THE EVOLUTION OF CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHY IN THE VI-VII CENTURIES

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ABSTRACT

The II-III centuries represented the period of the birth of Christian sacred art through Christians imitating the custom of pagans, from whose ranks most of them came, to decorate their graves, sarcophagi or mausoleums with images and even by borrowing some pagan symbols and themes, to which they obviously gave a new, Christian meaning, to which, of course, exclusively Christian themes were added, most often of biblical origin, most of them having a narrative-historical character. In the 4th-5th centuries, under the careful supervision of the Church, a synthesis was made regarding the themes addressed, by abandoning some, by taking over others from the imperial imaginary, prevalence acquiring a dogmatic character, from the desire to express and through the mediation of figurative art, not only through the poetic, transposed into songs, the truths of faith formulated at the first four ecumenical synods, but also in terms of styles. In this second stage of the history of Christian sacred art, especially in the 5th century, as a result of the synthesis achieved in the capital of the empire between the two great artistic currents that manifested themselves in painting, the Hellenistic-Alexandrian and the Syro-Palestinian, was formed the Constantinopolitan painting school and the stylistic features specific to this school crystallized . The present study aims to point out the main characteristics and developments of Christian sacred art in the Byzantine Empire starting from the time of Emperor Justinian I until the outbreak of Byzantine iconoclasm.

Keywords: *miniatures; Nilotic landscape; Quinisext synod; canon of orthodoxy; Justinian;*

INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527-565), Christian iconography experienced an era of extraordinary development, both thanks to the art of mosaic and parietal fresco painting, by decorating the churches built during this period in Constantinople and in the great cities of the empire, as well as thanks to miniature art, which gained considerable momentum.

Between the two types of painting, the monumental, wall painting, and the miniature, there seems to have been a reciprocal exchange of themes, with the miniaturists drawing inspiration from monumental art to decorate their manuscripts and vice versa[1].

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[1] Herbert L. KESSLER, "Narrative Representations", in: Kurt WEIZMANN (ed.), *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, *V. The Christian Realm*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1979, p. 495.

1. THE ROLE OF MINIATURES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SACRED ART IN THE VI-VII CENTURIES

Compared to the parietal painting, in which the number of scenes was limited not only by the surface of the church walls, but also by the costs that such a painting entailed, especially the mosaic, the manuscripts represented the environment conducive to the increase in the number of compositions, sometimes a theme being illustrated by a whole cycle of images. In some manuscripts executed between the 5th and 7th centuries, hundreds of scenes are represented, sometimes as many as 69 on a single page, as in the *Ashburnham Pentateuch*[2], originating apparently from North Africa, the total number sometimes exceeding 300 scenes for a manuscript.

The Book of Kings, the earliest Christian manuscript, also known as the *Quedlinburg Itala*, probably made in Rome at the beginning of the 5th century, has between 200 and 300 illustrated scenes, the author apparently drawing inspiration from the mosaics of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore[3]. There are about 330 scenes in the *Cotton Genesis* manuscript, which was to be used as a source of inspiration in the 13th century by the mosaicists who decorated the domes of St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, and in the *Vienna Genesis* even more[4]. Along with these miniatures, we should mention the *Rossano Gospel*, created in Antioch or Jerusalem in the 6th century, the *Rabulla Gospel*, made in 586 in Mesopotamia, at the monastery of St. John in Zagba[5], the *Syriac Bible* from Paris, to which it also adds others, of lesser importance.

The miniatures are also important because, beyond the predominantly narrative character of the scenes that illustrate them, especially when it comes to the Old Testament texts, some scenes have a dogmatic character, such as *Christ in glory*, or liturgical, such as the *Communion of the Apostles*. They also prove that in the 5th-6th centuries the compositions of the main New Testament themes that illustrate the fundamental events in the life of the Savior Jesus Christ – the Birth, the Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Passion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, but also His miracles, were already finalized.

In the *Rossano Gospel*, the theme of the *Communion of the Apostles* is represented, the composition of which, broadly speaking, is the same to this day. Only the Holy Table of Sacrifice and the ciborium, which usually appear in contemporary compositions of the theme, are missing from the miniature composition, instead the Savior Jesus Christ is represented twice, sharing with the holy Apostles on the right and left of the composition, dressed in white, slightly bowed, in humble postures, prepared to receive the Holy Eucharist. To the right of the Savior, due to his white hair, can be identified the Holy Apostle Peter, who receives the Holy Body[6]. Another representation of the Communion of the Apostles, this time engraved on a paten, sometime between the years 565-578, is much closer to the consecrated composition, as it also shows the Holy Table and the ciborium[7].

Rabulla's Gospel also preserves probably the earliest composition of the *Crucifixion* theme in which Christ is represented clothed, in earlier compositions, from the 5th century,

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[2] Kurt WEIZMANN, *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination*, George Braziller, New York, 1977, p. 15; John BECKWITH, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, col. *The Pelican History of Art*, Penguin Books, 1979, p. 145.

[3] K. WEIZMANN, *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination*, p. 20.

[4] K. WEIZMANN, *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination*, p. 16.

[5] K. WEIZMANN, *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination*, p. 21.

[6] K. WEIZMANN, *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination*, p. 21.

[7] John BECKWITH, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, p. 99.

Christ having only his loins covered with a cloth, called a *subligaculum*[8]. Unlike the previous compositions of the *Crucifixion* from the IV-V centuries, the one in *Rabulla's Gospel*, which has a narrative character, is much more developed, the author trying to render as faithfully as possible the Gospel accounts of the Savior's crucifixion. In this composition Christ appears crucified between the two robbers, the Roman soldier stabbing him in the side with a spear, while a servant hands him the cane at the end of which is the sponge soaked in vinegar. At the foot of the cross, three Roman soldiers are playing dice with the shirt of the Saviour, on the right, standing figures, are the Virgin Mary and the Holy Apostle John, and on the left, three little myrrhs, weeping. Immediately below the scene of the *Crucifixion* is illustrated the *Resurrection*, in a sequence of three frames. To the right of the image appears the angel who announces the Resurrection to the Mother of God and the myrrh-bearers, in the center of the image the tomb is represented, in the form of a structure with two columns whose door is open, in front of which are the fallen Roman soldiers as dead, and on the left, Christ the Savior He is shown His Mother and Mary Magdalene, fallen at His feet[9] (fig. 1).

If the previous representations of the *Crucifixion*, from the 4th-5th centuries, will most likely not be sought to visually testify to the Chalcedonian doctrine, this type of representation of the *Crucifixion* represents the answer given by Chalcedonian orthodox theology to the Monophysite heresy. He pleads in this regard several important arguments. First, being copied in a monastery, the Gospel has an official character, being the expression of the faith professed by the inhabitants of that monastery, and it is known what influence the monasteries had in the life of the Church and Christian communities at that time.

The argument has all the more relevance since the monastery of Zagba was located in a geographical area where the Monophysite heresy had many followers, therefore Rabulla will be sought to highlight, through this miniature of the *Crucifixion*, the human nature of the Savior Jesus Christ, which the Monophysite heretics denied. Also, according to the statements of some researchers, the scene had as its model a monumental painting from one of the churches in Jerusalem, probably that of the Resurrection[10]. Last but not least, another argument in favor of this statement is the fact that in the lower section of the same page the theme of the *Resurrection* appears, while on the next page the theme of the *Ascension* is represented, both highlighting both the deified human nature and the divine glory of the Savior Jesus Christ. Moreover, the presence of the Mother of God in the scene of the *Ascension* is interpreted as a way of highlighting the human nature assumed by the Incarnation of the Son of God[11].

So, on just two pages, representing the *Crucifixion*, the *Resurrection* and the *Ascension*, Rabulla testifies iconographically and iconologically to the Chalcedonian teaching about the union of the two natures, divine and human, in the incarnate Person of the Son of God.

The scene in which the *Ascension of the Savior* is represented (fig. 2) shows that the theme was definitive from an iconographic point of view, it differed very little from the composition that was to be consecrated. The only difference lies in the fact that, in Rabulla's miniature, Christ ascending is represented standing, in the mandorla, blessing with the right

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[8] Frédérick TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creștine. De la simbol la icoană secolele II-VI,* traducere de Elena Buculei și Ana Boroș, Ed. Meridian, București, 2002, pp. 456-458; H. L. KESSLER, "Narrative Representations", pp. 502-504.

[9] *S. Quatuor evangelia. Anno Chr. DLXXXVI. Syriace exarata*. cod. plut. 1.56, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, http://teca.bmlonline.it/ImageViewer/servlet/ImageViewer?idr=TECA0000025956&keyworks=Plut.01.56; Charles BAYET, *Byzantine Art*, Parkstone Press International, New York, 2009, p. 48.

