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**BEAUTIFUL CREATURES:
MACEDONIA AS “THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY
DELIGHTS”**

In the year of 1808, after becoming the first French King of Spain under the name of Jose I, Joseph Bonaparte, the brother of Napoleon I, practically plundered the art collections of the monastery of El Escorial near Madrid¹, with a sole purpose of sending the valuable artifacts to France and enrich the artistic wealth of his homeland with precious paintings, manuscripts etc. One of the rare works, which, during this international crime, has not been taken to France was Bosch's triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (from around 1500)² due to, as Jose I has stated *the monstrosity of the picture, as well as the ugliness of the creatures* depicted within its painterly composition. On the account of that, this Renaissance master-piece has luckily remained in Spain and in 1939 has been put to public display in the colossal museum treasury of Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid³. Although *The Garden of Delights* has remained undisclosed in regard to the iconographic and symbolic features of its many-fold visual constellation, its painterly qualities have never been seriously disputed. Hence, despite the “delicate artistic taste” of Jose I, the ugly creatures, composite humanoids, chimerical forms and supernatural beings of Bosch's “*Earthly Garden*” have become benchmarks of an artistic creation labeled as ideologically progressive, visually pre-figurative and painterly avant-garde. Being equally enigmatic and provocative, elusive and iconic, this breathtaking work of art created by the ingenious and foresighted Hieronymus Bosch is, by all means, one of the most debated pictures in the domain of art history⁴. However, long before

¹ G. Tinterow, G. Lacambre, *The French Taste for Spanish Painting*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2003, 98.

² F. De Poli, *I Geni dell'arte Bosch*, Milano 1978, 46-51, 96-98; W. Bosing, *Hieronymus Bosch c. 1450-1516. Between Heaven and Hell*, Köln 2010, 50-56.

³ A. Pallucchini, C. Ludovico Ragghianti, L. Ragghianti Collobi, *Musei del Mondo: Prado, Madrid*, Milano 1968, 131-134.

⁴ H. Belting, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, München 2005; P. Glum, *Divine Judgement in Bosch's “Garden of Earthly Delights”*, *The Art Bulletin* 58, 1976, 45-54; M. Gomez, *Hieronymus Bosch: The Garden of Earthly Delights*, in Gaillard J. and M.: *Hieronymus Bosch:*



Fig. 1, Stobi, Episcopal basilica, North-west pilaster

Сл. 1 Стоби, Епископска базилика, северо-западни пиластар



Fig. 2, Stobi, Episcopal basilica, The rat and the mouse

Сл. 2 Стоби, Епископска базилика, Пацов и миш
the mega-talented Dutch master has executed his lavishly detailed panorama of the sinful mankind, Byzantine artists have also been picturing strange bio-morphological shapes, peculiar beings, elusive creatures and fright-

ening monsters which were due to the mysterious depths of the religious notion, as well as the unrestrained fantasy of their creative imagination⁵. Penetrating into the spheres of material culture, decorative ornamentation of jewelry and architectural embellishment of sacral edifices, these elements have grown into a unique cluster of iconographic oddities marked by extraordinary visual and symbolic features. Within the treasury of the Early Christian and Medieval cultural heritage of present day Republic of Macedonia, there is a significant number of specimen belonging to this sphere of “elusive iconography”, which have been left aside of the mainstream investigation of the scholars. In that regard, this paper should give an insight in the meaning and significance of some of the most remarkable examples of the “beautiful creatures” of Medieval Macedonia.

The oldest example in the chronological chain of iconographic peculiarities of “Macedonia Bizantina” is found among the oldest fresco décor of the Episcopal basilica in Stobi from the late 4th century⁶. Among the remnants of the one-time monumental fresco repertory of the Episcopal temple preserved within the on-site museum depot, one can notice fragments from figural scenes, graphic ornamentation and architectonic emulation, all of which comprise the

The Garden of Earthly Delights, New York 1989; A. B. Rooth, *Exploring the garden of delights: Essays in Bosch's paintings and the medieval mental culture*, California 1992.

⁵ *Handbook of the Byzantine Collection: Dumbarton Oaks*, Washington D.C. 1967, No. 306; L. von Wilckens, *Die textile Künste von der Spätantike bis zum 1500*, München 1991, 71-73; H. Maguire, *Images of the Court*, in: *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843-1261* (Ed. H. C. Evans and W. D. Wixom), New York 1997, Fig. on p. 189.

⁶ Vлага Aleksova, *Старата епископска базилика во Стоби*, Годишен зборник на Филозофскиот факултет 38, Скопје, 1985, 43-72.; Eadem, *Early Christian Basilicas at Stobi*, Corso di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina 33, Ravenna 1986, 47-52; Eadem, *Loca Sanctorum Macedoniae. Култ на мартирите во Македонија од IV до IX век*, Скопје 1995, 95-96; I. Mikulčić, *Stobi. An Ancient City*, Skopje 2003, 113-115.

