

THE LIFE CYCLE OF JOHN THE FORERUNNER IN THE BASILICA OF ST. NICHOLAS IN VOSKOPOJA

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Abstract

St. John the Baptist (the Forerunner) has a very important place in the orthodox tradition, not only because he was the prophet and forerunner of Jesus, but also because just like St. Elijah the Prophet, he was the first monk. Considered as the most venerable saint after the Virgin Mary his cult is firmly established in Eastern Orthodox territories and it is celebrated many times throughout the year, precisely 6 times. In addition, every Tuesday is dedicated to his memory. The existence of one monastery with the name of the Saint in Voskopoja (Albania) demonstrate the honor and respect attributed to St. John. They also demonstrate a particular type of cult in this region. A short cycle filled with episodes of John's life, which perhaps is implicitly related to this "cult" is part of the iconographic program applied by David of Selenica during the fresco decoration of the Church of St. Nicholas in Voskopoja (1722 – 1726). Inside this church, the life cycle of St. John the Forerunner is located in the third line of paintings of the northern wall, facing the southern gate, which remains the sole functional entrance leading into the temple. This cycle entails these scenes; St. John in front of Herod, St. John in Prison, the Decapitation, and the Banquet. This particular composition in which David follows deliberately the latebyzantine model does not amount to a systematic menologion (calendar cycle). It rather appears to be a selection of scenes from the martyrization of the saints (martyrological cycle). In the church of St. Nicholas, the cycle of the Forerunner is linked to the martyrization scenes of other prominent saints, such as St. Artemios, St. Eustathio, St. Demeter, St. George and St. Stephen. Nonetheless, the life cycle of St. Johan the Forerunner in the church of St. Nicholas is not the only one in the region. An even earlier cycle (XVII century) can be found in the church that goes by the same name in the neighboring settlement of Boboshtica. The life cycle of St. Johan in that church involves a greater number of scenes.

Key words: *Saint Johan the Forerunner, Boboshtica, Life cycle, David of Selenica.*

The Life Cycle of John the Forerunner (Baptist) in the Basilica of St. Nicholas in Voskopoje

Voskopoja's churches and Vithkuqi region rank among the most representative monuments of art of the 18th century churches in the Balkans. We can say that their murals are comparable to those

of major monastic centers in Mount Athos¹. Most of these churches are characterized by their similar, basilica like architectural structures². Besides the differences in style and date, these monuments also bear similar concepts related to the realization of iconographic programs³.

Inside the monuments of this region (Voskopoje - Vithkuq), which is inherent in terms of the cultural and economic development of the 17th and 18th century , there is a cult of special reverence for a very prominent saint in the Orthodox tradition, St. John the Baptist, Prophet and Forerunner of Christ . A monastery dedicated to St. John the Forerunner is located in north of Voskopoja, nearly 2 kilometers from its center. According to the ktitorik inscription the church of this monastery was built in 1632 and painted in 1659⁴. Another 17th century (since 1569) monument in the region which bears the name of the Saint is the Church of Boboshtica. In this church, the cycle dedicated to John comprises complete and rich scenes⁵. Another shorter cycle, with episodes from the Saint's life that perhaps is indirectly linked to this "cult ", is part of the iconographic program used by David Selenica during the fresco decoration of the Church of St. Nicholas in Voskopoje (1722-1726)⁶.

