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The Pillar of Fire as a Sign of Theophany: Some Examples from Byzantine and Postbyzantine Art

From the numerous aspects on the theme on the 'dramaturgy' of light in the process of the creation of sacred space, which A. Lidov has noted, we shall draw your attention on several examples presenting 'the Iconography of light and fire in Christian art'. Naturally in support of the material of imagery we turn to some philosophical-theological concepts of light and fire, and in particular to the pillar of fire as a sign of theophany.

As early as in the texts of the Old Testament The Lord appeared as light, for example as a *pillar of fire* before the Jews (Exodus ch.13:21). It is precisely the *pillar of fire* that is the centre of our presentation, for as a topos of divine presence, it passes on into the New Testament tradition. From here on it appears in all kinds of theological and liturgical literature and genres. We find an interesting example in the New Testament apocrypha of Abgar: "Thaddeus set out with Luke for the town of Edessa, where Abgar was lying in bed for six years. Taking Christ's' image, on a cloth, Thaddeus together with Luke reached the town of Hierapolis, but were afraid, so they did not enter it. They lay outside the town, concealing the image of Lord between two tiles. And a *pillar of fire* appeared from the heavens, where the image of the Lord lay hidden. The guard at the town's gates when he saw the miracle, cried out loudly. At the same time Thaddeus took the image of the Lord and continued on their way. The townsmen went out to the place where *the pillar* had risen, but were frightened, and fell on their faces, because they saw that the image of the Lord was on a rock. They took the image and carried it in the town. At the city gates they met blind men, lame men and leper, who cried 'Jesus of Nazareth, have mercy on us!' and when they touched the image of the Lord they were cured. And the townsmen, when they saw that miracle, glorified the Lord".

And this is how the same episode is given in the Life of Saint Gregory the Great (the Dialogist): After the death of the Roman Pope Pelagius, all unanimously elected as his successor Gregory, the Abbot of the monastery dedicated to the holy Apostle Andrew the First-Called. For seven months he would not consent to accept this service, considering himself unworthy. And he, wishing to escape so great a rank and such honour, secretly left the town and hid in some desolate places. Searching everywhere for their pastor, and not finding him, the Roman people were very sad. And all began eagerly to pray to the Lord, to tell them where His servant was. And a pillar of fire appeared, seen by all,

the *pillar of fire* set to a desolate place in a forest where Gregory was hiding. Then all understood that the heavenly pillar has appeared to point to the place where he had retired. Immediately the people went there, found his pastor and gladly took him to the town, in spite of him not desiring this’.

We find an interesting example in Medieval Balkan hagiography, with the respective visualization in the cycle of the Life of St. John the New from Beligrad or from Suceava. St John from Beligrad is one of most venerated saints in present day Romania, whose relics are kept in present day Suceava — the main town of Moldavia. The belief in the miraculous powers of the saint is the reason for many believers and people in search for cures to come to the sarcophagus at the church of St. George in Suceava.

The cult of St. John from Beligrad arose in Romania during the reign of Alexander the Good (1400-1432) in Suceava — the capital of Moldavia where the relics of the saint had been translated. The saint had then been declared patron and protector of the Moldavian capital and patron of Moldavia as a whole.¹ Soon later a Life called Passio of St John the New was written together with an office for the saint. A. Yatzimirskij considers² that Gregorius Tsamblak, known for his work in Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania alike, and subsequent metropolitan of Kiev, was the author of the Passio of St John the New.³ Recently Francis Thomson presented serious arguments in favour of the Romanian origins of the author, of the same name, with the claim that ‘that this is the first Life — actually the first work in prose written in Middle Bulgarian, and all that is known about the author is that his name is I Gregory, and he was a Hieromonk at the church of “Mirăuți” at Suceava’.⁴

This is the place to note that the 17th century is the time for the appearance of the first translations in Greek of Passio of St John the New done by the Alexandrian Patriarch Nicephorus (1639-1645) and the Cretan man of letters Meletius Sirigos (1585-1663).⁵ The interest towards the ‘Passio of St. John the New’ continued in the following two centuries, when new Greek translations came out by the Constantinopolitan Patriarch Kalinicus III (1757) and Nicodimus Agiorites (1749-1809).⁶ The enormous popularity of the cult of St. John the New among the Orthodox nations in the Balkans during the 16th – 19th century is indicative of the interest in the text of the life. This is explained by the circumstance that in the personality and the suffering of the saint what comes out above all is not the national consciousness, but the defense of Orthodoxy as a unifying idea.

D. Gonis has offered an original view that Tsamblak’s work has become an ‘antiheretical work directed towards the greatest enemies of Orthodoxy — Muslims, Latins and Hebrews’.

Nevertheless St. John the New was a Greek Saint, whose life was written in Middle Bulgarian by Gregorius Tsamblak or a Romanian of the same name, or a Romanian of the same name and can be seen as the first Romanian saint. The popularity of the cult towards the saint in Romania is of such significance that he is even subject of wall paintings.

Not only had the images of the saint appeared as early as images of warrior saints Demetrius and George in the wall paintings in the church of St. George at Voronet monastery in 1547, at the "Apostol" of 1610, in the miscellany of Barlaam of 1643 and elsewhere) but in church murals the cycle of the life of the saint appears with numerous scenes, visualizing different episodes of the text of the Life. This is where we should note, as has been noted elsewhere⁷, that the appearance of cycles of lives in art is not an obligatory phase in the development of the cult of given saint, rather it depends on the popularity of the saint in a given region or depending on concrete ideological and historical circumstances. In this case the particular veneration of the saint is connected specific ideological and historical circumstances.

Who actually was St. John the New? Here I should recall, he came from a wealthy family, from a Greek family of merchants from Trapesund. In 1330 he arrived by sea in Belgrade (the Turkish Akerman, the present day Belgorod Dneprovskii, Cetatea Alba in Romanian). On his way he began a dispute with captain of the ship, who was a Venetian or Genoese 'frank' about the true faith. When they arrived in Belgrad, the captain reported John to the Head of the town (known as an 'eparch' or 'hegemon'), saying that he had promised to give up he faith and accept the faith of those ruling the town. The 'eparch' was called a 'Persian' and an ardent believer in the sun, in those times, lands under the Tartars. In an impertinent talk with the commander of the town John defended his faith, and the angry eparhos subjected him to cruel torture and in the end ordered him to be tied to the tail of a fiery horse and to be drawn in the town. After his death miracles began, and after his body was laid in the church and later moved to Suceava.