Fig. 3,
Collection of
Vinica terracotta
plaques, Saint
Christopher and
Saint George

Сл. 3 Збирка
Виничких
теракота,
Свети
Христифор и
свети Ђорђе



visual skeleton of the four consecutive phases of the painterly decoration of the edifice⁷. In the frames of the last painterly layer applied in the closing decades of the 4th century, the painters have represented an image of a furious rat which has climbed the surface of the north-west pilaster of the edifice watching over a little mouse in a ready to attack position⁸ (Fig. 1). Bristling and infuriated, cramped and malicious, the rat is depicted in a slightly larger than life size and is situated in the central part of the pilaster as a supporting element of the west portion of the church. Depicted with a sketchy drawing and left with no elaborated modelation of the forms or a coloring pigment, the rat is surrounded by nonchalant strokes of dynamic character executed with the same instrument used in the configuration of the rodent.

As much as the appearance of the rat is surprising as an element of the fresco décor of a main ecclesiastic edifice such as the Episcopal temple in the very important church see of Stobi, something else has attracted our scholarly attention. Although painterly undefined and left in a stage of an anatomic study without any furnishing of colors, shades and/or hues, the rat has been precisely depicted as contorted in a ready to jump position towards the little mouse facing the opposite side of the pilaster, unaware of the deadly danger hanging over it (Fig. 2). Being far from the visual symbolism of the other scenes encompassed by the fresco program in the temple (Daniel in the Lions' Den, Catechumens at the Spring of Eternal Life, Christ as Master of the Universe, Psalm of King David 42⁹), the "composition" of the rat attacking a mouse looks like a result of

Fig. 4, Site of St. Erasmus near
Ohrid, Komani-Kruje rondela
pendant

Сл. 4 Локалитет Светог
Еразма код Охрида, Комани-
Крује рондела привезак

⁷ S. Blazevska – M. Tutkovski, *The Episcopal Basilica in Stobi*, Early Christian Wall Paintings from the Episcopal Basilica in Stobi, Stobi, 2012, 12-16.

⁸ Elizabeta Dimitrova, *The Painterly Horizons of the Frescoes of the Episcopal Basilica: Iconographic Design, Symbolic Configuration, Stylistic Modularity*, Early Christian Wall Paintings from the Episcopal Basilica in Stobi, Stobi 2012, 30-31.

⁹ Eadem, *The Painterly Horizons of the Frescoes of the Episcopal Basilica: Iconographic Design, Symbolic Configuration, Stylistic Modularity*, 21-36.

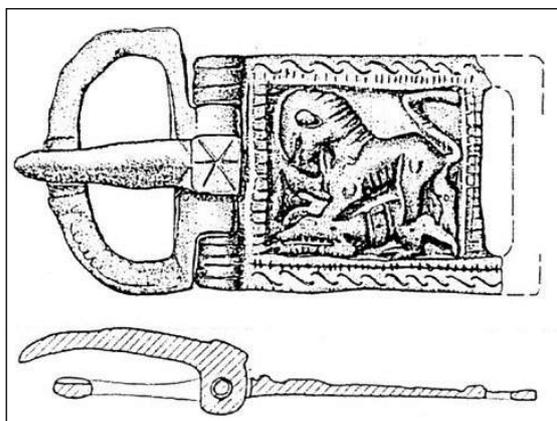


Fig. 5, Site of Devol, Drenovo, Belt buckle (drawing by I. Mikulčić)

Сл. 5 Локалитет Девол код Дренова, Појасни језичац (цртеж И. Микулчића)

somebody's observation of a real event occurring in the interior of the edifice. Namely, the vivid biological structure of the two "animals", the playfulness of the naturalistic bestial pose of the rat, the picturesquely captured intent of the rodent to take its little prey by surprise, as well as the lack of precisely defined painterly configuration of the images characteristic of the rest of the depictions in the basilica, speak in favour of the highly profane character of the sight. Since no existent analogies have been detected in the painterly arrangements of Early Christianity, neither the literary works from the period contain any allusions to the rat being of importance to the visual symbolism of Christian iconography, one

has to admit that the rat hunting the mouse in Stobi is a genuine phenomenon within the artistic creativity of the period in question. Being a sole example of a picture encompassing a rat and a mouse depicted as a predator and a prey in the entire painterly culture of Early Christianity, this representation, by all means, discloses the authentic creative imagination of its author, as well as the unimposing artistic language of his visual execution¹⁰. In regard to its significance, the location of the "scene" right next to the entrance of the basilica, open and accessible on a daily base, could point to a secular connotation of this picture; in other words, depicting the two unwanted, yet highly frequent visitors of any church, the painter has unknowingly created the earliest genre sight in the entire Christian artistic production.

Some century and a half later, the treasury of iconographic oddities of Macedonian artistic legacy reveals yet another strange creature in the image of Saint Christopher, depicted on a slab from the collection of the Vinica terracotta reliefs¹¹ (Fig. 3). Represented with a canine head, most likely due to the misspelled epithet *Canineus* ('dog-like') instead of *Cannaneus* (Canaanite, man from the Land of Canaan)¹², Christopher is probably the most unfortunate saint in the Early Christian iconography, who, instead of being represented young, handsome and fair, similarly to his peer colleagues (St. Demetrius, St.

