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*Elizabeta Dimitrova*

IN THROUGH THE INNER DOOR  
(THE MOSAIC IN THE NARTHEX OF THE LARGE BASILICA  
IN HERACLEA LYNCESTIS)

The vast museum of artistic accomplishments from the very beginnings of Christianity, which safeguards the ever-living creative breath of the irreversible centuries, has preserved precious works of art all over the Mediterranean region. Inspired by the mysterious depths of the religious dogma and animated by the creative passion of their authors, they bear witness to the explosive energy of the cultural growth at the sunrise of the new era, representing the creative heights of artistic imagination from the dawn of Christian times. Located in the heart of the area that produced the pulsating tissue of Early Christian artistic bloodstream, Macedonian territory has contributed to the wealth of this great treasury by its numerous archaeological sites abounding in cultural stratification. The diversity of architectural plans, the innovative forms of decorative sculpture, the genuineness of terra-cotta revetment arrangements and the splendid floor mosaics decorating the sacral and profane buildings of the Late Antique period, are the sparkles of the flame that burned for centuries in honour of the festive ritual of artistic creation.

Within the framework of the mosaic pavements produced in the Early Christian period in the Macedonian territory, an artistic discipline which marks the creativity of this region, the ones discovered at the site of Heraclea Lyncestis are among the most representative. Decorating the floors of the two basilicas and the Episcopal palace, they display a wide range of complex iconographic concepts that sublime the symbolic aspects of the religious dogma, visualized in expressive and dramatic compositional schemes. However, among all of the Heraclea mosaics, the decorative ensemble in the narthex of the Large Basilica stands out in its opulence and attractiveness (Figure 1). Famous for the profusion of motifs and the complex arrangement of symbolic messages, this mosaic, originating in the late 5<sup>th</sup> – early 6<sup>th</sup> century, is enumerated in the diapason of the most representative works of art created in the Balkan region in the earliest centuries of Christianity. By the sophisticated orchestration of its iconographic structure, as well as the refined absorption of symbolic nuances, it reveals the power and the passion of metaphoric expression in the field of artistic creation.

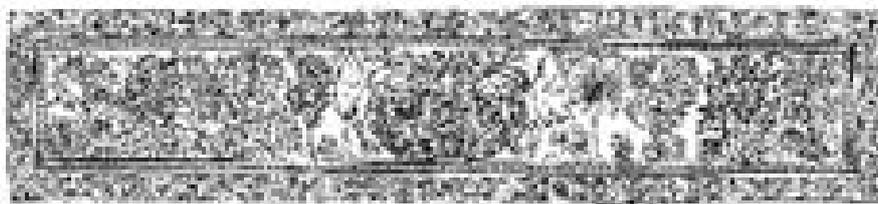


Figure 1. Heraclea Lyncestis, Large Basilica, Narthex (Drawing by Prof. I. Mikulčić)

Sl. 1. Хераклеја Линкестис, Велика базилика, нартекс

The compositional scheme of the arrangement is very elongated to fit in the dimensions of the architectural space of the narthex. The elements of the executed ensemble are organized within a wide rectangular frame, followed by a narrow border, which encompasses the inner structure of the scene. The core of the composition, located in the central part of the ensemble, is conceived as a firm skeleton, the symmetrical arrangement of which stresses the sublimation point that unites the components in the side parts of the mosaic. Its elliptic shape and almost geometrical order of the depicted elements embody a picture of solemn and festal atmosphere, contrary to the playful and vivid rhythm of the episodes in the side portions of the scene. The emblematic character of the middle section, configured with underlined precision in the disposition of the constituents, imposes itself not only as an axis of the compositional arrangement, but, as we shall see, of the thoroughly elaborated symbolical concept of the mosaic.

In the context of its iconography, the central part of the ensemble represents a symmetrical composition comprised of a deer and a doe depicted on either side of the central motif - two grapevines stemming from a chalice, branching out into rich structure of leaves and grapes. In the upper part of the scene, above the chalice, there is a flying dove depicted on either side of the centrally positioned grape clusters, while the symmetrical scene in the upper part is flanked by the representation of two lavish peacocks. This scene is depicted in the central part of the decorative arrangement of a flora and fauna that embellishes the whole floor of the chamber. In the frames of the decorative arrangement depicted alongside the central scene, there are fruit-bearing trees of various botanical types with branches laden with fruits. High over and above the treetops of this blooming garden there are flying birds, mostly doves that carry red ribbons in their claws. Below, at the foot of the trees, decorative plants – ivy, lilies and roses bloom, supplementing the animated splendour of the represented landscape.