Actually John was the victim of the enemies of Moldavia, namely the Tartars, as up to the middle of the 14th century Moldavia was under the Tartars and the Mongols. Later his being tortured was seen in the context of the Ottoman invasions in the Balkans and those torturing John were identified with the Turks. This is particularly clear in the seventeenth century and is to be found in Romanian translations of the Life and in wall paintings of the cycles of the Life of John the New. What is substantial for us is that from the very beginning the saint he was venerated not as a Greek, rather as a defender of Orthodox Christianity, hence a defender of their paternal tradition. Therefore, as we already noted St. John the New (or St. John of Suceava) was the first Romanian saint, whose cult is alive to this day. The belief in the miraculous powers in the relics of the saint gathers an enormous number of believers and people seeking to be cured at the shrine in the church of St. George in Suceava daily. And this is so today. However when we visited Suceava in 1988 — one of the worst years of the Chaushesku's rule - we were impressed by the daily visits to the relics of the saint.⁸

Namely these are the reasons for the penetration of the illustrated life cycle of St. John the New in Romanian mural art.⁹

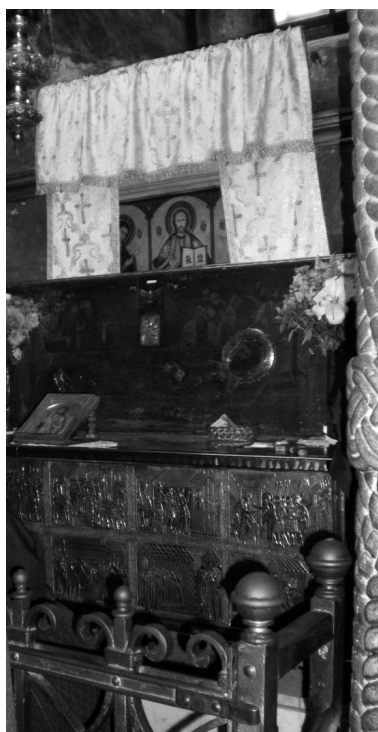
Here we shall dwell on some features of illustrated Life cycles of St. John the New. The twelve scenes decorating the caskets with the relics

of the saints could be considered the earliest, as a masterpiece of goldsmith's work of the 15th century. Chronologically what follows are scenes of the Life of the Saint in the church of St. George at the Monastery of Voroneio (1547). We shall also dwell on two more, we have especially examined, namely: the wall paintings in the outer narthex of the Bishopric church in the town of Roman (XVI century) and the wall paintings in the narthex of the church of Resurrection at the Suceviioa Monastery (1596- 1601).¹⁰

Usually illustrated lives of saints emerge in the principal cult centre, i.e. where the veneration of the saint began or received special significance because of the translation of his relics and made him saint protector of a given ruler, town or country. The case of St. John the New is similar. The beginning of his cult should be sought in Beligrad, the place of his martyrdom, which is given in late Russian mineion from the 16th century on¹¹. However the main stimulus for the development and shaping of the cult of this saint was the solemn translation of the relics to the capital of Moldova. It was here, Stefan Kozhuharov explicitly notes, that that the office for St. John the New of Beligrad (Suceava) was written (in Romania)¹². This was where the earliest visualization of the cycle of St. John the New, also known as St. John of Suceava.

Extended Life cycles emerge in such works of art which are directly connected with the shaping of the cult of the saint, rather marking the place of his martyrdom, the discovery or preservation of his relics. Thus the cycle of Life of St. Steven of Decani, whose literary base is from a different work of Gregory Tsamblak, is illustrated for the first time on a large special icon, which was placed on the grave of the saint in the Decani Monastery¹³. The earliest cycle, dedicated to St. John the New consists of twelve relieves, decorating the gilt silver shrine which contained the saint's relics after their translation from the old metropolitan church in Suceava (Mirăuți) in the church of St. George, where they are kept to this day. After T. Voinescu's brilliant and convincing stylistic analysis they date from the second half of the 15th century, the period of the flourishing of Romanian art under Stefan the Great.¹⁴

Thus the earliest cycle of the Life St. John the New appears on the front wall of the sarcophagus (or shrine) in two rows (fig.1), with six scenes each, i.e. the twelve episodes of the martyrdom are illustrated, namely 1. John before the Eparch; 2. The soldiers strip John; 3. The Eparch orders gnarled sticks be brought; 4. The cruel torturer (called the Eparch in the captions) orders that John be lain on the ground and beaten with the sticks; 5. John is cast in a dungeon; 6. John is brought before the Eparch anew; 7. The Eparch orders the beating of the martyr on the ground; 8. The saint, tied to the tail of a horse, is drawn along the streets of the town; 9. Angels and a pillar of fire appear above the body of the martyr; 10. The Jew speaks of the wonder; 11. Frightened, the Eparch orders the burial of the body of the martyr; 12. The frank's attempt to steal the body of the saint, while the Warrior of Christ (that is John himself), appears before the presbyter in the church and call on him to stop the theft.



1. *Saint John the New silver Sarcophagus with scenes of his Life. The Church "Saint George" in the Monastery of St. John the New in Suceava. XV century. Romania*

It is essential however to establish which episodes of the literary text were chosen to be illustrated and what considerations were for this selection. The sheer necessity to depict on a limited area those episodes of the Life of the saint, which would give the essence of his dignity of sainthood, calls on the selection of the most important. Such are above all the episodes, which immediately place the saint in the category of saints and marked his belonging to a group of saints (hermits, martyrs, prelates etc). The exposition of the narrative usually only shows the birth of the hero, and the critical moments in his life, which mark the *transition* from ordinary life to feats, marking ritual step (for instance the ordaining of St Nicolas as a Bishop) or theophanic signs, as it is in our case.

