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**THE FRESCOES OF SMALL POST-BYZANTINE CHURCHES IN SOUTH-WEST BULGARIA: THE CASE STUDY OF THE VISION OF ST PETER OF ALEXANDRIA\*\*\***

*Abstract:* The present article is part of the research of into a group of small post-Byzantine churches with lateral choirs in southwest Bulgaria. These churches do not only share a similar architectural type, but also follow a common iconographic programme. The article addresses the depiction of the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria in these monuments, namely in the Churches of Saint Nicholas in Vukovo and in the church of Saint George in Studena. It explores the development of the image in Byzantine manuscripts and monumental painting from its emergence in the eleventh until the sixteenth century AD in Byzantium and the Balkans. It also examines the exact geographical locations of the churches containing different versions of the Vision in their iconographic programme. The analysis of the changing elements in the depiction of the Vision shows that in most cases different additions or alterations must have been a reaction to theological debates, historical and ecclesiastical events, such as theological discussions about the Divine Liturgy, the conquest of Constantinople by the crusaders and consequently by the Ottomans, and the unionist Church Councils. The geographical evaluation of the monuments reveals that during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries AD the two regions, where most examples of the Vision seem to be concentrated are Kastoria and Ohrid, while an interesting shift is observed in the sixteenth century AD, where the two focal areas are the region between Ioannina, Meteora and Ellassona and the region around Pernik and Sofia, precisely where the group of small churches under research is located. This may mean that the construction of this group of small churches took place under the influence of the monastic centre of Meteora and could have aimed to imitate monastic architecture in order to recreate a monastic environment.

*Keywords:* Byzantine and post-Byzantine period, The Vision of St Peter of Alexandria, Bulgaria, Meteora



Fig. 1. Vision of Peter of Alexandria. Boboševo, Prophet Elijah, east wall, 19<sup>th</sup> c. AD (personal archive)

Сл. 1. Визија св. Петра Александријског, Бобошево. Пророк Илија, источни ѕид, 19. век (лична архива)

In the south-western region of Bulgaria, less than fifty kilometres from the town of Pernik can be found a group of small post-Byzantine churches. These buildings follow the architectural type of barrel-vaulted single-nave churches with lateral choirs. The architectural type, though simple, is distinctive due to the presence of choirs on their long sides<sup>1</sup>.

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In some cases, there is only one choir, such as in Boboševo (E. Флорева, “Пророк Илия” в Бобошево, София 1978, 19 [plan]) and Alino (E. Флорева, *Алинските стенописи*, София 1983, 11 [plan]). For the architectural type of the barrel-vaulted single-nave churches with lateral choirs, see I. П. Арванитίδου, *Μονόχωροι καμαροσκεπείς ναοί με πλευρικούς χορούς*, in I. Δ. Βαραλής – Φ. Καραγιάννη (eds.), *ΚΤΙΤΩΡ. Αφιέρωμα στον δάσκαλο Γεώργιο Βελένη*, Θεσσαλονίκη 2017, 63-69.

These churches, dating from the early sixteenth century AD onwards, not only are of a common architectural type but also share some important features in their iconographic programme. Unfortunately, the majority of frescoes in the churches of the group under study either do not survive or their state of preservation is poor. Nevertheless, the fragmentary remaining frescoes allow us to conclude that the small churches followed a specific iconographic programme similar to that found in other single-nave churches in the area. One of the distinctive themes in the iconographic programme of these churches is the depiction of the Vision of St Peter of Alexandria. This article will explore the representation of the Vision in the churches of St Nicholas in Vukovo and of St George in Studena. Discussing the emergence of this scene and its development in monumental painting, it will search for explanations and answers in the historical and theological context of the time. Analyzing the geographical location of the monuments, which include the image of the Vision in their iconographic programme, the article will introduce possible reasons for the construction of the small churches under research.

The representation of the Vision of St Peter is found in three churches within the studied group. In the cases of St Nicholas in Vukovo and St George in Studena, the frescoes are part of the original decoration of the churches and situated on the east side of the north wall, adjacent to the small niche of the prothesis. In the church of the Prophet Elijah in Boboševo, only a small portion of the original wall paintings of the side walls and choirs has survived<sup>2</sup>. However, in the nineteenth century AD, during the partial repainting of the church, the depiction of the Vision of Peter of Alexandria was chosen once again. This time, it was placed on the eastern wall of the church and presented in a different manner. The scene features only Peter and Arius, positioned on either side of the niche of the prothesis. They are identified by inscriptions denoting their names and by the phrases inscribed on the ribbons they hold (fig. 1).

In the church of St Nicholas in Vukovo<sup>3</sup>, St Peter is depicted in a three-quarters pose from the middle to the top. Below his waist there is a small four-

<sup>2</sup> И. Кепов, *Минало и сегашно на Бобошево*, София 1935, 191; А. Василиев, Проучвания на изобразителните изкуства из някои селища по долината на Струма, *ИИИИ VII* (1964), 155-157; В. Марди - Бабикова, *Научно мотивирано предложение за обявяване на църквата "Св.Илия" в с.Бобошево*, Кюстендилско за паметник на културата, Архив НИПК, София 1969, 20; Цв. Дремсизова-Нелчинова, Л. Слокоска, *Археологически паметници от Кюстендилски окръг*, София 1978, 14; Флорева, *op. cit.*; И. Гергова, *Ранният български иконостас 16-18 век*, София 1993, ил. 47; С. Ангелов, Църквата "Пророк Илия" в гр. Бобошево, Дупнишко, in К. Минчева, Св. Ангелов (eds), *Църкви и манастири от Югозападна България през XV- XVII в.*, Част 1, София 2007, 41-42; П., Събев, *Страстният цикъл в българската стенна живопис през XVII в.*, Търново 2011, 134-135.