[10] H. L. KESSLER, "Narrative Representations", p. 495.

[11] H. L. KESSLER, "Narrative Representations", p. 455.

and holding an open rotulus in the left, and not sitting on the two rays of the rainbow, surrounded by the nimbus that symbolizes His divine glory, as in the current compositions. The mandorla is supported in the upper part by two angels, on either side of the mandorla two other angels in flight holding in their hands, on the side, a crown, the mandorla being carried by tetramorphs in the chariot of fire, as in the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ez 1:4-28). In the lower register of the image, in the central axis, the praying Virgin Mary is depicted, framed by two angels turned to the Apostles on the right, with Saint Paul the Apostle in the foreground, with a book in his hand, and on the left, headed by Saint Peter the Apostle, who holds the keys and a cross.

This composition is also important from an iconological point of view because, through the presence of the Mother of God and the Holy Apostle Paul, its iconography exceeds the scriptural narrative framework. Through the presence of the Virgin, whose participation in the Ascension of the Lord is not mentioned by the Holy Gospels, but is affirmed by the church tradition, is postulated not only the teaching about the two natures united in the Person of the Savior through His Incarnation and Virgin Birth[12], but also about the plenitude To the Church, its Head, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Apostles being present. The presence of the Holy Apostle Paul reinforces the image of the fullness of the Church, symbolizing at the same time the dynamism of the Church after the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Likewise, the praying attitude of the Virgin recalls her role as intercessor for people before the Throne of Her Son[13], as one who is Mother of God - Theotokos. Moreover, from this period the teaching about the role of intercessors before the Savior Jesus Christ of both the Mother of God and the saints is imposed, and this can be seen in the development of the iconography of the Virgin and the saints[14]. A theme that illustrates this teaching, which would become representative of Eastern Christianity, is the one known as *Deisis*, a composition in which on either side of the throne of judgment on which sits the Savior Jesus Christ, the Right Judge, is His Mother, on the right, and Saint John the Baptist, on the left, interceding for Christians[15].

A particular evolution of Marian iconology that sought to illustrate the dogma established at the 3rd Ecumenical Council in Ephesus about the Virgin Mary as Mother of God – Theotokos took place in Rome. Starting from the 5th century, the Virgin Mary was represented in the mosaic of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore as a Roman Augusta, an image that would be repeated in the following period in other churches, in a painting from the church of Santa Maria Antiqua being dressed as a queen, with imperial jewels. This image of the Virgin, known as *Mary the Queen*, was not received in the East, however, remaining a specific creation of the West[16], from which other themes would later develop, such as the *Coronation of the Virgin*.

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[12] K. WEIZMANN, *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination*, p. 101.

[13] Michel QUENOT, *Învierea și icoana*, traducere și prefață de pr.Vasile Răducă, Ed. Christiana, București, 1999, p. 213; †Vasile COSTIN, *Semnificaţia icoanei bizantine în ortodoxie*, Târgoviște, 1997, pp. 69-70.

[14] Margaret FRAZER, "Iconic Representations", in: Kurt WEIZMANN (ed.), *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, *V. The Christian Realm*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1979, pp. 516, 557.

[15] S. SOPHRONIUS HIEROSOLYMITANUS Patriarcha, *SS. Cyri et Joannis miracula*, 36, *PG* 87/3: 3558D; Cyril MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453, Sources and Documents*, Medieval Academy reprints for teaching, 16, published by University of Toronto Press, p. 135.

[16] J. BECKWITH, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, p. 94.

Along with the manuscripts mentioned above, one more must be counted, executed at the end of the 5th or the beginning of the 6th century[17], the original of which is lost, but which is known from a copy made at the beginning of the 9th century. Known as the *Apocalypse of Trier*, after the name of the place where it was discovered, but being most likely executed in the scriptorium of the monastery of Tours in the style specific to the Carolingian era[18], the manuscript contains no less than 74 miniatures illustrating the *Apocalypse* of Saint John the Apostle, a fact that denotes the interest of Christians in the Lord's Parousia at a time when millenarian ideas still persisted. Among the seventy-four miniatures, each occupying a whole page, those compositions in which Christ in glory, represented either with His face, as a beardless young man with long hair, sitting on a nimbus, or as a Lamb, in a nimbus, holding the Book with seven seals is surrounded by tetramorphs (fig. 3). In the context of these miniatures, although in most of them they have the Book of the Gospel in front of them, the tetramorphs are no longer associated only with the Holy Evangelists, whose symbols they had become, but also with the Last Judgment, this meaning emerging both from the fact that the Lamb-Christ has in front of him the Book with seven seals (Ap 5:1-8), as well as the presence in miniature of the seven candles or the twenty-four elders from the Apocalypse (Ap 4:4-7).

The oldest iconographic representation of the tetramorphs in a church also dates from the same period as the original of the *Apocalypse from Trier*. In the apse of the Hosios David church in Thessaloniki, the original mosaic is preserved in which Christ is represented in glory, as a beardless young man with long hair, sitting like a throne on the rainbow inscribed in the nimbus that symbolizes His divine glory, which is surrounded by the tetramorphs of the vision of Ezekiel (1:5-11) (fig. 4).

As a mode of representation, there are both similarities and differences between the tetramorphs in the scene of the *Ascension of Christ* in *Rabulla's Gospel*, described above, those in the *Theophany* of Hosios David and those in the *Apocalypse of Trier*. In all three representations the tetramorphs have many eyes on the wings, like the cherubim, and are around Christ in glory, glory symbolized either as a nimbus, in Hosios David and in the *Apocalypse of Trier*, or as a mandorla in *Rabulla's Gospel*. Instead, in the *Apocalypse of Trier* the tetramorphs are represented both with the whole body and the book of the Gospel, as in Hosios David, and only with the zoomorphic head and three pairs of wings, as in the *Gospel of Rabulla*. As for the symbolism of the tetramorphs in the three compositions, those from *Rabulla's Gospel* are undoubtedly associated with the divine glory from Ezekiel's vision, considering the theme of the *Ascension of Christ*, those from Hosios David are associated with the Holy Evangelists, an understanding also supported by the presence, on one side and the other of the composition, of the prophets Ezekiel and Habakkuk, and those of the *Apocalypse of Trier* are associated with the Last Judgment. And regarding the representation of Christ in glory there are similarities and differences between the three compositions. Thus, in *Rabulla's Gospel* Christ is represented in a mandorla, standing, with long hair and a beard, with his right hand raised, while in his left hand he holds an open scroll, in the *Theophany* of Hosios David, he is depicted as a young man, with long hair and beardless, sitting on the rainbow and surrounded by the nimbus of his divine glory, with his right hand raised and the scroll in his left, while in the *Apocalypse of Trier* Christ, also

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[17] James SNEYDER, "The Reconstruction of an Early Christian Cycle of Illustrations for the Book of Revelation – The Trier Apocalypse", *Vigiliae Christianae* 18 (1964), North-Holland Publishing Co., pp. 153-155.
[18] J. SNEYDER, "The Reconstruction of an Early Christian Cycle of Illustrations for the Book of Revelation – The Trier Apocalypse", pp.148-149.

young and beardless, having a cruciform aura, is seated on the nimbus as a throne of glory, or the throne of glory on which he sits is symbolized by two superimposed nimbuses.

The several similarities between the representations of the tetramorphs and Christ in glory in the original that served as a model for the *Apocalypse of Trier* and the scene in the apse of the church of Hosios David could mean either the existence of a common source, from which both the miniaturist and the who executed the mosaic, or the fact that one of the two works became a source of inspiration for the author of the other. If we take into account the claim that the scene of the *Ascension of Christ* in *Rabulla's Gospel* was inspired by the Palestinian prototype of a monumental parietal painting[19], we can assume that the mosaic from Hosios David became a source of inspiration for the miniaturist of the original manuscript of the *Book of Revelation*, which, in turn, served as a model for the copyists in the scriptorium of the monastery of Tours who produced, at the beginning of the 9th century, the *Apocalypse of Trier*. The probability that the representations of the tetramorphs and Christ in glory from the mosaic of the church of Hosios David in Thessalonica were taken over in the original manuscript of the Apocalypse which then reached a monastery in France should not raise great problems of acceptance, considering the wide circulation of manuscripts in the era and their role in disseminating iconographic themes and compositions in the Christian area. This last aspect is confirmed by a passage from Bede the Venerable (672-735), which records the fact that the monk Benedict Biscop (628-690), traveling to Rome, acquired a significant number of books illustrated with miniatures to be used as models for decorating the churches he had built in Wearmouth[20].