Within the representation of a blooming garden, the world of fauna in the side parts of the composition is represented by a wild goat on the left, depicted in a swift yet graceful movement; and to the right of it, a flash of a battle, where a raging lion attacks and charges with open jaws the bull that is prepared to meet the first clashing moment of this battle on his horns. On the right of the composition, the animal kingdom is represented by a restless dog tied to a tree, keeping a vigilant eye on the garden, and a scene of a merciless hunt, depicted

in the final act of a cheetah devouring an antelope. The whole arrangement is edged with a narrow border of decorative motif in a shape of water waves and a wider band with octagonal fields showing water creatures – fish, dolphins, octopi and water birds. According to the research conducted so far on this mosaic, and from the standpoint of the interpretation of similar decorative compositions on Early Christian mosaic pavements, the complex structure of the Heraclea arrangement was seen as a symbolic representation of the Christian cosmos portrayed through the depiction of its four elements - the Kingdom of Heaven (the central symmetrical scene), Paradise (the line of fruit-bearing plants), Earth (in the form of the animals) and Water (the fish and birds as inhabitants of the water world).<sup>1</sup>

Not doubting the accuracy of the global idea incarnated in this composition as an example of the cosmological significance of Early Christian theological thought given substance in other iconographically similar mosaic decorations as well, in the opulent Heraclea mosaic we nonetheless sense another level of symbolic meaning, which speaks of the complexity and multi-layered nature of notional significance in the illustration of the central idea of the Christian universe. In some of my earlier papers, I have already noticed that within the symbolic structure of Heraclea mosaic, the central motif of the Psalm 42 - a chalice with grapevine flanked by a deer and a doe (Figure 2) represents the catechumens at the well of the water of life.<sup>2</sup> It fulfils their bodies with the breeze of baptismal immersion and their souls with the Eucharistic dream of the salvational mission of Christ, from which they will awake in the luxurious Garden of Eden. Symbolizing the ritual of the mystical union of the faithful with God, accomplished through acceptance of the regenerative energy of the baptismal water and Eucharistic offerings, the depiction of the opening verse of the Old Testament Psalm reveals the idea of the essential significance of the Holy sacraments for the blissful revival of the believers.

According to the original verses within the illustration of the text of the Psalm 42, the motif of the cantharos as a centre of the decoration is a symbol of Christ - the spring of faith; it is the God's well where the lessons of the Christian thought spring out, a symbolic representation of the Well of Life that the souls of

<sup>1</sup> Г. Цветковиќ-Томашевиќ, *Мозаикої на ѿодої во нарїексої на големаїа базилика. Оїис. Сїил. Иконографїја. Сїмболизам. Техника. Маїеријали. Конзервацїја*, Хераклеја III, Битола 1967, 48-63; *ibid*, *Une mosaïque du Ve siècle de Hérakléa Lynkestis et la question de la formation du style de l'art médiéval. Symbolisme et son reflet sur le style*, Actas del VIII Congress international de arqueologia cristiana, Barcelona 1969 (1972), 567-580; *ibid*, *Mosaiques paléochrétiennes récemment découvertes à Hérakléa Lynkestis. Notices préliminaires, La mosaïque gréco-romaine, Colloques international II*, Vienne 1971 (1975), 389-390; *ibid*, *Рановизантијски ѿодни мозаици*, Београд 1978, 87-93.

<sup>2</sup> Е. Димитрова, *Поѕлег врз мозаикої од нарїексої на Големаїа базилика во Хераклеја*, *Културен живот* 3-4, Скопје 1995, 48-52; *ibid*, *On the Narthex of the Great Basilica in Heraclea*, *Macedonian Review*, Vol. XXV, 2-3, Skopje 1995, 105-112; *ibid*, *Есхатолошкиѿе ѿораки на ранохристијанскаїа умеїносїи во Македонија*, *Религиите и религиските аспекти на материјалната и духовната култура на почвата на Република Македонија*, Скопје 1996, 152.

