

MEDIEVAL SIMULACRA OF THE MOTHER EARTH IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Within the sphere of the Christian doctrine the Earth is not existent as a hypostasis distinction. However, the representation of a female figure defined by the attributes and even by the name Gaia / Earth appears in the decorative solutions of the secular medieval material, as well as in the narrations of the Christian sacral art. In these contexts the figure is being determined as a personification of the Earth. Her iconography derives from the antique visual matrixes which articulated the immanent and transcendent ideas of the primordial deity - Mother Earth.¹

Having in mind the hybridism of the Byzantine civilization – being a chrono-topic syncretism of Roman law and administration, of Greek culture and Oriental sensuality, the “pagan” remaining within its artistic system are not a lapse. Namely: “...every art begins by what is known as a borrowing from a higher culture, or, more accurately, by communing with it.”²

The iconographic model of the personification Earth shows certain evolution inside the Christian pictorial system. Within the process of Christianization, the antique borrowing became de-divinized by the dividing of her corporality from her personality. The “flesh” became a personification, while the hypostasis` features dispersed in the female representatives of the Christian “pantheon”.

This dividing of the primordial deity was not synchronic to the beginning i.e. the proclamation of Christianity for an official religion. Such conclusion derives from the contextual and the iconographic characteristics of Earth`s representations. During the Early Medieval period Gaia was represented in the usual “antique” style, maintaining the emphasis on the attributes of fertility and abundance (fig. 1). The contextual presence of Gaia`s functional aspects can be seen in the compositions in which she appears.

In the painted floor from **Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharby** (fig. 2), the Earth is depicted as a female bust, richly dressed, with a snake coiling around her neck

¹ Д. Панић, Г. Бабић, *Језик персонификација*, in: Богородица Љевишка, Београд, 1975, 70-80.

² D. V. Ainalov, *The Hellenistic Origin of the Byzantine Art*, Rutgers University press, New Jersey 1961, 4.

like a necklace, and with a garment filled with fruits in both hands.³ Similar iconographic variants appear on the two Egyptian garments (fig. 3, 4), as well as on the central medallion of one necklace belonging to the so called numismatic type (fig. 5).⁴ Apart from the secular, her image also appears in examples that probably possess sacral determinant. On the so called **Barberini diptych** (fig. 6), the subordinated representation of Gaia emphasizes the moment of the imperial triumph, while on the 6th century seal from **Svinec** (fig. 7), where she holds a cornucopia, the image transforms into an ecclesiastic emblem.⁵

The qualification “personification” does not seem quite suitable for the above mentioned representations of Gaia, which having in mind the given contexts, are more likely to represent invocations of good luck and abundance, as well as to confirm and stress certain historical moments. These “pagan” investments, as well as the image of this *persona non grata*, are not that illogical for the Christianity. Namely, the co temporal religious doctrine had the rank of state’s confessional ideology, but the mental configuration of the Byzantine men was not, nor it could ever be, ultimately Christianized. The antique roots of the empire dominated the “pagan” sub consciousness of the Byzantine culture, which could only trespass through the antique symbolical system. For these reasons the term “personification” should probably be understood more descriptively, as some kind of *simulacra*.

After the Iconoclastic hiatus the Christian art gathered a different artistic outlook. This transformation was a partial consequence of the final defining of certain theological issues, thus proclaiming the illustrated Christian narrations for hieratic compositions.⁶ However, the representations of Gaia were not excluded from the pictorial solutions. Although lacking textual references, the representations of the Earth became almost an obligatory element in certain scenes.

At this standpoint the illustrations of the **Last Judgment** in the Christian sacral monuments appears as most interesting. The image of Gaia is a part of the **All Going Assumption** (fig. 8, 9) i.e. the moment when the angels request from the Earth and the Sea to give away their deceased. The eschatological background of this scene utterly correlates to the antique generic aspects of the goddess Earth. The iconography of her image although Christianized i.e. cleansed of the antique nudity, still maintained certain attributes which primordially gravitate towards this deity – the holding of the heavenly arch, the reptile beast underneath or next to her, the appearance of floral elements on her cos-

³ Ed. David Talbot Rice, R. H. Pinder - Wilson, *Islam i arabljanska osvajanja*, in: Rani Srednji Vek - Uobličavanje evropske kulture, Jugoslavija Beograd, 1976, 49-62.

