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**ON THE IMITATION (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) OF ANTIQUITY: OPUS  
RETICULATUM AT THE EAST FACADE OF ST. JOHN  
KANEŌ CHURCH IN OHRID\***

Late Byzantine architecture found new fascination in the classical past, but how that past was conceived varied widely.<sup>1</sup> This paper will consider how antique method of construction such as *opus reticulatum* fundamentally changed the perception of meaning and visuality in Byzantine architecture which gravitated toward antiquarianism. In addition, this article illuminates the aesthetic and historical aspects of images, regarding them as artistic ideas and architectural achievements. In doing so, it also highlights the most significant elements that perpetuate themselves in the configuration and the perception of the antiquity in the architecture.

Adopting an interdisciplinary and comparative method, this paper aims to investigate such issues found at the east façade of the St. John Theologian church in Ohrid (fig.1). Toponym Kaneo is well known in the historiography of Byzantine architecture for a long time.<sup>2</sup> Church was in the focus of research of several prominent historiographers such as Gojko Subotić, Krum Tomovski, Petar Miljković Pepek, Đurđe Bošković (fig.2.), Sašo Korunovski.<sup>3</sup> In scientific historiography church Kaneo recently appeared on the cover of ARTUM Journal of Art History Department of Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade (fig.3).

All mentioned scientists and their publications contributed to profound understanding of the building phases of the church, architecture and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> R. Nünlist, *The Ancient Critic at Work: Terms and Concepts of Literary Criticism in Greek Scholia*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 194-198

<sup>2</sup> G. Subotić, *Sveti Konstantin i Jelena u Ohridu*, Beograd 1971, 10-38, 107-108.

<sup>3</sup> M. Zloković, *Stare crkve u oblasti Prespe i Ohrida*, Starinar III (1924-1925), 137 – 139; Đ. Bošković- K. Tomovski, *Srednovekovnata arhitektura vo Ohrid*, Zbornik na trudovi, Ohrid 1961, 87; П. Миљковић-Пепек, *Црквата Свети Јован Канео*, Скопје 1987.

horizons which marked the exteriorized and interiorized image of the whole site (fig.4, 4a), especially by providing exact datation in the last decade of 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> It is known that it belongs to cross in square churches with the dome above central bay. Upper parts of the church are characterized with rather balanced but distinguished horizontal axis filled with certain brickwork patterns.<sup>5</sup>

The overall image of the façade (fig.5) leaves impression not only that antiquity is used on the vast surfaces of the wall, but that almost all available façade framings are filled with appropriate antique motif recontextualised according to the meaning of spatial units of the church. Flowering of court culture and encyclopedic approach to aesthetic discourse of the Ancient Greek world not only did it make contacts with classical works, but some of its prominent representatives certainly saw Antiquity in three dimensions.<sup>6</sup> From the centuries of late antiquity and of the Byzantine Age, by the way, we have only a trifling number of theoretical remarks on the subject of imitation.<sup>7</sup>

Of the practical application of imitation, however, we have evidence from the various centuries.<sup>8</sup> This long-known fact must hardly be understood as if the Byzantines had consciously conceived the hundredfold application of ancient motifs, figures, and quotations as imitation. The fact is rather that the Eastern Empire had not experienced a break in its historical and cultural development as had the West. Again one discovers from remarkable details in the literature, art, and architecture of Byzantium that the cultural continuity had been preserved since antiquity.<sup>9</sup>

Attention is directed towards visuality<sup>10</sup> and visual discourse of brickwork. The creation of visual narratives involves memory as much as it does the act of seeing.<sup>11</sup> It is a process in which visual sequences are perceived and are

<sup>4</sup> S. Korunovski, *The Architecture of the church St. John Kaneo and its chronological, stylistic correlation with some Ohrid churches*, Zbornik Srednovekovna umetnost na muzej na Makedonija 5, Skopje, 2006, 15–23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 17,18.

<sup>6</sup> I. Jevtić, 'The Antiquarianism and Revivalism in Late Byzantine Court Culture and Visual arts', in A. Odekan, N. Necipoglu and E. Akyurek (eds.) *The Byzantine Court: Source of Power and Culture. Papers from the Second International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium*, Istanbul 2013, 209-217; E. N. Boeck, *Imagining the Byzantine Past: The Perception of History in the Illustrated Manuscripts of Skylitzes and Manasses*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2015.

<sup>7</sup> H. Hunger, *On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature*. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 23/24 (1969), 15-38; Anthony Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium. The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> B. Kilerich, 'Abstraction in late antique art. Envisioning Worlds in Late Antiquity', ed. C. Olovdotter, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018, 77-94.