Thus in the cycle of St. John the New not only is the birth of the saint omitted, but all moments connected with his life in Trapesund and his travel by sea, which appear in his life. The illustration begins from moment when the saint is brought before the eparch and forced to change his faith.

From here on, in the central narrative of the Life, follow the enumeration of his feats f as a saint, which are more or less equivalent but sufficient to explain the attri-

bution to a type saint. For the type of martyr, as is the case of St. John the New, the scenes of torture are particularly important (namely they prevail in the illustrated cycle, as well as the miracles (see further on). The artist decides to illustrate those episodes from the text which not only shall have a stronger impact on the viewer, raising a sense of horror, compassion, mercy, and admiration, but also motivate the holiness of the person of the Life.

The only episode which as usual is shown, as it is in all Lives, is the Death or the Dormition of the Saint. It is of particular importance as a transition from life on earth to eternal life. Namely for this reason the scenes representing the death of the saint are never the end of the illustrated scenes. Mostly often the episodes, borrowed from the 'post-biographical narrative' constitute a decisive share of the illustrated cycle. These are scenes, representing miracles after the death of the saint as a result of 'his direct interference in earthly matters' or miracles connected with the relics of the saint. The discovery of the relics is given particular significance — most often the intact body of the saint. To the medieval consciousness namely this moment is proof of holiness of the hero, or rather the hand of the Lord in the discovery of the saint for the people.

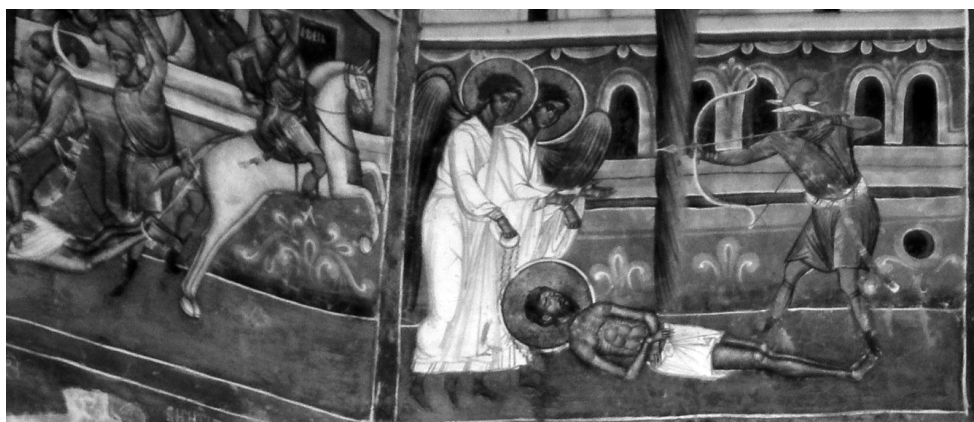
Thus, in the illustrated cycle of St. John the New the scene when the pagan beheads St. John the New is not the final one. Still four follow explaining the miracles after his death or connected with his body: the theophanic vision above the dead body with the pillar of fire, coming

from heaven, and the three men bearing light (angels, representing the Holy Trinity), the miracle with the Jew, who attempts to shoot an arrow at them and finally the attempt of the franc to steal the body of the saint, the dream of the presbyter and the saving of the relics. In a series of episodes after his death in this cycle the *pillar of fire* coming from the heavens has the greatest importance.

In fact this is how the text runs '...So, they untied the body. They left it lying on the ground together with the head, for none of the righteous dared not touched it. That night there was light burning above the body of the martyr and three unknown men in light, who silently burnt incense silently and sang some kind of holy liturgy; and **a pillar of fire stood over the body of the martyr**. Actually this was what many saw.' The appearance of the pillar of fire, as well as the abundance of burning lights beyond doubt was seen as a Divine sign and the text further runs, even 'the tormentor greatly frightened of all this ordered the Christians to bury the body'. And still further, 'they took the body, showed great respect, placed it in a consecrated place'. And further on the text mentions the body of the martyr as 'holy relics', which 'pious persons' would place close to the holy table. 'Thus the body remained 70 years and more. **Ever since during the night there was no end of Divine visions: pillars of fire, coming down and staying over the grave of the martyr, or unknown Divine forces, sometime lights and fragrance would come from it.**'¹⁵

Once created the iconographic scheme of the cycle of the Life of Saint John the New spread and in later works or art, with few changes in the episodes, and in the way they were given in iconographic details. With the further consolidation and spread of the veneration of the saint the images are in the ideological propaganda. In all visualized cycles the scenes representing the pillar of fire coming down, or already down over the body are essential. This is the case in the cycle of St. John the New in the church of St. George in Voronec (1547, which also has twelve scenes including the scene with the Pillar of fire (fig.2).¹⁶ There are some differences in the details, which lead to a substantial change in the ideological content of the entire cycle. What I have in mind are the attire of the ruler of Beligrad and the soldiers, which in the relieves of the shrine indicate certain western influences and represent costumes, similar to those found in the work of art from the Italian *renaissance* about 1400. Here the ruler of Beligrad and the soldiers wear the attire of Turkish nobility, and the eparch as well as the remaining figures have turbans on their heads. Thus the tormentors of St. John are identified with the Turks, while the martyr himself is not seen as a Greek, but a defender of Orthodox Christianity and the Moldavian State.¹⁷

Another substantial innovation in the mural cycle is the final scene which presents the solemn translation of the relics of St. John the New to Suceava during the reign of Alexander the Good (1400-1432), his wife Anna and metropolitan Josef, according to the inscriptions. (The inclusion of this scene has led to the omission of one of the beginning scenes, which is of much less significance, where the eparch sends soldiers



2. Angels and a pillar of fire appear above the body of the martyr. Mural on the façade of the church "Saint George" in the Monastery of Voronets 1547. Romania

to bring sticks to beat the saint). This new scene completes the presented cycles in all later monuments.