¹⁰ Eadem, *Ars Viva of Macedonia Paleocristiana. Byzantine Frescoes in the Episcopal Basilica at Stobi*, Collection de Centre de Recherche d' Histoire at Civilisation de Byzance, Collège de France, 2016 (in print)

¹¹ Eadem, *The Terracotta Relief Plaques from Vinica*, Старинар н.с. књ. XLIII-XLIV/1992-1993, Београд 1994, 64-65; Eadem, *The Ceramic Reliefs of the Vinica Kale*, Skopje 1995, 152-162; Eadem, *Виничките теракоти*, Скопје 2000, 50-52; Eadem, *The Vinica Mystery. The Ceramic Treasuries of a Late Antique Fortress*, Vinica 2012, 231-241; Eadem, *The Ceramic Relief Plaques from Vinica*, Skopje 2016, 11.

¹² J. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, London 1974, 68.

George, etc.), gained a portrait of a monstrous mail figure composed of a human body and animalistic face of a wild canine. Allegedly, this was due to his origin from the tribe of Kinocephali, i.e. to his ugliness and presumable birth in the land of the cannibals¹³, a phenomenon adopted by ecclesiastical literature and put in circulation at the turn of the 5th century. Being convinced in his Christian belief, the dog-headed savage was baptized and given a Christian name, human tongue and facility of speech which enabled him for missionary work¹⁴. Accordingly, the canine-like appearance of Saint Christopher in the Early Christian artistic depictions could be ascribed to the eccentric cult of the saint configured both by oriental legends and church authors. Therefore, the association of Saint Christopher to the Egyptian god of the Underworld – Anubis, as well as to Hermanubis - the Hellenistic deity of sepulchral rituals, is not surprising if one bears in mind their animalistic facial features linked to the chthonic character of their eschatological roles. Since the function of the terracotta plaques from Vinica is, by all means, of a funeral nature¹⁵, the dog-like figure of Saint Christopher was most probably chosen as the most appropriate iconographic feature for depiction of his specific funerary role. Moreover, in the representation from Vinica, Saint Christopher formidable as he is, pierces the head of another creature, this time a man-like serpent¹⁶. Holding a monumental cross



Fig. 6, Saint Georges at Kurbinovo, Narrowing of Hell
Сл. 6 Свети Ђорђе у Курбинову, Силазак у пакао

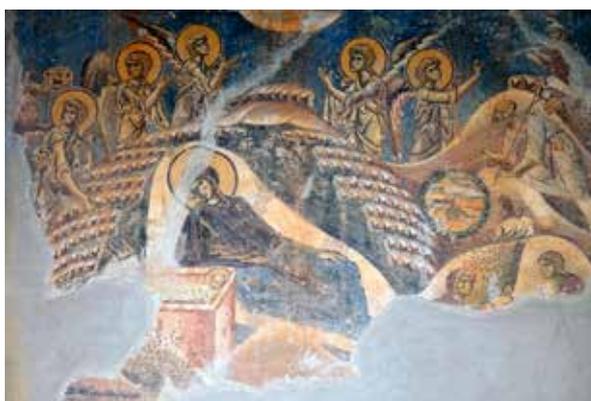


Fig. 7, Saint Georges at Kurbinovo, The Nativity
Сл. 7 Свети Ђорђе у Курбинову, Рађање Христа

¹³ J. Поповић, *Житија светих за мај*, Београд 1974, 219.

¹⁴ Christophorus, in: *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie 5 (Ikonographie der Heiligen, Aaron – Crescentianus von Rom)*, ed. Herder, Rom – Freiburg – Basel – Wien 1973, col. 497.

¹⁵ E. Dimitrova, *The Ceramic Reliefs of the Vinica Kale*, 204-212; Eadem, *The Vinica Mystery. The Ceramic Treasures of a Late Antique Fortress*, 255-269.

¹⁶ E. Dimitrova, *The Terracotta Relief Plaques from Vinica*, Fig. 12; Eadem, *The Ceramic Reliefs of the Vinica Kale*, Fig. 19; Eadem, *Виничките теракоти*, Т. XXVI; Eadem,

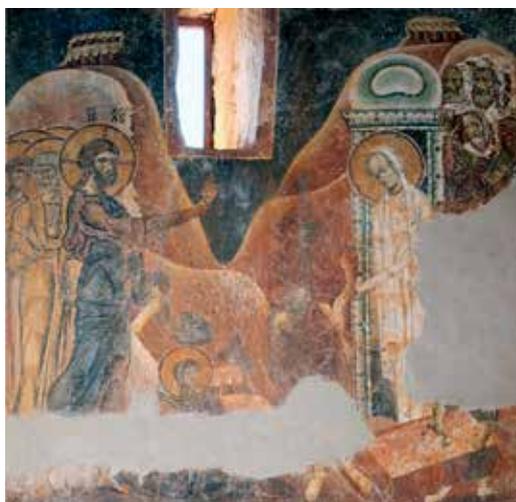


Fig. 8, Saint Georges at Kurbinovo, Raising of Lazarus

Сл 8 Свети Ђорѓе у Курбинову, Васкрсење Лазара

and a lance as a weapon against the chthonic enemy, Saint Christopher is, by all means, represented as a Christian soldier fighting the dark forces of evil; only, in this case, the evil has a human face, while the dog-headed saint is a transvestite of an animal origin into a figure of a mail individual. Being a unique specimen of an extraordinary, highly eccentric and inimitable visual representation, this Vinica depiction of Saint Christopher's image testifies to the border-line iconographic patterns generated within the hyperactive and highly unpredictable artistic character of Macedonia Paleocristiana.