<sup>9</sup> A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium, 189-190*.

<sup>10</sup> G. Peers, *Sacred Shock: framing Visual Experience in Byzantium*, Pennsylvania University Press 2004, 124 – 125.

<sup>11</sup> Key note for understanding of the images of antiquity from *Seimeioseis Gnomikai* on the study of History where he declared that: "without the collective experience of ancient historians, philosophers and orators, no one, no matter how noble of nature, can succeed in life; even as a plant requires water, so only the ancients can provide the examples and guidance, to be inscribed on the image producing tablets of memory". M. J. Featherstone, *Theo-*

coordinated in the imagination. Hence, these perceptions are shaped by the interplay between the present and the time of the creation of the visual narratives. On the first glance, it is easy to say that these apses contain developed *opus reticulatum* manner of placing the brick between mortar layers (fig.6).<sup>12</sup> This building technique also called diaper pattern<sup>13</sup> is known from antiquity, especially from Roman architecture when stone or brick blocks were used and their square bases formed polychrome patterns (fig.6a).<sup>14</sup> Previously was stated that *opus reticulatum* was present and extensively used in Byzantine architecture for more than five centuries but that in Palaeologan period was used «exclusively on discreet areas: under niches, in niches and in lunettes».<sup>15</sup>

In order to adequately understand the idea of this segment of the façade in exegetic context, it is necessary to be reminded of Cosmas Indicopleustes and his famous *Christian Topography* (fig.7, 7a). In the 6th century Cosmas Indicopleustes from Alexandria, in his *Christian Topography*, presented the idea that the Tent of Covenant, that God had shown to Moses at the Mount Sinai was in fact an image of the world.<sup>16</sup> Based on the preserved illuminated manuscripts of the *Christian Topography* of the nineteenth century, it can be seen that the world is represented in the form of a quadrilateral with clearly marked paradise rivers that irrigate it and the ocean surrounding the part of the Ecumene inhabited by the humankind. Cosmas' descriptions of the Earth de facto correspond to the descriptions of the Christian Church (in the basic sense of the word): The earth is a flat rectangular area that resembles the Ark of the Covenant. The base is Earth and the sky is a cover (to these descriptions the basic division of the facades of the Late Byzantine Churches into two zones, separated by a cordon cornice should be added).<sup>17</sup>

How to “read” and interpret such wall register (fig.8, 8a, 8b)? The entire surface of the apse is precisely the illustration of the Cosmas' vision of the world. The circumstance that the background is made by a diagonally divided

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*dore Metochites's Semeioseis Gnomikai: Personal Encyclopedism*, Encyclopedic Trends in Byzantium?, ed. P. van Deun C. Macé [Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta 212], Leuven 2011, 333-344.

<sup>12</sup> H. Hallensleben, *Die Architekturgeschichtliche Stellung der Kirche Sv. Bogorodica Perivleptos (Sv. Kliment) in Ohrid*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> R.G. Ousterhout, *The Architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul*, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington 1987, 134.

<sup>14</sup> A. H.S. Peter Megaw, *Byzantine reticulate revetments*, Charistērion eis Anastasion K. Orlandon, Athens 1966, 10 – 22, esp. 12. Usage of this opus was studied by A. Choisy, *Le batir chez Romains vol.1*, Paris: Ducher, 1873; rééd.: Arnaldo Forni, 1969 et 1984; [repro. en fac-similé] Lormaye: J. Laget, 1999, PXLIV; A. Radivojević, *Konstrukcije i tehnike građenja antičkog Rima*, Beograd 2004, 54-55.

<sup>15</sup> J. Trkulja, *Aesthetics and Symbolism of Late Byzantine Church Façades*, 1204-1453, Princeton University, 2004, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Tent of the Covenant: *Cosmas Indicopleustes, Topographie Chrétienne*, t. II, ed. W. Wolska - Paris 1970, 54–57, 71, 89.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

field brings us back to the illustration from the Cosmas' Topography: this time it is about the portrayal of the cover, i.e. the roof of the Tabernacle, which is depicted by a diagonally divided field so as to form the rhomboidal fields (fig.9).

The creator of these ornaments suggests the fundamental idea of all images perceived as mediating realms. The idea of Ark of the Covenant, the boundary seems crucial and the wall is a sign of passage and transfiguration, dialectic interaction of the holy and most holy realms with the active participation of the beholder.<sup>18</sup> As seen on brickworking of the apse, not just their shape but also precise treatment as kind of icons which are observed in their elaborate framing, undoubtedly indicates the iconic importance that brick creators observed in them.