In the wall paintings of Romanian churches from the 16th century the cycle of St. John the New also appears in the outer narthex of the church at Bistrița, whose naos was decorated as early as 1498 at the time of Ștefan the Great. As we did not have the possibility to study this cycle ourselves, we shall only note that according to Paul Henri¹⁸ on the northern wall there are the scenes 'Appearance of St. John before the eparch' and the 'Translation of his Relics to Suceava', i.e. the first and the last scene of the cycle. This allows us the conclusions that cycle was complete and contained the customary number of scenes.

Special attention should be paid to the cycle, painted in the outer narthex of the Bishopric church at the town of Roman. It was placed in the third register of the southern, western, northern wall, above the cycles of St. Nicolas and St. George. Above it follow the images of the Ecumenical Councils, while in the fifth band we find the most common cycle in wall painting after the Life of St. Parascheve (St. Petka) from Târnovo. Here too the cycle includes the scene with the *pillar of fire* coming from the heavens (fig. 3).¹⁹

In the eastern part of the southern façade of the church of St. George in Suceava (the same church where the shrine with the relics of the saint is kept) dated 1522-1589, whose wall paintings are with quite a loss of colors and damaged, we noticed the existence of a similar cycle. Recently Tereza Sinigalia is publishing a scene from the Life of St. John the New found after the restoration works in this church. It is interesting to note that the scene is the following: "Angels venerate the body of the Martyr and a pillar of fire protects his crps".²⁰

In the 17th century the tradition continued, together with the anti-Ottoman leaning of the cycle, which comes originally from Voronets. From the beginning of the century date the wall paintings in the exterior of the main church of the Resurrection of Christ in the Sucevița Monastery. Here, in the second band of the southern, western and northern wall we find the familiar cycle of the Life of St. John the

3. Angels and a pillar of fire appear above the body of the martyr and the Miracle with the Jew. Mural in the Bishopric church "Sainte Parasceve" in Roman. XVI century. Romania



4. Angels and a pillar of fire appear above the body of the martyr and the Miracle with the Jew. Mural in the church of Resurrection of the Monastery of Sucevița. 1596-1601. Romania

New. In the murals of the Resurrection church we find exactly according to the text — two scenes where the Pillar of Fire appears (fig. 4 and 5). In its composition of episodes and iconographic features the scenes of this cycle are closest to the Voroneț cycle.

In connection with this cycle I would like to draw attention to one more example of the use of light as a sign of Divine presence, Divine protection, and Divine message. Illustrated cycles of St. Petka also occur chiefly in Romanian monuments from the 15th to 17th century. I am referring one of the most venerated saints among the Balkan peoples, known as St. Petka (or Paraskeva) of Epivat, Tarnovo Belgrade (or from Serbia) and Iassi , as her relics were translated and preserved successively from the place of her birth Epivat (Greece), the Bulgarian capital Tarnovo, afterwards Vidin, Belgrade and Constantinople and finally at Iassi, Romania.

It is difficult to say when and where the iconography of the Life cycle of St. Petka of Tarnovo in wall painting in the Balkans took shape. Most



The Pillar of Fire over the Tomb of ST John the New. Mural in the church of Resurrection of the Monastery of Sucevița. 1596-1601. Romania

probably the interpretation of the text of the Life arose namely in Moldavia in the 16th century, based on the Life of the saint, written by the Bulgarian patriarch Euthymius.²¹ So far the earliest known illustrations of the Life cycle of St. Petka of Tarnovo is that of the murals in the church of the village of Arbure (Romania), built in 1502 by the local feudal lord Luka Arbure, hence the name of the village, and decorated later in 1541, as the donor's inscription gives the date and name of the painter Dragash. While here it is impossible to examine the entire cycle we shall only note the presence of two scenes which emphasize light as a sign of Divine presence. At Arbure in the third scene of the cycle we find the episode where, while praying the saint an angel — messenger or a kind a 'light youth' as it quoted in text, forces her to give up living in the desert and return to life among people. The inclusion of the scene with the appearance of the angel or 'light youth' before the saint in the desert, which is missing in the earlier Life, beyond doubt points to the extended Life, written by Patriarch Euthymius.

The eighth scene represents St. Paraskeva, enthroned, surrounded by radiance from both sides, with the figures of two archangels at her side, the radiance is probably darkened by images of angels, while bellow it, there is a bier with the lying figure and St. Petka, as an angel, appearing in front of it. Here we see the appearance of the saint before ordinary Christians Georgi (or Euthymia) with her request that her body be taken out of the common grave with that of a sailor. The basis of the iconographic interpretation of the scene was probably drawn from the illustrations of some offices of the Akathistos Hymn of the Virgin. Here again, as in the text of Life by patriarch Euthymius, as well as in the image light and bright light is the main markers for holiness, which all Christians understood.

Considering the spread and development of Life cycle of St. Petka of Tarnovo we can examine some works of monumental wall painting, iconography and graphics from the 17th and 18th century, preserved in Romania (the wall painting in the church of St. Paraskeva in Roman

from the 16th century and an engraving of the well known ‘Miscellany of Sermons for Sundays and Major Feasts during the Year’ by Barlaam Metropolitan of Moldavia, published in 1643 and in Yugoslavia, the wall paintings in the church of St. Petka at the village of Tarnava, the icon of St. Paraskeva with a Life from Pec (1728), an engraving from the Fenek monastery at Srem (1782).²²

Once shaped the iconographic scheme of the Life cycle spread in the course of three centuries with slight changes in the number of episodes or the separate iconographic details. It gave life to an iconographic tradition whose continuity could be traced to the end of the 18th century. In all monuments we find the episodes ‘The Appearance of the Angel (‘the light youth’) before St. Petka in the Desert’ and ‘The Appearance of St. Petka Enthroned and surrounded by angels, before Georgi or Euthymia’.