The 6th century records, therefore, the appearance of the first explicit representations of the *Last Judgment* theme, based on the *Book of Revelation*, and this not only in the manuscript to which I referred. On the triumphal arch of the church of S. Michele in Affricisco is preserved a scene in which Christ the Redeemer, seated on the throne, is surrounded by nine angels, seven of them blowing trumpets, a scene that would refer to the text of the *Apocalypse* (8:7 – 11:19)[21]. The first illustration of this theme, however, belongs to the end of the 3rd century or the beginning of the next and illustrates the parable of the choice and separation of the sheep from the goats in *Matthew* 25:31-46, being carved on the lid of a sarcophagus located in Rome[22], a scene that would be repeated in the 6th century in the church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravena[23].

2. ICONOGRAPHY OF THE HOLY ANGELS

The presence of the images of the tetramorphs in the miniatures from the original manuscript of the *Apocalypse*, which appeared at the end of the 5th century, the beginning of the 6th, in the *Gospel of Rabulla*, in the church of Hosios David in Thessalonica is not exactly accidental, this represents, most likely, the visual materialization of the symbolic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who lived and wrote in the same period[24],

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[19] J. SNEYDER, "The Reconstruction of an Early Christian Cycle of Illustrations for the Book of Revelation – The Trier Apocalypse", nota 11, p. 152.

[20] VENERABILIS BEDAE, *Vita Sanctorul abbatum monasterii in Wiramutha et Girvum*, *PL* 94:717B; J. SNEYDER, "The Reconstruction of an Early Christian Cycle of Illustrations for the Book of Revelation – The Trier Apocalypse", p. 147.

[21] J. BECKWITH, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, p. 118, 122. C. DELVOYE, *Arta bizantină*, vol. 1, traducere de Florica-Eugenia Condurachi, prefață de Vasile Drăguț, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1976, p. 131.

[22] M. FRAZER, "Apse themes", in: Kurt WEIZMANN (ed.), *Age of Spirituality…*, p. 558.

[23] F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine…*, p. 384.

[24] Kevin CORRIGAN and L. Michael HARRINGTON, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite", *The Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. ZALTA and Uri NODELMAN (eds.), https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-

from the work *On the Heavenly Hierarchy*. In this writing of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the first symbolic interpretations of the tetramorphs and the holy angels in Christian theology appear, interpretations to which we can give an iconological character since the author interprets the analogous faces/icons[25] of the holy angels, as they were seen by the authors saints during the revelations received. After stating that the theological language of Holy Scripture is symbolic when it uses "figures" to speak of the holy heavenly powers, Pseudo-Dionysius warns that:

"in order that we also may not, like the vulgar, irreverently think that the heavenly and Godlike minds are certain manyfooted and many-faced creatures, or moulded to the brutishness of oxen or the savage form of fions, and fashioned like the hooked beaks of eagles, or the feathery down of birds and should imagine that there are certain wheels of fire above the heaven, or materil thrones upon which the Godhead may recline [...]"[26].

Pseudo-Dionysius also shows that, "out of regard to our intelligence, so to speak"

"the theologians ought, when they have come to the bodily representation of creatures altogether without body, to represent and display them by appropriate and, as far as possible, cognate figures, taken, at any rate, from our most honoured and immaterial and exalted beings, and ought not to clothe the heavenly and Godlike simple essences with the many froms of the lowest creatures to be found on the eath"[27].

Interpreting the faces of the tetramorphs, Pseudo-Dionysius interprets that the human face shows "on account of the intellectual faculty, and their having powers of looking upwards"[28], the lion's face signifies "the leading, and robust, and indomitable", the bull's face "denotes the strong and the mature, turning up the intellectual furrows for the reception of the heavenly and productive showers; and the Horns, the guarding and indomitable", while the face of the eagle "denotes the kingly, and soaring, and swift in flight, and quickness in search of the nourishment wich makes strong, and wariness, and agility, and cleverness; and the unimpeded, straight, and unflinching gaze towards the bounteous and brilliant splendour of the Divine rays of the sun, with the robust extension of the visual powers"[29]. About the wings that are sometimes attributed in Holy Scripture to holy angels (Acts 25:20, Is 6:1-3, Is 1:5-6, Dan 9:21, Rev 14:6), the author interprets that they "displays the elevating quickness

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bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=pseudo-dionysius-areopagite, 04. 03. 2024; Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, on the other hand, invokes a series of arguments in favor of identifying Pseudo-Dionysius with Dionysius the Areopagite, the philosopher converted by the Holy Apostle Paul in the Athenian Areopagus, Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Introducere*, in: SFÂNTUL DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, *Opere complete*, traducere, introducere și note de pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, PAIDEIA, București, 1996, pp. 9-13.

[25] S. JOANNES DAMASCENUS, *Oratio III, Adversus eos qui sacras imagines abjiciunt*, 21, *PG* 94:1342A; ST JOHN DAMASCENE, Treatise on Images, Part III, in: *On Holy Images, followed by three Sermons on the Assumption*, translated from the original Greek by Mary H. Allies, London, 1898, pp. 95-96; SF. IOAN DAMASCHIN, Tratatul III apologetic despre sfintele icoane, 21, în vol. *Tratatele apologetice contra celor ce atacă sfintele icoane*, traducere, introducere și note de pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, București, 1998, pp. 138-139.

[26] S. DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De coelesti hierarchia*, II, 1, *PG* 3:138A; DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *On the Heavenly Hierarchy*, II, 1, in: *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite. Part II. The Heavenly Hierarchy and The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Now first translated into English from the original Greek, by the Rev. John Parker, James Parker and Co., London, 1899, p. 4; SFÂNTUL DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, *Despre Ierarhia Cerească*, II, 1, in: *Opere complete*, p. 16.

[27] S. DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De coelesti hierarchia*, II, 2, *PG* 3:138C; DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *On the Heavenly Hierarchy*, II, 2, p. 5; SFÂNTUL DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, *Despre Ierarhia Cerească*, II, 2, in: *Opere complete*, pp. 16-17.

[28] S. DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De coelesti hierarchia*, XV, 3, *PG* 3:330D; DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *On the Heavenly Hierarchy*, XV, 3, p. 57; SFÂNTUL DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, *Despre Ierarhia Cerească*, XV, 3, p. 36.

[29] S. DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De coelesti hierarchia*, XV, 8, *PG* 3:335D-338A; DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *On the Heavenly Hierarchy*, XV, 7-8, pp. 63-64; SFÂNTUL DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, *Despre Ierarhia Cerească*, XV, 8, p. 38.

and the heavenly progress towards higher things, and the superiority to every grovelling thing by reason of the ascending, and the lightness of the wings denotes their being in no respect eartly, but undefiledly and lightly raised to the sublime"[30].

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite has the merit, therefore, of having offered the first solid theological arguments, with authority, considering the reception and influence of his theology on the subsequent development of Christian theology, in favour of the anthropozoomorphic iconic representation of the Holy Angels, emphasizing the symbolic character of the "figures" or "faces" with which they, being described in the Holy Scriptures by the holy authors, can also be represented in icons by painters.

The symbolic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius in *On the Heavenly Hierarchy* was a response to the aniconic theological current of the 4th century based on the spiritualist-intellectualist theology whose leading exponents were Saint Epiphanius of Salamis (313-403), Evagrius the Pontic (345-399) and Macarius of Magnesia (295-394)[31]. Among other arguments against icons, Saint Epiphanius invoked the one according to which art could not convey any truth about the spiritual nature, so that even angels, who are spiritual, incorporeal and immaterial beings, cannot be represented iconographically[32].

The aniconic theology of St. Epiphanius of Salamis and Macarius of Magnesia, from the 4th century, was continued in the 6th-7th centuries by the Monophysite hierarchs Philoxen of Mabugg (†523) and Severus of Antioch (459-538). Philoxenus of Mabugg affirmed, in the case of the spiritual nature of angels, only a knowledge by faith and an intellectual worship, to the absolute exclusion of any material representation, which is not suited to their spiritual nature, and which would do nothing but deceive the mind.

In his homily *On Faith*, he wrote: "And thus also is it in respect of the spiritual natures and orders of celestial beings, and it is faith which maketh it possible to receive every word which is spoken concerning them; for otherwise there must necessarily be unbelief, since the Book calleth them «absolute spiritual beings» [in one place], and in another it speaketh of them as «compacted bodies», to which it attributeth forms which are diffesent from each other. Concerning the Seraphim' we are told by the word of the Book [that they have] wings and faces, and concerning the Cherubim' [we are told that they have] other forms which are different from each other; which of these statements are we to accept as true? for according to the outward hearing of the word each contradicts the other"[33].