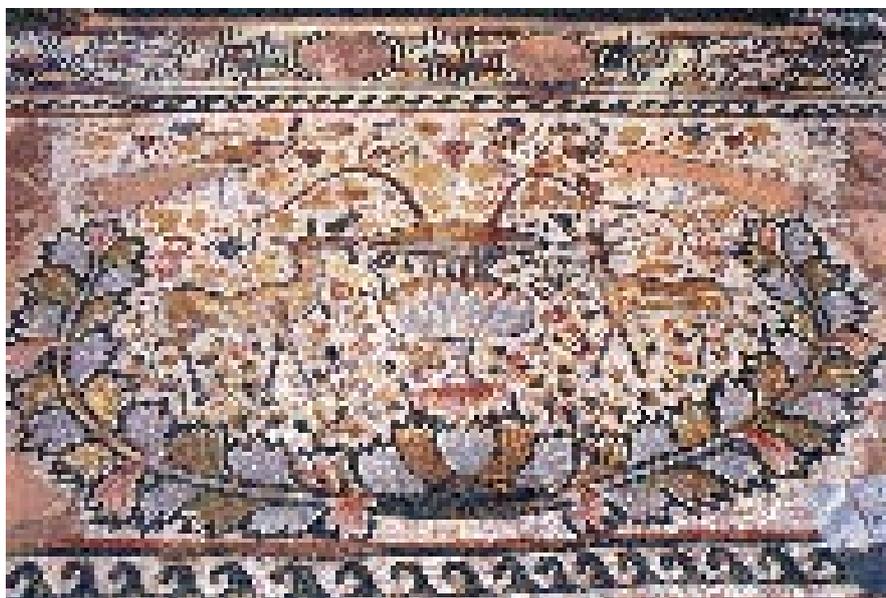


Figure 2. Heraclea Lyncestis, Large Basilica, Narthex (detail) (Photo: B. Simovski)  
Sl. 2. Хераклеја Линкестис, Велика базилика, нартекс (детал)

thirsty believers long for, in order to accept the virtues of the faith.<sup>3</sup> Quenching their religious thirst with the salutary nectar from the source of creed, they rush to dive in the stream of regeneration and into the waves of the new baptismal birth that will take them on eternal journey through the endless horizons of the Garden of Eden. Receiving the water of initiation that washes their sins, as well as their pagan past, the newly baptized believers, through the baptismal immersion, gain the gift of the faith - the chance for a rebirth in everlasting and immortal life. Thus, the central scene of the Heraclea mosaic represents a symbolic image of Baptism and at the same time a depiction of the Holy Eucharist of the believers, who receiving the lessons of Christianity, look for the blissful eternity after their baptism.

This baptismal and Eucharistic symbolism of the scene is enhanced by the element of the grapevines branching out of the chalice, and in view of the text of the Gospel of John (15:1; 15:5) as well as the Eucharistic significance of wine as the symbol of the blood of the Saviour,<sup>4</sup> this scene attains the allegorical characteristics of Christ's sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> It becomes an emblem of the communion of the believers through their mystical participation in the Holy plot folded at the Last Supper of Christ in Jerusalem and sealed with his blood shed on the

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, *Поглед врз мозаикои од нартексои на Големата базилика во Хераклеја*, 50; *ibid*, *On the Narthex of the Great Basilica in Heraclea*, 108-109.

<sup>4</sup> A. Cabrol – H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire de la archeologie chrétienne et la liturgie*, XV/2, Paris 1953, col. 1796-1797.

<sup>5</sup> Е. Димитрова, *Најстариите христијански симболи*, Скопје 1995, 141.

cross of Golgotha for the deliverance of humanity.<sup>6</sup> By drinking the generous blood of the Saviour transformed into Eucharistic wine in honour of the new, reconcilable alliance with God, established on the Good Friday when Christ had suffered in the agony of all human sins, they become members of the community, which celebrates his Passion through the festive ritual of Eucharist. Therefore, through the symbolic meaning of the grapevine, related to the idea of the relationship established between God and men through Christ's voluntary sacrifice and his blood shed on the cross for the salvation of mankind, this scene is at the same time a symbolic depiction of the Christian Church.