<sup>3</sup> А. Протич, Денационализиране и Възраждане на Българското Изкуство през Турското Робство от 1393 до 1879 год., in *България 1000 години 927-1927*, Т. 1, София 1930, 441; Василев, *op. cit.*, 153-154; А. Божков, За някои "Забравени" паметници на българската монументална живопис от XVI в. Стенописите от Вуково, *Изкуство 9-10* (1964), 47-57; Дремсизова-Нелчинова, Слокоска, *op. cit.*, 14; П. Стефанов, Фрескови надписи и графити във Вуково (1598), *Palaeobulgarica XIII*, I, (1989), 67-80; С. Ангелов, Църквата Св. Никола в село Вуково, *Годишник на Софийския университет*



Fig. 2. Vision of Peter of Alexandria. Vukovo, church of Saint Nicholas, north wall, 16<sup>th</sup> c. AD (personal archive)

Сл. 2. Визија Св. Петра Александријског, црква Св. Николе, северни зид, 16. век (лична архива)

sided niche in the wall. He is bending towards Christ, to the right, with his slightly raised hands, which are either pointing at Christ's clothes or signify a gesture of prayer. Peter's face is not preserved but a halo above his head can be distinguished. He is wearing a white and red polistavrion, a vestment with geometrical figures in a shape of a cross, and a white episcopal omophorion with red crosses over his shoulders. Christ is depicted on a smaller scale than Peter but in full-length, standing in a three-quarters pose on a Holy Table. He is depicted naked or wearing a torn garment – it is not clear due to damage in the wall painting – and only a few parts of His body are visible, including His left

“Св. Климент Охридски” Център за славяно-византийски проучвания Проф. “Иван Дуйчев” ХСVIII 17 (2012), 45-60; I. П. Арванτιδου – Λ. Κ. Τραϊανοῦ, Δύο μικροί ναοί με πλευρικούς χορούς στη νοτιοδυτική Βουλγαρία, *Βυζαντινά* 33 (2013-2014), 319-344; М. Захаријева, Стенописите от църквата “Възнесение Христово” в с. Червен брег, Дупнишко, in *Културно наследство - състояние и перспективи Конференция в чест на 90-годишнината от рождението на проф. Любен Прашков (Нов Български Университет, 5.11.2021г.)*, София 2022, 194-203; М. Куюмджис, Вуково, Църква “Св. Никола” in Б. Пенкова (eds.), *Корпус на стенописите от XVI век в България*, София 2022, 129-132.



Fig. 2a. Vision of Peter of Alexandria. Vukovo, church of Saint Nicholas, north wall. Saint Peter and Christ (personal archive)

Сл. 2а. Визија Св. Петра Александријског, Вуково, црква Св. Николе, северни зид, свети Петар и Христос (лична архива)

hand in front of his stomach, a small part of His right hand, and both of His legs from the thighs below. The figure of Arius can be seen beneath the four-sided niche and Peter. He is depicted in a pose of prostration, wearing white garments and maroon shoes. Only the lower part of the figure is preserved, from the waist to the bottom. In front of Arius part of the Holy Table can be seen, but extensive damage does not allow a more detailed description (fig. 2).

In the church of St George in Studena<sup>4</sup>, St Peter is depicted full-length in a three-quarters pose, holding a scroll in his hand. He is looking at the young

<sup>4</sup> А. Василиев, Една старинна црква при С. Студена, *ГНМ* 7 (1942), 164-184; А. Василиев, Църкви и Манастири из Западна България, *РП* IV (1949/1950), 78; Д. Димитров, Й. Иванов, Г. Кожухаров, Кр. Миятев, Г. Стойков, Л. Тонев, *Кратка история на българската архитектура*, София 1965; Кр. Миятев, *Архитектурата в средновековна България*, София 1965, 220, fig. 261; Д. Митова-Джонова, *Археологически паметници в Пернишки окръг*, София 1983, 162; М. Коева, П. Йокимов, Л. Стоилова, *2000 години християнство Православни храмове по Българските земи (XV - средата на XXв.). Архитектура. История. Библиография*, София 2002, 58; Б. Николова, *Православните църкви през Българското Средновековие (IX-XIV)*, София 2002, 186; С. Мильов, Р. Иванов, *Шетба из Пернишко*, София 2006, 87; Ст. Стоянов, *Фотоалбум на православни храмове, скалини църкви, манастири и стенописи от България*, София 2009, 28; М. Захариева, Студена. Църква "Св. Георги", Б. Пенкова (eds.), *Корпус на стенописите от XVI век в България*, София 2022, 233-239; М. Захариева, Нови сведения за църквата

Christ to the right. Peter is shown with a halo, has white hair and a beard, and is wearing a white omophorion with red crosses over his shoulders, a pink vestment, a yellow epitachelion over the vestment and a white sticharion underneath. The scroll contains the dialogue between Peter and Christ. The text is damaged but considering other similar representations of the Vision, it can be assumed it contains Peter's question: "Who, O Saviour, tore your clothes?" and Christ's answer: "Arius, the madman". Christ is depicted on a smaller scale than Peter, standing in a three-quarters pose. He has a halo and is most likely to be wearing a torn garment, although the extensive damage caused to the fresco allows one only to assume. A four-sided niche in the wall serves as a Holy Table, upon which Christ is standing. Christ is depicted under the ciborium of the Holy Table. Immediately to the left of the niche is the head of a large fish with its mouth open. The head of Arius protrudes from the mouth of the beast (fig. 3).