One of the most intriguing examples, in regard to its *sui generis* format, is the so called *Lady X*¹⁷ of the Komani—Kruje culture (Fig. 4). This idiosyncratic anthropomorphic representation depicted on the rondela pendant dated in the 7th-8th centuries is undoubtedly a paramount of

scientific research since it has no identical parallels and analogies in the given time and space of the Byzantine Empire. It has no identical counterparts even within the very culture to which it belongs.¹⁸ Thus, in an effort to demystify this *femme fatale*, our attention focalized on written sources and material culture, both *ante* and *post quem* the artifact itself, pivoting the examination around the matrix of the depiction. The posture of this *beautiful creature* is associative of the female deities whose paradigms can be traced in the beginning of time. In

The Vinica Mystery. The Ceramic Treasuries of a Late Antique Fortress, Figs on pp. 232, 233; Eadem, *The Ceramic Relief Plaques from Vinica*, Figs. on p. 10.

¹⁷ "Lady X" is a reference given by the author of this paper. The rondela pendant has been discovered as a grave find at the archaeological site of St. Erasmus near Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia, but the results and conclusions of these excavations were only scarcely published, mainly as reports or catalogue reviews, see: В. Маленко, *Раносредновековната материјална култура во Охрид и Охридско*, Охрид и Охридско низ историјата, ИНИ, книга I, Скопје, 1985.

¹⁸ For the ethnical and culturological origins of the Komani-Kruje culture see: Lj. Dzidrova, *The Komani-Kruje Culture – Another View. An Attempt for the definition of a Culture and an Ethnic Group as a Contribution to the Political Administration of the Balkans in the Early Middle Ages, 300-305*, in Papers from the EAA Third Annual Meeting at Ravenna 1997, Volume I: Pre- and Protohistory, (ed. By M. Pearce and M. Tosi) BAR International Series 717, 1998; For the scarce data concerning the archaeological excavations, context and morphology of the rondela pendant, see E. Манева, *Средновековен накит од Македонија*, Скопје, 1992, 182; For the origins and analogies of the pendant, with accent on the Carpathian nomad influences of the anthropomorphic representation, as well as for one similar analogy discovered at the site of Derjan, Mati in Albania, see: Eadem, *Средновековен накит од Македонија*, Скопје, 1992, 32-33.

Fig. 9, Site of Markovi
Kuli, Varosh, Prilep,
Golden earrings
Сл. 9 Локалитет
Маркових кула у
Вароши код Прилепа,
Златне наушнице



these circumstances, having in mind the chronological, religious and the cultural time-frame of the Komani-Kruje rondela pendant, one possible attribution of the female representation appears to be the *daimona* (spirit) *Genetyllis*¹⁹. The given nomenclature comes from an entry in a later source i.e. the 10th century *Suda* (*Souda*), but it is quite plausible that the notion of the *Genetyllis* was present prior to the actual compilation of the written encyclopedic source. The *Suda* associated the *Genetyllis* with *Aphrodite* and *Eileitheia*, the second being frequently related to *Hera*, *Artemis* and *Hecata* in the Greek Pantheon. *Eileitheia*, the presumed Minoan effigy of earlier procreation goddesses became a goddess of childbirth and midwifery in Ancient Greece. Thus she received an important role in the religious cult, as well as in matters in everyday life. When depicted, she is usually represented in a kind of an *orans* pose, with her hands raised in the air as if she is about to receive the newborn child.

The following layer of the analogical *stance* analyses of the rondela pendant brings forward a somewhat closer chronotope. Namely, the relatively stylized appearance of this *beautiful creature* brings her very close to the written remarks embodying the Slavic Pantheon. She resembles *the tall one with long arms* of the Old Kievan Pantheon²⁰, described as the spinner of the life's thread, nurturer of good fortune, guardian of child's birth, and protector of woman's work and destiny. It is quite intriguing that this remarkable example of the material culture shows layers of both ancient and co-temporary pagan influences, intertwined and invested with notions that can never be fully demystified. Thus, in an effort to decrypt the abstract contents of the elusive feminine representation by analyzing the assets of the community that incarnated her, it would probably be most appropriate to say that this object belonged to the "Byzantinized" cultural layer of the community, where by *Byzantinized* we refer to the close interchange among the peoples settling these territories and the Byzantine tradition in the very same. In a degree, this is undoubtedly one of the ambiguous features of the early Byzantine 'civic life', a time when the ancient and pagan female deities and allegories were still necessary for the emphasizing of certain secular principles, as well as a time when the Empire gave way to the culturological ex-

¹⁹ The *Suda* or *Souda* is a massive 10th century Byzantine encyclopedia of the Mediterranean world, written in Greek and encompassing ca 30.000 entries, many drawing from ancient sources; see *SUDA entry gamma 141: Γενετυλλίς* (*Genetullis, genetyllis*), <http://www.stoa.org/sol-entries/gamma/141>.

