургиска симболика сцени, која долази до изражаја када се она, са свим дефинисаним иконографским обележјима, укључује у програм олтарског простора византијских цркава – један од првих таквих примера јесте живопис Богородице Пери вленте у Охриду (1295).

У оквиру приказа развоја композиције Визије светог Петра Александријског и прегледа споменка из XIII века у којима је она насликана пажња је посвећена и сцене у Ариљу (1296), као и представи у пењинској црквици „Писмата” у Иванову, на којој се појављују сва иконографска обележја ове композиције из XIII века.