### *The iconographic development of the Vision of St Peter*

The visual representation of the Vision is based on St Peter's life. At that time, Peter served as the Patriarch of Alexandria during the onset of the debate about the essence of the Holy Trinity. Arius' persistence in promoting his deviant ideas compelled Peter to excommunicate him from the Church<sup>5</sup>, and despite Arius' attempts to be reinstated, Peter remained resolute in keeping him outside. Peter appeared unyielding toward Arius, doubting the sincerity of his repentance. Peter's opinion was confirmed by the Vision he had.

When Peter was imprisoned during the reign of Diocletian (AD284-305), members of the Church visited him and asked him to receive Arius back into the Church. Peter refused, however, and narrated to them his Vision, in which a young Christ had appeared to him wearing torn clothes, holding them against His chest to cover His nakedness. In astonishment, Peter asked the Lord who had torn his garments, to which Christ replied that it was Arius. In the Vision, the Lord instructed Peter not to receive Arius into communion, as he had committed wrongdoing against God and His flock.

«...Ἐφη γὰρ τὸν Κύριον ὄναρ ἰδεῖν ἐν σχήματι παιδίου, νεογενοῦς ὑπὲρ τὸν ἥλιον περικείμενον χιτῶνα διερρηγμένον ἀπὸ κεφαλῆς ἄχρι ποδῶν· παρ' οὗ μαθεῖν, ὅτι Ἄρειος διαρρήξας αὐτόν, ἐν συμβόλῳ δηλοῦντος τὴν τοῦ Υἱοῦ πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα διαίρεσιν εἶναι τὰ τῆς ἀσεβείας τοῦ Ἀρείου καὶ βλασφημίας δόγματα...»<sup>6</sup>.

„Св. Георги“ в с. Студена, Пернишко, in E. Мутофов, М. Колева, *Изкуство и общество*, т. 1, София 2023, 151-170.

<sup>5</sup> Σωζόμενος Ἐρμεῖας Σαλαμίνιος, *Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία*, 15, 10-11 (J-P. Migne [ed.], PG67, 904C).

<sup>6</sup> H. Delehaye (ed.), *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae e codice Sirmondiano nunc Berolinensi*. Propylaeum ad Acta Sanctorum Novembris, Brussels 1902, 257-258 (digital version: <https://archive.org/details/DelehayeSynaxariumConstantinopolitanum/page/n89/mode/2up> last visit: 12/12/2023).

Following Peter's death, his successor, Patriarch Achillas of Alexandria (AD312-313) took a more dialectical approach and, accepting Arius' apology, received him back into the Church<sup>7</sup>. However, in 381 AD, Arius' teachings were ultimately condemned as heresy at the First Council of Constantinople<sup>8</sup>.

The earliest depictions of the Vision of Peter of Alexandria are found in illuminated manuscripts dating back to the eleventh century AD. The miniature of the earliest manuscript (AD976-1025), the *menologion* of Emperor Basil II (*Cod. Vat. gr.* 1613, f. 204)<sup>9</sup>, depicts the beheading of St Peter and a young Christ appearing to him at the same time. He is blessing Peter with His right hand and encouraging him at the moment of his martyrdom. Only the presence of a young Christ in the scene wearing a torn garment hints at the martyr's Vision.

The earliest complete scene of the Vision of Peter of Alexandria, in accordance with the descriptions of the original text, is documented in a Paris manuscript (*Par. Gr.* 580, 2v)<sup>10</sup> dating back to the middle of the eleventh century AD. The full-length Peter turns to the right, facing a young Christ in front of him, while Arius is on his knees between them. Christ is depicted in the air, radiating rays of light.

A reference to the Vision is also found in a liturgical scroll from the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem (no. 109) dating to the late eleventh century or in the early twelfth century AD<sup>11</sup>. In this case, the text is flanked by miniatures. On the right side the martyrdom of Peter is depicted<sup>12</sup> while on the left there is an image of the Vision. Peter is shown standing with his head raised, looking at Christ, who is in the air at the height of the cover of the altar's ciborium. Christ is depicted at a young age, and one of His shoulders is not covered by His garment. The figure below Christ's feet and opposite Peter is most certainly Arius.

The earliest known representation of the Vision in monumental art is found on the northeast pillar of the Basilica of St Nicholas in Melnik in Bulgaria, dat-

<sup>7</sup> Σωζόμενος, *op. cit.*, 15, 15-17.

<sup>8</sup> Β. Ι. Φειδάς, *Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία. Απ' αρχής μέχρι την Εικονομαχία*, τ. Α', Αθήναι 2002, 456-459.

<sup>9</sup> *Cod. Vat. gr.* 1613 (digital version [https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Vat.gr.1613](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1613) [last visited 12/12/2023]).

<sup>10</sup> It is highly probable that this marks Arius' initial appearance in the scene of Peter's Vision, see H. Omont, *Miniatures des plus anciens manuscrits recs de la Bibliothèque Nationale du VI<sup>e</sup> au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1929, 48-50, CII (digital version <http://digital.lib.auth.gr/record/127982/files/002.pdf> [last visited 12/12/2023]); И. Акрабова Жандова, "Видението на св. Петър Александрийски" в България, *ИБАИ* 15 (1946), 33.