²⁰ *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, (trans. and ed. by S. Hazzard Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz Wetzor) Cambridge Massachusetts, The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953.



Fig. 10, Site of Gorno Orizari, Kocani, Golden earrings

Сл. 10 Локалитет Горно Оризари код Кочана, Златне наушнице



Fig. 11, Site of Gorno Orizari, Kocani, Golden earrings

Сл. 11
Локалитет
Горно Оризари
код Кочана,
Златне
наушнице

change and inclusiveness of the non-Christian neighbors.²¹ There is no dilemma - Christianity changed the attitude toward procreation, subordinating instinct to celibacy, although at the same time the woman's prestige as a wife and mother accelerated. However, despite the official condemnation, Byzantium retained and perpetuated many pre-Christian beliefs in facilitating the desirable effect, especially when faced with medical expertise²². At an overall it seems that this *Lady X* incarnated the ultimate force of life, fertility and wellbeing, the attributes of which have later been invested in the supreme female principle of the Christian pantheon, the Virgin, as well as in other locally venerated female saints.²³

The Hyperborean feathered quadruped, the antique guardian of mountains with gems and precious stones, the protector of the deceased in the after-life, the royal and armorial synkrisis of the medieval elite, the anachronic griffin²⁴ is the next *beautiful creature* in the time-space continuum of our research. The following 10th century example of a bronze belt buckle, discovered at the archaeological site of Devol, Drenovo in Republic of Macedonia, depicts a lion-griffin clutching a smaller animal (Fig. 5)²⁵. Undoubtedly, the image is a picto-

²¹ E. A. Gittings, *Women as Embodiments of Civic Life*, in *Byzantine Woman and Their World*, (ed. by I. Kalavrezou), Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2003, 35-66.

²² J. Spier, *Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets and Their Tradition*, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 56, 1993, 25-62.

²³ E. A. Gittings, *Women as Embodiments of Civic Life*, in *Byzantine Woman and Their World*, (ed. by I. Kalavrezou), Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2003, 35-66

²⁴ For the origin and meaning of the Griffin in different cultures and civilizations see *Encyclopedia Britannica* (online) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/griffin-mythological-creature>; J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant, *Rjecnik simbola*, Kisa, Stylos, 2004, 249-250.

²⁵ For the Byzantine production of belt ornaments and their function as transfers of cultural and technological elements among the non-Christian neighbors and federates of the Empire see: F. Daim, *Byzantine Belt Ornaments of the 7th and 8th centuries in Avar Contexts*, in *Ineligible Beauty*, *Recent Research on Byzantine Jewelry*, British Museum Research Publi-

rial device of ranking. The griffin motif appeared on Byzantine imperial costumes, on “robes of honor” bestowed upon generals or other military officers, on diplomatic gifts and even on ecclesiastical objects²⁶. This *beautiful creature* of the Asian mythology infiltrated Byzantine art and reached the Balkan area in the 10th century, a time co-temporary of the belt buckle itself. In the case of the artifact the depiction of the griffin appears at the time of the expansions of Emperors Simeon’s and Samuil’s states²⁷. Whether a devise of military, administrative or culturological rank the image nonetheless articulates an emblem of some sort, just like the belt itself denotes a position – social, economic or ruling one.²⁸ Thus, we can presume that the griffin appears as a substitution of an *order/strata* still not identified within the emporium of medieval Devol, but definitely existent in the Byzantine/Byzantinized socio-culturological stratification and its complex system which followed the geostrategic and economical aspirations of the empire, as well as of the empire’s adversary states under the Byzantine domain. Evidently discernible of this commission, the griffin belt buckle will undoubtedly receive greater attention and elaboration in the future researches aimed at the prominence of this particular motif on similar media in the material culture.

The next example belongs to the mid-Byzantine painting of Macedonian fresco treasury and can be found within the extraordinary painterly panorama executed in the church dedicated to Saint George at the village of Kurbinovo in 1191²⁹. Among the many iconographic novelties of this remarkable fresco ensemble, the breakthrough of the Melismos scene as the earliest iconographic ex-

cation 178, The Trustees of the British Museum, 2010 (ed. By C. Entwistle and N. Adams); For the basic information concerning the geo-historical context of the chronology of the belt buckle, as well as the basic information concerning the place of origin see: И. Микучиќ, *Средновековни градови и тврдини во Македонија*, Скопје, МАНУ, 1996, 33-34.

²⁶ For the emblematic and heraldic recognition of the griffin motif on other media of high, even imperial rank see: A. Muthesius, *Textiles as Text*, in *Wonderful Things: Byzantium through its Art*, Papers from the Forty-second Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, London, 20-29 March, 2009, ed. by A. Eastmond and L. James, Ashgate, 2013, 185-202.

²⁷ For the geo-political situation on the Balkan peninsula in this period see: J. Fine, *The Early Medieval Balkans, A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1983.

