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CHRIST AS PRIEST
IN BYZANTINE CHURCH DECORATION
OF THE 11TH AND 12TH CENTURIES

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The latest studies ever more often regard the 11th century as a watershed in Byzantine church decoration¹. This era introduced in altar apses, as innovations of principle, such scenes as "The Communion of the Apostles" and "Officiating Bishops", which determined the purely liturgical nature of mid-Byzantine iconographic programs. The changes were not limited by these two scenes. As shown earlier, the 11th century introduced and spread the image of Christ Emmanuel in the garments of a bishop at the moment of church consecration². As we see it, the image of Christ the Priest, which emerged in mid-11th century murals (the mosaics of St.Sophia of Kiev present the best-known example), deserve examination among the new liturgical themes of the 11th and 12th centuries³. The unusual haircut (with short hair taking the shape of a double crown round the tonsure) is the main characteristic feature of the iconographic type. Such a haircut was the most general token of belonging to one of the priesthood degrees⁴, which corresponded to the idea of Christ as the great patriarch above all the levels in the church hierarchy. We can notice other features of this type: the short beard, pointing to the youth of Christ, the scroll in His hand as symbol of the Logos and token of Master, and, finally, the special cuffs or epimanikia, a characteristic detail of the Byzantine liturgical vestments--another tactful indication of His priestly rank⁵. In his time, D.V. Ainalov convincingly proved that the apocrypha "On the Priesthood of Christ" (*Peri hierosynes Xristou*), which appeared under Justinian, was the literary source for this iconographic type⁶. Let us recall it⁷. The elder of the Constantinopolitan Jewish community tells about an old scroll which testifies to the young Christ being elected one of the 22 priests of the Temple in Jerusalem. The election was preceded by long debates, as He did not belong to the priestly tribe of Levites and, according to the Law, had no right to serve in the Temple, but an investigation stated His virginal birth of Mary and divine descent, which justified His election. Christians found a proof of this story of the Jewish elder in ancient writers and--which mattered most--in the Gospel according to St. Luke, which mentioned Christ's synagogal sermons. This widely current apocrypha was incorporated in the well-known Suidae Lexicon in the 10th century. To all appearances, the text owed its popularity to its basic idea of Christ's exceptional right to priesthood, as connected with the important theme of succession from Old Testament to New Testament priesthood.

¹ Chr. Walter. *Art and Ritual of the Byzantine Church*. London, 1982.

² A.M. Lidov. *Obraz "Khrista-arkhiyereya" v ikonograficheskoi programme Sophii Okhridskoi*. - *Zograf*, 17. Beograd, 1986, pp. 5-21; Idem. *L'image du Christ-Prelat dans le programme iconographique du Sainte Sophie d'Ohride*. - *Arte Christiana*, fasc. 745, vol. LXXIX. Milano, 1991, pp. 245-250.

³ V.N. Lazarev. *Mozaiki Sophii Kievskoi*. Moscow, 1960, pl. 17, pp. 31-32, 98-90.

⁴ For the Byzantine interpretation of this hairstyle see: N. Krasnoseltsev. *O drevnikh liturgicheskikh tolkovaniyakh*. Odessa, 1894, pp. 68-69.

⁵ See: Walter. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 20-21.

⁶ D.V. Ainalov. *Novy ikonografichesky obraz Khrista*. - *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, II, 1928, pp. 19-23; N.Thierry. *Sur un double visage byzantine du Christ du VIe siecle au VIIIe // Studi in memoria di Giuseppe Bovini*, II. Ravenna, p. 639-657.

⁷ For the unabridged and concise Greek versions of the text, see: A. Vasiliev. *Anecdota graeco-bizantina*. Moscow, 1893, p. 58-72.

A special iconography of Christ as the Priest already existed in the second half of the 6th century, judging by the miniatures of the Rabbula Gospels (586)⁸. In one of the four full-page miniatures of the Syriac manuscript, Christ is represented enthroned among monks in a garden in bloom, framed by an ornate arch crowned with a cross and creating the image of an ideal church. The combination of the pictorial motifs of the garden and the church brings to mind the heavenly Jerusalem, where Christ serves the Liturgy with the righteous.