<sup>11</sup> A. Grabar, Un rouleau liturgique constantinopolitain et ses peintures, *DOP* 8 (1954), 176, fig. 18; J. Bogdanović, The Rhetoric and Performativity of Light in the Sacred Space: A Case Study of The Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria in A. Lidov (ed.), *Hierotopy of Light and Fire*, Moscow 2013, 284.

<sup>12</sup> Peter was martyred in AD310/1, the final year preceding the Galerian decree for the cessation of persecution (Serdica, 30 April AD311): «Ταύτη δ' οὖν ἐνάτω ἔτει τοῦ διωγμοῦ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀποτιμηθεὶς, τῷ τοῦ μαρτυρίου κατεκοσμήθη στεφάνῳ.», see Ευσέβιος του Παμφίλου, Επισκόπου της εν Παλαιστίνη Καισαρείας, *Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία*, Λόγος Ζ', 22, 16-18 (J-P. Migne [ed.], PG20, 736B).



Fig. 2b. Vision of Peter of Alexandria. Vukovo, church of Saint Nicholas, north wall. Arius (personal archive)

Сл. 2б. Визија св. Петра Александријског, црква Св. Николе, северни зид. Арије (лична архива)

ing back to the early thirteenth century<sup>13</sup>. From this period onward, this scene becomes widespread in the Balkan region, including Cyprus<sup>14</sup>. It is frequently included in the iconographic programmes of churches of the Palaiologan period and in the post-Byzantine period until the late nineteenth century AD. In fact, this specific iconographic theme secured a fixed place in the church, typically appearing in the altar near the prothesis on the north wall<sup>15</sup>.

The distinct elements of Peter of Alexandria's Vision evolved gradually. The arrangement of the main figures — Peter of Alexandria, Christ, and Arius — followed the layout of the eleventh-century manuscripts, with a few exceptions. Patriarch Peter is typically portrayed on the left, and a young Christ on the right<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> S. Cvetkovski, The Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria, from the Church of St. Archangels in Prilep. *Iconographical Research*, Зограф 36 (2012), 84; L. Mavrodinova, *Crkvata Sveti Nikola pri Melnik*, Sofia 1975, 24-25.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout the present research, ca. 120 instances of monumental depictions of the Vision of Peter of Alexandria have been identified in the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula (Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, North Macedonia, Romania, Albania, Cyprus).

<sup>15</sup> Διονυσίου του εκ Φουρνά, *Ερμηνεία της Ζωγραφικής Τέχνης*, (εκδ. Α. Παπαδόπουλος-Κεραμεύς), Πετρούπολις 1909, 219; Cvetkovski, *op. cit.*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> However, there are a few exceptions, such as in the Perivleptos of Ohrid



In the first monumental depiction of the scene in the church of St Nicholas in Melnik, an inconsistency is observed compared to the manuscripts. Christ is rendered in the air at the same scale as Peter, while in the manuscripts, the figure of Christ is in front and slightly higher than Peter, on a notably smaller scale. In the thirteenth century AD, the iconographic pattern of the church in Melnik prevailed, and the representation of Christ, in the Vision at the monastery of Olympiotissa in Ellassona, Thessaly (late thirteenth century AD), was rendered on the same scale as Peter. The scale of Christ began to gradually diminish by the end of the same century, as evident in the Church of the Virgin Perivleptos in Ohrid (AD1294/5). In the fourteenth century AD, this slight difference in the scale of the two protagonists of the scene prevailed in the northern Balkans, as seen in the katholikon in Gračanica Monastery (AD1319-1321), in the church of the Virgin Hodegetria in Peć (ca. AD1335), in the rock church in Ivanovo (fourteenth century AD), and in the church of the dormition of the Theotokos in Mateič (AD1348-1352)<sup>17</sup>. Concurrently, in the middle of the fourteenth century AD, in the southern part of the peninsula, the depiction of the Vision with Christ portrayed at a significantly smaller scale than Peter emerged. This change is likely due to an effort to adhere to the original description of the Vision, which speaks of the appearance of Christ as a 12 year-old child, and the initial model of the manuscripts.

Another important characteristic in the evolution of the iconographic type of the Vision is the supplementary elements in the depiction of Christ. The earlier monumental representation in the basilica in Melnik followed the pattern of the liturgical scroll from the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem (no. 109), and Christ was depicted in the air with a ciborium above His head. In subsequent depictions of the Vision, variations are observed in the portrayal of Christ. He is either depicted in the air, as in Peć, or standing on the Holy Table, as in the Church of the Holy Archangels in Prilep (ca. AD1270)<sup>18</sup> and in Ohrid, Ellasona, Gračanica, Studena, Vukovo, etc. He may be standing under a ciborium, as in churches in Melnik, Gračanica and Studena, or not have anything above His head, as in Perivleptos, Olympiotissa, Peć, Mateič, and in the Church of the Dormition of the Theotokos in Zrze (ca. AD1350)<sup>19</sup>.

In the story of the Vision nothing is mentioned about the Holy Table. The first representation of Christ standing firmly on the Holy Table is found in the Church of the Holy Archangels in Prilep, and from the middle of the fourteenth century AD onwards, the depiction of Christ standing on the Holy Table, as seen in Perivleptos, Olympiotissa, Mateič and Zrze, seems to become established. The fixed position of the scene in the sanctuary — almost from the beginning —

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(AD1294/5), Church of the Virgin in Mateiče (AD1348), and the katholikon of Gračanica Monastery (AD1319-1321), where the arrangement is reversed, see S. Koukariis, The depiction of the Vision of Saint Peter of Alexandria in the sanctuary of Byzantine churches, *Зораф* 35 (2011), 63-71, fig. 1, 4, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66, fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. For the church in Ivanovo, see Акрабова Жандова, *op.cit.*, 33, fig. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Cvetkovski, *op.cit.*, 83-88.