After affirming that all the Scriptures say about angelic powers are received and understood by faith, Philoxenus of Mabugg, like Pseudo-Dionysius, interprets the meaning of the eyes and wings and the other limbs with which angels are described in Scripture, and shows that these limbs symbolize the power of the whole spiritual nature of angels to see, to reason, to move, to understand, or to perform other works[34]. Unlike Pseudo-Dionysius, however, Philoxenus de Mabugg remains at the affirmation of the understanding of the

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[30] S. DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De coelesti hierarchia*, XV, 3, *PG* 3:331D; ; DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *On the Heavenly Hierarchy*, XV, 3, pp. 59-60; SFÂNTUL DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, *Despre Ierarhia Cerească*, XV, 3, p. 37.
[31] Glenn PEERS, *Trupuri imateriale. Reprezentări bizantine ale îngerilor*, traducere din limba engleză de Maria Yvonne Băncilă, prefață de Ștefan Ionescu-Berechet, NEMIRA, 2011, pp. 100-106.
[32] Glenn PEERS, *Trupuri imateriale. Reprezentări bizantine ale îngerilor*, p. 100.
[33] PHILOXENUS OF MABBÔGH, *The Second Discourse. On Faith*, in: *The Discourses of Philoxenus Bishop of Mabbôgh, A.D. 485-519, edited from syriac manuscripts of the sixth and seventh centuries in The British Museum*, vol. II, with an English translation by E. A. Wallis Budge, Asher and Co. Publisher, London, 1894, p. 30.
[34] PHILOXENUS OF MABBÔGH, *The Second Discourse. On Faith*, pp. 30-31.

spiritual nature of angels through a purely intellectual belief, rejecting the possibility of their material visual representations.

Philoxenus of Mabugg's attitude towards the iconic representation of angels was also embraced and supported by Severus of Antioch in his homilies. In *Homily 72, At the deposition of the holy relics of the Holy Martyrs Procopius and Phocas in the church named after the Archangel Michael*, he argued his attitude of rejecting the veneration of the holy angels in icons[35], accusing their worshipers of "borrowing some images" from pagans to express the truth of faith[36], and that they "worship angels, in fact, as gods; through lack of moderation they exceed even the legitimate limits and take the veil of idolatry as the outward appearance of piety"[37].

Citing the scriptural texts in which the angelophanies are described, after highlighting the different forms in which the angels manifested and allowed themselves to be seen by men, Severus accepts that the holy authors, "using the custom in use among us", described angelic powers in words and images common to the knowledge of men, but these images and likenesses to sensible things and materials are used as symbols for their spiritual attributes, for which reason he interprets all statements concerning the holy angelic powers symbolically. So far, his thinking is in agreement with that of Pseudo-Dionysius. But, contrary to this, after showing that "if we think that the nature (of the angels) is identical with the appearances under which they appear, it is equally necessary to think that they are various and material, and this, when they are immaterial and simple because they are spiritual", he concludes that angels, since they are spiritual beings, which cannot be seen in their essence, have no materiality and no corporability, nor can, and, by way of consequence, neither should they be represented in material images in icons[38]. Therefore, Severus of Antioch condemns the representation of angels in icons and the painters who made them, accusing that: "the painters' hand, which is unseemly and is its own law, favouring pagan inventions or idolatrous scorns and arranging everything in its favour, depicts Michael and Gabriel dressed as princes or kings, with royal purple robes, adorning it with crowns and putting in their right hands the sign of authority and dominion over all the earth. For these and similar reasons, those who honour angels in such a foolish way, depart from the Church and violate her commandments, are anathematized by those who ordained[39] the holy canons"[40].

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[35] SÉVÈRE D'ANTIOCHE, *Homélie LXXII, Sur la déposition des corps sacrés des saints martyrs Procope et Phocas dans l'Église dite de Michel*, in: Maurice BRIÈRE (ed.), *Les* Homeliae Chatedrales *de Sévère d'Antioche*, version syriaque de Jaques d'Édesse (Hom. LXX à LXXVI), *Patrologia Orientalis*, XX, Firmin-Didot, Paris, 1919, pp. 71-89.

[36] SÉVÈRE D'ANTIOCHE, *Homélie LXXII, Sur la déposition des corps sacrés des saints martyrs Procope et Phocas dans l'Église dite de Michel*, p. 73.

[37] SÉVÈRE D'ANTIOCHE, *Homélie LXXII, Sur la déposition des corps sacrés des saints martyrs Procope et Phocas dans l'Église dite de Michel*, p. 74.

[38] SÉVÈRE D'ANTIOCHE, *Homélie LXXII, Sur la déposition des corps sacrés des saints martyrs Procope et Phocas dans l'Église dite de Michel*, pp. 78-81.

[39] Severus of Antioch refers to Canon 35 of the Synod of Laodicea, held sometime between 343 and 381, in which the participating bishops decided: „Christians must not forsake the Church of God, and go away and invoke angels and gather assemblies, which things are forbidden. If, therefore, any one shall be found engaged in this covert idolatry, let him be anathema; for he has forsaken our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and has gone over to idolatry." (Henry R. PERCIVAL (ed), *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church. Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees, Toghether with the Canons of All the Local Synods which have Received Ecumenical Acceptance. Edited with Notes ghathered from the Writhings of the Greatest Scholars*, col. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds), vol. 14, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1900, p. 150; Arhid. Ioan N. FLOCA, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe, note și comentarii*, Sibiu, 1992, p. 225). The canon has in mind a heresy called the angelics, from the regions of Phrygia and Pisidia, whose beginnings go back to the apostolic period, since St. Apostle Paul also condemns it in the

The text of Severus of Antioch, beyond the attitude against the honouring of holy angels both in the worship of the Church and through the creation of their icons, is important for the iconography of the holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel in the 6th century, as it describes how they were depicted in icons.

The hostile attitude of Severus of Antioch towards the veneration of angels and their representation in icons was probably determined by the existence of exaggerated local cultic practices in Phrygia and Pisidia, dedicated to holy angels, conducted separately from the public worship of the Church, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the fact that the painters were inspired by the models of pagan art to create some representations of the holy winged angels[41]. Added to this is the fact that some exponents of paganism claimed that the angels, whom Christians honoured and represented in icons, were identical to the pagan gods, which is why Severus equated the veneration of holy angels with pagan idolatry.

In the regions that had not known the local context of Phrygia and Pisidia the iconic representation of the holy angels did not raise problems of acceptance by the Church. The winged Archangel Gabriel appeared in the scene of the *Annunciation* in the church dedicated to Saint Sergius in Gaza[42], winged angels were engraved everywhere on the silver plates in which the iconostasis of the Great Church of Constantinople was dressed[43], and icons of the Archangel Michael were in a church in the Constantinople district Plates and in the one rebuilt by the emperor Justinian from Sosthenion[44]. The orator and poet Aghatias (532-580), in an epigram dedicated to the icon of the Archangel Michael of Plata, reveals a different theological report from those of Philoxen of Mabugg and Severus of Antioch towards the icon of the Archangel, a report in accordance with patristic theology, according to which honour ascends from the figure in the icon to the prototype. Aghatias wrote the following in this epigram: "The wax, very bold, represented the invisible, the immaterial archist of the angels in the likeness/appearance of his form. Yet [the task] was not without satisfaction, so long as the mortal man who beheld the image turned his mind to a higher contemplation. His veneration is no longer distracted: engraving upon himself the [archangel's] features, he trembles as if in the presence of the latter. The eyes encourage deep thoughts, and art is able, through colours, to send [to its object] the prayer of the mind"[45].

The theological thinking of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite concerning the holy angelic powers was followed in the following centuries by other defenders of the cult of holy angels in general and of their iconographic representation in particular. Thus, bishop John of Thessalonica (610-649) answered a pagan, who objected that angels cannot be represented because they are spiritual beings, that the nature of angels is not like the divine nature, the only invisible and uncircumscribed, they have some corporeality, aerial or as of fire, being therefore circumscribed, that they could be seen in human form by those to whom they were sent by God, and therefore can be represented[46].

Epistle to the Colossians (2:18) as "a hypocritical worship to the angels", whose followers replaced the prayer and worship to the Savior Jesus Christ with that offered exclusively to the holy angels.

[40] SÉVÈRE D'ANTIOCHE, *Homélie LXXII, Sur la déposition des corps sacrés des saints martyrs Procope et Phocas dans l'Église dite de Michel*, pp. 83-84; Glenn PEERS, *Trupuri imateriale. Reprezentări bizantine ale îngerilor*, p.113.

[41] Glenn PEERS, *Trupuri imateriale. Reprezentări bizantine ale îngerilor*, pp. 53, 63, 66.

