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**SEVEN SNAKES: UNPUBLISHED 19TH CENTURY BAPTISM
OF CHRIST ICON OF THE TRYAVNA SCHOOL
IN BULGARIA**

Abstract: This paper deals with the iconographic type of the Baptism of Christ. Seen from a wide enough time perspective, it turns out to be - despite the conciseness of its fundamental structure - reasonably complex. And it has undergone a remarkable evolution. There are, therefore, many features that could be studied through this long process of more than a thousand years. However, the one that focused our attention was that of the seven snakes appearing, at a certain time (era) and place (geographical context), beneath the slab where the Redeemer stands in the middle of the Jordan. To address this specific topic, at first, a basic sequence of milestones on the type has been established. In this way, a broad chronological spectrum allows an approach to the type over time. Then, addressing the geographical area in which the seven snakes exist (as well as the stage in which this topic is developed), a zoom has been made on outstanding icons in Bulgaria. As the next step, a first half of the 19th century unpublished icon from the Tryavna Icon Painting School, Bulgaria, in a private collection in Barcelona, has been described. This icon has been assigned to the Master of the Church of The Dormition of the Mother of God in Lesura. It was the starting point to led us to consider the seven snakes item. As a fourth section in this paper, this icon has been placed in the proper context thanks to the contribution of similar images: related icons (seven snakes). And, finally, a certain development about snakes has been carried out to allow a better understanding of the theological context in which the topic of the seven snakes could be framed.

Keywords: Seven snakes, Baptism icon, Tryavna art school, Seven-headed snake/dragon, Cheirograph.

Milestones on the topic

The first of the five sections of this paper aims at a basic but consistent approach to some relevant works of the antique iconography related to the Baptism of Christ type. Keeping in mind its evolution over time, considered its antiquity, provides a framework in which later considerations can be conveniently placed.



Fig. 1 Icon of the Baptism of our Lord, Tryavna Icon Painting School, Bulgaria, first half of the 19th century, 31.5x23cm, which was probably displayed in the Great Feasts row of an iconostasis.

Сл. 1. Икона Крштења Христовог, Триавнска иконописна школа, Бугарска, прва половина XIX века, 31,5x23cm, која је вероватно била изложена у реду Великих Празника иконостаса.

In this sense, the first work to be considered is the metal Baptism of Christ of Sagolasheni, Church of the Dormition of the Virgin (East Georgia), 10th - 11th centuries, gilded silver, 30.5x35 cm, Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts¹. Since a lot of our attention is going to be devoted to the river, the facts that the water level covers the lower half of Christ (a little below the waist) and that five fish are shown swimming in the most natural way are highlighted. Therefore, it is a simple and naturalistic approach.

Another work, this time on wood, is a detail of an icon from the Saint Catherine's Monastery collection in Sinai²: right wing of a triptych, Baptism and Anastasis (verso: Saint Damian), 10th century, 28x8.6x1.3 cm³. Following the proposed argument line, in this very simple image the whole body of the Saviour can be guessed, submerged in a very schematic river, in which some slight undulations simulating small waves are shown. And, besides Saint John and the two angels on either side, not much else can be seen. So, nude body and nude river.

¹ N. Burchuladze, *100 ქართული ხატები 100 Georgian Icons*, Tbilisi, 2023, 29.

² Since this Monastery houses the most important collection of ancient icons in existence and many of them are documented on the website of The Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai, we will now consider a series of six items that are especially useful for showing the evolution referred to above.

³ <https://www.sinaiaarchive.org/s/mpa/item/12119#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-2017%2C394%2C5260%2C2591> (03/10/2024) Courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai.



Fig. 2 „He who welcomes the mystery and blesses humanity“, showing his right arm crossed at a right angle over his chest. The main alternative position is raising that right hand towards the Baptist, blessing him.

Сл. 2. „Онај који прихвата Тајну и благосиља човечанство“, показујући своју десну руку прекрштену под правим углом преко груди. Главни положај је подизање десне руке према Крститељу, благосиљајући Га.