<sup>19</sup> Z. Ivković, *Živopis iz XIV veka u manastiru Zrze*, *Zograf* 11 (1980), 68-82; Bogdanović, *op. cit.*, 285-286.

raises questions about the theological, doctrinal, and liturgical symbolism it expresses<sup>20</sup>. The representation of Christ standing on the Holy Table in monumental art is connected with the allusion to the Eucharist and Melismow<sup>21</sup>. Different scholars connect the depiction of Christ standing on the Holy Table, as well as the placing of the scene of St Peter's Vision in the sanctuary near the prothesis, to the debates, discussions and treaties about the Divine Liturgy which took place from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries AD due to various reasons<sup>22</sup>.

During the same period, a mandorla surrounding Christ appears, which is a clear reference to the Paris manuscript (*Par. gr. 580*) where Christ descends from heaven radiating rays of light. Its appearance in the middle of the fourteenth century probably symbolizes the uncreated light of Christ, the theological notion closely connected with hesychasm taught by St Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century AD<sup>23</sup>. This iconographic type ultimately prevailed<sup>24</sup>, although there are some cases where earlier models were chosen<sup>25</sup>.

In the iconography of the Vision, Christ is primarily depicted wearing a white, transparent or beige garment, and rarely appears naked<sup>26</sup>. In the surviving monumental representations, there is a variety of ways the "torn" garment is rendered, and in some early depictions the tunic is shown intact<sup>27</sup>. In most

<sup>20</sup> Two of the earliest depictions of the Vision are located outside a sanctuary. In the church of St Achilles in Arilje (AD1226), the scene is located in the narthex, and in the Archangels' church in Prilep (AD1270), the scene is on the western part of the northern wall, see Cvetkovski, *op.cit.*, 83.

<sup>21</sup> Cvetkovski, *op. cit.*, 85. In a few cases, the scene of the Vision is depicted on the southern wall of the sanctuary, next to the diaconicon, as seen in Panagia in Velestovo in Ohrid (AD1444), see G. Subotić, *Ohridska slikarska škola XV veka*, Beograd 1980, 66, fig. 42.

<sup>22</sup> Koukariis, *op. cit.*, 66-68.

<sup>23</sup> Bogdanović, *op. cit.*, 293.

<sup>24</sup> The mandorla emerges in numerous churches after the mid-fourteenth century AD, including most of the churches in Kastoria (St Nicholas of Tzotza [A. Saraferas, A. Gimourtzina, Ch. Sarigiannidou, *The church of Hagios Nikolaos tou Tzotza in Kastoria*, Kastoria 2015], St Athanasios of Mouzakē [N. Παζαράς, *Οι τοιχογραφίες του ναού του Αγίου Αθανασίου του Μουζάκη και η ένταξη τους στην μνημειακή ζωγραφική της Καστοριάς και της ευρύτερης περιοχής*, αδημοσίευτη διδακτορική διατριβή, Θεσσαλονίκη 2013], St Nicholas Church of Nun Eupraxia [Koukariis, *op. cit.*, fig. 7]), as well as in the Church of the Virgin at Zaum in Ohrid [C. Grozdanov, *Ohridsko zidno slikarstvo XIV veka*, Beograd 1980, 112-113] and Hagios Dimitrios in Boboševo (Хр. Станева, Рестаурация на църквата «Св. Димитир» в Бобошево, *III* 3 [2005], 37-46).

<sup>25</sup> In some cases, Christ is depicted without anything above His head, as in the church of St Athanasios of Mouzakē (AD1383), in Manasija (AD1408-1417) (Bogdanović, *op. cit.*, 286) and in St. Demetrius Bobosevo (AD1488) (Kuneva, *op. cit.*, 381, fig. 3; Hr. Staneva, R. Rousseva, *The Church of St Demetrius in Boboshevo*. Sofia 2009) or under a ciborium, as in St Anargyros in Servia (AD1510) (Δ. Ευγενίδου, *Τα βυζαντινά μνημεία των Σερβίων*, Πρακτικά Α΄ Πανσερβιώτικου Συνεδρίου για την ανάπτυξη της περιοχής (6-8/10/95), Σέρβια 1997, 82 κ.ε.).

<sup>26</sup> Christ is depicted naked in several churches, including Perivleptos in Ohrid (Cvetkovski, *op. cit.*, scattered), and in the two churches of the group under study in Vukovo and Studena.

<sup>27</sup> Christ is depicted with torn garments in several churches, including the churches

Fig. 3. Vision of Peter of Alexandria. Studena, church of Saint George, north wall, 16<sup>th</sup> c. AD (personal archive).

Сл. 3. Визија св. Петра Александријског, Студена, црква Св. Ђорђа, северни зид, 16. век (лична архива)



representations, following the narrative of the Vision, Christ is portrayed with a torn garment, holding it with His hand in front of His stomach<sup>28</sup>. Alternatively, He is depicted with a tunic leaving the right shoulder and arm uncovered, and in this variation, Christ does not hold the garment with His hand<sup>29</sup>.