His seat resembles a synthronon, and the arch behind Him, the altar apse. The features of the iconographic type (the hair worn in a double crown, the short beard and the scroll) add to the image of Christ the Priest. Characteristically, the Ascension scene in the parallel miniature of the double page represents the traditional Christ with a long beard and hair going down to His shoulders. Also symptomatic in this context is the placing of "The Descent of the Holy Ghost" on the reverse of this page as incarnating the idea of the emergence of the earthly Church. An analysis of the miniature in the Rabbula Gospels allows us to assume that even the earliest instances of this particular iconographic type were connected with the priesthood theme.

The image of Christ the Priest repeatedly appeared in art before the Iconoclasm. The coins of Justinian II and the Crucifixion on the lid of the Vatican reliquary are the best-known examples⁹. However, this image is not found in altar decoration in the post-Iconoclastic centuries till the 11th.



Figure 1 Christ with the priestly hairstyle. Solidus (golden coin) of Justinian II. reverse: the emperor at Golgotha. Early 8th century

⁸ C. Cecchelli, G. Furlani, M. Salmi. *The Rabbula Gospels*. Olten-Lausanne, 1959, f. 14r; D.H. Wright. *The Date and Arrangement of the Illustrations in the Rabbula Gospels*. - *DOP*, 27, 1973, pp. 203-204, pl. 2.

⁹ N. Thierry. *Sur un double visage byzantin du Christ de VI^e siècle au VIII^e*. - *Studi in memoria di Giuseppe Bovini*, vol. II, p. 639-657.

The appearance of this image in the Kievan St. Sophia can be directly connected with an idea, important in the 11th century Byzantine theology, which emphasized the role of Christ not only as the ecumenical Emperor but Patriarch heading the Universal Church. In the Kievan St. Sophia, Christ the Priest, represented in a medallion above the triumphal arch, links the Pantocrator in the dome with the liturgical themes of the altar apse, where the new scene of the "Communion of the Apostles," depicting Christ officiating in the Heavenly Temple, occupies the central place.

All together the images of the Virgin Orant, the Communion of the Apostles and the Holy Bishops in the three registers of the altar apse embodied a symbolic idea of the ideal Church, the Temple of the Heavenly Jerusalem. A dedicatory inscription above the conch of the Kievan St. Sophia accentuated the Jerusalem symbolism¹⁰. This context clarifies the image of Christ with the features of a Jerusalem templar priest, meant to remind us of the succession in the New Testament priesthood, the unity of the Earthly Jerusalem and the Heavenly, the extratemporal Church and its Great Patriarch.

In the iconographic program of St. Sophia at Kiev, Christ the Priest is also connected with the Old Testament high priests--Aaron and Melchisedech--depicted on the vault of the east arch. This connection can be easily explained as Old Testament prototypes--but a more concrete and profound idea seems to underlie the mural. An explanation of the symbolic connection between the three images is provided by Chapter 7 of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews. According to this text, Christ, Who did not belong by birth to the sons of Aaron, inherited the superior and eternal priesthood of Melchisedech by repudiating the Law of the Old Testament. The idea of the true priesthood also dominates the apocrypha "On the Priesthood of Christ," which lies at the basis of the rare image at the Kievan St. Sophia.

It appears to be of tremendous importance that this idea, and the text itself of Chapter 7 of the Epistle to the Hebrews acquired quite a new meaning in mid-11th century Byzantine theology in connection with the polemic on unleavened bread (azymes). The testimony of Apostle Paul became the cornerstone of theological arguments which came from the Orthodox participants in this polemic, who saw the Catholic use of unleavened bread as blind following of the Jewish law¹¹.

With direct quotations from Chapter 7 of this Epistle, they argued that Christ performed a new Passover at the Last Supper, and acquired a new priesthood "after the order of Melchisedech"--higher than that of Levites. Now, if priesthood is changed, the law which prescribes unleavened bread must also be changed. The polemic with the Latins, which occupied the minds of the entire Orthodox Christendom, was well known in the Kievan Russia, too. The several polemical treatises by Russian Metropolitans which have gone down to us from the 11th century include some specially dedicated to the crucial issue of azymes¹².

As we see it, this polemic lends us a better understanding of the pathos of the Sermon on Law and Grace by Metropolitan Hilarion of Kiev, which proclaimed the superiority of the grace of Christ over the Law of the Old Testament. In the iconographic treatment of St. Sophia, we see an affinity to the ideas of Hilarion, who could have taken an immediate part in the elaboration of its iconographic program.