The Cycle is found on the third line of paintings. The scenes are located at the base of the northwestern dome. They start in the northern wall of the basilica and continue on to the western part of the first transom. The scenes are read from right to left; The first episode where " St. Joan rebukes Herod " takes place inside the palace. This becomes obvious from the heavily fractured architectural background with striking images of arches, lintels and columns decorated with capitals and floral reliefs. Within the walls appears King Herod on the throne, the crown sitting on his head while clutching the rod in his left hand. He is dressed in a red robe stuck up around his neck and decorated in the lower part with golden ribbons loaded with geometric ornaments. Similar ribbons traverse the dress that stands out in the bust through the mantle. With his right hand makes a move towards John who is standing on his feet in front of him. The Saint is wearing his characteristic dress, camel leather underneath and covered by a simple robe. He stands facing King Herod, lifting his right hand in a warning gesture while holding a parchment in his left hand. Over the buildings it is written in Greek with large white letters against a dark blue background, "It is not allowed to have as your wife, your brother Philip's spouse ." Behind King Herod stand three soldiers who are set in motion, anticipating the event that follows next, the Incarceration⁷. Two of

¹ R. ROUSSEVA, Iconographic characteristics of the churches in Moschopolis and Vithkuqi (Albania), in «Makedonika», 35(2005-2006), pp. 141-161.

² The architecture of churches in the Voskopoja region see A. Meksi- P. Thomo ; Post Byzantine Architecture in Albania (Basilicas), "Monuments", *Tiranw, 1981, 1 (21) pp 99- 148. P. Thomo ; "Post Byzantine Churches' Architecture in southern Albania" Tiranw 1998.*

³ R. ROUSSEVA, Iconographic characteristics of the churches in Moschopolis and Vithkuqi . op.c.

⁴ Th. Popa.; "Inscriptions of churches in Albania" Tiranë 1998. pp, 158-159.

⁵ Stransky. A.; L'eglise Saint- Jean de Boboshtica, en Albanie. In; *Revue des etudes slaves*, Tome16. Fascicule 1-2, 1936. Pp. 76- 79. The author in this article publishes parts of the inscription and the date of church that does not exist in now days.

⁶ Th. Popa.; "Inscriptions of churches in Albania" .op.c

⁷ In its most elaborated variant appear two or three soldiers who capture John and escort him in the prison inside which the Saint is seen. In this case the apprehension and the incarceration, two episodes from John's life, follow one another. This is not a very common practice in Post Byzantine painting, frescos and paintings. The apprehension moment has been removed because it is implied. Bl.A. *Κατσιώτη*, "Οι σκηνές της ζωής και ο εικονογραφικός κύκλος του αγίου Ιωάννη Προδρόμου στη βζυαντινή τέχνη", Αθήνα 1998.

them appear in profile looking at each other stunned while the third one stands in a frontal position with his face turned toward the Forerunner. They appear in military gear, carrying spears and shields and helmets on their heads. It follows with the dungeon's scene.

The building appears as a thick wall rising in both ends, inside which, through a small window can be seen the upper body of the St. John the Forerunner. The "Incarceration" episode is based on the Gospels' stories (Math. 3 .Mark. 17 .Luk. 19-20) . According to them, The Forerunner (Ο Προδρομος) was imprisoned because he criticized Herod for having married his brother's wife. For this reason the Saint was incarcerated in the Macherait tower (Μαχαίρα) .The Incarceration scene shares many common details with other analogous Biblical scenes of saints, such as the one of St. Demetrius , the three generals in the cycle of St. Nicholas , at St. George , etc. The most interesting iconographic element in the evolution of the scene (the prison) is the architectural structure. Some examples in most of Byzantine manuscripts describe the prison as a building with arched stone walls which include the Saint, in several others that are even more numerous appears a simple arched window with a parapet decorated with nails or an arch supported on two columns⁸. This fact has preceded the shape that the building would have in the future. In the Palaeologan era appear complex construction facades such as castles with towers and protective walls inside which the Saint is shown in his cell in full body length. In the post-Byzantine period architecture generally is simplified only to a closed grate window that conveys the idea of incarceration and isolation within which the figure of John appears only in his torso.

In the post-Byzantine painting as well as in the short cycle of Saint Nicholas, "Incarceration" is usually displayed in a complementary role, taking part in extended cycles or associated with scenes of pathos viz. with the "Feasting", or "Decapitation" (eg; the church (katholikon) and the refectory of the Monastery of Great Lavra, the refectory of the Monastery of St. Dionisis etc.)⁹.