⁴ H. Maguire, *Garments Pleasing to God: The Significance of Domestic Textile Design in the Early Byzantine Period*, DOP 44, 1990, 217-19; H. Maguire, *Magic and Money, in Image and Imagination*, Great Britain, TJ International Ltd, Padsow, Cornwall, 2007, 1037-1054, 1039-40.

⁵ L. Rodley, *Byzantine Art and Architecture – An Introduction*, Cambridge University press, 1994, 92; А. В. Банк, *Византийское искусство в собраниях Советского Союза*, „Советский художник“ Ленинград – Москва, 1996, 297, каталожки број 117.

⁶ I. Kalavrezou, *Images of the Mother – When the Virgin Mary Became Meter Theou*, DOP 44, 1990, 165-172, 168-69.



Fig. 1 - Gaia - Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharby, Floor painting, 727 AD, Umayyad, National Museum of Damascus, Syria

Сл. 1 Геја - Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharby, Слика на поду из 727. године, Омајадска династија, Национални музеј у Дамаску, Сирија



Fig. 2 - Tapestry woven panel - The Earth with Crosses, Byzantine Egypt, 4th - 7th century, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Сл. 2 Таписерија - Земља са крстовима из периода IV-VII века, Византијски Египат, Музеј Лувр, Париз



Fig. 3 - Textile roundel with Figural Decoration, Egypt, Byzantine, 5th-7th century, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University

Сл. 3 Медаљон (диск) од текстила са фигураљном декорацијом из периода V-VII века, Византијски Египат, Музеј Артура Саклера, Универзитет Харвард, Бостон

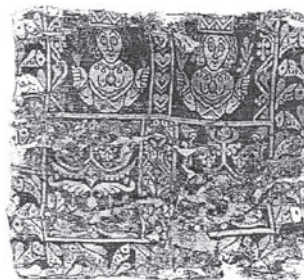


Fig. 4 - Silk sleeve band, 6th-7th century, New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery

Сл. 4 Трака свиленог рукава из периода VI-VII века, Уметничка галерија Универзитета Јејл, Њу Хејвен,



Fig. 5 - Gold Pendant, Byzantine, 6th century, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia

Сл. 5 Златни привезак из VI века, Музеј лепих уметности у Вирџинији, Ричмонд, Вирџинија



Fig. 6 - Barberini Diptych, Constantinople, 6th century, Anastasius or Justinian in Triumph, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Сл. 6 Диптих Барберини из Цариграда (VI век), Цар Анастасије (или Јустинијан) приказан у тријумфу, Музеј Лувр, Париз



Fig. 7 - Lead seal from Svinec, A Goddess with Cornucopia - Gaia (?), 6th century, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia

Сл. 7 Оловни печат из Свинца, Божиња са рогом изобиља - Геја (?) из VI века, Музеј Ермитаж, Санкт Петербург



Fig. 8 - Last Judgment – Personification of the Earth, Church of St. Clement (The Virgin Peribleptos), Ochrid, Western facade, before 1595.

Сл. 8 Страшни суд - персонификација Земље, фреска на западној фасади цркве Св. Климента (Св. Богородице Перивлепте) у Охриду (пре 1595. године)



Fig. 9 - Last Judgment, Monastery of Kučevište, Sts. Archangels, Narthex, 1630/31.

Сл. 9 Страшни суд, фреска у припрати манастира Св. Арханђела у Кучевишту, (1630/31. године)



Fig. 10 - Personification of the Earth, The Virgin of the Hospitals, Ochrid, 14th century, southern facade

Сл. 10 Персонификација Земље, фреска на јужној фасади цркве Св. Богородице Болничке у Охриду (XIV век)



Fig. 11 Psalm 148, Lesnovo Monastery, 1349.

Сл. 11 Илустрација 148 Псалма, фреска у припрати манастира Лесново (1349. године)



Fig. 12 - The Pentecost, Church of the Holy Virgin, Kučevište, c.1330.