A third icon, from the Saint Catherine's Monastery collection in Sinai, a templon epistyle with Twelve Feast Scenes, 12th century, panel height a little over 40 cm⁴, shows an image which is much less limited by the lack of space (compared to the previous one) and slightly more evolved: in addition to a nude full body Christ (transparent perizonium) and imperceptible clear calm waters, there is the novelty of a male personification of the river, as well as a Calvary Cross. Both elements appear on the lower left margin of the river.

The next board we pay attention to is the right-side door (Baptism, Pentecost, and Koimesis) of a tetrptych about the Twelve Feasts, 12th century, from the Saint Catherine's Monastery collection in Sinai⁵. In this case, the general iconographic type gains in complexity although, in relation to the river and the central character, a basic proposal is still forwarded: Christ virtually naked, surrounded by a water whirlpool nearly up to the neck, in which no other element can be seen. A fancy and unique solution to combine both elements⁶.

⁴ <https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/16443#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-371%2C0%2C4341%2C2138> (03/10/2024) Courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai.

⁵ <https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/10723#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-776%2C-102%2C2309%2C1137> (03/10/2024) Courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai. Also, in: K. A. Manafis, *Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, Athens, 1990, 158.

⁶ We were able to appreciate the mastery and size of this piece in the display cases set up for this purpose in the narthex of the Catholicon of Saint Catherine's Monastery during our visit in December 2017.

The following work is the first that could be considered (*stricto sensu*) as a single type icon, in addition to having been widely reproduced, and therefore so spread and well-known. It is the 13th century Baptism in Saint Catherine's Monastery collection in Sinai, 33.5x23.2 cm⁷. It is a reference icon, thematically austere, in which the most basic of the iconographic type is represented on a wide golden background that, together with the frame, conveys a special feeling of nakedness/horror vacui. The Central Character is shown totally naked in the middle of the river that seems to be behind Him rather than around Him. In this river, four schematic red fish and a Calvary Cross of the same colour are shown.

Another third quarter of the 13th century Sinai panel, part of a Twelve Feasts' epistyle, with Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation of the Lord, and Baptism, shows a scene of the Baptism⁸ where, despite a wider developing of the mountain landscapes in the background, the canon that distinguishes the icons that have been discussed so far is maintained: simplicity in the approach to the central scene (nude body and nude river/some fish?).

A final (of the series of six) icon of Sinai, a Baptism in one of the three panels of the Feasts, 14th century, Saint Catherine's Monastery collection in Sinai⁹, takes the iconographic type a step further: although the figure of Christ is shown starkly naked (without the slightest sense of immersion), in a prominent central position, occupying a large part of the space of the river; two personifications of the Jordan River are shown, one on each side of the Saviour's feet, in addition to some animated aquatic creatures slightly above them.

In a sudden change of register (in space and time), we leave Sinai and go to Mount Athos. Without a doubt, another great place of reference if we want to establish the milestones of a chronological sequence for the iconographic type of Baptism. In this case, we proceed to consider a couple of works. The first one is a Baptism in the Protaton, 16th century, 31.8x46.7 cm¹⁰, which is defined, first of all and by comparison with all the previous items, by the spectacular chromaticity (colour range) of mountains, river (deep blue), and clothing of the angels. In addition, Christ covers his nakedness with a perfect perizonium. And, the two personifications of the river are consolidated, on either side of the feet of the Son of God, while seven red fishes swim above them. And the second one, also a Baptism in the Protaton, 1611, 76x38 cm¹¹, represents a further step in the proposed development. Christ wears his delicate white perizonium, now

⁷ <https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/16474#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-2422%2C-1%2C7306%2C3600> (04/10/2024) Courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai. Also, in: H. C. Evans, *Trésors du Monastère de Sainte-Catherine Mont Sinai Égypte*, Athens, 2004, 73-77; C. Rossi, *Les trésors du Monastère Sainte-Catherine*, Vercelli, 2006, 142; and K. A. Manafis, *op. cit.*, 195.

⁸ <https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/16408#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=0%2C-131%2C4000%2C1970> (04/10/2024) Courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai. Also, in: H. C. Evans, *op. cit.*, 78-83.