[42] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 64.

[43] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 87.

[44] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, pp. 115-116.

[45] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 115.

[46] MANSI, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collection*, vol. 13, col. 163-166; C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, pp. 140-141.

3. FIGURES OF FOUNDERS AND DONORS IN CHRISTIAN ART

In the era of Justinian, the emperors who founded them or who granted them certain privileges and the bishops during which the respective churches were built or decorated with parietal images began to be represented in the mosaics or frescoes that decorated the churches, some of them being even buried there[47], and examples of this are quite numerous and edifying, especially in Italy.

Thus, in a composition that occupies the entire shell of the apse of the holy altar of the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano in Rome (526/530) Bishop Felix IV (490-530) appears, on the right of the scene, holding a model of the church in his hands. In the centre of the composition is Christ the Redeemer, to whom the Holy Apostle Paul, standing on His right, presents one of the two martyred brothers, and on the left, the Holy Apostle Peter introduces the other brother. On the left side, opposite Pope Felix, balancing the scene, is the Holy Martyr Theodore[48] (fig. 5). Very similar to the composition in the church of Santi Cosma e Damiano is the one on the triumphal arch of the church of San Lorenzo fuori le mura in Rome (578/590)[49]. In this composition, the holy martyr Lawrence, on the right of Christ in glory, sitting on the nimbus, is introduced by the Holy Apostle Peter, and the holy martyrs Stephen and Hippolytus, represented on the left, are introduced by the Holy Apostle Paul. Bishop Pelagius II (579-590) is represented on the right of the composition, with a smaller stature than that of Saint Lawrence.

In the conch of the apse of the holy altar of the church of San Vitale in Ravenna (546/547) a slightly different composition is preserved. In the central axis of this composition, Christ is depicted in glory, a beardless young man, sitting on a nimbus, with a winged angel on his right and on his left, dressed in white clothes. The angel on His right presents the Holy Martyr Vitalius, to whom Christ offers the crown of martyrdom, while the angel on the left introduces Bishop Ecclesius (522-532), the founder of the church, who offers Christ the Redeemer the model of the church[50]. Also in Ravenna, the figure of Bishop Victor[51] (538-545) can be recognized on the cloth woven in gold and silk for the table of the Holy Altar in the Ursiana church, and in the church of San Apollinare in Classe there are mosaics with bishops Severus (308-348), Ursus (399-426), Ecclesius, Ursicinius (533-536), considered its founder, as well as a panel with Archbishop Reparatus (671-677) together with Emperor Constantine IV (668-685)[52]. By far, the most famous mosaic panels in Ravenna are the two in the church of San Vitale, in which the emperor Justinian (527-565), accompanied by the bishop Maximianus (546- 556), by priests and soldiers, and Empress Theodora, accompanied by the ladies of the Court[53].

It is not only in Rome and Ravenna that we encounter the custom of representing the figures of emperors or bishops on the walls, most often in mosaic, in the churches they founded. We also meet this practice in Gaza, in the churches of Saint Sergius[54] (536) and

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[47] J. BECKWITH, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, pp. 112, 114-115, 118-120.

[48] J. BECKWITH, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, pp. 125-126.

[49] J. BECKWITH, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, pp. 147-148.

[50] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 105; Judith HERRIN, *Ravena, capitala imperiului*, traducere din limba engleză de Mihai Moroiu, Baroque Books & Arts, București, 2021, p. 269 și pls. 29.

[51] J. BECKWITH, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, p. 112; C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 105; J. HERRIN, *Ravena, capitala imperiului*, p. 263.

[52] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 130; J. HERRIN, *Ravena, capitala imperiului*, pp. 398-399, pls. 56.

[53] J. HERRIN, *Ravena, capitala imperiului*, pp. 271-274, pls. 37, pls. 38.

[54] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 62.

Saint Stephen[55] (536/548). In most cases, the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul or the holy martyr to whom the respective church was dedicated present to Christ the Savior, represented in glory, the founder of the church, who holds the model of the church in his hand, offering it either to the patron saint or to the Savior Jesus Christ[56].

However, the precedent had been created in the 5th century by Emperor Leo I (457-474). He placed on the ciborium above the reliquary where the covering (maphorion) of the Mother of God had been deposited, an icon of the Virgin Mary in majesty, sitting on the throne, to her right and left being prostrated the emperor Leon and his wife Verina[57]. Following the example of Emperor Leo I, the patricians Galbius and Candidus, who, according to tradition, had discovered the maphorion of the Mother of God in Capernaum and brought it to Constantinople sometime between 471-473, dedicated a very large icon to the Virgin Mary, which was placed in the church built by Leo I in honour of the Virgin. In the upper part of this icon, two angels were represented, on one side and the other of the Virgin and Child Jesus were Saint John the Baptist and Saint Conon, and in the lower part, in a humble posture of prayer and gratitude, the two patricians[58].

The presence of the founder and the bishop in the frescoes or mosaics that decorate the churches, very often even in the dome of the apse of the holy altar, is explained by the rhetorician Choricius in one of the writings in which he describes the church of Saint Sergius in Gaza, built during the time of Emperor Justinian by the governor of Palestine, Stephen, and by bishop Marcian of Gaza. Describing the mosaic that adorned the cap of the apse of the holy altar, Choricius shows that in the centre is represented the Virgin Mary holding the Baby Jesus at her breast, and on one side is represented a group of pious people, in the attitude of adoration. "At the extreme right of this group", writes Choricius, "is a person who looks in every respect like an emperor, and who is worthy both to be among the friends of God and to bear the name of the first of God's deacons of old [St. Ștefan]: this for several reasons and above all because, having the bishop as a partner in his work, he donated the church to his fellow citizens, knowing full well that, while other liberalities bring only the embellishment of the city, the building of churches it brings not only beauty, but in addition a name for godliness. He is the one who, sitting next to the patron of the church [St. Serghie], asks him to accept the gift graciously; the latter consents and looks at him with a gentle look as he puts his right hand on his shoulder, evidently about to present him to the Virgin and her Son, the Saviour"[59].

From the text of Choricius it is quite obvious that the depiction of the founder in this scene, and by extension in all scenes of this type, is not meant to glorify him before the people, but on the contrary, to show him humble, humbly waiting as the saint to whom the church was dedicated to receive his gift and invoking his intercession before the Savior and the Virgin Mary for the forgiveness of his sins. This theme would appear frequently in the foundations made by Christian principles over time, but over time it migrated from the apse of the Holy Altar, or from on or from the vicinity of the triumphal arch on the western wall of the church.

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[55] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 70.
[56] Tomasz POLAŃSKI, ”The Mosaic and Painting Decoration in the Church of Saint Stephen of Gaza and the Christian Ecphrasis (Choricius of Gaza, Asterius of Amaseia, Nilus of Sinai)”, in: *Folia Orientalia*, 48, 2011, pp. 194-195.
[57] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, pp. 34-35.
[58] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, pp. 34-35.
[59] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 62.

4. THE CRYSTALLIZATION OF THE CHURCH ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM

The presentation made by the rhetorician Choriciu of the church of St. Sergius in Gaza is particularly important from an iconographic point of view, as the author describes all the holy images that adorned the walls on one side and the other, starting with the *Annunciation* and continuing with the *Visit of the Virgin to Elizabeth*, the *Nativity of the Lord*, *Annunciation of the Nativity of the Lord to the shepherds*, *Meeting of the Lord*, *Wedding at Cana*, *Healing of Peter's mother-in-law*, *Healing of the withered hand*, *Healing of the centurion's servant*, *Resurrection of the son of the widow of Nain*, *Faith of the sinful woman*, *Calming of the storm on the sea*, *Peter walking on the sea to Christ*, *Healing of the demoniac*, *Healing of the woman with the issue of blood*, *Raising of Lazarus*, *Last Supper*, *Kiss of Judas*, *Christ before Pilate*, *Pilate washing his hands*, *Crucifixion of Christ between the two robbers*, *Soldiers guarding the tomb*, *Resurrection of Christ*, *Christ appearing to His Mother and the myrrh-bearing women*, *Ascension*. Choricius also states that the central part of the ceiling was decorated with the prophets of the Old Testament, who prophesied about the coming of Christ into the world[60].

It can be observed, from the description made by Choricius, the existence in the era of a real iconographic program, well-knit, with a narrative character, inspired by the Holy Gospels, in which the influence of the apocryphal accounts about the Virgin Mary timidly made its way. In the *Annunciation* scene, surprised by the greeting of the Archangel Gabriel, the Virgin "drops the purple from her hand", a detail that does not appear in the canonical writings, but which is related in the apocryphal ones[61].