The Decapitation scene constitutes the most interesting moment of the cycle of John in the Basilica of St. Nicolas in Voskopojë. It takes place outside the palace, in nature. To the right of the composition stands the executioner shortly after he has beheaded John. He is depicted as a powerful young man in military outfit and a red cloak waving behind his shoulders¹⁰. The Executioner appears in motion leaning on his right leg, holding firmly his sword in his right hand, and the Saint's head surrounded by an aureole in his left one. Behind the executioner, in the background, one can note the body of St. John. He is on his knees, just a moment after receiving the fatal blow. His body is falling with his hands joint like in a prayer position, whilst blood bursts from his neck. A step further appears Salome approaching with the disc in her hands and staring in profile at the Forerunner's head. She is wearing a red robe hanging loose on her body, decorated with floral elements and ribbons around the neck and sleeves. Her hair braid tied and hanging over the right shoulder.

⁸ A. Κατσιώτη, "Οι σκηνές της ζωής,

⁹ A. Κατσιώτη, "Οι σκηνές της ζωής,

¹⁰ The executioner is usually depicted as young man, representing classic beauty and force. He is shown in military outfit and in some scenes a cloak waves behind his back. In some scenes he carries his sword with both hands (The martyrization scene of St. Stefan in the chapel of Kukuzelica), whereas in some others, he carries the sword on his right hand and the sheath on the left one. A. Κατσιώτη, "Οι σκηνές της ζωής

This scene featuring a famous episode in the iconography of many Saints - Martyrs, is known since the Paleochristian period. The decapitation of the Forerunner is a typical scene, analogous to those of dozens of martyrs because as it is well known within the canons (rules) of Christian art, new schemes are not preferred as long as approved preexisting scenes can be still utilized¹¹. The most ancient iconographic cycles dedicated to the Forerunner were particularly characterized by "pathos" and therefore set the decapitation moment as the most important part (scene) of his martyrdom . At least until the 10th century, the decapitation scene together with the Burial constituted the closure of the iconographic cycle of the Saint. The Head Tracking Episodes were added later. (The Burial and the Head Invention episodes are taken from the Western culture). The 11th century marks the display of complete cycles with Saints – Martyrs, and it is in this period that the cycle of the Forerunner was developed, especially the beheading scenes often appeared in calendars (μηνολογία) illustrating August 29. Over the following centuries this scene became widespread in the codices, monumental paintings and icons. Iconographic appearances of this scene differ in the positions that the martyr and executioner are shown. According to Grabar which was based on the decapitation scenes presented in the calendar of the Forty Martyrs Church in Tirnovo (1230)¹², depending on the moment " before or after the fatal strike " the scene is divided into two types; where the executioner stands with his body leaned backward preparing to deliver the blow, and when leaning on his left foot, he strikes with his body forward. Generally, to the first category (with some exceptions) belong those images predating the 13th century, while scenes of the second category were made after the 13th century.

In the 7th century depiction in Cavushin (Kapadokia), The Forerunner appears on his knees with his head decapitated , blood flowing out of his neck and with the right hand in prayer position. This is an unusual iconographic appearance with strong realistic elements in comparison with similar scenes of that period, which are characterized by coldness and apathy. (Absolute stillness, inertia, total lack of expression of pain and sorrow are the main characteristics of Orthodox consecration). The same drama contains the presentation in the chapel of St. Sophia in Ohrid (11th century) where the body of the beheaded Saint jerks violently falling to the ground.