In addition to the Eucharistic significance of this central motif, the presence of the doves in the illustration of the 42nd Psalm is associated with the representation of the Christian souls who, overcome by the charisma of the faith, are savouring the grace of Paradise.<sup>7</sup> The depiction of the cantharos with grapevine as a symbolic source of eternal bliss acquired through the baptismal waters and Eucharistic offerings, when complemented by the images of the doves, as in the Heraclea scene, refers to the essential significance of the Christian sacraments for the immortal destiny of the believers in the idyllic landscape of Heaven.<sup>8</sup> It creates an allusion to the eternal delight of those saved by baptism and gratified by communion in the cradle of the newborn life. The image of the Christian community raised over Christ's Eucharistic sacrifice and his resurrectional glory, in the central part of the Heraclea mosaic, is crowned by the representation of the peacocks, which, according to ancient beliefs and applied Christian interpretations, are linked with the notion of the Resurrection<sup>9</sup> and the immortal dimension attained through Baptism and immersion in Christ's faith. They are emblems of immortality, of the desired immortal life and everlasting rejoice in Paradise.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in the context of the Eucharistic symbolism of the scene, the inclusion of the peacocks refers to the idea of the tragic sacrifice of the Saviour transformed into resurrectional gift awaiting the faithful in the after-life. It reflects the conception of eternity acquired through symbolic consumption of Christ's sacrificial blood in the ritual of the Holy Eucharist, and alludes to the ever-living happiness of the believers in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Yet, within the complex symbolism of the composition in the Heraclea narthex, this middle picture of the allegory of the blissful destiny of the Christian souls is accompanied by symbolic scenes with specific funereal significance. In the northern part of the composition, the lion and the bull are represented as a symbol of inevitable and predestined clash (Figure 3). One side of this conflict is depicted through the figure of the bull, which according to the symbolic meaning of this animal appropriated by Christianity from older beliefs creates the allusion to sacrifice, to the inevitable sacrificial offering presented to the Glory

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, *Есхајолошкиите њораки на ранохристијанската уметност во Македонија*, 152.

<sup>7</sup> A. Cabrol – H. Leclercq, *op. cit.*, col. 1781.

<sup>8</sup> E. Димитрова, *Есхајолошкиите њораки на ранохристијанската уметност во Македонија*, 152.

<sup>9</sup> A. Cabrol – H. Leclercq, *op. cit.*, XIII/1, Paris 1937, col. 1076.

<sup>10</sup> E. Димитрова, *Најстариите христијански симболи*, 119.

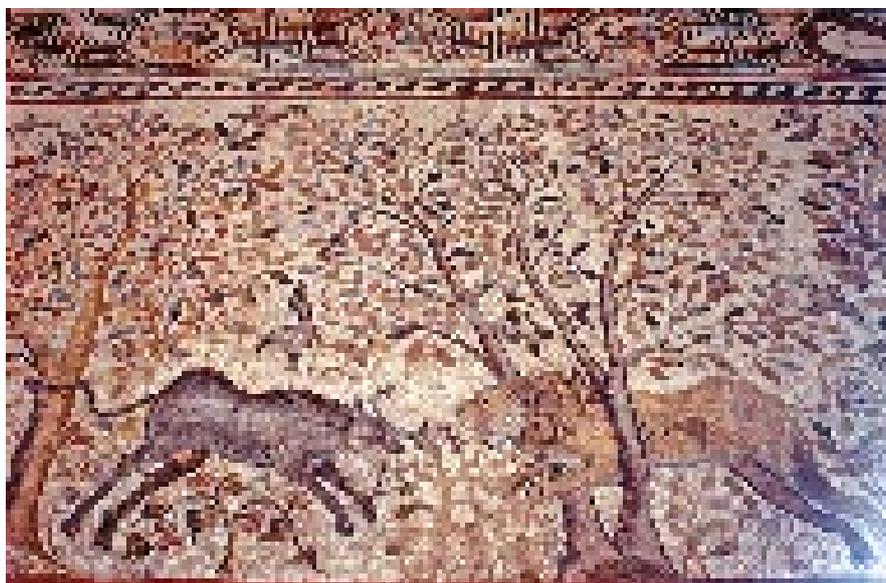


Figure 3. Heraclea Lyncestis, Large Basilica, Narthex (detail) (Photo: B. Simovski)