⁹ <https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/12117#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=21&xywh=-2422%2C-1%2C7306%2C3600> (04/10/2024) Courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai.

¹⁰ M. Vassilaki, *The Treasury of the Protaton, Volume II*, Mount Athos 2004, 138-139.

¹¹ M. Vassilaki, *op. cit.*, 161-162.

consolidated for ever (no more nakedness), and two important new features appear: a rocky base on which the body of the Son of God stands, as well as four snakes emerging from behind it. Around the figure of Jesus, in the water of the river, eleven basic fishes can be seen helping in defining the scene.

To conclude this first section on the approach to a certain historical sequence of the iconographic type of the Baptism of Christ, a couple of icons from Albania are considered. The first one is: Onufri, circa 1540, National Museum of Medieval Art, Korçë, Albania¹². In this icon, the rocky base on which the body of Jesus stands is perfectly shown, as well as five snakes emerging from behind it. In addition, there is a pair of personifications of the river riding large aquatic animals, and many other aquatic creatures, including bivalves. And, the second one is: Onufri Qiprioti, early 17th Century, National Institute of Cultural heritage, Tirana, Albania¹³. It is noteworthy that this icon displays a flat surface square geometric stand (stone slab/cheirograph)¹⁴ to support the body of the Savior. The name of Adam, the first man, is written, as a signature, on it. This element, which is here presented through this icon for the first time, will serve as a frame for the topic of snakes that is so closely linked to it. In fact, the scene shows four snakes coiled around the stone slab. Again, on either side and below it, two personifications of the river are shown, accompanied by all kinds of water creatures - one might even say marine ones (!) - among which a crab and an octopus stand out at the bottom.

In conclusion, to summarize the evolution of the Baptism of Christ type, comparing the Sinai icon (footnote 7) with Onufri's (footnote 12) could be suggesting.

¹² Y. Drishti, *The Byzantine and post-Byzantine icons in Albania*, Tirana, 2003, pl. 18; VV. AA., *Percorsi del Sacro, Icone dai musei albanesi*, Milán 2002, 126-127; M. Milella & T. Piccolo, *Santi sull'Adriatico. La circolazione iconica nel basso Adriatico*, Roma 2009, 70-71.

¹³ <https://www.gettyimages.at/detail/nachrichtenfoto/christ-baptism-by-onufri-qiprioti-begin-of-the-17th-nachrichtenfoto/461643507?adppopup=true> (09/10/2024); VV. AA., *Percorsi del Sacro*, op. cit., 60-61.

¹⁴ A. Gavrilović, "Contribution to the study of the scene of Baptism of Christ in Serbian medieval art with special interest in the church of Saint Nikita near Skoplje (around 1324; 1484)", *Holy king Milutin and his age: history, literature, art. Thematic collection of papers from the International Scientific Conference "King Milutin and the palaeologan age: history, literature, cultural heritage"*. Skopje, October 24-26, 2021, Kragujevac 2023, 733-761. "It is the first study of the issue of cheirograph in Baptism scenes in Serbian medieval art from its beginning until the end of the art done in the Byzantine tradition (1800)", 733. "In Serbian and Slavonic versions of the story, the Devil prevented Adam from tilling the soil until he agreed to sign a contract pledging the servitude to him. Adam and Eve having agreed to this, Satan brought a flat rock and recorded the contract on it. Adam put his "cheirograph" ("rukopisanje") on the rock testifying that he belonged to Satan. After Adam left his handprint on the stone, Satan rejoiced and placed the rock in the Jordan river", 735-736. We are extremely grateful to the author, not only for pointing out the existence of the paper, but also for her guidance during the discussion at the session of the Symposium.

Outstanding icons in Bulgaria

Having followed a historical sequence that makes it possible to understand that at a certain point (16th - 17th centuries) the model of the stone slab/cheirograph and the snakes was established, we proceed to follow this model in Bulgarian lands to show the consolidation of the type of the stone slab and the seven snakes. Therefore, one of the fundamental elements will be this one: the seven snakes.