In the post-Byzantine period, in addition to the “Decapitated” version prevails another type of scene, where St. John is a bit of leaning with his head lowered in anticipation of the executioner’s lethal strike, and Salome appears kneeling beside John holding the disc for his head. This is a typical appearance of the School of Crete and is found in many icons and murals¹³. Theophanies used this scene in the Monastery of Great Lavra (1535)¹⁴ and so did Frango Katelano in Varlaam Monastery in Meteora (naos 1548)¹⁵. The same variant appears in the eksonarteks of Filantropinon Monastery on the island of Ioannina and it is attributed to the Kondari brothers (third phase in 1560¹⁶) , in the narthex of the church of John the Theologian in Megala Vragiana

¹¹ Greek and Roman themes inspired by mythology and history, as it is for instance the decapitation of Medusa from Perseu or Klitemnestra from Orest, etc. Bl K. *Weitzmann*. Greek Mythology in Byzantine Art. Princeton 1950. A. Κατσιώτη, “Οι σκηνές της ζωής, fq 124.

¹² A. Grabar. *La Peinture religieuse en Bulgarie*, fq. 100. Paris, 1928

¹³ A. Τουρτα. *Οι ναοι του Αγίου Νικολαουστη Βιτσα και του Αγίου Μινα στο Μονοδενδρι*. Athens 1991. P,205.

¹⁴ A. Κατσιώτη, “Οι σκηνές της ζωής,

¹⁵ R. ROUSSEVA, *Iconographic characteristics of the churches in Moschopolis and Vithkuqi* ..op.c

¹⁶ M. Αχειμαστού- Ποταμιανού, *Οι τοιχογραφίες της Μονής των Φιλανθρωπικών στο Νησι των Ιωαννίνων, Αθήνα 2004, φργ 157.*

in Agrafa (1649)¹⁷. "The Decapitation" of John appears even in churches dedicated to the Archangels Michael and Gabriel respectively in Voskopoja (1720-1725) and Vithkuqi (1682-1728)¹⁸.

In the Banquet episode, as in the first scene that we just discussed (John rebukes Herod), with two buildings on the edges of the image, the various architectural elements, high walls, arches, etc. , it is understood that the events takes place inside Herod's palace¹⁹. In this scene one can distinguish a square table on which are placed various dishes, with King Herod sitting in the center and surrounded by other guests. The guests, the archons of Galilea (as we mentioned Gospel Mark , - 21 .) and Herod are depicted wearing expensive clothing with crowns and turban on the head, embodying thus the nobles of the royal court. The table is wealthy, flashy spoons, plates and pieces of food are thrown carelessly on the table cloth that also stands as expensive and decorated with floral elements. Salome dances in front of the table holding up the disc carrying the Forerunner's head²⁰. She turns toward Herodiata, who reaches her hands to get the disc. Herod's wife is presented with a royal robe decorated with golden ribbons and with the queen's crown on her head. Herodiatas' presence is not confirmed by the old writings, however it is commonly found in iconography.

The iconographic presentation of Herod's Banquet, is based almost entirely on Matthew's (ιδ. 6-8 .) and Mark's confessions (στ. 21-23 .). According to them, in the banquet hosted by King Herod, Salome with the encouragement of her mother Herodiata demanded and received as a reward the Saint's head. These episodes tackled so much the imagination of future generations, and many authors and apocryphal writings treated the death of Herod, Herodiata and Salome associated with the Baptist's decapitation. Herod's banquet is part of the earliest known samples of the Forerunner's iconographic cycle. In its general appearance (structure), the banquet scene is also similar to the Mystical Supper, the Hospitality (Filokseninë) of Abraham or the Wedding in Cana²¹. This episode, either separated, or linked to the decapitation in one single scene, is part of the iconographic programs of churches starting from the 13th century. Together with the Saint's birth they constitute the most common appearances in its cycle. Typically, the combination

¹⁷ Βιταλιωτης. Ι.; Το εργο του ανωνυμου « ζωγραφου του Αγιου Στεφανου » Μετεωρων στα Μεγαλα Βραγγιανα των Αγραφων, Byzantina 28, (2008), fig.27.