In earlier representations of the Vision, it seems that St Peter does not hold anything in his hands; he is either pointing at Christ or his slightly lifted hands signify prayer or a gesture of speech. However, in the early fourteenth century the scene seems to have been enriched by having Peter of Alexandria

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in Gračanica, Peć, Mateič and in St Demetrios in Boboševo.

<sup>28</sup> Such as in the churches of Zrize, Zaum, Ευπραξία, Manasija, and the two churches in Kastoria: St Nicholas Kyritzēs (A. Στρατή, Ο ναός του Αγίου Νικολάου του Κυρίτζη στην Καστοριά. Σχόλια και παρατηρήσεις στην παλαιότερη ζωγραφική του [τοιχογραφίες και εικόνες], in *International Scientific Conference Cyril and Methodius: Byzantium and the World of the Slavs*, Θεσσαλονίκη 2015, 241, 245, fig. 16α) and St Spyridōn (Kuneva, *op. cit.*, 385, fig. 9)

<sup>29</sup> Such as in the churches in Kastoria: of St Nicholas of Tzotza, St Athanasios of Mouzakē, and St George tou Vounou (A. Τριφονοβα, *Οι τοιχογραφίες του Αγίου Γεωργίου του Βουνού στην Καστοριά*, αδημοσίευτη διδακτορική διατριβή, Θεσσαλονίκη 2010, 83-88, fig. 20)

holding a scroll where the question to Christ is written: “Who, O Saviour, tore your clothes?”<sup>30</sup>. In later representations, Peter’s scroll often contains a liturgical text<sup>31</sup>.

The figure of Arius was integral to the scene of the Vision from the beginning. Arius is depicted kneeling between Peter and Christ, a position consistent with both known manuscripts describing the Vision (*Paris. Gr.* 580 and the scroll from Jerusalem). In the early monumental depiction of the Vision in Melnik, Arius is placed exactly where he appeared in the manuscripts, at the lower level of the scene, between Peter and Christ. However, the face of Arius is clearly visible in the basilica in Melnik, while in the manuscripts only the back of the figure is shown. In later depictions, the face of Arius is entirely covered, such as in the church of Virgin Perivleptos in Ohrid, or at least his eyes are covered by his hands, such as in the church in Gračanica. Furthermore, the depiction of Arius inside the mouth of a beast is a significant addition to the iconography of the Vision scene. The iconographic theme of Arius with the beast is known from a Latin manuscript of the early eleventh century AD, in which the mouth of the beast was interpreted as the fanged jaws of Hell<sup>32</sup>. The representation of the beast devouring Arius in the scene of the Vision emerged in the middle of the fourteenth century AD. One of the earliest known inclusions of this element into the scene can be encountered in the Zrze Monastery in North Macedonia (ca. AD1350)<sup>33</sup>. Different researchers argued that the appearance of the beast is a direct reference to the Last Judgment, emphasizing the plot’s didactic aspect<sup>34</sup>.

*The in-context dissemination of the iconographic theme of Peter’s Vision in the environment*

According to the cases known so far, the iconography of Peter’s Vision emerged at the beginning of the thirteenth century AD, with the earliest monumental depiction found in the church of St Nicholas in Melnik. The association with the conquest of Constantinople by the crusaders in AD1204 is inevitable, while the geographical proximity of the church, where the Vision was depicted first, to the Byzantine capital contributes to this assumption. However, a question arises here regarding how immediate the church’s reaction to this event

<sup>30</sup> This inscription is visible in the church of St Demetrios in Pechka (AD1321), in Serbia (Bogdanović, *op. cit.*, fig. 10), in the church of St Athanasios of Mouzakē and in the church in Studena (sixteenth century AD).

<sup>31</sup> One of the earliest known examples of the scroll with a liturgical text is found in the church of St Nicholas of the nun Eupraxia in Kastoria (AD1486), see Kuneva, *op. cit.*, fig. 3.

<sup>32</sup> E. H. Kantorowicz, The Quinity of Winchester, *The Art Bulletin* 29.2 (1947), 73, fig. 1.

<sup>33</sup> For all depictions of Arius being devoured by a dragon, see Σιώπης, *op. cit.*, 101-106.

<sup>34</sup> Kuneva, *op. cit.*, 378.