Second antique ornament, open meander motif (fig.10), runs through whole east facade surface. It is a meander shaped as Cyrillic "П" where the two vertical bricks are alternating with two horizontal bricks positioned above the starting point of next vertical brick row. It is indicative, however, that are numerous examples of meanders with almost identical proportions as in Kaneo church. Except Perivleptos Church in Ohrid (fig.10a) it appears on the lateral walls of Virgin church in Zaum (fig.10b), facades of St. Demetrios church in Veles (fig.11, 11a);<sup>19</sup> at the apse, north and south side of St. Nicholas church of Rhodia, northern register of the apse of Paregoritissa church, apse of Kato Panagia and east façade of St. Vasileios church in Arta.<sup>20</sup> That type of meander with flat, rectangular constituent elements derive except from Epirotic churches also from Constantinopolitan ones, such as diakonikon of the south church of Constantine Lips in Constantinople.<sup>21</sup>

Ornamental technique in Kaneo church made by brick (fig.5) creates considerable optical tension: ornaments taken by themselves, give the illusion of occupying three-dimensional space impacted with polychromatic effect of brick and mortar. That fuses foreground to background and enforces the idea of a transparent screen; it is a paradoxical vision which gives rise to the effect of the walls having been de-materialised. The wall is stretched down around the church like a drapery, draping the body of the altar, like a a cover of flesh.<sup>22</sup>

It might be unprecedentedly concluded that *opus reticulatum* as mimesis of antiquity and P meander are the most successful synthesis of the liturgical

<sup>18</sup> J. S. Ćirić, "Open up, ancient doors, and let the King of Glory enter". *Meaning of entrances in the Byzantine Architectural Setting: Preliminary Thoughts*, Byzantium and the heritage of Europe: Connecting the cultures, Proceedings of the 3rd International Symposium Days of Justinian I, Skopje, 30-31 October 2015, ed. Mitko B. Panov, Skopje (2016), 146-151.

<sup>19</sup> G. Velenis, *Ermenia tou Exoterikou Diakosmou ste Byzantine Architektonike*, t.II, Thessaloniki, 1984, table 86.

<sup>20</sup> V. N. Papadopoulou, *Byzantine Arta and its monuments*, Athens 2007, 125; J. S. Ćirić, *Brick substance at Zaum Church in Ohrid*, PATRIMONIUM.MK Year 6, N°11 (2013), 99 – 109.

<sup>21</sup> T. F. Mathews, *The Byzantine churches of Istanbul: Photographic Survey*, Penn. State University Press 1976, 386; J.S. Ćirić, *Materijalnost i opeka: Fasade crkava Carigrada tijekom vladavine bizantske obitelji Paleologa, XVI Dani Cvita Fiskovica, Rab 26 - 29.rujan 2018*, Zagreb 2018, 12.

<sup>22</sup> N. Isar, 'Le mur aboli: Le sacrement de la Parole dans les absides des eglises moldaves', *Byzantinoslavica* 60.2 (1999), 611 – 632.

and cosmological conception of the Middle Ages, above all of the heritage of Antiquity, but also the Greek philosophical heritage that was so much present during the Palaiologos era, especially placement of the church as referring to Celestial Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion it can be said that, however manifold and varied in respect to quantity and intensity the imitation of antiquity may have been, it certainly belonged to the essential features of 13<sup>th</sup> c. Byzantine architecture in the high language. It is vital to grasp that a dimension of sacred space that enables a believer to experience of the relation between the facade and perception, ignites the human faculty of creative thought. This form of perception is empirical in the foundation of the processes that reproduce the real through the use of artistic techniques –*mimesis* – that focus on mental content and concrete visual information to produce awareness. Therefore, one defines the imagination before the statement of the concrete image through sensations, perceptions, imagery, and consciousness of the image produced by brick. In other words, the imagination is defined prior to the act of realization. To understand the meaning of an artistic representation is to recognize it as a form of knowledge depicted. The concept of imitation as image, as illusion, is at the threshold of the architectural “aura” created by correlation of materials and liturgical rites.<sup>24</sup> The brickwork represents the values that drive the reproduction of antique images and objects. In addition to values that belong to other eras, the concept of imitation also refers to the experiences and moments of social history of Late Byzantine *milieu* that comprise the circumstances that influence the communication process.

