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STONE VENEER IMITATION IN THE CRYPT WITH AN ANCHOR: ORIGIN AND CONNOTATIONS

Abstract: The pictorial program of the tomb with an anchor from the Yagodin Mala Necropolis represents a conventional example of Early Christian funerary art. In the meantime, the origin of one of the decorative motifs of the program – namely the painted imitation of stone veneer – remain unclear. The studies aims to trace back three distinct style of stone veneer imitation and to clarify which of them influenced the paintings of the tomb with an anchor. The basic stone imitation style goes back to Ptolemaic Alexandria, while the other two developed predominantly in Rome. All three of them were still in use in the 4th – 5th centuries AD. The pictorial program of the tomb with an anchor is likely to have been influenced by Hellenistic (Alexandrian) and the earlier Roman style.

Kew words: Early Christian painting, Roman painting, Early Christian art, Hellenistic painting.

The early Christian tomb with an anchor from the Yagodin Mala Necropolis offers a semantically clear pictorial program and fine quality paintings. The tomb is dated back to the late 4th – first half of the 5th century. It has already been under the scrutiny of scholars, so this study focuses on just one element of the iconographic program, namely the painted imitation of stone veneer on the western wall of the tomb.[1] (Fig. 1)

The imitation looks like a combination of two rectangular panels, made of two different stones. Each panel is set in a frame imitating another type of stone. As Dr. Rakocija argues, the parallels to this design are quite common throughout the Balkan Peninsula and Pannonia.[2] Similar approach to the stone veneer imitation was also popular in the funerary art of Western Asia Minor and Northern Black Sea region. In some cases it was the particular arrangement of the elements that coincided with those in other tombs (like in the 4th century AD

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[1] M. Rakocija, Painting in the Crypt with an Anchor in Niš, in: *Niš and Byzantium VII*, Ниш 2009, 87-106. fig. 14, 15, 16, 27.

[2] *Ibidem*, 95.

Fig. 1 Niš, lower half of the western wall (photo M. Rakocija)

Сл. 1 Ниш, доња половина западног зида (фото: М. Ракоција)

tomb 91 in Thessaloniki[3]), in other cases – the choice of imitated stone types (like in Beška tomb in Serbia, dated by the 4th decade of the 4th century AD[4] or in Sardis tomb in Turkey, dated by the 4th century AD[5]).

It seems that the artist that painted the tomb with an anchor favored two quite conspicuous decorative stones. Due to the master's skillful performance, we may suggest that the left one seems to be *cipollino* marble, while the right one is most likely one of the breccia types. Both stone types were highly popular in the imperial Rome as decorative materials and samples for painted imitations. Both types came into fashion in the early Empire and conquered the provinces. At first sight, the case seems very straightforward: the origin of the imitation decorative pattern is pure Roman.

It seems more complicated, though, when taken diachronically, within broad geographic and cultural context. In order to trace the origin of this popular imitation pattern, it is important to trace back the evolution of the stone veneer imitation paintings up to the early Christian period. Neither classical Greece and early Hellenistic Macedonia, nor Republican Rome seem to have fancied luxurious stone veneer or its imitation. Pictorial programs of Macedonian monumental tombs of the 4th and 3rd centuries BC often contain exquisite ornamental decorations but no stone veneer imitation paintings are known so far.

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3   Ε. Μαρκή, *Η Νεκρόπολη της Θεσσαλονίκης στους υστερορωμαϊκούς και παλαιο-χριστιανικούς χρόνοθς (μέσα του 3ου έως μέσα του 8ου αι. μ.Χ.).* Αθπηνα 2006, 177, σχεδ. 131.

4   O. Špehar, Home for Eternity. A possible Interpretation of the Late Roman Tomb Paintings from Beška, in *Зборник за ликовне уметности 45*, Novi Sad 2017, fig. 4.

5   V. Rousseau, Reflection, Ritual, and Memory in the Late Roman Painted Hypogea at Sardis, in *MDPI Arts* 2019, 8, fig. 7.