Besides in hagiography the divine nature of the *pillar of fire* also appears in hymnography. Thus in the Akathistos Hymn of the Feast of the Shroud of the Holy Virgin, Ikos 7, there is a text, referring to the Holy Virgin: “Радуйся, столпе огненный, среди мглы греха всем нам путь спасения показующий”. It is interesting to note that in the visualization of similar texts, when through metaphors separate qualities of the Holy Virgin are brought out, the metaphor of the text of the poetical hymn is accepted as a concrete image and assumes a material expression. A direct example is the visualization of the hymn “Ἀνῶθεν οἱ προφηταὶ σε προσκυνοῦσιν”. Every one of the prophets ‘see’ the Virgin differently (i.e. different aspects of her holiness) and announces it through different realia, with which she is compared and often these ‘realia’ are presented immediately before each of them: before Isaiah it is a burning ember, before Moses — a burning blackberry bush etc.

This is connected with the growing interest in hymnographic texts and their visualization in Byzantine art from the Paleologian period. Naturally there is a change in the very images of prophets. As according to the chants every one of the prophets ‘sees’ the Holy Virgin differently (i.e. depending on the different degree of holiness) and renders it through different metaphors, the metaphors themselves are directly visualized together with semi-figures of the respective prophets. In wall painting of the Byzantine commonwealth visualization of early Old Testament images of Holy Virgin began in Paleologian period. In Bulgaria these tendencies became noticeable from the 15th century onward. Thus in the church of the Holy Virgin of Vitosha at the Dragalevtzi Monastery, the texts written on the scrolls of the prophets explain how each ‘see’ the Holy Virgin, while the realia she is compared with are expressed immediately before everyone of them, a burning coal is in front of Isaiah, a burning blackberry bush in front of Moses, a candlestick with seven burning candles in front of Zachariah etc. (fig. 6). Such a chant becomes part of wall painting to such an extent that the respective texts were also copied in the Iconographic handbook of Dionisius of Furna.

The *pillar of fire* as a marker of the presence of the Holy Virgin is also used in the legends of her miraculous icons, which in most cases could

be called 'monastic folklore'. Above all here we shall deal with the visualization of the legend of the miraculous icon of the Holy Virgin Portantissa, the main holy protector of the Iviron monastery on Mount Athos. According to the legend, during the iconic controversy, a God fearing widow of Nicaea in Asia Minor threw the icon into the sea, to save it from the troops of the iconoclastic emperor Theophilus. Eventually the sea waves carried it to the shore close by Iviron monastery.



6. *The prophet Moses with the burning bush. Mural in the church "The Holy Virgin of Vitosha" in the Monastery of Dragalevtsi near Sofia. 1496. Bulgaria*

Here is part of the text: "After the demise of a person, who had come to the Holy Mount Athos, once monks from the Iviron monastery saw *pillar of fire* in the sea, which reached the sky at its top. Full of great surprise and horror they could not move and only exclaimed, Oh Lord has mercy on us! This vision was repeated several days and nights in succession, anchorites from all the monasteries around gathered on the beach and saw that the *pillar of fire* rose above the icon of the Holy Mother. Several times thy tried to reach it, yet the icon moved away from them. The monks from Iviron, gathered by their abbot, met in the church with tears in their eyes prayed to the Lord to present their monastery with valueless treasure — the holy icon of the Lord's mother. And the Lord mercifully heard their earnest prayer".

Unfortunately there is no study of the written sources on the legend, neither on its manuscripts. The only possibility before us is to trace reports of travelers and the descriptions of antiquities in the Iviron monastery. They indicate that the legend was quite familiar in the 18th century²³. V. Barskij who visited the monastery in 1747 rendered it in all its details. However the information coming from the Georgian traveler from the 18th century Timote Gabaishvili is particularly valuable. He provides not only a record of the legend as it was known then and the episodes with the miracles, which obviously had arisen at different times, but also reports a miracle which was observed in 1755 (i.e. two years prior to his visit at Mt. Athos). The case in point was the miraculous saving of the monastery from a fire. This report shows that during second half of the 18th century the legend already existed, however the monastic community continued to add new elements to the oral tradition.²⁴

The earliest illustrations of the legend, as far we can judge by the information we found come from monuments which cannot be dated before the end of the 17th century and early in the 18th century. In the earlier copies known of the Iviron Portaitissa these illustrations are still missing. I have in mind the icon taken to Moscow in 1648, which is kept in the catholicon of the Novodevichi Monastery in Moscow.²⁵ According to the latest studies of Vera Chentsova it was brought to Moscow at the request of archimandrite Nikon of Novospasovo.²⁶ The same is valid for



7. The story of the icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa. Mural in the church "The Holy Virgin Portaitissa" in the Iviron Monastery on Mount Athos. 1774



8. The story of the icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa. Detail. The icon emerges in a fiery bright light before the walls of the Monastery Iviron. Mural in the church "The Holy Virgin Portaitissa" in the Iviron Monastery on Mount Athos. 1774

another copy, known as 'Iverion II', ordered by patriarch Nikon and taken to the Iver Valdaya Monastery in 1656.²⁷

Six episodes of the history of the miraculous icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa are included in the decoration in wall paintings of the church of Holy Virgin Portaitissa of Iviron (fig. 7, 8). This church, named after the miraculous icon is not mentioned in historical sources before the second half of the 12th century. According to the Syndikon of the Monastery it was completely rebuilt in 1680. One of

the inscriptions (on a slab from its facade) notes that the ruler of Ugrovvalahia Sherban Kantakousin paid for the decoration of the church in 1683 on September 30, when Abbot was Euthymius, Dionysus IV Patriarch of Constantinople and Nikolai Katholikos of Georgia. This inscription refers to the decoration of the naos and can be considered the date of the wall paintings in the narthex where the scenes discussed is situated.²⁸



9. *The icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa from the Rozhen Monastery with scenes visualizing the story of the icon. XVIII century. Bulgaria*

We should not rule out the possibility that these wall paintings represent the first representation of legend of the miraculous icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa. At any case it is logical namely that it occurred in the Iviron Monastery, where the cult towards the icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa arose and took shape, to find the iconography of the scenes illustrating its miracles. Once it took shape the iconography of this cycle was repeated in all later copies, which the donors desired to include images of its history and miracles.