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НА ПОДОБИЈЕ (МИМЕЗИС) КЛАСИЧНЕ АНТИКЕ: OPUS RETICULATUM НА ИСТОЧНОЈ ФАСАДИ ЦРКВЕ СВЕТОГ ЈОВАНА КАНЕО У ОХРИДУ

У раду се разматра фасадна артикулација цркве Светог Јована Канеа у Охриду. Имајући у виду да је црква детаљно разматрана у историографији, а да фасаде нису детаљно анализирани након рестаураторско-конзерваторских радова, у раду се анализирају орнаменти који уједно представљају наслеђе класичне антике али су реконтекстуализовани у хришћанској архитектури. Уопште узев, указује се

<sup>23</sup> J. Erdeljan, *New Jerusalems on the Balkans: Translation of the sacred space in the local contexts*, *Translation of Sacred Space in the Local Context*, in: *Новые Иерусалимы. Перенесение сакралных пространств в христианской культуре*, ред-сост. А. М. Лидов, Москва 2006, 105-107. In the context of creating of the sacred context in Ohrid cf. J.S. Ćirić, *Medieval architecture in Ohrid and paradigms of creation of the sacred spaces. A few observations*, *Canakkale Onsekiz mart üniversitesi Balkan ve ege uygulama ve araştırma merkezi uluslararası Balkan tarihi ve kültürü sempozyumu 6-8 ekim 2016*, *Canakkale bildiriler cilt I*, Canakkale: Onsekiz mart üniversitesi, 2017, 319 – 329.

<sup>24</sup> R. Webb, *Spatiality, Embodiment and Agency and Ekphraseis of church buildings, Aural Architecture in Byzantium. Music, Acoustics, and Ritual*, ed. B. Pentcheva, Routledge, London – New York 2018, 163-175.

на специфично значење мотива *opus reticulatum* и како се тај мотив интерпретира у Сакралној топографији Козме Индикопловца, затим тзв. П меандар и веза са још неколико сакралних целина у Охриду, Велесу, Арти и т.д. Напоследку, употреба класичне антике се анализира у контекстима стварања ауралне архитектуре у којој учествују не само материјали и конкретни литургијски обреди већ и оптичке илузије које уосећавање орнамената може да створи у оку посматрача/ верника.



Fig.1. Church of St. John Kaneo, Ohrid, view from northeast, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić  
Сл.1. Црква Св. Јован Канео у Охриду, изглед са североисточне стране, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.2. Table with images of St. John Kaneo church in Ohrid, photographed by the architect Đurđe Bošković during the 1933<sup>rd</sup> (Archaeological Institute Belgrade)  
Сл.2. Табла са сликама цркве Св. Јован Канео у Охриду, фотографисао архитекта Ђурђе бошковић током 1933.године (Археолошки институт у Београду)