The existence of this iconographic program during the 6th-7th centuries is also confirmed by the *Vita S. Pancratii*[62], a writing that was compiled in Taormina, Sicily[63], most likely at the beginning of the 8th century, around the time of the outbreak of iconoclasm, the years 732 /733[64]. According to the author of this writing, the Holy Apostle Peter asked a painter to represent in images the figure of the Savior Jesus Christ, as well as the entire history of salvation, beginning with the *Annunciation* and continuing with the *Birth*, *Baptism*, Apostles, healings, *His sale by Judas*, *Crucifixion*, *Putting in tomb*, the *Resurrection from Hell*, until the *Ascension to heaven*, urging that all the churches be decorated with these scenes so that the faithful are convinced of the reality of the Incarnation of the Son of God and strengthen themselves in the right faith[65]. Even if it is of little historical value, given that it was written in Taormina, reflecting, among other things, the "attitudes and practices towards religious images and church decoration" in Sicily[66], the *Vita S. Pancratii* not only confirms the existence of an iconographic program, but proves that it is the same generalized iconographic program, the one in Sicily being similar to the one in Gaza. Very likely, the same iconographic program will have been followed in the church of

[60] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, pp. 64-68.

[61] ****The Infancy Gospel of James*, 10, 11, 12, in: *The Complete Gospels*, Annotated Scholars Version, Revised and Expanded Edition, Robert J. Miller (ed.), Sonoma, Polebridge Press, 1994, pp. 388-389; ****Protoevanghelia lui Iacob*, X, XI, XII, in: *Evanghelii apocrife*, traducere, studiu introductiv, note și prezentări de Cristian Bădiliță, Polirom, Iași, ²1999, pp. 39-40.

[62] Cynthia J. STALLMAN-PACITTI, *The Life of Saint Pankratios of Taormina*, Greek text, English Translation and Commentary, edited by John B. BURKE, *Byzantina Australiensia* 22, Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2018.

[63] C. J. STALLMAN-PACITTI, *The Life of Saint Pankratios of Taormina*, pp. 18-19.

[64] C. J. STALLMAN-PACITTI, *The Life of Saint Pankratios of Taormina*, pp. 11-18.

[65] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, pp. 137-138; C. J. STALLMAN-PACITTI, *The Life of Saint Pankratios of Taormina*, 6-9, pp. 51-59.

[66] C. J. STALLMAN-PACITTI, *The Life of Saint Pankratios of Taormina*, p. 22.

San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, in the 26 panels that describe the life, miracles and passions of the Savior Jesus Christ[67].

However, the existence of this iconographic program did not mean, for the era we are referring to, the obligation of its representation in every newly built church. Emperor Justinian I, for example, did not decorate any of the churches he built or rebuilt in Constantinople[68] with holy images. In Saint Sophia, it was limited to representing the sign of the Holy Cross in the apse of the holy altar[69], and on the walls above the circular arches on the ground floor, all around the church, baskets with fruit, leaves, trees with birds in their branches and vines with bunches of grapes[70]. However, on the silver dome that covered the Holy Altar, the figure of the Savior was engraved, as well as the Holy Angels, the Prophets, the Holy Apostles and the Virgin Mary[71], and on the vestment that covered the Holy Table, *Christ Pantocrator* was woven in gold thread, having on the right and on the left the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, scenes inspired by the Savior's miracles, but also the important edifices built by Justinian[72].

A possible explanation for the fact that the emperor Justinian was reserved in decorating the walls of the churches of Constantinople with holy images could lie in his repeated attempts to reconcile the Chalcedonians with the Monophysite heretics and the influence of his wife Theodora, who was a supporter of the Monophysite party, reason for which will probably be maintained, their vision of the human nature of Christ. From this perspective, the image of Empress Theodora in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, where she appears with the mantle decorated with the *Adoration of the Magi* scene (fig. 6), becomes interesting. Even if only the three magi are visible on the mantle, the scene obviously also implies the presence of the Virgin and Child, whom the viewer must see with the mind's eye. If the Virgin carrying the Child in her arms visually testifies to the teaching from the Council of Ephesus in the year 431 which states that she is the Mother of God - Theotokos, the Baby Jesus carried in the arms of His Mother expresses the dogma about the union of the two natures in the Incarnate Person of the Son of God, established at the Council of Chalcedon in the year 451. Considering Theodora's pro-Monophysite attitude, the representation of this scene on her mantle will have been the way chosen by the panel sponsor to challenge and ironize the empress's heretical faith, making her this, against her will, preacher of the Chalcedonian faith against which she fought? The presumptive affirmative answer to this question, although it cannot be argued, must not be absolutely rejected.

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[67] J. BECKWITH, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, pp. 107-108.

[68] In addition to Saint Sophia, in Constantinople he also built the church of the Virgin in Pêgé (p. 103), St. Apostles (p. 103), St. Michael the Archangel from Platê (p. 115) and the one in Sosthenion (p. 116), cf. C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*.

[69] PAULUS SILENTIARIUS, *Descriptio Ecclesiae Sanctae Sophiae*, Ducangio interprete, 491-492, *PG* 86/2:2138B; PAULUS SILENTIARIUS, *Descriptio S. Sophiae*, 491-492, ex recognitione Immanuelis Bekkeri, in: Paulus Silentiarius, Georgius Pisida et Sanctus Nicephorus Cpolitanus, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, 1837, p. 25; C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 83.

[70] PAULUS SILENTIARIUS, *Descriptio Ecclesiae Sanctae Sophiae*, 650-654, *PG* 86/2:2144A; PAULUS SILENTIARIUS, *Descriptio S. Sophiae*, 650-654, p. 32; C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 86.

[71] PAULUS SILENTIARIUS, *Descriptio Ecclesiae Sanctae Sophiae*, 693-709, *PG* 86/2:2146AB; PAULUS SILENTIARIUS, *Descriptio S. Sophiae*, 693-709, p. 34; C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 87.

[72] PAULUS SILENTIARIUS, *Descriptio Ecclesiae Sanctae Sophiae*, 764-802, *PG* 86/2:2148B-2150A; PAULUS SILENTIARIUS, *Descriptio S. Sophiae*, 764-802, pp. 37-38; C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, pp. 88-89.

In addition to the biblical images that made up this iconographic program, in the Christian East churches were usually decorated, either on the walls of the nave (narthex) or on the pavement, and with images of a profane nature[73], representing scenes of hunting or fishing, fruit trees and plants, birds and animals or aquatic landscapes, a favorite theme being the *Nile*[74] (fig. 7). The descriptions made by the rhetorician Choricius of this type of images executed in the churches of Saint Sergius[75] and Saint Stephen[76] in the 6th century are confirmed today by archaeological discoveries in the Middle East and beyond. As for the reason why, in the period of the V-VIII centuries, this type of images was used to decorate the churches, researchers' opinions are divided. While some believe that their role was purely decorative, others affirm the existence, in a Christian context, of a meaning, if not several, that refers to the teaching of the Christian faith. According to the latter, the representation of the Nile, either anthropomorphic or of an aquatic landscape, would refer to the Garden of Eden, the Nile being considered one of the four rivers of Heaven. Scenes of this type would therefore induce the idea of earthly paradise. A second meaning, considering the role of water, and of the Nile in particular, for the fruitfulness of the earth, would be that of the richness of the fruits that people receive through divine providence[77]. The same meanings could be attributed to trees laden with fruit, in which birds sing, or to flowers and plants, and even panels with animals. However, beyond the possible meanings that some researchers identify, the source texts show that the role of these representations was rather a decorative-aesthetic one, of delight or pleasure to look at, as it appears from the records of St. Nilus of Sinai ("so that to delight the eye in the house of God")[78] and of Choricius ("what a splendid, what a delightful sight", "this delightful sight")[79].

The end of the 7th century recorded the enrichment of Christian iconography with a new theme, that of the *Ecumenical Councils*. A. Grabar is of the opinion that this theme appeared in Constantinople, shortly after the end of the VI Ecumenical Council (680-681), and that it is due to the emperor Justinian II (685-695 and 705-711)[80], the images of the synods being represented both in the Imperial Palace and in the famous Milion, the place from which the roads to all the provinces of the Empire left, up to its edges, but also beyond them, as well as in churches. According to him, it was from Milion, the tribune from which the emperors made known, *urbi et orbi*, the confession of faith they supported[81], that the theme of the six synods would have been taken over and figured in the mosaic in the Church

[73] A se vedea, în acest sens, Janine BALTY, *Mosaïques antiques du Proche-Orient, chronologie, iconographie, interprétation*, Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon, Paris, 1995.