Among the rare wall paintings of the legend of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa we should mention the eight silver medallions, decoration on the repousse of the icon of the Holy Virgin of Iviron, dated towards the 80s of the 17th century and kept in the Novodevichi Monastery in Moscow. This icon according legends belonged to the Russian Princes Sophia, exiled here by here brother Peter the Great.²⁹ In the medallions there are eight scenes, illustrating the history of the icon and one of the miracles during the attack of the Persians, done over a gold background in enamel.³⁰ In fact when the

repousse was taken off in 1974 it was established that images of the icon contained scenes illustrating the history of the miraculous icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa, situated around the central image. The scene are ten, the dimensions of the icon are 77 by 60, 5 cm inv. No 564/1256.³¹ Probably this is the earliest cycle we know so far.

The legendary history of this miraculous icon is so popular that it led the preparation of copies which were spread in various parts of the Orthodox world, however above all in Russia and the Ukraine³². All known copies of the icon of the icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa (or the Iverian Holy Virgin, as it is known in and the Ukraine, as well as the original do not contain scenes representing the history of the history of the icon or its miracles. This is why the two icons of the Virgin Portaitissa, which have picturesque cycles with interesting illustrations of the legends from Mt. Athos, are of particular interest.

One of these icons today is at the monastery of the Nativity of the Mother of God at Rozhen (6 km east of Melnik), where it had been bro-



10. The icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa from the Rozhen Monastery. Detail. The widow throws the icon in the sea, but the icon does not sink. XVIII century. Bulgaria



11. The icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa from the Rozhen Monastery. Detail. The icon emerges in a fiery bright light before the walls of the Monastery Iviron. XVIII century. Bulgaria

ught directly from Iviron . The inscription on the icon itself tells it was the work Jacob, a monk in the Iviron Monastery Διὰ χειρὸς Ἰακώβου μοναχοῦ Ἰβηρίτου. Historical information have many times confirmed the close ties of the Rozhen Monastery with Mt. Athos.

The miraculous icon of the Rozhen monastery (fig. 9) is an absolute reproduction of its prototype. Both dimensions (1, 37 by 94 cm) and its name ΜΘ ΘΥ Η ΠΟΡΤΑΙΤΗCΑ ΤΩΝ ΙΒΗΡΩΝ and its specific iconographic features point to this. The inscription itself is written below the image of the Virgin: Ἱστορήθη ἡ παροῦσα ἀγία εἰκὼν εἰς ἀντίτυπον τῆς Πορταΐτιδος διὰ συνδρομῆς τοῦ πανοσιωτάτου ἁγίου προηγουμένου κυρίου κυρίου Ἱγνατίου Ἰβηρίτου δι' ἐξόδων δέ κ(αὶ) εὐλαβείας τῶν εὐσεβεστάτων κυρίων Μανικάτῃ Ταμπάκῃ. κ(αὶ) Κώνστα Καλτζούνῃ εἰς ψυχικῆς σστηρίας.

The basic difference of the Rozhen icon from the original is the presence of 10 scenes, illustrating the main episodes of the history of the icon (and some of it some miracles), placed on both sides of the image of the Virgin. The episodes are given from top to bottom and from the left to the right, as follows:

1. The soldiers of the iconoclast Emperor Theophilos (829-842) ordered the righteous widow to throw the icon into the sea. The accompanying text runs as follows: Προστάζεται ἡ χήρα παρὰ τῶν στρατιωτῶν νὰ εὐγάλη τὴν ἁγίαν εἰκόνα.

2. The widow throws the icon in the sea, but the icon does not sink (fig.10): Φοβηθίσα ἡ χήρα τοὺς στρατιώτας ἔρριπεν τὴν ἁγίαν εἰκόνα εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν.



12. The icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa from the Rozhen Monastery. Detail. The monks try to take it out of the sea, but it moves away. XVIII century. Bulgaria

3. The icon emerges in a fiery bright light before the walls of the monastery Iviron (fig.11): Ἐφάνη ἡ ἁγία ἱκὼν φλόγα πυρὸς ἀπέναντι τῆς μονῆς τῶν Ἰβηρῶν.

4. The monks try to take it out of the sea, but it moves away (fig.12): Ἀπερχομένων τῶν πατέρων εἰς τὸ λαβὴν τὴν ἁγίαν ἱκό[να] αὐτὴ ἐμακρύνθη ἀπ' αὐτῶν.

5. The Virgin appears in the dream to monk Gabriel and orders him to take the icon out of the sea:

Ἡ Θεοτόκος προστάζει τὸν Γαβριὺλ νὰ εὐγάλι τὴν εἰκόνα ἀπὸ τὴν θάλασσαν

6. Gabriel takes the icon out of the while the monks are waiting on the shore:

Ὁ Γαβριὴλ εὐγάζωντας τὴν ἁγίαν εἰκόνα ἀπὸ τῆς θαλάσσης ἐδεξάντον αὐτόν.

7. The monks bring the icon in the monastery and conduct a service:

Φέροντες τὴν ἁγίαν εἰκόνα εἰς τὸ καθολικὸν ἔψαλαν ἁγρυπνίαν.

The last three scenes represent three of the most well-known miracles the icon has performed.

8. The virgin sinks the ships of the pirates who have attacked the monastery (Arabs or Persians):

Θαῦμα τίς Θεοτόκου ὁποῦ ἐσύνηριψε τὰ κάτεργα τῶν κουρσάρων.

9. When famine sets in and flour is insufficient the Virgin once again appears before monk Gabriel and tells him the store rooms are full: Ἐλίποντα τὰ ἄλευρα ἡ Θεοτόκος παραδόξως τὰ ἐπλήθυνε.

10. A monk is praying before the icon the Virgin. The text runs as follows: Θαῦμα νεότερον παρὰ τῆς Θεοτόκου. Ὁ παρὼν μοναχὸς κατατρέκον τὴν μονὴν κ(αὶ) κουλαθεῖς ἰαθεῖς διὰ μετανή(ας). He was an enemy of the monastery, but hand dried, and cured it by penitence.