The first examples of luxurious stone veneer imitation seem to have originated from early 3rd century BC Alexandria. Unfortunately, no Alexandrian public or private buildings survived. The only architectural structures available for studies are the city's monumental tombs. A mysterious 'Alabaster tomb' is deemed to be an antechamber of the Macedonian type tomb. It was completely made of huge blocks of Egyptian alabaster. (Fig. 2) The Alabaster tomb is the only one funerary monument of its type known so far. It is likely to have inspired the development of the stone imitation decorations in Egypt. The T-shaped doorframe follows Macedonian architectural model (that later entered the 2nd style Pompeian paintings). J.-I. Empereur and M. S. Venit argued that it belonged to some exceptionally high-ranking deceased, while A. Adriani even hinted at Alexander the Great.[6] Anyway, as the decorations of the most aristocratic Alexandrian tombs imitate alabaster surface of the walls, columns and even ceilings, the status of the Alabaster tomb's owner is likely to have been royal or close to royal. (Fig. 3)

Alabaster had long been an explicitly elite material as opposed to abundant and less expensive limestone and sandstone. In the 2nd century BC new luxurious stones, such as agate, jasper and onyx appeared in pictorial programs of Alexandrian tombs. Most likely the funerary art imitated decorations of public buildings and upper class residences. In the 1st century BC the Alexandrian style became a source of inspiration for Roman artists. Following the hypothesis of J. McKenzie, many scholars agree that the second Pompeiian style was

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6   A. Adriani, *Tomba di Alessandro*, L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2000, 49-50; J.-Y. Empereur, *Alexandria Rediscovered*, George Braziller Publisher, New York, 1998, 152-153; M. S. Venit, *Monumental Tombs of Ancient Alexandria. The Theater of the Dead*, Cambridge 2002, 8-9.

Fig. 3 Tomb II, necropolis Moustapha Pasha, Alexandria, 3rd century BC, *in situ* (the author's photo).

Сл. 3 Гробница II, некропола Мустафа Паша, Александрија, 3. век пре н.е, *in situ* (фотографија аутора).

influenced by Alexandrian architectural decoration.[7] In contrast with the Republican period, the imperial tastes tended towards much more luxury and the new fashion fitted smoothly.

When adopted in Rome, the stone veneer imitation painting gradually developed into three specific types. The first stone imitation type was based on the Alexandrian tradition. Usually the artists painted dados consisting of rectangular panels and friezes. The painters usually preferred to imitate luxurious alabaster, agate, onyx, jasper and other impressive stones. That was especially the case of East Mediterranean region and Egypt. (Fig. 4)

The second type of stone veneer imitation seems to have derived from the early second Pompeian style. The design patterns consist of alternating stone veneer panels and columns, as well as imitation of stone friezes. For instance, the famous House of Griffins on the Palatine hill is decorated with imitations of onyx or alabaster stone panels. The late Republican – Early Imperial sanctuary in Brescia represents a 'golden standard' of this style. The decorative system includes imitations of various ornamental stones. *Aulae* 3 and 4 (2nd quarter 1st BC.) accommodate exceptional quality imitations of alabaster panels.[8] An agate-like frieze is partially preserved in the *Aula* 2 of the shrine.[9] The Romans also fancied other types of luxurious stones for architectural decoration, and their preferences were introduced into the stone imitation repertoire. Since the 1st century AD, breccia – which had been almost unknown in Alexandrian imitation painting – kept gaining popularity in Roman art, as well as expensive *cipollino* marbles imported from Greece.[10]

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[7]   J. McKenzi, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt. 300 BC – AD 700*, Yale 2007, 96-113.

[8]   F. Rossi, *Un luogo per gli dei. L'area del Capitolium a Brescia*, All'Insegna del Giglio s.a.s., Firenze, 2014, 256. Tav. II b, tav. V b.

[9]   F. Rossi, *Un luogo per gli dei…*, 2014, 250, fig. 438 tav. IV.

[10]   F. Antonelli et als, The colored stones and marbles decorating the Odeion of Pompeii, in *Proceedings of International Conference on Metrology for Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Trento, Italy, October 22-24, 2020*, 427; L. Lazzarini, Three Important Coloured Stones of Ancient Greece: History of Use, Distribution, Quarries, Archaeometry, Deterioration, in *Monument damage hazards and rehabilitation technologies: International symposium on the conservation of monuments in the Mediterranean Basin (8th, 2010, Patras)* / ЕМП, Παν. Πατρών, ΤΕΕ-Τμ. Δυτ. Ελλάδας, 2010, 22.

Fig. 4 Tomb I, necropolis Anfushi, Alexandria, 2nd – 1st century BC, *in situ* (the author's photo).

Сл. 4 Гробница I, некропола Анфуши, Александрија, 2.– 1. век пре н.е., *in situ* (фотографија аутора).