[74] Anne-Marie GUIMIER-SORBETS, "The Repesentation of the Nile on Mosaics: Various Context, Various Meanings", in: *Journal of Mosaic Research*, 16, 2023, pp. 239-250; Rachel HACHLILI, "The Iconographic Elements of Nilotic Scenes on Byzantine Mosaic Pavements in Israel", in: *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, july, 1998, pp. 106-120; Tomasz POLAŃSKI, "The Nilotic Mosaic in the Saint Stephen's church of Gaza in Choricius' description", in: *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilisation*, 13, Kraków, 2009, pp. 169-180.

[75] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 62.

[76] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 72.

[77] A.-M. GUIMIER-SORBETS, "The Repesentation of the Nile on Mosaics:…" p. 246; R. HACHLILI, "The Iconographic Elements of Nilotic Scenes...", p. 118; T. POLAŃSKI, "The Nilotic Mosaic in the Saint Stephen's church of Gaza...", p. 177.

[78] S. NILUS ABBAS, *Epistolarum libri IV. LXI Olympiodoro eparcho*, PG 79:578D; C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 33.

[79] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 69, 72.

[80] André GRABAR, *Iconoclasmul bizantin*, traducere, prefață și note de Daniel Barbu, Editura Meridiane, București, 1991, p. 110.

[81] A. GRABAR, *Iconoclasmul bizantin*, pp. 109-111.

of the Nativity in Bethlehem[82]. The date of the appearance of this new theme is, however, rather subsequent to the conclusion of the Second Trulan Council in Constantinople (691-692) than the Sixth Ecumenical Council, as A. Grabar states[83], since the iconographic scheme of the Councils preserved in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem visualizes not only the six Ecumenical Synods, but also six local synods, which would suggest that it expresses iconographically the first two canons of this synod, in the first one being recalled and reaffirmed the teaching of faith established in the six Ecumenical Councils held until then, and in the second, the canons adopted both within the Ecumenical Councils and those of the local councils, the apostolic councils and those of the Holy Fathers of the Church were received and strengthened[84].

Also, perhaps we should not exclude the hypothesis that the cycle of ecumenical and local councils appeared in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, precisely as a confession of faith and a silent reminder of the dogmas and canons of the right faith in a Muslim environment hostile to Christians, and from here the imperial authority from Constantinople took over the theme only in the part that expresses the true faith established in the six Ecumenical Councils and represented it in the Imperial Palace and in Milion as a public affirmation of the faith that the emperor officially supported and which it had to be accepted by all his subjects. It is certain that, if in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem the cycle of synods had an exclusively confessional character of the right faith, the one in the Imperial Palace and in Milion had an exclusive character of affirming the religious policy of the emperor, thus explaining the fact that the emperor Philippicus Bardanes (711-713), who was a Monothelite, erased from the Imperial Palace the image of the 6th synod, which condemned the Monothelite heresy, and Constantine V (741-775) erased from Milion the entire cycle of Ecumenical Councils, replacing with images of chariot races from the Constantinopolitan hippodrome[85].

As for the iconographic representation of this theme, as shown by A. Grabar, each synod is symbolized by a *ciborium*, on the Holy Table with the Holy Gospel, and the section of the church, which has a domed roof. In Bethlehem, due to the aniconic religion of the Muslim occupier and the legislation stemming from it, which forbade any representation of any being, the characters are missing, the synod being identified by the inscription of the name of the city where it took place above the dome of the church and by an inscription that summarizes the decisions of the synod[86]. In Constantinople, the iconography is distinguished by the presence of the main actors who participated in the synod in question, the emperors and bishops, gathered in a solemn session of the synod under the presidency of the emperor[87].

Despite the flourishing period that Christian sacred art experienced in this era, iconoclastic ideas and manifestations did not completely disappear from the life of the Church. In the first half of the 6th century, in an epistle addressed to his suffragan Julian of Atramytos, to whom he answered several questions, Bishop Hypatius of Ephesus (531-538) was forced to justify the prohibition of the second commandment of the Decalogue, on the

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[82] A. GRABAR, *Iconoclasmul bizantin*, pp. 113-114.

[83] A. GRABAR, *Iconoclasmul bizantin*, p. 113.

[84] Henry R. PERCIVAL (ed), *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church. Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees, Together with the Canons of All the Local Synods which have Received Ecumenical Acceptance…*, pp. 359-361; Arhid. Ioan N. FLOCA, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe, note şi comentarii*, Sibiu, 1992, pp. 97-101.

[85] A. GRABAR, *Iconoclasmul bizantin*, pp. 110-111.

[86] A. GRABAR, *Iconoclasmul bizantin*, pp. 103, 107.

[87] A. GRABAR, *Iconoclasmul bizantin*, p. 117.

one hand, and, on the other, the presence of holy icons in churches and their veneration[88]. Hypatius of Ephesus argued the necessity of holy images in the church through economy, highlighting their didactic role in catechizing Christians who are imperfect in knowledge, who, through the medium of sight, can more easily understand the lives of the saints and follow their example. To strengthen his position, the author invokes the example of the prophet Moses, who ordered that the figures of Cherubim be woven into the curtain that separated the Holy from the Holy of Holies and that on the lid of the Ark of the Testimony there should be two cherubs beaten from pure gold (Is 36: 33; 37: 7-9).

Although iconoclastic attitudes and ideas were much more widespread in the East, where iconoclasm started, moreover, Ephesus being one of the centres directly involved in the outbreak of this phenomenon, through bishop Theodosius (729-754), they did not absent from the West as well, although they manifested themselves on a smaller scale. Thus, at the end of the 6th century, Bishop Serenus of Marseilles (595-600) ordered the removal of icons from churches, being the first bishop to take such a measure. Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) disapproved of this measure and, in an epistle, he addressed to him, he wrote that

"you should not have destroyed what had been placed in the churches, not for worship, but only to be worshipped. It is one thing to worship an icon, and another thing to learn from this icon before which he addresses his prayers. What the Scripture is for those who know how to read, that is the icon for the ignorant, who learn from these icons the path to follow. The icon is the book of those who do not know how to read"[89].

5. THE BIRTH OF THE ORTHODOX ICONOGRAPHIC CANON

The iconoclastic attitude of Bishop Serenus of Marseilles was however singular at that time, the icon already having its place, role and importance in the life of the Church well established, which, moreover, were consecrated by the Church through canons 73, 82 and 100 of the Quinisext Synod from the years 691-692, also known in history as the Second Trulan Council, after the name of the Trullo room of the imperial palace where it took place.

In Canon 73 the Church referred to the representation of the Holy Cross, deciding that the sign of the Holy Cross should no longer be represented on the ground in order not to be trampled on and thus profaned by passers-by: "Since the life-giving cross has shewn to us Salvation, we should be careful that we render due honour to that by which we were saved from the ancient fall. Wherefore, in mind, in word, in feeling giving veneration (προσκύνησιν) to it, we command that the figure of the cross, which some have placed on the floor, be entirely removed therefrom, lest the trophy of the victory won for us be desecrated by the trampling under foot of those who walk over it. Therefore those who from this present represent on the pavement the sign of the cross, we decree are to be cut off"[90].

Much more important for the history of sacred art and for Christian iconology is Canon 82, by which the Church ordered that the Savior Jesus Christ should no longer be represented symbolically, as a lamb, but in his human form: "In some pictures of the venerable icons, a lamb is painted to which the Precursor points his finger, which is received

[88] C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, pp. 116-117; Paul J. ALEXANDER, "Hypatius of Ephesus: A Note on Image Worship in the Sixth Century", in: *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 45, no. 3(Jul. 1952), pp. 177-184.

[89] S. GREGOIRE, *Epistole*, l. IX, epist. ix, *PL* 77:949; C. J. HEFELE, *Histoire des conciles*, tome III, deuxième partie, l. XVIII, chp. I, 332, Paris, 1910, p. 610.

[90] C. J. HEFELE, *Histoire des conciles*, tome III, première partie, l. XVII, 327, Paris, 1909, p. 572; Henry R. PERCIVAL, "The Canons of the Council in Trullo; often called The Quinesext Council, A. D. 692", in: *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Chrch...*, p. 398; Arhid. Ioan N.FLOCA, *Canoanele Bicericii Ortodoxe, note și comentarii*, p.147; L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei*, p. 57.

as a type of grace, indicating beforehand through the Law, our true Lamb, Christ our God. Embracing therefore the ancient types and shadows as symbols of the truth, and patterns given to the Church, we prefer «grace and truth», receiving it as the fulfilment of the Law. In order therefore that «that which is perfect» may be delineated to the eyes of all, at least in coloured expression, we decree that the figure in human form of the Lamb who taketh away the sin of the world, Christ our God, be henceforth exhibited in images, instead of the ancient lamb, so that all may understand by means of it the depths of the humiliation of the Word of God, and that we may recall to our memory his conversation in the flesh, his passion and salutary death, and his redemption which was wrought for the whole world"[91].

