

THE SCENE „MELISMOS“ IN THE CHURCH „ST. VIRGIN“
IN DOLNA KAMENITSA (XIV C.)

The medieval church „St. Virgin“ in the village of Dolna Kamenitsa (XIV c.) is nowadays situated in Serbia, in the northeast direction of Nis, nearby Knjajevatz (Pl. 1). It was founded by an unknown boyar from the Vidin kingdom. The partially preserved inscription ‘despot Michael, the son of tsar Michael...’ could be found next to the portrait of the nobleman ruling the area. There are not historical sources about the despot Michael. It is generally considered that he is son of Bulgarian tsar Michael Shishman (1323-1330). Most scholars date the church and its frescos back to the first quarter of the XIV century. Some of them identify the despot Michael with son of Michael - Asen (1323/24-before 1356), the son of Bulgarian tsar John Alexander (1331-1371). They date the mural painting back to the second half of the fourteenth century. The above-mentioned problem is one of the main problems concerning the church St. Virgin in Dolna Kamenitsa. Although it has been investigated in the near past by Serbian and Bulgarian scholars¹ among whom- M. Djorovic-Ljubinkovic, R. Ljubinkovic, S. Nenadovic, D. Boshkovic, L. Mavrodinova, D. Panajotova - there are many vague aspects which deserve to be put into consideration. Being in process of my research, I want to share some of my observations.

¹ М. Ђоровић-Љубинковић, Р. Љубинковић, *Црква у Доњој Каменици*, Старинар, 1, Београд 1950, 53-84; Б. Живковић, *Доња Каменица*, Београд 1987; Идем. *Конзервативорски радови на фрескама цркве у Доњој Каменици*, Саопштења, IV, Београд 1961; С. Ненадовић, Рестауратсија Доњокаменичке цркве, Зборник заштите споменика културе, кн. X, Београд 1959, 52-68; Ђ. Бошковић, Белешке са путовања Св. Богородица у Доњој Каменици, Старинар, 1933-34, 277-280; Л. Мавродинова, *Црквата в Долна Каменица*, С., 1969; Н. Мавродинов, *Старобългарската живопис*, С., 1946, 166-169; Д. Панайотова, *Ктиторските портрети в црквата в Долна Каменица*, Сп. БАН, 4, 1970, 3-19; Идем., *Црквата в Долна Каменица (1323-30) и изкуството от тази епоха*, Проблеми на изкуството, 3-4, 1970, 43-51; Идем., *Les portraits des donateurs et l'ornement sur les fresques de L'Église Dolna Kamenica*, Byz. Bulg., 4, 1973, 275-294; Идем., *Les portraits des donateurs de Dolna Kamenica*, Zbornik Vizantološkog Instituta, 12, 1970, 143-156; D. Panajotova-Piguet, *Recherches sur la peinture en Bulgarie du bas moyen age*, Р., 1987, 159-252; Е. Коцева, *Някои особености на надписите в црквата “Св. Богородица” в с. Долна Каменица*, III, 14, 1970; М. Kiel, *The church of our Lady of Donja Kamenica (Dolna Kamenica) in Eastern Serbia in: Actes du XIVe congres international des*



Sl. 1. Църквата „Св. Богородица“ в с. Долна Каменица

Fig. 1. The Church of Holy Virgin in Donja Kamenica

The church is very small, with cross-shaped plan of the nave, a dome and a two-storied narthex with two steeples.

The most part of the mural painting is preserved. The Dodecaorton and the Passion cycle are exposed in the upper registers of the nave. The Marian cycle is depicted in the narthex on the first floor. The Life of St. Nicholas is situated in the north tower on the second floor. The Life of St. Paraskevi is painted in the south tower. Few donors' portraits are represented in the church. Iconic pictures of Virgin Skoroposlyshitel'nitsa, Virgin Eleousa, Christ Pantocrator and St. George Diasoritis are rendered in the first register among the full-length saints. In the apse of the church is depicted Virgin enthroned with Christ and attended by two archangels. The scene Melismos is represented in the lower register (Pl. 2). Above the window we can see an altar with the Christ child on it he lies on both the paten and chalice. His body is covered with a veil in the form of Gospel

cover, and his right hand is raised in benediction. The asterisk is placed above him, and the lance and a spoon are below. The legend „Melismos“ is inscribed above that image. There are two bishops: St. Basil The Great and St. John Chrysostom, dressed in polystavria, flanking the child. They make a gesture of blessing with their right hand and stretch the left hand towards Christ.