The third type of stone imitation is particularly Roman. The wall-painting imitated *opus sectile* floor panels. As the *opus sectile* floors themselves, the imitations started with simple geometric patterns and thorough imitation of the stone texture. But by the Early Christian period the artists cared less about verisimilitude of imitation and more about whimsical ornamental designs. The evocative samples of these style can be seen in Hypogeo Livenza, Rome (4th century AD),[11] Thermopolium in Ostia Antica (early 4th century AD),[12] and tomb / in Thessaloniki (4th century AD).[13] This type gained tremendous popularity in the provinces and can be found everywhere from Upper Egypt to Crimea and from the Eastern Mediterranean region to Spain. Since the second half of the 4th century, the vast majority of Early Christian churches had been frequently decorated with alternating imitations of *opus sectile* panels and columns, thus mixing the third and the second types. (Fig. 5)

Actually, all three styles were in use in the Late Antiquity, often intermixed in various combinations. The inclination towards a particular style depended on a local tradition, function of the building and – to a certain extant – social status of customers. For some reasons, in Italy the funerary art hadn't engaged in stone veneer imitations until the Early Christian period, so the provinces developed their own funerary decorative programs. The majority of funerary monuments tended towards a mix of the first and third decoration types.

The choice of particular stones to be imitated seems to have depended, from one hand, on materials used in real architecture, from the other – on cultural and artistic influence. In Egypt, for instance, the esthetic characteristics

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[11] C. Pavia, *Guida delle catacombe romane. Dai tituli all'ipogeo divia Dino Compagni*, Roma 2000.

[12] S. Falzone, *Ornata aedificia. Pitture parietali dale case ostiensi*, Roma 2007, 158, fig. 100.

[13] Ε. Μαρκή, *Η Νεκρόπολη της Θεσσαλονίκης...,* πιν. 20 α.

Fig. 5 Church of Kosmas and Damian, Thessaloniki, 6th century (the author's photo).

Сл. 5 Црква Св. Козме и Дамјана, Солун, 6. век (фотографија аутора).

Fig. 6 Wall painting in the Roman villa in Dion, Macedonia, 2nd century AD, *in situ* (the author's photo).

Сл. 6 Зидно сликарство римске виле у Диону, Македонија, 2. век н.е., Македонија, *in situ* (фотографија аутора).

of the alabaster had been praised since pharaonic times. It was expensive, and yet available. A lot of quarries supplied required amounts of the stone. The agate was rare, just a few quarries in the Eastern desert supplied this expensive stone.[14] On the other hand, its uncompromisingly luxurious, distinctive texture was easy to reproduce in wall-paintings. Both in residences and tombs alabaster and agate seem to have stated the elite status of the tomb owners. This connotations are particularly clear in the areas that experienced strong influence of Ptolemaic culture, such as Egypt, Nubia, Eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus.

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[14] J. A. Harrell, P. Storemyr, Ancient Egyptian quarries – an illustrated overview, in *Geological survey of Norway special publication*, 2009, 18.

Rome – on the other hand – was not that well acquainted with alabaster, probably because alabaster deposits were scarce in the Italian Peninsula. Meanwhile, the Romans favored exquisite local decorative stones, namely *breccia* and *cipollino marbles*. Their textures are very articulate and the color palette is quite varied. (Figs. 6, 7). And yet, these decorative stones were not abundant, so the Roman have to import them, primarily from Greece and Asia Minor. They were rather expensive and therefore luxurious. Breccia is associated with Roman art, but there is at least one example of breccia imitation in Hellenistic Macedonia (House of plastered wall, Pella, 3rd century BC). The decoration of the so-called 'house with plasters' in Pella, dated back to the early 3rd century BC contains a painted frieze that seems to have imitated some local type of breccia. In fact, it is reminiscent of famous *breccia di sciro*, mined on the Skyros Island. Macedonia kept strong cultural ties with Ptolemaic Alexandria, so the appearance of stone frieze imitation in Pella probably reflects the influence of Alexandrian architectural style. The scholars basically agree that there are not known breccia imitations in Ptolemaic Alexandria, while the collection of the long-closed Graeco-Roman museum in Alexandria possesses an interesting

Fig. 7 Early Christian tomb, Thessaloniki, now in the Archaeological museum of Thessaloniki, 4th century AD (the author's photo).

Сл. 7. Ранохришћанска гробница, Солун, сада у Археолошком музеју у Солуну, 4. век н.е.,(фотографија аутора).

painted fragment from the so-called Saqiya tomb from Alexandrian necropolis Wardian.[15] The lower part of the fragment is occupied by what looks like breccia dado imitation. The Saqiya tomb paintings are dated back by the majority of scholars to the late Ptolemaic period, that is to the first half of the1st century BC. It seems that breccia had been known in the Hellenistic Mediterranean before the region adopted the Roman decorative conventions, though it couldn't compete with traditional alabaster and other popular stones.