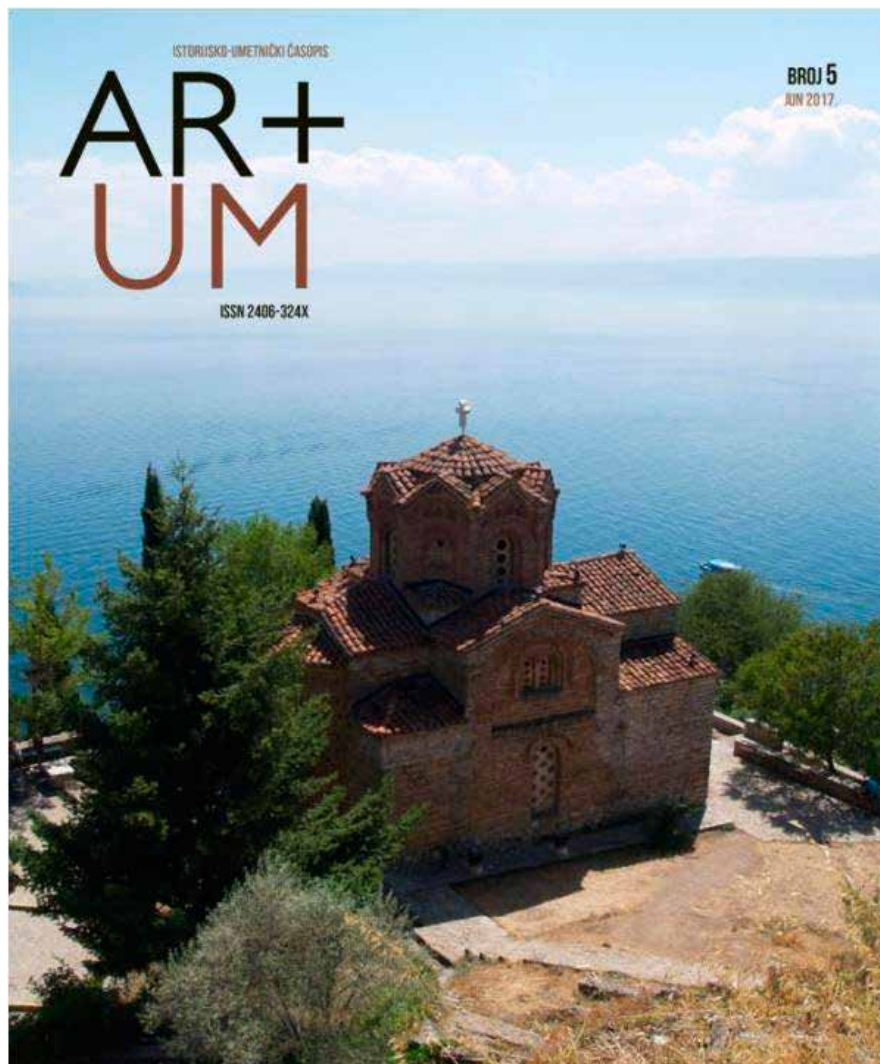


Fig.3 Cover of the journal ARTUM (photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić, editor of the journal Vladana Putnik Prica)

Сл. 3. Насловна страна часописа АРТУМ (фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић, уредник Владана Путник Прица)





Fig.4. View above the church, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić  
Сл.4. Изглед са видиковца изнад цркве, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.4a, View from the southeastern side, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić  
Сл.4а. Изглед са југоисточне стране, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.5 View from the east, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić  
 Сл.5. Изглед са источне стране, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig 6. Opus reticulatum, detail from the apse of St. John Kaneo church, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.6. Opus reticulatum, детаљ апсиде цркве Св. Јован Канео, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.6a Opus reticulatum, Ostia antica, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.6а. Opus reticulatum, Остија антика, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

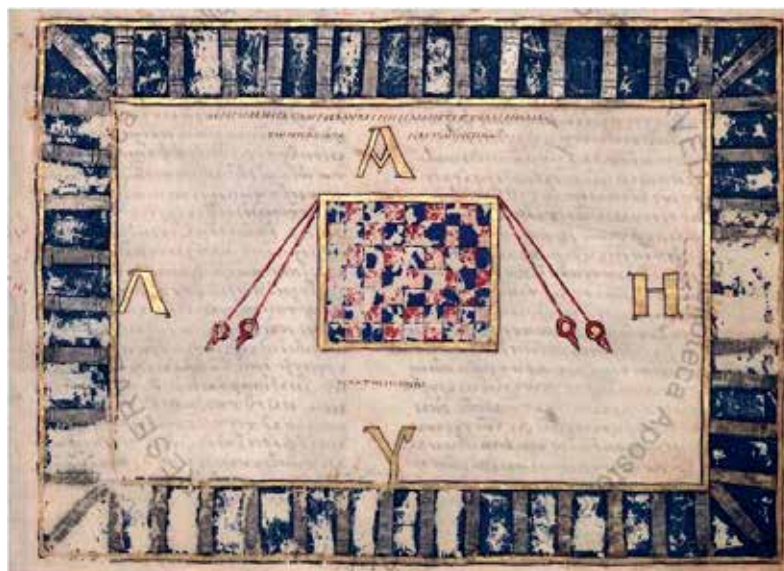


Fig.7, 7a Cosmas Indicopleustes, Vat. Gr.699, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana  
Сл.7, 7а Козма Индикопловац, Vat. Gr.699, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana



Fig.8, 8a,8b. Details from the apse of St. John Kaneo church, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.8, 8а, 8б. Детаљи апсиде цркве Св.Јован Канео, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.9. Cosmas Indicopleustes, Vat. Gr.699, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

Сл.9. Козма Индикопловац, Vat. Gr.699, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana



Fig. 10. П meander, details of the apse, St. John Kaneo church, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.10. П меандар, детаљи апсиде, Св. Јован Канео црква, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig. 10a. П meander, details of the apse, Virgin Mary Perivleptos church, Ohrid, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.10а. П меандер детаљи апсиде, црква Богородице Перивлепте, Охрид, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig. 10b. П meander, details of the south wall, Zaum church, photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić

Сл.10б. П меандар, детаљ јужног зида, Заум, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић



Fig.11, 11a. Façades of  
St. Demetrios church in  
Veles, photo: Jasmina S.  
Ćirić

Сл.11,11а. Фасаде  
цркве Св. Димитрија у  
Велесу, фото: Јасмина  
С. Ћирић