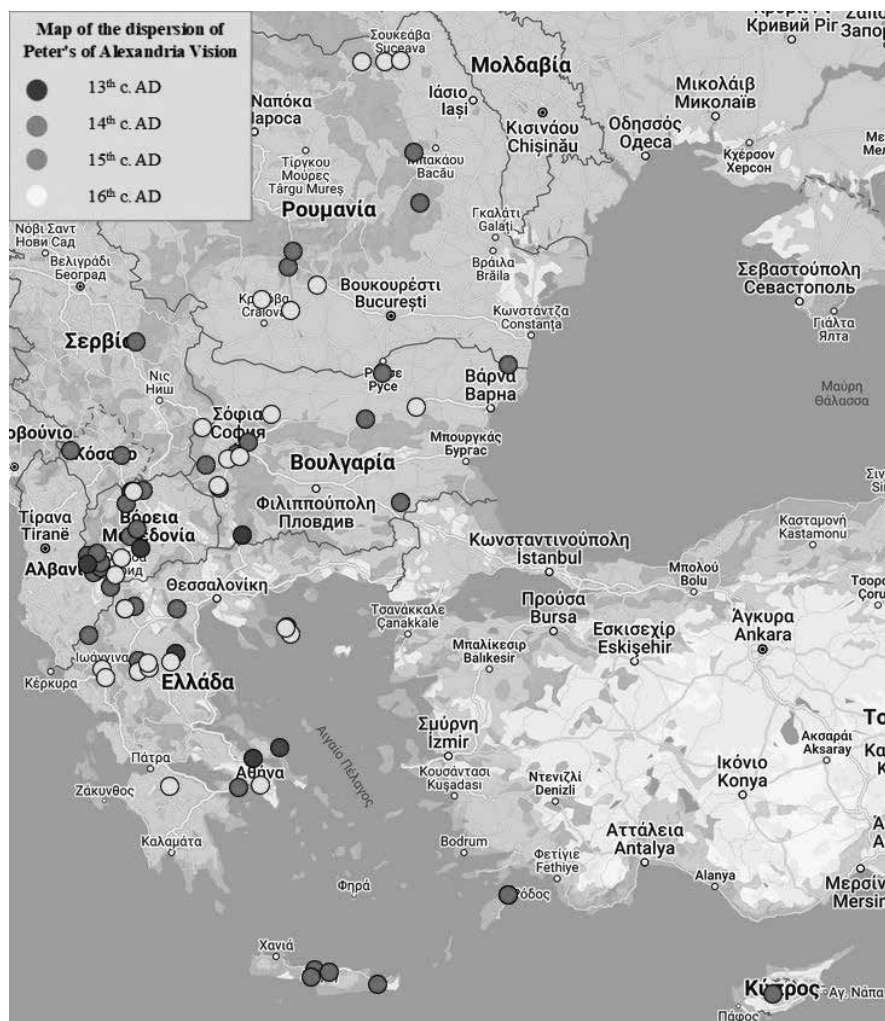


Fig. 4. Map of the dispersion of Peter's of Alexandria Vision (modified by googlemaps).  
 Сл. 4. Мапа распрострањености представе Св. Петра Александријског (измењено на Гугл мапама)

could have been. Even if the depiction of the Vision is not yet very frequent in the early thirteenth century AD, it seems to have been subsequently adopted by the major artistic centres of the time and to have become widespread (fig. 4).

In the fourteenth century AD, the dissemination of the subject increased, with greater concentrations around and between the cities of Skopje, Ohrid, and Kastoria, according to the examples known so far. The spread of the scene of the Vision in the iconographic program of several fourteenth-century churches could be associated, on the one hand, with the hesychastic disputes rocking the

Church<sup>35</sup>, and on the other hand with ecclesiastical events and the struggle between the unionists and anti-unionists<sup>36</sup>. This struggle peaked at the end of the thirteenth century AD but did not subside<sup>37</sup>. In this historical context, around the middle of the fourteenth century AD, a very particular iconographic feature was added to the scene of Peter of Alexandria's Vision: a monster swallowing Arius<sup>38</sup>. The Church took a clear position on political events and decided to unequivocally state its position against the central administration, the Western Church, and all kinds of heresy. No longer satisfied with depicting Arius in a kneeling position, which symbolized the submission of heresies, it now aimed to emphasize the prevalence of Orthodox doctrine and the eradication of all false doctrines. Once again, iconography served to inform the believers but also acted as a tool for Church propaganda.

The Unionist Council of Ferrara-Florence (AD1438-1439) reignited the conflict between Unionist and anti-Unionists<sup>39</sup>, but in the fifteenth century AD, the empire and subsequently the Church faced different and more pressing problems than the struggle against the papacy. In AD1453, Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, which led to the abolition of the Byzantine Empire. The iconographic theme of the Vision was now well-established and was represented in churches from central Romania to Crete and from eastern Albania to eastern Bulgaria, with a greater concentration in the areas influenced by the artistic centres of Ohrid and Kastoria.

Based on data concerning the dispersion in the sixteenth century AD, it seems that the theme of the Vision of Peter of Alexandria continued to be particularly popular in the continental part of the southern Balkan peninsula, as examples were found from northern Romania to the Peloponnese and from Kastoria to eastern Bulgaria. The two areas of concentration are located in the region around the monastic unit of Meteora – in the area between Ioannina, Meteora, and Elassona – and in the region around Sofia and Pernik, the area where the churches of the group under study with the frescos of the Vision are located. This is an impressive finding, considering the potential significant influence from the monastic centre of Meteora. These are single-nave churches with lateral choirs which appeared in a limited geographical range, sharing similar – if not identical – constructional and morphological features. Furthermore, the majority of these churches are built in isolated places outside settlements.

<sup>35</sup> I. Β. Φειδάς, *Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία. Από την Εικονομαχία μέχρι την Μεταρρύθμιση*, τ. Β', Αθήνα 2002, 505-537. For the influence of hesychastic perceptions in general, see T. Παπαμαστοράκης, *Ο διάκοσμος του τρούλου των ναών της Παλαιολόγειας περιόδου στη Βαλκανική χερσόνησο και την Κύπρο*, Αθήνα 2001, 284-297.

<sup>36</sup> Φειδάς, *op. cit.*, Β', 589-602.

<sup>37</sup> Warm thanks are due to our colleague, associate professor Mr. Yiannis Varalis of the Department of History, Archaeology, and Social Anthropology at the University of Thessaly, for the fruitful discussion on the subject and for the insights he shared with us. We eagerly anticipate receiving them in written form.

<sup>38</sup> The correlation of the monster's depiction with the demonology mentioned by Akrabova Zandova (Ακραβοβα *op. cit.*, 30) and embraced by Kuneva (Kuneva, *op. cit.*, 378) should be re-examined based on more recent data.