The *cipollino verde* in particular gained tremendous popularity both in Rome and the provinces. Both breccia and *cipollino* marble were distinctive and easy to imitate. Since the end of the 4th century AD, the majority of imitations had grown more and more abstract.[16] Just breccia and *cipollino* remained recognizable. Both stones were introduced to all three decorative types. But the popularity of the new decorative stones didn't mean the decline of Egyptian alabaster

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[15] M. S. Venit, *Monumental Tombs of Ancient Alexandria. The Theater of the Dead*, Cambridge 2002, plate VII.

[16] Κ. Φραγούλης, *Η επισκοπική βασιλική της πρωτοβυζαντινής πόλης του Δίου* (The episcopal basilica of the early Byzantine city of Dion). Θεσσαλονίκη 2015, 144.

Fig. 8 Tomb I Ammoi, Nea Paphos, Cyprus, 2nd – 1st century BC, *in situ* (courtesy of Dr. Svetlana Malykh).

Сл. 8 Гробница I Амои, Неа Пафос, Кипар, 2. – 1.- век н.е., *in situ* (фото: др Светлана Малик).

and onyx, especially in the regions that had long-established cultural connections with Ptolemaic Egypt.

In the light of the above-mentioned evolution of the stone veneer imitation styles, the architectural decoration of the tomb with an anchor appears in a slightly different perception. Speaking of the stones that the artist chose to imitate, their 'Romanness' looks quite obvious, even though breccia – to a limited extent – was already been known in the region.

The overall decoration of the walls seems to be more of the Alexandrian type. The pictorial programs of some Alexandrian and Cypriot tombs offer interesting parallels. The decoration of the painted tomb I in Ammoi (north of Nea Paphos) contains a dado imitating alabaster veneer, loosely dated back to the 2nd-1st centuries BC.[17] (Fig. 8) Apart from alabaster veneer imitation, there is another important detail: a wide dark-red band separating the dado from the upper part of the wall. This element, dividing the lower and upper parts of the tombs, is particularly characteristic of the Eastern Mediterranean funerary design. The Ammoi tomb is likely to be one of the earliest tombs of the type. As Cyprus remained under Ptolemaic rule for more than two hundred years, the Alexandrian architectural traditions kept strong position on the island. The zoning of decorative surface used to be a common approach in Macedonian architectural decoration. For example, the red band was included into decorative program of Alexandrian Tomb B1 in Gabari Necropolis.[18] Alexandrians developed their own style combining such zoning with stone veneer imitation. Unfortunately, a lot of painted tombs have been destroyed since their discovery, and the black and white pho-

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[17] A.M. Guimiet-Sorbes, D. Michaelides, Alexandrian Influences on the Architecture and Decoration of the Hellenistic Tombs of Cyprus in Michaelides, D., V. Kassianidou and R. S. Merrillees (eds), *Proceedings of the International Conference Egypt and Cyprus in Antiquity*, Nicosia, 3-6 April 2003, Oxbow Books, 2009, 229.

[18] J.-Y. Empereur, *Alexandria Rediscovered…*, pl. 4.20

tos is the only material available for study. Nevertheless, the main characteristics of the decorative style are already traceable in the mid-Ptolemaic period.

We also see a wide dark red band in Niš.[19] Yet another little detail in the design of the Yagodin Mala tomb with an anchor is worth mentioning: a delicately rendered vine in the upper part of the wall finds its parallel in the Alexandrian tombs Hadra[20] and Wardian
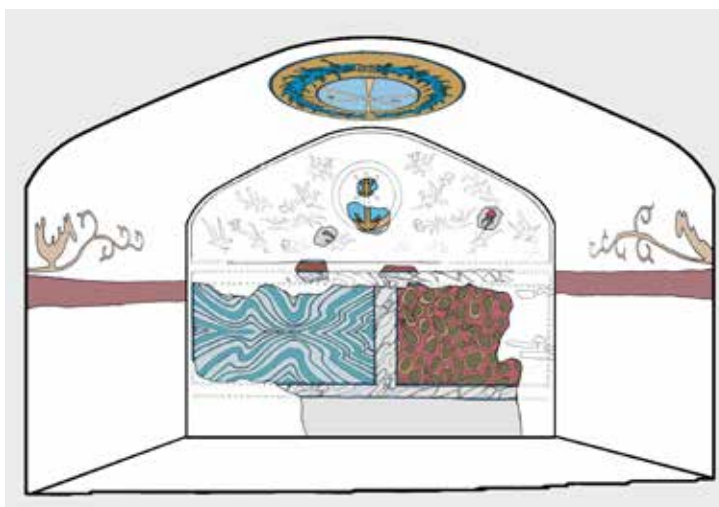