¹⁸ R. ROUSSEVA, Iconographic characteristics of the churches in Moschopolis and Vithkuqi ..op.c

¹⁹ Typical is the case of Saint Apostles in Thessaloniki in the 14th century where Caryatid forms are placed as columns, while medallions with busts decorate the architectural space shown us the artist's interest for giving details borrowed from antiquity. In this way the painter tries to highlight the contrast between the palace of infidel King Herod, symbol of the ancient world and the Christian teachings that are represented by the Forerunner. A. Κατσιώτη, "Οι σκηνές της ζωής.

²⁰ This unpopular moment in the Gospels, is seen in a 4th century text attributed to Mark the pseudo evangelical "and his daughter carrying the head and dancing in the middle of the banquet", " ...η δε κορη λαβουσα αυτην (την κεφαλην) και ορχησαμενη μετ' αυτης εν μεσω του συμποσιου, επεδωκεν αυτην τη μητρι αυτης τη Ηρωδιαδη.. Salome's name is not mentioned in the New Testament. Her name is mentioned by the jewish historian Flavius Josiphus who informs us also of the controversies between Herod and the Forerunners, as well as about the decapitation of the Saint. Despite Josiphus attribution of political overtones to the described events, his writings stands as the only secular description against the New Testament. A. Κατσιώτη, "Οι σκηνές της ζωής

²¹ Various details such as kitchen utensils, the guest's clothes or even Salomes', the way she dances, the architectural framework of the scene, the psychologically charged atmosphere as well as many other details taken from everyday life are mainly indicators of the painter's capacity to add variety and interest to the scene. A. Κατσιώτη, "Οι σκηνές της ζωής

banquet / Decapitation dominates compact iconographic cycles (concise) dedicated to John. Specific details on the narrative line and the iconographic representation of this scene we find located in parallel in the Old Testament. For instance, bringing the Forerunner's head to King Herod corresponds with David's carrying of Goliath's head, whilst Salome's dance corresponds to that Moses' sister, Miriam, after crossing the Red Sea. The motive of Salome's dance can be compared from a literary standpoint with the mythological dance of Mainadon and Agaves holding Pentheu's head. For narrative reasons the Banquet and Salome's dance created a model that often merged both scenes into a single one. Together with the Decapitation they formed compact and short cycles that were used in the decoration of churches during the Paleolog's period (St. Apostles in Thessaloniki, 14th century, the church in the Monastery of St. Prodhromit in Seres, 14th century). The use of these scenes together, linked or separated (the decapitation, the dance and banquet) stands almost as an unchanged rule in the post-Byzantine examples.

With some minor changes (mainly in the number of characters which take part in every scene) the life cycle of St. John in the church of St. Nicholas in Voskopojë painted by David of Selenica generally follows the late Byzantine model²². The cycle is made of four compact scene placed one after the other and whose narrative character is connected through the architectural background - The Saint in front of Herod – The Saint in Prison – The decapitation – and The Banquet. One exception is in the third scene which has an unusual composition and probably the painter took it from an engraving and then developed it within the cycle in question. The Master creates depth by placing the characters in two dimensions, and drama by depicting the executioner and Salome mainly in red, while John's body falls down behind their back, covered in blood which explodes out of his neck. The Forerunner's cycle in the Basilica of St. Nicholas is not a systematic menologion (calendar cycle). In this case, we mainly deal with a selection of scenes from the martyrdom of saints (martyrological cycle). The Forerunner's cycle throughout the northern part is associated with several scenes of the martyrdom of many honored saints as St. Artemio²³, St. Eustathi, St. Demetrius, St. George and St. Stefan.

²² The cycle is presented even in the painting manual of Dionisio da Furrna. Dionisio da Furrna "Ermeneutica della pittura"; Fiorentino Editore- Napoli, 1971

²³ In the Post Byzantine painting, starting from the 17th century, St.Artemio has a special cult in Mount Athos.



Fig.1 The Life Cycle of John the Forerunner in the Basilica of St. Nicholas in Voskopoja



Fig.2 The Decapitation