As G. Babic² and other have demonstrated, the scene of officiating bishops is developed in the historical context of the Christological disputes, which began in the late eleventh century. At the center of these debates was the questions whether Christ could receive the sacrifice and simultaneously to be sacrificed. The official answer was that Christ could offer as man and receive as God. In the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the lower register of the sanctuary underwent a radical transformation³. The frontally depicted authors of the liturgy and bishops of the Orthodox Church turned in a three-quarter pose, unrolled liturgical scrolls, and began to concelebrate with the living priest. The transformation in stance was accompanied by the creation of a central image to which the celebrants turned. The Melismos was introduced in the mural painting at the end of the twelfth century. The image had no artistic predecessors in Byzantium and no parallels in the West. The composition consists of a diminutive figure of Christ,

² Г. Бабић, *Hristolos[ke raspre u XIII veku i pojava novih scena u apsidalnom dekoru vizantijskih crkava*, Зборник за ликовне уметности 2, Нови Сад, 1966, 11-17; Ch. Walter, *Art and Ritual of Byzantine church*, L., 1982, 207-212; Sh. Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries*, S. and L., 1999, 44-47

³ G. Babic, *op.cit.*, 17-29; Ch. Walter, *op. cit.*, 200-203; Sh. Gerstel, *op. cit.*, 37-44

who reclines directly on the painted altar or within a bowl-shaped paten. According to Sh. Gerstel⁴ and other among the factors, that may have guided the development of this new composition, are organic changes in the text and performance of the liturgy. However the scene is doctrinal rather than realistic.⁵

As to the name Melismos, there is no universal manner in which the composition is labeled.⁶ The word

Melismos is inscribed above some images, other are labeled simply with the abbreviation for Christ's name. In number of churches the term used to describe the image is „thyomenos“, the Sacrificed One.

G. Babic and Chr. Walter⁷ laid the foundation for a study of the prayers inscribed on Episcopal scroll in monumental decoration. In their examination of forty-two churches the authors identified the opening word of thirty prayers from the liturgies of St. Basil and St. Chrysostom, ranging from the offertory prayers to the concluding prayer of the service. Generally, painted bishops hold scrolls inscribed with the words of the silent prayers of the liturgy.

In the church St. Virgin in Dolna Kamenitsa the unrolled scrolls in the hands of St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom are omitted and replaced by a gesture of benediction. As far as I know, the earliest example of concelebrating hierarchs, who make a blessing gesture towards the sacrificed Christ, is in the church St. Virgin in Studenica⁸ (Pl. 3). The scene of officiating prelates is depicted in the nord chapel in the Radoslav narthex, dated 1233-34. St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom make with their right hand a gesture of benediction towards the child with elongated proportions. Christ lies directly on a painted altar and his right hand is raised in blessing. The liturgical vessels are depicted above his body. St. Basil holds in his left hand a closed scroll. Two angels deacons are present.



Sl. 2. Сцѣната „Мелисмос“ в „Св. Богородица“, Долна Каменица.

Fig. 2. The scene of the Adoration of the Lamb in the Church of Holy Virgin, Donja Kamenica

⁴ Sh. Gerstel, 15, 29, 34-35, 43-44

⁵ Ch. Walter, 207

⁶ Sh. Gerstel, 43

⁷ Ch. Walter, G. Babic, *The inscriptions upon Liturgical Rolls in Byzantine Apse Decoration in: Studies in byzantine iconography*, L., 1977, 243-254; Ch. Walter, *Art and Ritual...*, 203-225; Sh. Gerstel, *op. cit.*, 29-34

⁸ L. Hadermann-Misguish, *Karbinovo*, Bruxelles, 1975, II, fig. 30; М. Касанин, Б. Тодић,



Sl. 3. Сцѣната “Поклонение на жервѣтата” в “Св. Богородица”, Студеница (по Хадерман и Манич).

Fig. 3. The scene of the Adoration of the Lamb in the Church of Holy Virgin, Studenica (according to Hadermann and Manić)

In the north chapel in the church of the Savior in Jica (painted in 1220-21 and repainted in 1310 according to the previous schemes) two hierarchs were depicted with their arms outstretched towards the Christ child on the paten and a chalice on the altar.⁹ Now the scene is damaged.