In this sense, the first icon to be considered is the Baptism in the National Church Museum of History and Archaeology, Sofia, Bulgaria, 14th - 15th centuries (?)¹⁵, 50.5x34.4 cm¹⁶. This icon features a stone slab/rock from which seven rather filiform snakes emerge. This is therefore the first work in this paper where the number is this one.

A second Bulgarian image could be The Baptism of Christ, Church of St. Petka, Krapets, Pernik region, 17th century, National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia, Bulgaria¹⁷. It can be clearly seen that Christ stands on a regular square stone slab from which, presumably, seven worm-like snakes emerge (unfortunately, the lower margin could not be preserved and not all the snakes can be seen).

The next image is the Baptism of the Lord, double-sided icon (Prophet Jeremiah), Gabrovitsa, Ihtiman district (Pazardzhik region), 17th century, Exhibit of the month for November 2022, National Archaeological Institute with Museum Sofia, Bulgaria¹⁸. This is an icon that follows the tradition being studied. Unfortunately, its condition is not so good. Despite this fact, the regular square stone slab from which snakes appear can be seen. In paying specific attention to the slab and the snakes, it is quite similar to the previous image.

Let's now move to another icon: The Baptism of Our Lord, 17th century, 42x35cm, National Church Museum of History and Archaeology, Sofia, Bulgaria¹⁹. In this case, Christ stands practically on the frame, so that the base

¹⁵ Based on the solution to address the structure of the waters of the Jordan River in this icon, and considering the reasons that we argued to date a 17th century icon of Saint George, M. Gallés, "The others, from a horse. New 17th century Bulgarian icon of Saint George", *The Church and Otherness*, Sofia, 2024, 235-251, we would suggest that this icon is a late 16th century – early 17th century icon.

¹⁶ В. Пандурски, *Паметници на изкуството в Църковния музей – София*, Sofia, 1977, fig. 17, 388; VV. AA., *Feuer und Geist. 1000 Jahre bulgarische Ikonen*, Tübingen 2007, pl. 3, B-1.

¹⁷ This is a fresco, preserved and displayed in the Museum, which we were able to appreciate and take a picture during our visit in February 2024. <https://www.alamy.com/the-baptism-of-christ-mural-painting-from-the-church-of-st-petka-krapets-pernik-region-bulgaria-17th-century-national-archaeological-museum-sofia-bulgaria-image608950682.html> (10/10/2024)

¹⁸ <http://naim.bg/en/content/exhibits/28/> (10/10/2024)

¹⁹ А. Божков, *Българската икона*, Sofia 1984, pl. 124, 108, 190; А. Божков, *Тревненска живопис*, Sofia, 1967, 29. A curious analogy can be established between the waters of this icon and the beard of a Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, Bulgaria, tempera on wooden panel, early 17th century, 76.5x47.5 cm, Barcelona private collection (see M. Gallés, *op. cit.*, 248-249). This led us to propose this relationship in the context of the dating of icons



Fig. 3 The elegant prognathism of the face as a specific feature determinant for attributing the authorship of the work.

Сл.3. Елегантно обликовање лица као специфична карактеристика стила иконописца

stone slab is barely recognizable. However, seven worm-like snakes are clearly visible, perfectly aligned on either side of the Redeemer's legs. With this, the type becomes quite established.

It is the turn of another icon, that of the Baptism of Christ, Gorna Oryahovitsa, first half of the 17th century, 33.5x24.5 cm, National Art Gallery, Museum of Christian Art, The Crypt, Sofia, Bulgaria²⁰. The regular square stone slab is perfectly indicated (as in the case of the second and third Bulgarian icons) and, seven "dragon-like headed" (like in the Onufri Qiprioti icon) fili-form snakes are clearly visible, perfectly aligned on either side of Christ's legs.

The case of the following icon, The Baptism of Christ, 18th century, Bulgaria, Petit Palais, Paris²¹, serves as an exception to what has been shared lately. The waters of the Jordan River differ from the pattern that has been considered. And, for the purposes of our attention, the flat square stone slab just over the frame does not perfectly fit the pattern above. Finally, there are no snakes.