Sl. 3. Хераклеја Линкестис, Велика базилика, нартекс (деталј)

of God.<sup>11</sup> The lion that attacks another animal and thus demonstrates its invincible power was seen as the iconographic symbol of the destructive powers of death even in earlier pre-Christian times<sup>12</sup>; however, in Christian art, by virtue of the sublimation of the multifold symbolic meaning ascribed to it, the lion also becomes a symbol of the Resurrection.<sup>13</sup> Based on these symbolic dimensions, this part of the complex iconography of the Heraclea mosaic represents the everlasting struggle in the core of the Christian dogma. It is the struggle of life and death, the sacrifice and resurrectional desire, the sacrificial offering necessary for the salvational forgiveness and resurrectional gift donated to the patient. The bull, as a symbol of the sacrifice, surrenders to the invincible jaws of the mighty lion, thus creating an image of a deadly conflict, depicted as a powerful picture of Resurrection. The representation of the wild goat watching the battle (Figure 4) only enhances the resurrectional significance of the depicted combatting scene, subliming the pre-Christian symbolic meaning of a sacrificial offering presented for repentance of the sins<sup>14</sup> and the later Christian iconographic emblem of the sinful, deprived of eternal rejoice in the afterlife.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> G. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, New York 1971, 22.

<sup>12</sup> G. Rodenwaldt, *Römische Löwen*, *Le critica d'arte* I, Roma 1936, pl. 153, 154, 157.

<sup>13</sup> G. de Champeaux, *Introduction au monde des Symboles*, Paris 1966, 278; Е. Димитрова, *Најстарије христичјански симболи*, 155.

<sup>14</sup> J. Chevalier – A. Gheerbrant, *Rječnik simbola*, Banja Luka 2003, 220.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 218.



Figure 4. Heraclea Lyncestis, Large Basilica, Narthex (detail) (Photo: B. Simovski)

Sl. 4. Хераклеја Линкестис, Велика базилика, нартекс (детал)

On the other end of the Heraclea composition, the violence of death is represented by the helpless antelope that died in the claws of the furious cheetah (Figure 5). As one of the most ferocious predators, the leopard was considered an appropriate symbolic image of the dark powers of the underground, on the account of which it became an emblem of evil in pre-Christian religious contexts.<sup>16</sup> Playing the allegoric role of a merciless and relentless hunter, the panther became associated with the notion of unavoidable destruction, fear, and devastation. Therefore, the representation of the beast killing an antelope belongs to the category of symbolic representations that even in ancient times had served to depict allegorical scenes of death.<sup>17</sup> It is an iconographic model, which in Christian art also represents an image of the unavoidable destiny, of the tragic transience, of the inevitable reaping of death. The nearby image of the dog firmly tied to a tree, gazing at the fruitful garden in a helpless effort to unloose (Figure 6) is another emblematic character related to the idea of decease, due to its mysterious role of psychopomp in the religious beliefs prior to Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Its image in the Heraclea composition is symbolically associated with the funereal connotation of the later sequence, visualizing the mystical demon of the death - Behemoth, a Christian replica of the fearsome Cerberus, watcher of the underworld, keeper of the gates to the Kingdom of the Dead.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>17</sup> Е. Димитрова, *Најсџаритџе хрисџијански симболи*, 158.

<sup>18</sup> J. Chevalier – A. Gheerbrant, *op. cit.*, 476.

<sup>19</sup> R. Grevs, *Grčki mitovi*, Beograd, 1990, 442.