The images in the churches Bogorodica Ljeviska at Prizren¹⁰ (1309-1313) and Annunciation in Grachanica¹¹ (1320-21) demonstrate a large degree of similarity to the composition in Dolna Kamenitsa.

In the Prizren' main apse in the center of the scene of officiating prelates St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom are depicted blessing in the

direction of Christ, covered by an asterisk in the paten, two scroll and a chalice. Some of the other bishops hold unrolled scrolls or closed Gospels.

In the apse of the church in Grachanica, St. Basil and St. Chrysostom make a gesture of blessing towards the Christ child upon the paten, closed Gospel and a chalice. They hold a closed scroll in the left hand. Two angels holding rhipidia are exposed behind the painted altar. There are ten hierarchs with unrolled scrolls.

We see officiating bishops, who make a gesture of blessing towards the Christ – child in “St. Nikita” at Cucer (ca 1320),¹² in the church of the Savior in Kuceviste (ca 1330),¹³ in Psaca (1365-70)¹⁴ and in St. Virgin Bolnicka in Ohrid (70th years of XIVth c.).

In “St. Nicholas” at Ljuboten (ca 1344-1345)¹⁵ in the prothesis one bishop makes a gesture of blessing, while the other makes an incision with a lance in the body of the Christ child.

⁹ М. Кашанин, Ђ. Бошковић, П. Мијовић, *Жича*, Београд 1969, 169; Б. Тодић, *Српско сликарство у доба краља Милутина*, Београд 1998, 308

¹⁰ Д. Панић, Г. Бабић, *Богородица Левиска*, Б., 1975, фиг. 1

¹¹ Б. Тодић, *Грчаница. Сликаство*, Београд 1988, 140; Идем., *Српско сликарство...*, 331

¹² П. Миљиковић-Пепек, *Делојто на зографийе Михаило и Еуџихиј*, Скопје 1967, 98

¹³ И. Ђорђевић, *Сликаство XIV века у цркви Св. Спаса у селу Кучевшију*, ЗЛУ, Нови Сад 17, 1981, 96-97, пл. 23



Sl. 4. Сцената “Поклонение на жертвата” в “Св. Архангели”, Костур (по Пелекандис и Хадзидакис).

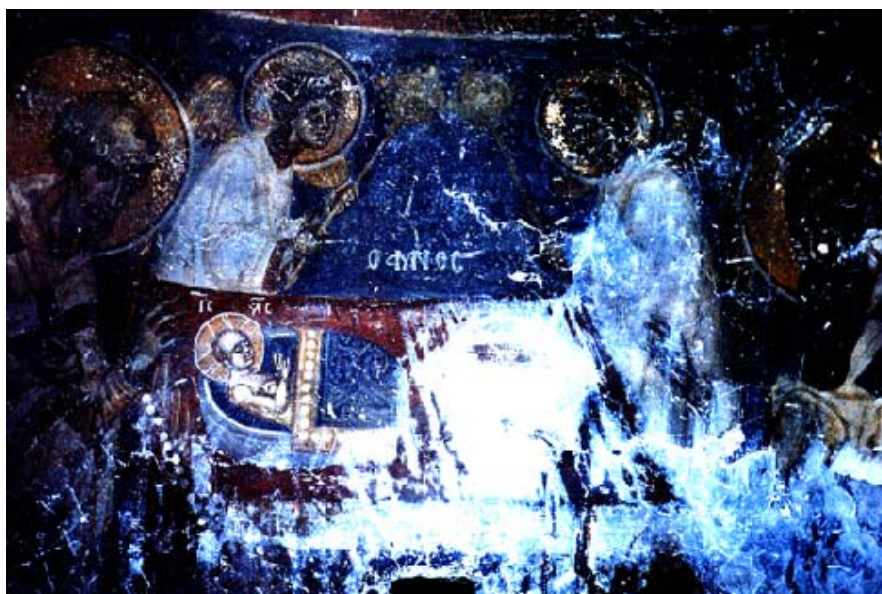
Fig. 4. The scene of the Adoration of the Lamb in the Church of the Holy Archangels, Kastoria (according to Pelekamides and Hadzidakis)

Despite some differences in the presentation, the above-mentioned examples from XIIIth and the first half of the XIVth centuries, share a common pattern: one or two of the authors of the liturgy make a benedictional gesture toward the sacrificed Christ in the scene of officiating prelates. This indicates the presence of local traditions in Serbia.