Сл. 12 Силазак Св. Духа на апостоле, Црква Ваведење Богородице у Кучевишту (око 1330. године)



Fig. 13 - The Christmas Hymn, Church of St. Clement (The Virgin Peribleptos), Ochrid, 1295.

Сл. 13 Божићна стихира, фреска у припрати цркве Св. Климента (Св. Богородице Перивлепте) у Охриду (1295. године)

tume and even the presence of wings. Yet still the most important component of her character – her personality was demised. In these compositions the Earth is nothing more than a genre motif (fig. 10).⁷

The castrated functionality of the Earth is also visible in the remaining scenes that use hers corporality – the **Psalm 148** (fig. 11), the **Pentecost** (the Descention of the Holy Spirit, fig. 12) and the **Christmas Hymn** (fig. 13).⁸

Observed through its historical context this de-divinization i.e. forgetting of the antique deities was not accidental. During the transition of the antique society into a Christian one, the Virgin gradually sublimed all the powers i.e. aspects of the previous goddesses.⁹ The idea of her supreme motherhood was clearly proclaimed in the Homilies of George of Nicomedia. In the narration titled “When his Mother stood next to the cross at the Crucifixion”, Christ’s words to the Deciples “ΙΔΟΥ Η ΜΗΤΗΡ ΣΟΥ” have the following interpretational meaning: “*Though I have forbidden you to call anyone on earth Father, I wish nonetheless that you call her mother and honor her as such, she who was for me an abode more than heavenly, and showed me an affection with which nature is unacquainted*”. These words undoubtedly describe the virgin as mother of all living (fig. 14).¹⁰

In the opening verses of the **Akathysthos** (fig. 15), the hymn dedicated to the Virgin, the idea of her invincibility is being emphasized. The Byzantine society begun to perceive the Virgin as a leader of the Christian armies and as a protector - palladium of the empire (fig. 16).¹¹ The root of her power was in her paradoxical virginal motherhood – the *parthenogenesis*. It is precisely the

⁷ A. Серафимова, *Кучевшики манастир Св. Архангели*, Скопје, 2005, 175, 177-78, 184-85.

⁸ For the Christmas Hymn see E. Димитрова, *Илустрацијата на Дамаскиновата Божикна химна во сликаната декорација на спомениците од XIV век*, Балканославика 25, Прилеп, Институт за старословенска култура, 1998, 137-158; *Ibid.*, *Манастир Матеејче*, Скопје, 2002, 95.

⁹ Elizabeth A. Gittings, *Women as Embodiments of Civic Life, in Byzantine Women and Their World*, 39; Bisera V. Pentcheva, *The Virgin of Constantinople: Power and Belief*, in ed. Ioli Kalavrezou, *Byzantine Woman and Their World*, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2003, 113-118; A. Baring, J. Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess, Evolution of an Image*, Arkana, Penguin Books, 1993, 574-75.

¹⁰ George of Nicomedia was a deacon and chartophylacs of St. Sophia in Constantinople and also a personal friend of the patriarch Photios, who in 860 appointed him a metropolitan of Nicomedia. Among his numerous preserved homilies, the most interesting are the ones connected to the theme Theotokos. Ioli Kalavrezou, *Images of the Mother: When the Virgin Mary Became Meter Theou*, DOP 44, 1990, 169.

¹¹ This aspect of the Virgin brings her close to Gaia. Namely the Roman commanders in cases of self-scarification for the army, pronounced a special devotion: “*Dis Manibus Tellurique*”, where on the last word they touched the ground. The epithets Blachernitissa and Hodegetria clearly testify of the sublime nature of the Virgin, who was an actual hypostase of nearly all the functions of the key antique goddesses. Bisera V. Pentcheva, *The Virgin of Constantinople: Power nad Belief*, во ed. Ioli Kalavrezou, *Byzantine Woman and Their World*, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2003, 113-117.