¹⁰ K.K. Akentyev. K proyasnenuyu smysla nadpisi nad konkhoi Sv. Sophii Kievskoi. - Vizantiiskoe iskusstvo i liturgia. Novye otkrytiya. Leningrad, 1991, pp. 16-19.

¹¹ See: Ch. Cheltsov. Polemika mezhdou grekami i latinyanami po voprosu ob opresnokakh v XI-XII vekakh. St. Petersburg, 1879; M.H. Smith. "And Take Bread...". Cerularius and the Azyme Controversy of 1054. Paris, 1978.

¹² A. Popov. Istoriko-literaturny obzor drevnerusskikh polemicheskikh sochinenii protiv latinyan (XI-XV vv.). Moscow, 1875; A. Poppe. Le traite des azymes. - Byzantion, 35, 1965, p. 504-527.

The place of Christ the Priest above the east arch of the Kievan St. Sophia was, probably, determined by a Constantinopolitan original which has not come down to us. We find an oblique indication of this in the Cappadocian cave church Cambazli kilise, with its analogous image of Christ, published by Nicole Thierry, who dates it to the mid-11th century¹³. The bust of Christ in a medallion is represented on the vault of the east arch in front of the chancel. The special haircut, the short beard and the scroll in the left hand are here complemented by the inscription, EMMANUEL, which can be interpreted as alluding to the Incarnation, an indispensable condition for the Christ's priesthood. This semantic accent was among the basic in Byzantine theology. To the sides of the medallion on the slopes of the arch, there are full-length figures of Solomon and David, with unrolled scrolls in their hands. Solomon's reads: "Wisdom hath builded her house" (Prov 9:1), and David's quotes a psalmic mention of the House of the Lord (45:10). In the iconographic context of this mural, the scroll inscriptions can be interpreted as another reminder of Christ as high priest of the temple of Wisdom, who linked the New and Old Testament priesthood.

Whereas the representation in the Kievan St. Sophia has been known to specialists for a long time, the figure of Christ as priest from the St. Sophia at Ochrid is described in the present paper for the first time. Its fragmentary condition made a correct identification of the image impossible earlier¹⁴. The mid-11th century fresco is under the window in the diaconicon of the church¹⁵. The head and shoulders representation of Christ, singled out with a special frame, is reminiscent of an icon. The remains of the cross are discernible in the nimbus. The hair does not fall on the shoulders but is above the ears like a crown. The barely perceptible short beard is also a definite indication that this is the rare type of "Christ the Priest." Christ's vestments are not entirely usual: the reddish-brown himation lies on both shoulders, fully revealing the chest in the blue chiton adorned with two yellow bands. These vertical bands, called potamoi (sources) in Greek, were the distinguishing feature of a bishop's sticharion and symbolized the grace of teaching granted him¹⁶. The special vestments point to Christ as High Priest.

Correct identification of the figure of Christ enables us to give a new interpretation of the iconographic program of the Ochrid Sophia diaconicon. Above Christ the Priest in the apse conch is St. John the Baptist. In his left hand he holds a staff crowned with a cross, which points to his role as Baptizer and spiritual pastor. His right arm is bent in front of his chest in a gesture of blessing related to Christ the Priest, represented immediately under St. John's hand. John's chiton is also adorned with bands and similar to a bishop's sticharion. By deliberately comparing these two images, above and under the window, the author of the iconographic program is reminding us of the Baptism as a kind of consecration (heirotonia) of Christ, the act of handing down the hereditary priesthood of the Old Testament to the High Priest of the new Church.

¹³ N. Thierry. *Peintures d'Asie Mineure et de Transcaucasie au Xe et XIe siècles*. London, 1977, XI, p. 9; Idem. *Sur un double visage...*, p. 655-657, fig. 9.

¹⁴ I am deeply grateful to Milan Radujko, who called my attention to this unusual image.

¹⁵ For a description of the murals in the diaconicon, see: P. Milkovic-Peppek. *Materiaux sur l'art Macédonien du Moyen Âge. Les fresques du sanctuaire de Sainte Sophie d'Ochrid*. - Recueil des travaux. Publications de Musée archéologique. Skopje, t. 1, 1956, p. 58.