²⁸ The importance and the symbolical meaning of the belt as a dress accessory, as well as the strict protocol of its ranking and emblematic usage are mentioned in several sources: the Latin panegyric *In Laudem Iustini* written by Corippus to celebrate Emperor’s Justin II’s ascent to the throne; in *Theophylacti Simocattae Historia*; in the *Vita of Theodore of Sykeon*; in the *Tractates* and in the *Administrando Imperii* written by Constantine VII Phorphyrogenitus, etc. For more elaborate discourse of these mentions see: F. Daim, *Byzantine Belt Ornaments of the 7th and 8th centuries in Avar Contexts*, in *Ineligible Beauty, Recent Research on Byzantine Jewelry*, British Museum Research Publication 178, The Trustees of the British Museum, 2010 (ed. By C. Entwistle and N. Adams), 61-62.

²⁹ L. Hadermann-Misguish, *Les fresques de saint Georges et la peinture byzantine du XII siècle*, Bruxelles 1975; A. J. Wharton, *Art of Empire. Painting and Architecture of the Byzantine Periphery. A Comparative Study of Four Provinces*, University Park and London, 1988, 123-126; Ц. Грозданов - Л. Хадерман-Мисгвиш, *Курбиново*, Скопје 1992; Ц. Грозданов, *Курбиново и други студии за фрескоживописот во Преспа*, Скопје 2006, 21-123; E. Dimitrova, *The Church of Saint George at Kurbinovo*, Skopje 2016.



Fig. 12, Saint Nicholas Šiševski, Architectonic decoration

Сл. 12 Свети Никола Шишевски, Архитектонска декорација

ample known so far³⁰, the “age sensitivity” of the depicted Biblical episodes³¹, as well as the picturesque genre details of the compositions³² are the most remarkable ones. However, “less important” components of the iconographic configuration of the depicted vistas were not omitted by the vigilant sense for eccentric detailing of the Kurbinovo painter, as well. In that regard, this paper aims at disclosure of a tiny element of the scenery arrangement applied by this outstanding and highly elusive “master of arts” within the visual skeleton of the composition depicting the Harrowing of Hell (Fig. 6). Namely, in the backdrop of the scene, behind the images of Adam and Eve, there is a mountain as an element of the landscape which has metamorphosized into a face of an old man, with a long beard, open mouth and swollen eyes³³. Represented in the upper corner of the scene, close to the edge of the composition, it remained unnoticed by most of the scholars; some of them, however, came up with an idea that this “mountain face” symbolizes the image of Hades, the lord of the Underworld, defeated by the resurrection of Christ³⁴. Seriously elaborated with a number of comparative specimens from the mid-Byzantine period, this idea, by all means, deserves significant scholarly attention. Still, if we canvas the compositions

³⁰ Sh. E. J. Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries. Program of the Byzantine Sanctuary*, Seattle and London 1999, 91-92; E. Dimitrova, “*The Da Vinci Mode*” – *Unsolved Mysteries of Macedonian Medieval Fresco Painting*, Niš & Byzantium Eight Symposium. The Collection of Scientific Works VIII, Niš 2010, 250-251.

³¹ The Visitation, The Nativity and the image of St. Helene being but a few examples of painter’s delicate taste for depiction of the real age of the saintly characters.

³² The Nativity, The Entry in Jerusalem, The Resurrection of Lazarus, The Baptism being some of the examples of inclusion of exquisite genre components in the illustration of synoptic compositions.

³³ S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L’arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, Milano 2006, 80.

³⁴ D. Georgievski, *Mysterious Mountain of Kurbinovo*, Byzantion 85, Bruxelles 2015, 70-76.

of the cycle depicting the Festal and Passion events in Kurbinovo's decorative program, we will find out that such metamorphosized mountains have "inhabited" other scenes, as well, such are: The Nativity (Fig. 7), The Raising of Dead Lazarus (Fig. 8), The Deposition etc, where Hades has no leading role in the depicted story, nor a supporting one, whatsoever³⁵. Having in mind the exceptional, highly allusive and visually explosive painterly vocabulary of the leading Kurbinovo master³⁶, we are more inclined towards the notion of the associative mountain being a component of the symbolic aspect of the scenery, rather than of the ideological one. Thus, we believe that the bearded mountain portrait is more due to the illusionistic artistic idiolect of the master, highly inventive and unpredictable, than to the projection of an allegoric symbolism taken from the scriptures and hidden in the background of the scene.