Fig. 14 - The Crucifixion, Osios Loukas, before 1048, Narthex mosaic

Сл. 14 Распеће, мозаик у нартексу цркве Хозиос Лукас (пре 1048. године)



Fig. 15 - Representation of the Icon of the Virgin Hodegetria, Verse 24 from the cycle of the Akathistos Hymn, Late 14th century, Markov Manastir

Сл. 15 Представљање иконе Богородице Одигитрије, илустрација 24 строфе Богородичиног Акатиста у Марковом манастиру (1376/77. године)



Fig. 16, 17 The Virgin – ΖΩΟΔΟΧΟΣ ΠΗΓΗ, Lesnovo Monastery, 1349, Narthex fresco painting

Сл. 16, 17 Богородица - Живоносни извор, фреска у нартексу Лесновског манастира (1349. године)



Fig. 18 - The Theotokos and Georgios of Antioch, Martorana, Palermo, c.1143 and later

Сл. 18 Богородица и Георгије Антиохијски, Марторана у Палерму (око 1143. и касније)



Fig. 19 - The Holy Wisdom build a Temple for Herself, Church of St. Clement (The Virgin Peribleptos), Narthex, 1295.

Сл. 19 Премудрост сазида себи храм, фреска у припрати цркве Св. Климента (Св. Богородице Перивлепте) у Охриду (1295. године)



Fig. 20 - David's repentance, Church of St. Sophia, Ochrid, 1345-46, Narthex

Сл. 20 Покајање Давидово, фреска на другом спрату припрате у цркви Св. Софије у Охриду (1345-1346. године)

element which most explicitly correlates the Virgin to the plead of antique goddesses, on which genealogical pre-beginning stands Gaia. The Virgin is the last in the chain of goddesses through which the earth becomes numinous.¹²

The symptoms of this process can be seen even in the metaphoric literal narration of her hymn i.e. in its pictorial incarnation. Inside the specter of attributes in the **Akathysthos**, the mythology and the iconography of the "**Fountain of Life**" (fig. 17) most directly creates the relation between the Virgin and her "ancestress", where the cult of Cybele stands dominant.¹³

The Virgin's connection to the qualifications of the earth-goddesses discreetly appears even in some other of her epithets. For example **Perybleptos** literally means "*the one visible from all sides, adored by all viewers*". Thus the Virgin became venerated as an "*assistant in the everyday issues*" and as "*the one who maintains the crown of the empire*", which is not too far from the symbolical presence of Gaia in the Barberini Diptych.¹⁴

¹² In the Hesiod's *Theogony* and in the Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Gaia gives birth to *Ouranos* (the Sky), *Oureus* (the Mountains) and *Pontus* (the Sea) through parthenogenesis. Hesiod, *Theogony*, 116ff (translation Evelyn-White). During the Middle Ages the Earth no longer represented a divine immanence in the nature, but the "fallen nature", the "other world". The aspect of fertility transferred to the Virgin. The Myth...553,574-75,577.

А. В. Поповић, *Богородица „Извор живота“ – Од Мајке Богова до мајке Божије*, Трећа Југословенска конференција Византолога, Крушевац 10-13 Мај 2000, Београд-Крушевац, 2002, 107-114.

¹³ А. В. Поповић, *Богородица „Извор живота“ – Од Мајке Богова до мајке Божије*, Трећа Југословенска конференција Византолога, Крушевац 10-13 Мај 2000, Београд-Крушевац, 2002, 107-114.

¹⁴ From the beginning of the Byzantine Empire the Virgin was considered a protector of the capital. The culmination of this aspect which will evolve in a direct connection to the imperial subjects takes place during the Palaeologan time. Иван К. Заров, *Ктиторството*

Finally her telluric nature i.e. her presence in the afterlife spheres emphasizes the ancient aspects of the Earth and her hypostases. The Virgin was considered “*Queen of Heaven*”, but she was also conceived as a protector and benefactor of the sinners, who possessed the power to change the afterlife destiny and to guarantee the salvation (fig. 18).¹⁵

And in the very end, probably as a superior “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*” inside the Christian doctrine, we should mention **Sophia** (fig. 19, 20), whose enigma resembles possible simulacra of Mother Earth. Described as a “creator of the world i.e. the matter” and as “womb of all creation”, and even as an escort of the Old Testament Yahweh, in her pleromatic chronotopy she resembles the primordial goddesses from the antique cosmogonies.¹⁶ Unfortunately, in a certain moment, probably due to the potential danger of this feminine complexity, the Christianity transformed the archetype image of Sophia into the Logos, thus opening the marginalization of the “*female principle*” inside the system i.e. its degradation into a subject “*less than completely divine, but more than fully humane*” – the Virgin.¹⁷

Using the sophisticated metaphor the Christian doctrine found a way to elaborate the functionality of the masculine i.e. the paternal theology, which although denied the existence of the “*female principle*”, could not exist without its even antinomy presence.