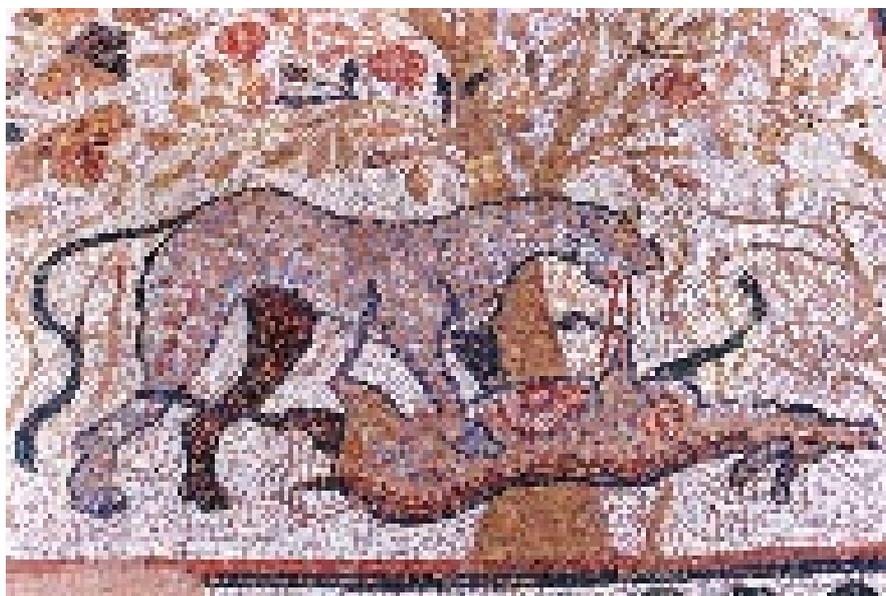


Figure 5. Heraclea Lyncestis, Large Basilica, Narthex (detail) (Photo: B. Simovski)  
Sl. 5. Хераклеја Линкестис, Велика базилика, нартекс (деталј)

According to the latest theory of Prof. Viktor Lilčić regarding the mystical symbolism of the structural elements of Early Christian church edifices through the prism of the ritual dimensions of their spatial concept,<sup>20</sup> this interpretation of the Heraclea mosaic decoration becomes even more conceivable. Namely, if we accept the idea that within the arrangement of the functional components of the Early Christian basilica ground plan, the elongated narthex was conceived as a narrow water barrier,<sup>21</sup> a Christian replica of the pagan river of souls, the location and spatial organization of which symbolizes the passage from the outer, pagan world into the consecrated Christian cosmos through the ritual of Baptism, than the Heraclea mosaic pavement reflects the Christian dogma in the most apprehensive way. Within the thoroughly conceived and sagaciously organized compositional matrix of the scene, the visual emblems of the older, just renounced belief are transformed into symbolic components of the new religious conception, reflected in an iconographic panorama filled with recognizable optical messages. The images of the grapevine, the antelope, the lion and the bull, the panther and the wild goat once associated with the cult of Dionysus, the pagan victor over death,<sup>22</sup> now become elements of a new and profoundly elaborated idea for a symbolic vision of the Christian salvation.

<sup>20</sup> В. Лилчиќ, *Ранохристијанска црква*, Скопје 2003, 37; *ibid*, *The Symbolism of the Basilica*, Macedonian Heritage, 24, Skopje, 2005, 40-44.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, *Ранохристијанска црква*, 58; *ibid*, *Early Christian Narthex – the Antique River of the Souls*, Macedonian Heritage 23, Skopje 2004, 77-80.

<sup>22</sup> R. Grevs, *op. cit.*, 95-98; A. Cermanović-Kuzmanović – D. Srejšević, *Leksikon religija i mitova drevne Evrope*, Beograd 1992, 110.