<sup>39</sup> Φειδάς, *op. cit.*, Β', 603-626.

Could there also be a connection between the two identified centres of the Vision at the construction level? Is it possible that these small sixteenth-century structures were an attempt to replicate the larger churches with choirs found in the monastic institutions of Meteora or the monastic environment of Meteora?

An initial consideration might be that due to the tense ecclesiastical situation in the sixteenth century AD in this region and the ongoing changes in church administration<sup>40</sup>, there was a greater need for believers to be connected to the church spiritual centre. Perhaps the incorporation of choirs in these small churches reflect the attempt to establish a connection between the region and the grand monastic centre of Meteora. Unable to construct large ecclesiastical buildings, they might have opted to add choirs to these small and isolated churches. These churches could have served as sacred places for gathering and spiritual isolation, creating a miniature version of a secular monastic centre in this particular region.

Of particular interest is the fact that from the sixteenth century AD onwards, the choice of the variant with the monster swallowing Arius increases significantly. This is probably due to the fact that Christians now live in an environment where their religion is not in harmony with the religion of the conqueror, which causes problems at different levels, from the daily exercise of their religious duties to their spiritual inner peace. Hence, the symbolism of the monster could be different from what it was two centuries before. At this time, Peter's Vision could have been used as a reminder to Christians living among the Muslims that their faith had once survived through great turmoil, namely the Arian controversy. The image might have served as an encouragement to the believers to hold onto the true faith until the end.

### *Conclusions*

The examination of the two scenes of the Vision of Peter of Alexandria from the churches in Vukovo and Studena, which belong to a specific group with a common architectural type, sheds light on the evolution of this depiction over time. The Vision emerged in the thirteenth century AD but gained gradual popularity from the fourteenth century AD. In the middle of the fourteenth century, characteristic elements of the scene began to evolve, incorporating additions that did not exist in the original narrative. A noteworthy development is the evolving figure of Christ, which changes in scale over the centuries. Christ is often positioned on a Holy Table, symbolizing the Eucharist, and surrounded by a mandorla, alluding to the uncreated light embraced in the fourteenth century AD by the theological movement of hesychasm. A significant addition was the appearance of a monster, taking various forms such as a fish, snake, or wolf, swallowing Arius. This addition suggests that the Church took a clear position on political events and decided to unequivocally state its position against the central administration, the Western Church, and all kinds of heresy. The fact

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<sup>40</sup> Φειδάς, *op. cit.*, A', 224, 235-236.

that additional elements not mentioned in the original narration of the Vision of Peter of Alexandria infiltrated the representation of the scene indicates that the representation acquired not only an anti-heretical but a liturgical character<sup>41</sup>.

Also important are the findings from the study of the dispersion of the Vision scene from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries AD. In the fourteenth century AD, the points of concentration of the scene are around the area of Skopje, Ohrid, and Kastoria. During the fifteenth century AD, the concentrations appear again in the area of Ohrid and Kastoria. Of particular interest is the fact that in the sixteenth century AD, the concentrations of the Vision are found in the wider area of Meteora and in the area around Pernik and Sofia in Bulgaria, precisely where the group of small churches with choirs in which the two frescoes presented in this article were found. Perhaps this finding, the connection between the area in Bulgaria and the area of Meteora, may ultimately answer the question of why, this concentration of single-nave churches with lateral choirs is found in this particular area of south-west Bulgaria.

On initial observation, it seems that there is a connection between the two areas, and it is likely that this particular area in south-western Bulgaria was influenced by the monastic community of Meteora. In the troubled sixteenth century AD, in the Pernik region, unable to construct large ecclesiastical buildings, they opted for the construction of small churches by attaching choirs on their long sides, similar to the *katholika* of the monasteries in Meteora. At the same time, they seem to have adopted the Vision within the sanctuary. However, further study of the iconographic and artistic connection between the two areas is needed to prove or disprove such a hypothesis.

#### *Abbreviations*

АрхивНИПК	Архивна Народния институт за паметниците на културата
ГНМ	Годишник на Народния Музей
ДОР	DumbartonOaksPapers
РП	Разкопки и Проучвания
ИБАИ	Известия на Българския археологически институт
ИИИИ	Известия на Института за Изобразителни Изкуства
ГСУ ЦСВП	Годишник на Софийския университет. Център за славяно-византийски проучвания “Проф. Иван Дуйчев”
ПИ	Проблеми на изкуството
РП	Разкопки и проучвания

<sup>41</sup> Koukiaris, *op.cit.*, 68.



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ФРЕСКЕ У МАЛОЈ ПОСТВИЗАНТИЈСКОЈ ЦРКВИ У ЈУГОЗАПАДНОЈ  
БУГАРСКОЈ. СТУДИЈА СЛУЧАЈА ВИЗИЈЕ СВЕТОГ ПЕТРА АЛЕКСАНДРИЈСКОГ

Иконографска тема Визија св. Петра Александријског појавила се у монументалном сликарству у раном 13. веку. Постепено је ова тема пронашла своје место у олтарском простору. Представљање поменуте теме везује се за илуминиране рукописе. Тема се временом развијала тако да је добила сврху у борби против јереси.

У овом тексту је реч о две представе Визије св. Петра Александријског, у Пернику на југозападу Бугарске. Чињеница да су сцене сачуване у областима Метеора (Грчка) и око Перника (Бугарска) упућују на питање о извесним архитектонским и иконографским утицајима центра на Метеорима.