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СРЕДЊЕВЕКОВНИ СИМУЛАКРУМИ МАЈКЕ ЗЕМЉЕ
У ХРИШЋАНСКОЈ ТРАДИЦИЈИ

Хришћанска хијератика представља баланс теолошке догме и натуралистичког артизма. У таквој наративној симбиози, персонификације се појављују као неопходни елемент експресије. Овај рад на конкретан начин прати појаву једног оваквог елемента – персонификацију Мајке Земље у хришћанској сакралној и секуларној материјалној култури. Ипак, уместо уобичајеног термина “персонификација”, у овој анализи користимо термин “симулакрум”. Разлог за овакву “недоследност” је сами лик овог нехришћанског божанства које се упорно јавља у хришћанском иконографском систему, разлучујући притом, своју хипостасност од телесности.

на великиот хетеријарх Прогон Згур на Св. Богородица Перивлента во Охрид, Зброник – Средновековна уметност 6, Скопје, 2007, 58-59.

¹⁵ Ц. Грозданов, *Охридско ѕидно сликарство од XIV век*, Охрид, 1980, 39-40, 82, 104-105, 107; С. Коруновски, Е. Димитрова, *Византиска Македонија*, Историја на уметноста на Македонија од IX до XV век, Скопје 2006, 143, 153, 176-177.

¹⁶ In the Old Testament Sophia, “The Mistress of All Creation”, is described as transcendent and immanent at the same time. Thus she becomes a descendant representation of the archetype of the existence – Zoe. The Myth, 470, 611-13.

¹⁷ Namely, God is worshiped (*latría*), the Saints are venerated (*dulia*), while the Virgin is given *superior veneration (hyperdulia)*. The Myth, 553. For the complexity of the relation between Sophia, Christ and the Virgin, as well as its theological implications see Н. Чаусидис, *Дуалистички слики*, Скопје 2003, 293-296, 300-304, 307-308.

Хронотопска анализа лика овог античког т. ј. искомског божанства у оквиру средњовековне епохе, разобличава ретроградни развој и поступну дисперзију функционалних аспеката Мајке Земље у другим женским ликовима хришћанског религиозног система. У раном периоду средњег века, Геја је, и иконографски и по својој функцији, слична својим античким матрицама. Потврде за наведену идентичност видљиве су у њеним иконографским атрибутима, као и у самом контексту представа, које су у суштини, инвокације добре среће и плодности.

Након Иконокластичке кризе и коначног уобличавања хришћанских догми, појава Земље у визуелним нарацијама добија све већи смисао жанр мотива – персонификације. И поред обавезног присуства Земље у одређеним сценама, њена представа лишена је хипостасних функционалних аспеката. Ова сфера некадашње супериорне стваратељке у пантеонима, у хришћанском религиозном свету транспонује се у теолошки прихватљиве женске протагонисткиње конфесије. Тиме велики број одлика Мајке Земље постају иманентни Богородици. Почевши од парадоксалне патрогенезе, преко свеопштег материнства и загробне добротворности, Богородица у ствари постаје отелотворење принципа античких пре-стваратељки, чији је прапочетак управо Геја.

Божанствена премудрост је још један сублимат код кога се могу осетити рецидиви некадашњих аспеката Геје, нарочито у сфери “стварања света” т. ј. материје. Потенцијална опасност ове женствене сложености доприноси да, у одређеном тренутку, она буде замењена синонимним Логосом. Кроз ову софистицирану метафору, хришћанска доктрина покушава да да оправдање функционалности патроналне теологије, али “женски принцип”, и поред званичне маргинализације, т. ј. неприхватљивости у систему, потврђује се антиномично, помоћу властитих симулакрума.