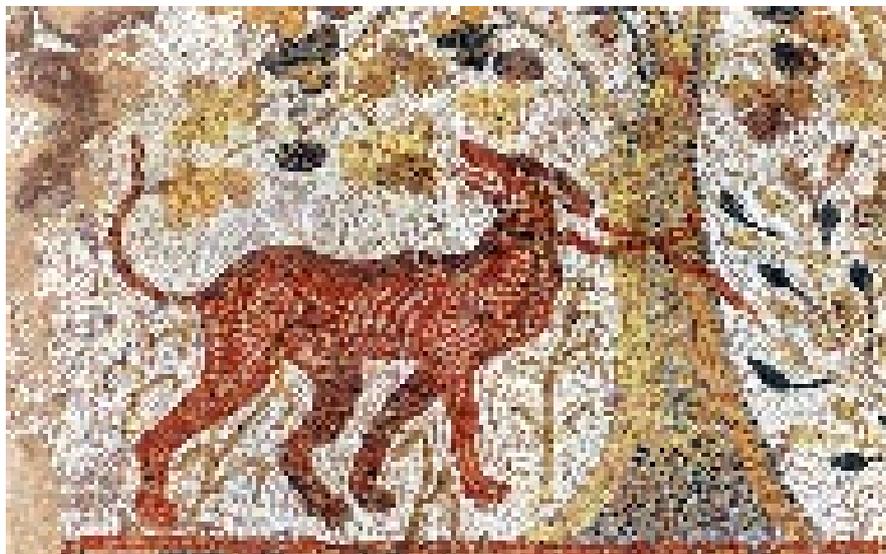


Figure 6. Heraclea Lyncestis, Large Basilica, Narthex (detail) (Photo: B. Simovski)

Sl. 6. Хераклеја Линкестис, Велика базилика, нартекс (детал)

In that regard, within the spectacular view of the Heraclea scene, the sacrificial animals of the pagan God, slaughtered at the altar of constant revival,<sup>23</sup> grow into ceremonial offering given for redemption, allusive to Christ's benevolent sacrifice and His celebration of the immortal rebirth; the mighty beasts attached to Dionysus as characteristic emblems of his divine power,<sup>24</sup> gain the significance of Christian symbols of the victorious strength immanent to the King of life and immortality; the grapevine cultivated and brought to men<sup>25</sup> turns into "the true vine" (John, 15:1), which will save mankind with the sweet nectar of the new belief; the pagan myth of the dismembered God, consumed by the believers with the purpose of their salvation after death,<sup>26</sup> is transformed into a visual allegory of the Eucharistic ritual which signifies the unity of the faithful with the Saviour on their journey to eternity; the former lord of the dead, killed and resurrected in order to renew the nature,<sup>27</sup> fades away in the blaze of glory of the One crucified and arisen from the dead, who donates immortal life to all humanity. The ancient emblems of the pagan apotheosis melt down into basic symbols of the new visual vocabulary of the Christian belief,<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ch. Daremberg et Ed. Saglio, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités grecques et romaines* II/1, Paris 1926, 233, 244.

<sup>24</sup> R. Grevs, *op. cit.*, 98; A. Cermanović-Kuzmanović – D. Srejšović, *op. cit.*, 110.

<sup>25</sup> M. Couch, *Greek & Roman Mythology*, New York 1997, 64; A. Cermanović-Kuzmanović – D. Srejšović, *op. cit.*, 109.

<sup>26</sup> A. Cermanović-Kuzmanović – D. Srejšović, *op. cit.*, 109.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

<sup>28</sup> Th. F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Princeton 1993, 45.

given to those who are about to slake their catechumenal thirst in the waters of their neophytic bliss. Thus, by the refined manner of the visual expression within the complex iconographic structure of the Heraclea scene, the symbolic messages of the Christian dogma are united in the unique significance of the Baptism and its role in the Resurrection as a triumph of eternal life for the baptized believers.

In a very carefully elaborated manner and within the symmetrical matrix as a most distinctive feature of the iconographic structure of Early Christian mosaic pavements decoration, the Heraclea scene reveals the complex notion of compositional arrangement of the symbolic elements into a unified picture of a profoundly visualized theological essence. Edged by a frame allusive to the water barrier that the narthex symbolizes, anticipating the baptismal significance of the waters of the River of Jordan, the composition consists of three main elements, whereat the two side motifs are joined with the central vision by scenery peculiar to the representation of the Garden of Eden. The scene to the right symbolizes the death, the unavoidable and ruthless, the inescapable and devastating, the passionate companion of earthly life, and the fearsome shadow of the living. The other to the left is represented as a symbolic allusion to the transience from earthly death to immortal life in Heaven, acquired through the benevolent sacrifice, redemption of the sins and the Resurrection. The central motif, which sublimes the symbolic aspects of the entire composition, luxuriously visualizes the rebirth, the beginning of the true and everlasting life, achieved through baptismal purification and earned by mystical unity with the Saviour in the ritual of the Holy Eucharist.