Our studies have shown, that the main version of this legend, including miracles, performed by the miraculous icon, was known in the 13th century, however monastic creativity continued to add new elements to the oral tradition — six episodes of the history of the miraculous icon of the Holy Virgin Portantissa and visualization in wall paintings decorating the church of the Holy Virgin at the Iviron monastery. The same episodes (and another four) have been painted around the image of the Holy Virgin Portantissa in two icons, which represent copies of the miraculous Iviron icon. Today one is in the monastery of the Nativity of the Holy Virgin at Rozhen, 6 km from the town of Melnik, where it was brought indirectly from the Iviron monastery on Mount Athos. (The Iviron monastery as early as the 14th century had a small chapel in the vicinity of Melnik. The main difference from the original in the Rozhen icon is the presence of ten scenes, illustrating the episodes of the histo-

14. The icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa from city of Tryavna with the panorama of the Monastery of Iviron and scenes visualizing the story of the icon and its miracles. XIX century. Bulgaria



15. The icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa from the city of Tryavna. Detail. The icon emerges in a fiery bright light before the walls of the Monastery Iviron and The monks try to take it out of the sea, but it moves away. XVIII century. Bulgaria



ry of the icon and some of its miracles), situated on both sides of the image of the Holy Virgin. In some of these scenes we find a fiery radiance (a pillar). Once established, the iconography of this cycle is repeated in later copies of the miraculous icon, where according to those which made the commission required images of its history and miracles. As a late expression of this tradition we could point to the icon of the Holy Virgin of Portantissa from the 19th century, from Tryavna and kept day at the Museum of Veliko Tarnovo (fig. 14, 15). Scenes of the history of the icon and the miracles are also presented here, however with a substantial difference. In the lower part of the icon's field, immediately below the image of the Holy Virgin Portantissa there is a panorama of the Iviron monastery. This suggests other possible models before the artist who was working on it. These are engravings of the image of the Holy Virgin Portantissa, her history and miracles, which always contain the panorama of the monastery. A similar print has also reached the



13. The Virgin Portaitissa of Iviron with the panorama of the Monastery of Iviron and scenes visualizing the story of the icon. Copper Engraving. 1805. National Library of Cyril and Methodius, Sofia, Bulgaria

monastery of the Holy Virgin at Arbanassi (not far from Tarnovo), and is kept today in the cat-holicon of the same church of Arbanassi. Evidently, we speaking of the continuity of a tradition from Mount Athos and its reflection in art in different regions of the Orthodox world.

The custom of spreading engravings and above all lithographs with a view of a given monastery or a famous sacred object is known for all large monasteries throughout the 19th century both at Mt. Athos and throughout the Orthodox world. There were traditional panoramic lithographs with a view of the monastery together with those of the image of its famous holy icon of the Holy Virgin Portaitissa and scenes of its history and miracles. Such a lithography had also reached the monastery of the Holy Virgin at Arbanassi and is kept today in its main church. Another similar one is in the collections of the Saints Cyril and Methodius National Library in Sofia (fig. 13).³⁴

Even the superficial comparison of the Tryavna icon with this engraving points to the identity of the composition and iconography

of the separate scenes. The only difference is that the inscriptions are shorter and are in Bulgarian. The strongest similarity is in architectural details of Iviron — the similar presentation of walls, the port, the pier, the five dome catholicon etc. considering the differences in the technique of building up the images (in one case it is graphic, in the other in oils). Obviously the master painter from Trayvna used this engraving, or a similar one, to create an icon for the donor Yanko for another church at Arbanasi (this is the place to note that the icon originates from the church of the Nativity at Arbanasi). The resorting to engravings from Mt. Athos as models for the creation of icons by Tryavna master painters is an interesting phenomenon in Bulgarian art of the 19th century, and by no means is limited with our example.

Here we examined several examples of the interpretation of fire, the pillar of fire and the fiery light as a New Testament theophany, drawn from hagiography and hymnography, as well as their visualization in various works of Orthodox art.

To this we can add folklore and anthropological aspects, connected with icons and fire. In Bulgaria the icons of St. Constantine and St. Helena play have a major role in the Nestinari custom, which is connected with ritual dance on embers, spread in Strandzha Mountain (Eastern Thrace). This is a complex phenomenon, with many layers, where pre-Christian and Christian concepts, a strong belief and popular views of nature and the world are to be found.

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Огненный Столп как знак теофании в византийском и пост- византийском искусстве

Среди многочисленных тематических аспектов драматургии света, используемой в процессе создания сакрального пространства, как неоднократно об этом упоминал А. М. Лидов, следует обратить внимание на несколько примеров, свидетельствующих об иконографии света и огня в христианском искусстве. Разумеется, что в ходе наших изысканий мы будем обращаться к ряду философско-богословских представлений об огне и свете. В частности, речь пойдет об огненном столпе как знамении Богоявления.

Уже в текстах Ветхого Завета сообщается о том, что Господь явился как свет: например, в виде огненного столпа перед евреями (кн. Исход 13. 21). Именно образ огненного столпа, о котором и пойдет речь в нашем докладе, служил топомосом божественного присутствия и был заимствован новозаветной традицией из Ветхого Завета. После этого он неизменно присутствовал во всех видах и жанровых разновидностях богословских и литургических произведений.

Помимо агиографических источников божественная природа огненного столпа также упоминается в гимнографии. Так, в Акафисте праздника Покрова Пресвятой Богородицы, в икосе 7, содержится упоминание о Пресвятой Богородице. Необходимо отметить, что в визуальной интерпретации подобных текстов, в которых посредством метафор прославляются отдельные качества Пресвятой Богородицы, метафора поэтического гимна воспринимается как конкретный образ и принимает соответствующее материальное воплощение. Наглядным примером служит визуализация гимна "Ανῶθεν οἱ προφῆται σε προσκυνοῦσιν". Каждый из пророков «видит» Богородицу по-разному (то есть, описывает различные аспекты ее святости) и возвещает о них с помощью различного рода реалий или символов, с которыми он сравнивает Богоматерь. Часто эти «реалии» представлены непосредственно перед упоминанием о каждом из пророков: повествованию об Исае предшествует образ горящих углей, а упоминание о Моисее начинается с описания пылающей купины.