In the second half of the XIV c. we find the same iconographical scheme in Kastoria as well. The parallels are in the church of Taxiarchs¹⁶ (on the second layer from 1359/60) and in St. Nikolas of Tzotza¹⁷ which decoration is dated from E. Tsigaridas to the limits of the period 1350-1370 year and from I. Sisiou – back to 1346 year. At that time the town is under Serbian domination. In the Taxiarchs, in the donor’s inscription a Serbian tsar Simeon Yrosh Paleolog is mentioned. In the scene of officiating prelates we have a mixed variant- St. Basil and St. Chrysostom hold an inscribed fan-shaped scroll in their left hand and they make a blessing gesture with the right hand toward the Christ child on the paten. Behind them St. Gregory the Theologian and St. Athanasios display unrolled scrolls. Two angels dressed as deacons extend liturgical fans (Pl.4).

¹⁶ M. Hatzidakis, *Kastoria*, 1992, 96, pl. 5, 6

¹⁷ E. Tsigaridas, *Toibografies tis periodou ton Palailogon se naous tis Makedonias*, Tessaloniki, 1999, 256-257, 346, eik. 149; I. Sisiou, *Mia agnosti sintesi ston Agio Nikolao Tsotza Kastorias sinenosi dio simantikon tematon tis Vasilikis Deisis kai tis Agias Triadas* in: *Afieroma sti mnimi ton Sotiri Kissa*, Tessaloniki, 2001, 527



Sl. 5. Сцената “Поклонение на жертвата” в “Св. Никола Дзодза”, Костур (по Цузаридас).
 Fig. 5. The scene of the Adoration of the Lamb in the Church of St Nicholas Džodža, Kastoria
 (according to Tsigaridas)

In the church St. Nikolas of Tzotza - St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom make a gesture of blessing towards the child within the paten, beside the chalice on the altar. The body of Christ is covered by liturgical cloth and his right hand is raised in benediction. The image is labeled “O AMNOS” /the Lamb/. St. Basil holds a closed scroll in his left hand. There are two angels holding rhipidia. St. Athanasios and St. Gregory the Theologian hold unrolled scrolls (Pl. 5).

In the parecclesion of the Panagia Mavriotissa in Kastoria (dated back to 1552), St. Basil holds the infant Christ in his hand and makes a gesture of blessing.¹⁸

Presumably the type of officiating bishop, who make a gesture of blessing towards the sacrificed Christ is created in Serbia, where the earliest and numerous examples exist. This iconographical tradition pays influence on the Balkans’ mural painting during the XIVth c.. The presence of images of St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom, which make a blessing gesture towards the child in churches in the Vidin kingdom and in Kastoria, proves that this unusual iconography is widespread from Serbia to other areas.

The introduction of the blessing gesture in the scene of officiating prelates requires further explication. Certain link between the blessing bishops and the performance of the liturgical rite, when the priest blesses the offerings, could be considered as possible.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ch. Walter, *Art and Ritual...*, 205

¹⁹ Б. Тодић, *Грачаница*, 140, 187

Теодора Василева

**СЦЕНАТА “МЕЛИСМОС” В ЦЪРКВАТА “СВ. БОГОРОДИЦА”
В С. ДОЛНА КАМЕНИЦА (XIV В.)**

Църквата “Св. Богородица” в с. Долна Каменица, Сърбия е била основана през XIV век от неизвестен болярин на Видинското деспотство. Сцената “Мелисмос” в апсидата се отличава със своята необичайна иконография – св. Василий и св. Йоан Златоуст не държат обичайните свитъци в ръце, а благославят младенца Христос. В известен брой сръбски църкви от XIII и XIV век също са изобразени благославящи архиереи в композицията “Поклонение на жертвата”. Това говори за наличието на местна традиция в Сърбия. През втората половина на XIV век ние откриваме същия иконографски модел и в Костур. Вероятно той е създаден в Сърбия, където са засвидетелствани най-ранните и многобройни примери, и оттам е бил разпространен в други области като Видинското деспотство и Костур.