Thus, as the mortals entered the basilica through the narthex on their way to the naos in order to take part in the ritual of the communion prepared in the sanctuary, they were granted with unique opportunity for illumination with the conception of the substantial significance of Baptism as a crucial prerequisite for their participation in the sacred rite of Eucharist. Being enlightened by the idea of the unavoidable path to be walked from the insignificant earthly life through corporal death to the eternal rebirth in Heaven via baptismal immersion, they were released from deadly fears and encouraged to enter the gates of immortality in the sanctity of the Eucharistic ritual. Since, in the symbolic concept of the Heraclea representation, death is depicted as a transient predecessor of the deceased, baptized with the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Saviour and rejoicing the Heavenly bliss of His eternal Kingdom. Through baptism and the Eucharist, by submitting himself to the sublime virtues of the Christian thought, the believer bequeaths his soul to God, leaving only his earthly transience to death. The baptismal waters, the Eucharistic offering and the fervor of faith open the path towards Heavenly bliss, where the souls of the believers delight in their immortality. Death is inevitable, yet fervent devotion to God transforms the end on earth into an eternal and immortal life in Heaven. Death becomes unavoidable transition towards the real life, given from the Saviour and incarnated in the symbol of the Christian Church that defeats faithlessness, as the eternal defeats the transient and life defeats death. Thus, within the complex symbolism of the Heraclea mosaic, the fundamental message of eternal life, serenity, and gratification of those who are baptized and die as Christians is represented uniquely.

*Елизабета Димитрова*

“КРОЗ УНУТРАШЊА ВРАТА”

(Мозаик у нартексу Велике базилике у Хераклеји Линкестис)

Полазећи од досадашњег тумачења мозаика у нартексу Велике базилике у Хераклеји Линкестис као слици хришћанског космоса, а у контексту анализе веома комплексне иконографије приказане композиције, покушали смо да продремо у дубљи смисао представљеног симболичног контекста сцене. Наиме, сама структура представе, чији централни мотив илуструје текст Давидовог псалма 42 као симболичну слику покрштења и евхаристије, док су бочни делови концептирани као визуелне метафоре хришћанске идеје о жртви, смрти и васкрсењу, упућује на сублимацију основних елемената догме, пренетих у медијум ликовног стваралаштва помоћу оркестрације визуелног облика и његовог симболичног значења. При томе, библиске алузије о месијанској улози Христа и апсорбована симболичка оптика из старијих веровања удружени су у суптилну ликовну експликацију темељне идеје о спасу, намењене неофитима који су преко нартекса улазили у базилику да би у олтару примили евхаристију.

У контекст нове теорије о симболизму структуралних елемената ранохришћанске базилике, према којој је нартекс био замишљен као уска водена баријера, односно, као хришћанска реплика паганске реке душа, чија локација и просторна организација симболише прелаз из спољашњег, паганског света у освећени хришћански космос путем ритуала покрштења, мозаична панорама у Хераклејском нартексу постаје најадекватнија визуелна експликација те идеје. Ликовни симболи Хераклејске представе, некадашњи амблеми култа бога Диониса, паганског победника смрти, уједињени су у симболичној визији хришћанског спасења са акцентом на покрштењу и његовој улози у васкрсу као тријумфу вечног живота за покрштене вернике. У том контексту, спољашњи оквир сцене, који алудира на водену баријеру коју нартекс симболизира антиципирајући баптизмално значење реке Јордана, обухвата три главна елемента композиције, при чему су странични мотиви повезани са централном представом сценографијом карактеристичном за приказивање Раја. Епизода у десном делу композиције симболизира смрт, док је она у левом представљена као симболична алузија прелаза из земаљске смрти у бесмрти живот у Рају преко добровољне жртве, искупљења греха и васкрсења. Централни мотив, који уједињује симболичне аспекте читаве композиције, представљен је као визија поновног рођења, стекнутог путем крштења и мистичног јединства са Спаситељем у ритуалу свете евхаристије. Тако је верницима, који су пролазили кроз нартекс да би ушли у наос базилике и примили причешће припремљено у олтару, била представљена порука о есенцијалном значењу крштења као круцијалном предуслову за њихово учешће у светом обреду евхаристије. Просветљени идејом о неизбежном путу који води од безначајног земаљског живота преко телесне смрти до поновног рођења у Рају путем баптизмалне имерзије, неофити су били ослобођени страха од смрти и охрабрени да уђу кроз врата бесмртности у светост евхаристичног ритуала.