Образ огненного столпа выступает в качестве маркера присутствия Пресвятой Богородицы и упоминается в легендах о чудотворных богородичных иконах, которые в большинстве случаев следует отнести к жанру «монастырского фольклора». В этом слу-

чае, прежде всего имеет смысл исследовать визуализацию легенды о чудотворной иконе Пресвятой Богородицы Портайтиссы – главной заступницы Иверского монастыря на Афоне.

Наши исследования показали, что основная версия этой легенды, включая чудеса, совершенные чудотворной иконой, была известна еще в 13-м веке. Однако монастырская традиция продолжала развиваться и обогащать устную традицию новыми подробностями: таковы шесть эпизодов повествования о чудотворной иконе Пресвятой Богородицы Портайтиссы и их визуальное воплощение в настенной росписи церкви Пресвятой Богородицы Иверского монастыря. Данные эпизоды (и еще четверо дополнительных) обрамляли центральный образ Пресвятой Богородицы Портайтиссы на двух иконах, которые, таким образом, являлись списками с чудотворной иверской иконы. Сегодня один из них находится в монастыре Рождества Пресвятой Богородицы в Рожене, в 6 км от города Мельник, в который икона попала окольными путями из афонского Иверского монастыря. (Иверский монастырь в начале 14 века имел подворье в виде небольшой часовни окрестностях Мельника). Основное отличие Роженской иконы от оригинала состоит в наличии десяти клейм, расположенных по обе стороны от образа Богородицы и повествующих об истории иконы и совершенных ею чудесах. В нескольких клеймах изображено огненное сияние (столп). Сформировавшись, устойчивая иконография этого цикла повторяется в более поздних списках чудотворной иконы, заказчики которых уже по своему усмотрению варьируют отдельные эпизоды из истории чудотворной иконы. Поздним выражением этой традиции можно считать икону Пресвятой Богородицы Портайтиссы 19-го века из Травны, которая ныне хранится в музее города Велико Тырново.

К этому можно добавить фольклорные и антропологические аспекты, связанные с почитанием икон и символикой огня. В Болгарии иконы святых Константина и Елены играют важную роль в обычае, именуемом «Нестинарей», который представляет собой ритуальный танец на углях, распространенный в горах Странджа (Восточная Фракия). Это сложное многослойное явление, в котором переплелись дохристианские и христианские верования, личная вера и распространенные фольклорные представления о природе и мироздании.

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- 20 T. Sinigalia, Op.cit., p. 103, fig. 23, 24.
- 21 E. Bakalova. La Vie de Sainte Parasceve de Tirnovo dans l'art balkanique du Bas Moyen Age. — *Byzantinobulgarica*, V, Sofia 1978 , 175-211.
- 22 E. Bakalova. La Vie..., passim.
- 23 We are obliged to the colleagues Lilia Evseeva and Lev Lifshitz for the photograph of the Icon of the Virgin. This icon was part of the Exhibition Byzantine Iconography, organized during the 18th International Congress of Byzantologists in Moscow 1991 and once again at the International Congress Crete, the Eastern Mediteranean and Russia in the 17th century, Moscow 1995. For fuller information see:
- 24 On the legend see: R. Dawkins. The monks of Athos. London 1936, 257-270. Similar points of view see by the Georgian scholar Elena Metreveli (Е. Метрели. Тимоте Габашвили. Путешествие. Тбилиси 1956, 19-21). We are obliged to Elena Metreveli for the information and for the photo of the design of Gabaishvili.
- 25 Подлинные акты, относящиеся к Ивирской иконе Божией Матери, принесенные в Россию в 1648 г. Москва 1879, 6. See also Н. Антушев. Историческое описание московского Новодевичьего монастыря. Москва 1885, 48-49. Н. Лихачев. Историческое значение итало-греческих иконописцев и их влияние на композиции некоторых прославленных русских икон. СПб., 1911, 13-16; Post Byzantine Painting. Icons of the 15th-18th Centuries (Catalogue of the Exhibition). Moscow 1995, № 81, 227-229.
- 26 В. Ченцова. Икона Иверской Богоматери (Очерки истории отношений греческой церкви к России в середине XVII века по документам РГАДА). Москва 2010, 225-241.
- 27 Other known copies of the Holy Virgin of Iviron in Russia are mentioned here. Different views have been expressed on the exact date of the arrival of the second copy. See: Л. Евсеева и М. Шведова. Афонские списки «Богоматери Портантиссы» и проблема подобия в иконописи. — В: Чудотворная икона в Византии и Древней Руси. Сост. А.Лидов. Москва 1996, 336-362; See also В. Ченцова, Цит. съч., 243-251.
- 28 The inscription was inscribed in 1774. See: S. Kadas. Op.cit, 54 The wall paintings in the narthex (not published so far) were photographed by the colleague Georgi Gerov on our behalf at his visit to the Monastery of Iviron in 1985 and we owe him our cordial gratitude for this service.
- 29 These detailed information we received during our visit to Moscow from our colleagues L. Evssea and I. Shvedova, who were preparing a study on it, and whom we owe special gratitude.

- 30 According to I. Shvedova these scenes, as well the entire repousse of the icon were the work Russian goldsmiths from the Kremlin workshops. Even the appearance of the Iviron Monastery and landscape background recall the configuration of a Russian monastery of the 17th century.
- 31 The cycle as well as the image of the Holy Virgin probably the work of a Greek master painter. In one of the scenes the catholicon of Iviron resembles those familiar to those familiar from prints.
- 32 On Russian and Russian copies of the icon the Holy Virgin see:
- 33 The first to report about this icon was His Reverence the Metropolitan of Nevrokop Pimen. The proskinitation of the icon was restored by Alexder Penev in 1985. Today the icon is kept in the northwestern chapel of the Anargyroi chapel of the main Monastery church and taken out on litany on the church feast day The Nativity of the Mother of God (September 8th).
- 34 D. Papastratos. Paper icons. Greek orthodox religious engravings 1665-1899. Athens 1990. Vol. II, pp. 425-426.