Fig. 9 Niš, reconstruction of painting in the crypt, drawing M. Dimanić
Сл. 9 Ниш, реконструкција сликарства у крипти, цртеж М. Диманић

3.[21] In Macedonia the motif had been used to decorate ritual furniture, urns and other funerary objects. Alexandrian artists seem to have found an additional location for the motif, and this location gradually became conventional. (Fig. 9)

Conclusions

To summarize, the stone imitation decoration of the tomb with an anchor belongs to an interesting type, particularly popular in South-East Europe, West Asia Minor and the North Black Sea region. To a certain extent, the choice of decorative program could have been stipulated by architectural characteristics of the so-called Macedonian type tombs, characterized by simple rectangular plans and moderate sizes. Basically this decorative type developed from Ptolemaic Alexandrian funerary painting, while Early Christian art took after its later Hellenistic East Mediterranean derivative. Despite the choice of presumably Roman decorative stones, namely breccia and *cipollino verde* marble, the design of the tomb with an anchor seems less Roman than that of the tombs decorated with *opus sectile* imitations.

The tradition of stone veneer imitation was deeply rooted in the ancient culture of *Pax Romana*. Apart from the pure esthetics, the imitations of expensive decorative stone veneer conveyed connotations of social importance of the public buildings and high status of the owners of residences and – in case of funerary painting – the deceased persons. The stone veneer imitations appeared

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[19] M. Rakocija, *op. cit.*, 88/9, fig. 27.

[20] A. Adriani, *Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto greco-romano*, serie C, I-II, Palermo 1963-1966, fig. 277.

[21] M. S. Venit, *Monumental Tombs…*, 107, fig. 92.

in Imperial cult temples, royal tombs, king palaces and elite residences. The high status connotations seem to have been persistent enough to transit to Early Christian art. Some scholars suggest symbolic Christian interpretations of decorative programs of the Early Christian tombs. It looks more likely, though, that specific Christian meaning were conveyed more explicitly through Christian symbols and figured programs, while the stone veneer imitation connotations remained the same as in the Ancient culture.

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ИМИТАЦИЈА КАМЕНА У КРИПТИ СА СИДРОМ: ПОРЕКЛО И КОНОТАЦИЈЕ

Ранохришћански гроб са сидром из Ниша (крај 4. – прва половина 5. века) поседује јасан сликовни програм и добро сачувано сликарство. Садржи свеприсутан декоративни мотив имитације камена постигнуте бојењем, који изгледа као комбинација два правоугаона панела, направљених од два различита камена. Чини се да су уметници гробнице са сидром фаворизовали два упадљива украсна камена – *cipollino* мермер и брешу. Оба типа су стекла популарност у раном Царству и поприлично су заступљени у провинцијама.

Да бисмо пратили порекло овог популарног узора имитације, морамо пратити развој сликања имитације камена све до ранохришћанског периода. Ни класична Грчка, ни Македонија, ни републикански Рим као да нису толико заступали присуство имитације камена. Чини се да први примери имитације луксузног камена потичу из Александрије, из периода раног 3. века пре нове ере. Тајанствена „гробница од алабастера“ направљена је од огромних блокова египатског алабастера. Декорације аристократских александријских гробница опонашају зидове, стубове, па чак и плафоне од алабастра, тако да је статус власника алабастерске гробнице вероватно био краљевски или близак краљевском. У 2. веку пре нове ере у програмима зидног сликарства александријских гробница појавило се ново луксузно камење, као што су ахат и оникс.

У 1. веку пре нове ере александријски стил је постао извор инспирације за римске уметнике. Многи научници се слажу да је други помпејски стил био под утицајем александријске архитектонске декорације. Када је усвојена у Риму, слика имитације камена постепено се развила у три специфична типа. Први тип је био заснован на александријској традицији. Обично су уметници сликали правоугаоне панеле. Чини се да други тип потиче из раног другог помпејског стила. На пример, чувена кућа Грифона на брду Палатин украшена је имитацијама оникса или алабастер камених плоча.

Трећи тип имитације камена је римски. Зидно сликарство је опонашало *opus sectile* подне плоче.

Имајући све ово у виду, архитектонска декорација гробнице са сидром могуће је другачије тумачити. Очигледан је римски утицај мада генерално декорација указује на то да је александријског типа. Традиција имитације камена дубоко је укоренила у култури *Pax Romana*. Осим чисте естетике, имитације скупог украсног камена одавале су друштвени значај и високи статус.