¹⁶ PG, t. 155, col. 712; *Pisaniya sv. otsov i uchitelei tserkvi, otnosyaschiesya k istolkovaniyu pravoslavnogo bogosluzheniya*. Vol. 3. St. Petersburg, 1856, p. 19.

In this context one of the most puzzling and well-known features of the iconographic program of the Ochrid Sophia can be explained. On either side of the window in the diaconicon is an unique row of six popes of Rome revered in the Orthodox Church¹⁷. This row seems all the more strange in view of the fact that the ktetor and most likely author of the iconographic program, Archbishop Leo of Ochrid, was an active participant in the theological polemic with the Church of Rome and one of the initiators of the schism of 1054¹⁸.



Figure 2 Christ the Priest. Mosaic image on the eastern domed arch of St. Sophia at Kiev. Mid-11th century

The image of Christ the Priest enables us to understand a special meaning: Leo of Ochrid is pointing to the absolute priority of Christ as supreme High Priest in relation to the authority of all the popes, who are duly esteemed as successors of St. Peter. This iconographic theme finds fairly close correspondences in the theological writings of Leo of Ochrid, in which the theme of the priesthood of Christ resounds with new strength in connection with the controversy over the use of leavened and unleavened bread in the Eucharist¹⁹.

Earlier we demonstrated the significance of this theme for the sanctuary wall-paintings of the Ochrid Sophia, where Christ is represented in the conch wearing the ritual garment of a bishop

¹⁷ A.W. Epstein. The Political Content of the Painting of Saint Sophia at Ohrid. - *JOB*, 29, 1980, S. 21-25; C. Grozdanov. Ritrati du sei papi nella cattedrale du Sancta Sophia a Ochrida. - *Balcanica*, II, 1. Roma, 1983, p. 3-11.

¹⁸ H. Gelzer. Der Patriarchat von Achrida. Leipzig, 1902, S. 6-10; H.G. Beck. Kirche und theologische Literatur im Byzantinischen Reich. Munchen, 1959, S. 534-535.

¹⁹ *Analecta sacra et classica*. Ed. card. Pitra. Roma, 1891, p. 745-762.

consecrating the church, and all the compositions on the walls are united by the theme of the liturgy in the consecrated Church, which evokes the idea of Sophia the Wisdom of God creating the Temple²⁰. The iconographic program of the diaconicon with its rare image of Christ the Priest provides a kind of historico-theological commentary to this main idea of all wall-painting.

The image of Christ as the Priest appears in two more Byzantine murals of the 12th century. In the Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi (1164), Christ the Priest is depicted in the dome above the southwest compartment²¹. The vestments of Christ, which look like a priestly phelonion, are the most original feature of this image. In three other corner domes of the Nerezi church, with its five domes, Christ is represented in the iconographic types of the young Emmanuel, the elder Ancient of Days and the middle-aged Pantocrator. This contrast of different images was a characteristic feature of the Byzantine iconographic programs of the 11th and 12th centuries, intended to show the eternity of the Second Person in the Trinity and the diversity of His appearances in the liturgy²².

However, the image of Christ the priest was unusual in this rank. The introduction of this rare theme could be determined by decisions of the Constantinopolitan Synod of 1156-1157, in which Alexius Comnenus, the ktetor of this decoration, most probably took part²³. The theme of Christ's priesthood was among the central at this Synod--the first specially dedicated to purely liturgical issues. It is noteworthy that in the drums of the four cupolas under the image of Christ, between the windows, there are angels in deaconal sticharions, with hands upraised, as if to the glory of the High Priest officiating with them. This detail, never before mentioned in scholarly literature, is all the more important since it presents the prototype of the Celestial Liturgy theme, which became so popular in the later Byzantine cupola programs.

The theme of Christ the Priest received spectacular development in the naos of the Nerezi church. The "Presentation of Christ in the Temple" and the "Lamentation" are demonstratively set opposite one another in the second tier of the south and north walls. Liturgical texts treat the Presentation of Christ as the appearance of the founder of a New Church, who adopted and transformed the priesthood of the Old Testament. It is not for nothing that this scene often represented the infant Christ clad as a bishop consecrating a church.

The Lamentation is an impressive image of the Sacrifice. The dead Christ lies in the lap of the Virgin as on an altar --a likeness emphasized by the white drapery resembling an altar cloth. The Mother presses Her self-sacrificing Son to the womb which gave Him birth in a composition expressing the unseverable unity of Christ and His Church²⁴.