In the vast repertoire of forms, precious materials and unique ornaments of the Late Byzantine jewelry pieces discovered on the territory of Republic of Macedonia, our attention was attracted to a specific type of earrings, defined as *'zracesti'* [ray-shaped]. This type of earrings has been discovered at couple of sites in Republic of Macedonia. The discovered pairs of earrings are dated in the 14th century and represent unique pieces of the luxurious refinement of the Late Byzantine elite (Fig 9, 10, 11).³⁷ The sociological rank, the culturological prestige and the artistic perfection denoted by the luxurious earrings are not at question. On this occasion we focus on the obscure secret contained in these pieces of jewelry. Namely, the decorative matrixes of these beautiful examples of Byzantine luxurious earrings hide within their delightful appearance an ancient creature, reputed to be the progeny of Medusa itself – the creature that *Pliny the Elder* described as able to "move both ways" the *Amphisbaena*. Known as the worm lizard or the Serpent of Hell with a dog-like heads whose eyes "glow like candles" in Medieval bestiaries³⁸, the origin of this beautiful creature can be traced back to the Greek mythology.³⁹ The *Amphisbaena* was believed to have spawned from the blood that dripped from the head of the Gorgon Medusa. *Pliny the Elder* described it as a creature that "had a twin head, that is one at the tail end as well, as though it was not enough for the poison to be poured out of one mouth". *Pliny* also recorded the medical properties of this creature, where the wearing of an *Amphisbaena* was supposed to safeguard pregnancy. This enchanting creature was believed to increase the person's allure, captivating the senses and seducing the opposite gender, while also granting remarkable powers to the master-wearer. The *Amphisbaena* was reputed to have amazing regenerative abilities in welding itself back together if its two sections were severed. Therefore, it appears that the Byzantine *prêt-a-porter* si-

³⁵ Ц. Грозданов – Ј. Хадерман-Мисгвиш, *Курбиново*, Figs. 38, 39, 42, 51; E. Dimitrova, *The Church of Saint George at Kurbinovo*, Figs on pp. 18, 22

³⁶ E. Dimitrova, E. Dimitrova, "The Da Vinci Mode" – *Unsolved Mysteries of Macedonian Medieval Fresco Painting*, 251-253; Eadem, *Cuia Culpa? Lapses and Misdemeanors of Medieval Artist in Macedonia*, Niš & Byzantium Twelfth Symposium. The Collection of Scientific Works XII, Niš 2014, 301-303.

³⁷ E. Манева, *Средновековен накит од Македонија, Скопје*, 1992, 59-60

³⁸ The Medieval Bestiary (on line), <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast144.htm>

³⁹ See the online sources <http://www.theoi.com/Thaumasios/Amphisbainai.html>

multaneously engaged both the actual and the allegorical zoo-morphology, thus creating a unique laconic and yet multilayered iconography. We believe that the concept of this ancient mythological creature and especially its supernatural domain as a prophylactic device has not been forgotten and its continuity can be seen in other examples of the material culture pre-dating the luxurious sets of earrings. Namely, the traces of this composite being are also found on a type of bracelets morphologically defined as *'lentesti'* [stripe-like]. One such example is dated in the 12th century and once again it is closely connected to a female carrier. Although the artistic elaboration of this example as well as the preciousness of the material are not in the realm of the *'luxurious'*, still the decorative matrix unambiguously catches the mystical amphisbaena, this time among the common class of the society.

The last example in our investigation of aesthetically unattractive, yet highly iconic depictions of peculiar creatures of Macedonian medieval treasury is the decoration of the south façade of the church dedicated to Saint Nicholas at the village of Šiševo, in the region of Matka near Skopje (60ties of the 14th century)⁴⁰. Inserted into the façade, beneath the semi-circular arch, there is a marble plate with a relief execution of a composition in which two lions have been joined in a single creature with a human face and an imperial crown⁴¹ (Fig. 12). Although not unique in the decorative assortment of motifs and ornaments used for embellishment of medieval products usually represented on flags, aristocratic banners and/or coats of arms of western nobility⁴², this feline image can be also found as an ornamentation of luxurious Byzantine jewelry⁴³. Composed of two bodily systems united by a single portrait of a crowned ruler, the picture of the chimeric creature executed on the façade of Saint Nicholas Šiševski church can be discussed, as we have already noticed in the existing literature, in more than one way: as a remnant of an older pagan symbolism that for whatever reasons remained alive until the end of the medieval period⁴⁴, or as a picture of an apocalyptic nature that for purposes undisclosed was depicted on a façade wall of an unidentified endowment⁴⁵. However, one has to bear in mind that the remnants of the original fresco painting executed in the interior and dated

⁴⁰ К. Петров, *Преглед на сакралните споменици во Скопје и околината од IX до XIX век*, Споменици за средновековната и поновата историја на Македонија I, Скопје 1975, 83-84; В. Лилчиќ, *Матка низ вековите*, Скопје 1995, 99-108; Е. Димитрова, В. Лилчиќ, К. Антевска, А. Василески, *Матка. Културно наследство*, Охрид 2011, 200-232.

⁴¹ К. Петров, *Декоративната пластика на спомениците од XIV век во Македонија*, Годишен зборник на Филозофскиот факултет 15, Скопје 1963, 280-281; В. Лилчиќ, *Матка низ вековите*, 100-102, Сл. 55; Е. Димитрова, В. Лилчиќ, К. Антевска, А. Василески, *Матка. Културно наследство*, 210-213.

⁴² Т. Robson, *The British Herald. Cabinet of Armorial Bearings of the Nobility*, Oxford 1830, 233, 315.

⁴³ *Heaven and Earth: Art of Byzantium in Greek Collections*, Catalogue of the National Archaeological Museum Athens, Athens 2013, 23, Catalogue No. 151.

⁴⁴ Н. Чаусидис, *Митските слики на јужните Словени*, Скопје 1994, 374; В. Лилчиќ, *Матка низ вековите*, 100-102.