Interpreting this canon, Leonid Uspensky opines that the Church did not limit itself "to the suppression of symbols and the formulation of the dogmatic principle that lies at the foundation of the direct image", but showed, indirectly, that in order to become an icon the image must capture not only the historical fact, but also the divine glory of the One who became incarnate, suffered, died, but also rose again, saving man from sin. The same theologian believes that the end of the canon represents the key to the symbolism of sacred art, which shows that "the teaching of the Church is not only expressed through *the subject* of the image, but also through *the manner* of treating that subject". He then defines *the manner* as the "pictorial language" adopted by the Church to express through a "historical image a spiritual and eschatological reality"[92].

Sorin Dumitrescu is of the opinion that the Russian theologian discovered "in the depths of this conciliar decision, the manifesto of modernity", that is, the *modal* era or the sign of *how* inaugurated by canon 82, through which, paradoxically, the painter gained freedom of expression on the condition of respecting *the authenticity* of the face of the painted One, "an appropriation without historical precedent" on the art market, and shows that according to this principle the Savior must be painted in such a way that "in every iconic detail of the human appearance of the Lord *the seal of the divine idiom can be understood*"[93].

From the statements of the two it follows that this Canon 82 of the Quinisext Synod marks the beginning of *the iconographic canon*, defined by Uspensky as "a certain criterion of the liturgical quality of the image [...] a principle that allows us to judge whether an image is an icon or not. He establishes the conformity between the icon and the Holy Scripture, defining the basis of this conformity, i.e. the authenticity of the transmission of the divine revelation in the historical reality with the means of what we call symbolic realism and in which the Kingdom of God is effectively revealed"[94].

Knowing and respecting the iconographic canon requires knowing the three essential aspects that define it, namely *liturgical*, *conciliar* and *ecclesiological*, which the icon must illustrate at once in order to be considered a canonical representation[95].

According to Sorin Dumitrescu, the pattern of the icon is in a reciprocal relationship with the iconographic canon, which he defines as the practical norm of the canon, while the canon represents the doctrinal norm of the pattern[96]. In turn, the icon's pattern figure embodies the icon's orthodoxy or the icon's quality of being orthodox and a orthodox model,

[91] C. J. HEFELE, *Histoire des conciles*, tome III, première partie, l. XVII, 327, p. 573; H. R. PERCIVAL, "The Canons of the Council in Trullo…", p. 401; Arhid. I. N.FLOCA, *Canoanele Bicericii Ortodoxe*, p. 151; L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei...*, p. 57.

[92] L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei...*, pp. 60-61.

[93] Sorin DUMITRESCU, *Noi și Icoana*, Ed. Anastasia, 2010, p. 95.

[94] L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei...*, p. 62.

[95] S. DUMITRESCU, *Noi și Icoana*, p. 104.

[96] S. DUMITRESCU, *Noi și Icoana*, p. 92.

therefore the pattern figure "fixes the orthodox way of the icon, the righteous strategies to which the icon's ways of asserting and preserving its righteous orthodoxy obey"[97]. The author exemplifies his statement by showing that from the 14th century, probably after the Church accepted the Palamite doctrine of uncreated divine energies, the divine light shared and experienced by the saints is symbolized in the icon by the application of "flashes" on the face and on their clothes[98].

If through Canon 82 it abolished "shadows and figures" in favour of the "human face" of the Incarnate Word, thus speaking out against "Jewish immaturity", through Canon 100 the Church manifested itself against "pagan immaturity", stopping any representations that provoke "toward the attachments of shameful pleasures":

"«Let thine eyes behold the thing which is right», orders Wisdom, «and keep thine heart with all care». For the bodily senses easily bring their own impressions into the soul. Therefore we order that henceforth there shall in no way be made pictures, whether they are in paintings or in what way so ever, which attract the eye and corrupt the mind, and incite it to the enkindling of base pleasures. And if any one shall attempt to do this he is to be cut off "[99].

It is unlikely that by this canon the Church had in mind images existing in churches, in which some characters were represented impudently, sensually, scantily clad, which would have scandalized the faithful and would have called into question the sanctity and necessity of the icon, so as it would happen in the Catholic West after the twelfth century through the fall into naturalism and sensualism. As L. Uspensky states, this canon shows that "the Church demands of its members a certain asceticism not only in life, but also in the art that both reflects and influences this life"[100].

CONCLUSIONS

The veneration of the icons of the saints led, over time, to some exaggerated practices. Thus, some very wealthy Christians ended up weaving images of saints onto their clothes, a practice apparently of Egyptian origin, which was probably motivated by the same belief in the *apotropaic* power of the icon[101] as in the case reported by Blessed Theodoret of Cyrus in the *Life of the Saint Teodor the Stylite*[102]. Bishop Asterius of Amasia fought, since the 4th century, the "vanity" of Christians who abused their wealth, embroidering on their clothes the face of Christ the Redeemer or the Holy Apostles, or miracles performed by Christ[103], thus confirming the existence of this practice quite widespread. The custom was

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[97] S. DUMITRESCU, *Noi și Icoana*, p. 112.

[98] S. DUMITRESCU, *Noi și Icoana*, p. 114.

[99] C. J. HEFELE, *Histoire des conciles*, tome III, première partie, l. XVII, 327, p. 575; H. R. PERCIVAL, "The Canons of the Council in Trullo…", p. 407; Arhid. I. N. FLOCA, *Canoanele Bicericii Ortodoxe,* pp. 159-160; L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei...*, p. 62.

[100] L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei...*, p. 62.

[101] Bente KIILERICH, "The State of Early Christian Iconography in the Twenty-First Century", in: *Studies in Iconography*, 36, 2015, p. 109.

[102] THEODORETUS, CYRENSIS EPISCOPUS, *Historia Religiosa seu Ascetica Vivendi Ratio*, XXVI, Symeones, *PG* 82:1473-1474A; THEODORET OF CYRRHUS, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, XXVI. Symeon (Stylites), 11, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by R. M. Price, coll. *Cistercian Studies Series*, 88, Cistercian Publications, 2008, p. 165; C. MANGO, *The art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 41; FERICITUL TEODORET, episcopul Cirului, "Viața Sfântului Simeon Stâlpnicul", 11, în *Viețile sfinților pustnici din Siria*, traducere din limba greacă și note de Dr. Adrian Tănăsescu-Vlad, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2001, p. 146.

[103] ASTERII AMASEAE EPISCOPI, *Homiliae*, I. *Homilia in locum Evangelii secundum Lucam, de divine et Lazaro*, *PG* 40:167-168; ASTERIUS OF AMASIA, "The Rich Man and Lazarus", in: *Ancient Sermons for Modern Times by Asterius,*

perpetuated in Byzantine society, two centuries later being captured even iconographically. In the 6th century mosaic from the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, which has as its theme the procession of the empress Teodora, the *Adoration of the Magi* is represented on the edge of her garment (see fig. 6). Another exaggerated practice, recorded in the miracles performed by Saints Cosmas and Damian, consisted in scraping some particles from the material from which the icon was made, mixing them with water and consuming them to cure diseases[104]. To these is added the replacement of the godfather at the baptism of an infant with the icon of a saint by some Christians, a practice recorded and, at the top, praised by Saint Theodore the Studite, the defender of the veneration of holy icons[105].

It would seem that, along with the other religious and doctrinal causes, such as the influences of the Paulician and Messalian sects, of the Monophysite heretics, who repudiated icons, but also of the Jews and Muslims, who considered the veneration of icons idolatry, these exaggerated practices, mentioned above, and the abusive use of holy images by depicting them on the various materials and objects sold as souvenirs in the holy places where Christians went on pilgrimages or even on the coins issued by the Byzantine imperial authority finally led to the public outbreak of iconoclastic attitudes in the 7th century.

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[104] MANSI, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, vol. 13, col. 67; C. MANGO, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, p. 139.

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fig. 1. Rabbula Gospels, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Cod.Plut I, 56, fol. 13r

fig. 2. Rabbula Gospels, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Cod. Plut. I, 56, fol. 13v

fig. 3. Trier Apocalypse, Revelation, XIII century

fig. 4. Thessaloniki Hosios David Church, Theophany

fig. 5. Apse Mosaic of Saints Cosmas and Damian Church, Rome

fig. 6. Theodora Imperatrice, San Vitale in Ravenna, VI century

fig. 7. Umm ar-Rasas, Church of St. Stephen, 756 year, central mosaic