These main scenes of the Nerezi murals share the topical theological idea of the officiating Christ, "who offers and who is offered," to quote the well-known liturgical prayer. It will be apt to recall here that the interpretation of these words became the reason for the Synod of 1156.

²⁰ Lidov. *Obraz Khrista...*, pp. 5-21; *Idem. L'Image...*, p. 245-250.

²¹ Ainalov. *Op. cit.*, pp. 22-23 (note by N. Okunev, who paid attention to this specificity)

²² Sh. Tsuji. *The Headpiece Miniatures and Genealogy Pictures in Paris gr. 74.* - *DOP*, 29, 1975, pp. 174-187; T. Avner. *The Impact of the Liturgy on Style and Context. The Triple-Christ in Taphou 14.* - *JOB*, 32/5, 1982, pp. 459-467.

²³ G. Babic. *Les discussions christologiques et le decor des eglises byzantines au 12e siecle.* - *Fruhmittelalterliche Studien*, 3, 1968, p. 368-386, 376.

²⁴ H. Maguire. *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium.* Princeton, 1981, p. 102.

The latest image of Christ the Priest can be found in the synthronon niche of the altar apse in the Church of the Savior at Nereditsa near Novgorod (1199)²⁵. The enthroned Christ appears as a prototype of the earthly bishop, who occupies the synthronon during the Liturgy. The image of Christ the Priest enthroned was quite traditional. Some miniatures make His seat resemble a synthronon²⁶.



Figure 3. Christ the Priest in the south-west dome of St Panteleimon's church at Nerezi, Macedonia, a. 1164

Representations of Christ in episcopal vestments appear in the later Byzantine murals (e.g., in the Church of St. Stephen of Nesebre).

²⁵ Les Fresques byzantines des Spas-Nerediza. Paris, 1928, pl. XXXV, 1-2; V.N. Lazarev. Drevnerusskie mozaiki i freski XI-XV vv. Moscow, 1973, figs. 243, 245, p. 49.

²⁶ The miniature representing Christ the Priest preaching in the Temple illustrates the text of Jn 7:14-24. 11th century lectionary of the Athonian Dionisiou Monastery (Dionisiou, 587, f. 19 v). See: The Treasures of Mount Athos. Illuminated Manuscripts, vol. 1. Athens, 1974, pl. 203, p. 437.



Figure 4. Christ the Priest in the synthronon niche of the Savior's church at Nereditsa near Novgorod, 1199.

"Peter of Alexandria" and "Elijah in the Wilderness" are represented in the Nereditsa wall paintings in special niches (acrosoliums) to the sides of the synthronon. The first, reminiscent of "The Vision of Peter of Alexandria,"²⁷ can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the rite of prothesis, preparation for Sacrifice. The representation of the Prophet Elijah being fed by a raven in the wilderness was the Old Testament prototype of the rite of Communion. The three representations in the altar apse niches created a rare image of the liturgical act officiated by Christ the Priest at its culminative moments²⁸.

²⁷ G. Millet. *La vision de Pierre d'Alexandrie*. - *Melanges Ch. Diehl*, t. II. Paris, 1930, p. 99-111.

²⁸ To all appearances, this system of representations was also linked to the ktetor theme of the murals. See: N.V. Pivovarova. *Ktitorskaya tema v ikonograficheskoi programme tserkvi Spasa na Nereditse*. - *Vspomogatelnye istoricheskie distsipliny*, vol. XXIII, Leningrad, 1991, pp. 148-153.



Figure 5. Destroyed murals of the sanctuary of the Savior's church at Nereditsa near Novgorod, 1199

After the 12th century, the iconographic type of Christ the Priest was practically never used--probably, due to the doubts about the canonicity of the apocrypha "On the Priesthood of Christ." No later than the 13th century, it was included in the list of the rejected books, and Christ's ordination was regarded as heretical fiction²⁹. There was another factor--the appearance of more concrete representations of Christ in the vestments of a Patriarch, closer corresponding to the ideas of the time, at the turn of the 14th century.

²⁹ The first indication to this is found in the Epistle to Pancus by Athanasius, a monk of Jerusalem. See: M. Sokolov. *Materialy i zametki po starinnoi slavyanskoi literature*. Issue 1, Moscow, 1888, pp. 108-109.