⁴⁵ К. Петров, *Декоративната пластика на спомениците од XIV век во Македонија*, 280-281.

in the 60ties of the 14th century, bear traditional features similar to some of the ensembles attributed to monastic ateliers⁴⁶. Although the identity of the khetor of Saint Nicholas Šiševski and the social dimension of his commissionership have remained completely undetected, the architecture of the church, as well as the preserved portions of the painterly decoration speak in favour of a modest endowment, produced by a member of the middle class nobility with a taste for ascetic artistic expression⁴⁷.

Therefore, we doubt the idea that the commissioner of the mentioned social rank and ideological configuration would incline towards the alternative religious horizons and/or decorative patterns characteristic of Bogomilism⁴⁸ or prefer ornamental patterns found in the catalogue of Romanesque designs⁴⁹. Being a central motif of the plaque which encompasses other zoomorphic images arranged around the oculus, the “twin-figured lion king” dominates as an iconographic axis of the executed relief decoration. Its position and modeling, as well as the situation of the plate beneath the massive arch visually configured under the dome of the edifice, implies a different significance than the one suggested by the archaeologists. Elevated in the highest register of the façade, which represents a meeting point of the dome as a crown of the church and the architectural corpus of the edifice as its main body (composed of two unities: a single-nave eastern church and a western cruciform narthex), the *theriomorphic* decoration of Saint Nicholas Šiševski temple embellished the crucial joint of the visually sensible structural unification and was represented as a decorative motif of a heraldic origin, quite frequent in Byzantium and medieval West with an allusion to the unity of power both celestial, as well as terrestrial⁵⁰. As this last example, as well as all the previously mentioned ones have shown, Byzantine artism had a specific visual format - fundamentally formal and yet, by all means, fantastic and provocatively allusive. It has never abandoned the language of symbols, of denotative and connotative meanings invested into depictions of seemingly usual repertoire. Hence, the examples that have been encompassed by this paper are considered *sine qua non* of Byzantine multiculturalism and inclusiveness of *Ρωμικη* encyclopedic comprehensiveness. They signify idiosyncrasy, allusiveness, provocation, visual enigma and aesthetic experience, as well.

⁴⁶ С. Радојчић, *Старо српско сликарство*, Београд 1966, 155-156.

⁴⁷ Е. Димитрова, В. Лилчиќ, К. Антевска, А. Василески, *Матка. Културно наследство*, 219.

⁴⁸ Н. Чаусидис, *Дуалистички слики. Богомилството во медиумот на сликата*, Скопје 2003, 179.

⁴⁹ К. Петров, *Декоративната пластика на спомениците од XIV век во Македонија*, 280-281.

⁵⁰ F. Dvornik, *Emperors, Popes and General Councils*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 6, Washington DC 1951, 1-23; D. J. Geanakoplos, *Church and State in the Byzantine Empire: A Reconsideration of the Problem of Caesaropapism*, *Church History* Vol. 34/4, Cambridge University Press 1965, 381-403.

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ПРЕЛЕПА БИЋА: МАКЕДОНИЈА КАО “ВРТ ЗЕМАЉСКОГ УЖИВАЊА”

Полазећи од многоструког иконографског и симболичног значења необичних бића приказаних у оквиру триптиха *Врт земаљског уживања* генијалног Хиеронима Боша, циљ овог рада био је тумачење “најатрактивнијих” узорака необичних композиција представљених у материјалној и ликовној култури средњовековне ризнице македонског наслеђа. У том контексту, изабрали смо примерке фантастичних бића убачених у иконографски концепт сцена у оквиру фреско сликарства, рељефне декорације, накита и архитектонске орнаментике споменика на подручју данашње Македоније из периода IV до XIV столећа. Анализирајући њихово програмско, визуелно, симболичко и естетско значење, дошли смо до следећих закључака: да је пацов приказан међу фрескама Епископске базилике у Стобима (IV век) најстарији жанр мотив у историји хришћанског сликарства, да је свети Христифор са фунерарне керамичке плоче из Винеце (почетак VI века) можда најстарији примерак анималистичког изгледа овог светитеља и да је човеколика планина у сцени Христовог силаска у пакао из Курбинова уствари инструмент илузионистичког сликарског поступка курбиновског зографа. Даље, *рондела* као примерак специфичне Комани-Крује културе (VII-VIII века) је аутентични примерак синергије између византијске традиције и паганског наслеђа словенског веровања, док је појасни језичац са представом грифона уникатни примерак сталешких ознака припадника виших феудалних кругова из времена X столећа. Вероватно један од најкарактеристичних мотива у оквиру материјалне културе високог средњег века на македонском подручју је вешто сакривени облик магичне *амфисбаене* у декоративној обради зракастих наушница из XIV века, које су украшавале ликове најеминентнијих дама високе владајуће класе. Са друге стране, декорација јужне фасаде цркве манастира Светог Николе у Шишеву, израђене у виду плоче са представом крунисаног краља са два лавља тела, приказана је као хералдички симбол уједињене владајуће моћи небеског и земаљског карактера. И све то у оквиру специфичног визуелног формата византијских мајстора, илустративног и илуминативног, фантастичног и провокативног, тајанственог и конотативног.