To conclude with this approach, The Baptism of Our Lord, Papa Vitan Tsonyuv, 179?, Historical Museum, Popovo, Bulgaria²², is going to be examined. This is an icon that deserves special attention as it anticipates a third level

with this pattern.

²⁰ K. Paskaleva, *Bulgarian Icons Through the Centuries*, Sofia 1987, pl. 76. The only reference to snakes that we have been able to find is in the brief description of this icon (corresponding „footnote“): „The master painter has depicted the usual composition of *The Baptism of Christ*, with Christ in the centre, standing on a slab, with the heads of snakes protruding under it - a symbol of triumph over evil“.

²¹ R. Ziadé, *Icones: Les arts chrétiens d'Orient au Petit Palais*, Paris 2017, 80-81. This is an icon which, according to the catalogue, comes from Bulgaria. We believe that, in light of what has been said about the Bulgarian icons of the Baptism of Christ, this work is different enough so as to be considered as such.

²² L. Tsaneva, *Tryavna icon painters*, Varna 2013, 112.

of approach to the icon that is intended to be described. It stands out in two main aspects: on the one hand, it is a clear example of the Tryavna Icon Painting School; and on the other, it shows the specific peculiarity of the most extremely filiform snakes (schematic, very much in line with one of the attributes of the School) that are being considered. In fact, we are getting quite near of the icon that we are intending to describe.

Description of the icon

This is a colourful icon of the Baptism of our Lord, Tryavna Icon Painting School, Bulgaria, first half of the 19th century, 31.5x23cm, Icon Collection in Barcelona, unpublished, which was probably displayed in the Great Feasts row of an iconostasis. Christ's figure, in the central position, standing on a flat stone slab from which seven filiform snakes with thin heads emerge, four on the left and three on the right, not only wears the corresponding perizonium, but is also covered with a cloak of the same design as the perizonium (nakedness goes on being covered up). The only angel (on the right) is in charge of carrying out this reverential task. On the left of the image, Saint John the Baptist holds a stylized cross with his left hand, while with his right hand he blesses/baptizes Jesus. The Redeemer is of the type "He who welcomes the mystery and blesses humanity", showing his right arm crossed at a right angle over his chest. In the specific case of this icon, the hand does not bless but welcomes and adores. The alternative position would be raising that right hand towards the Baptist, blessing him (Fig. 2).

The title of the scene is indicated in the upper margin: КРАЩЕНИЕ ХР(И)С(Т)ОВОУ²³, Baptism of Christ. This is the moment of the Epiphany. One of its specific iconographic traits is the presence (descent) of a dove, always associated with the Holy Spirit, descending from above. In this case, the dove carries its own smaller halo, from which "the light" that illuminates Christ comes out.

The faces of the characters are paradigmatic examples of the style of the Tryavna Icon Painting School in Bulgaria. In the image (Fig. 3) the progressive growth of the elegant prognathism of the face from right to left can be realized: while the angel has a round face, both Christ and especially St. John have developed chins. Being this specific feature determinant for attributing the authorship of the work, as will be seen later on.

Not to extend the description indefinitely, let us highlight another of the remarkable aspects of this icon: its striking background landscapes. A mere master's aesthetic effect? Or, simply, two different (vegetation) communities, with different orientations to the sun, on different geological nature grounds? It is certainly a daring step to leave the realm of aesthetics to enter that of science.

²³ We are indebted with Dr. Tereza Bacheva, Institute of Art Studies - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria, and Dr. Alexandra Trifonova, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Center for Slavo-Byzantine Studies "Prof. Ivan Dujcev", Sofia, Bulgaria, for their help in the transliteration and translation of both the title of the icon and the almost illegible back inscription: хуба'иль пе'чу с//у//рагануу or ХУБАНЪ ПЕГИТСОУ/АГАНОУЛОУ. We wonder if it has something to do with a certain John Pegitsou...

Fig. 4 The seven snakes in the icon being described.

Сл. 4. Седам змија на икони.



However, in our opinion²⁴, this is a beautiful example of the interpretation of the natural environment by the author, a first-degree evidence of the observational ability to capture the fundamental biological structures and reproduce them synthetically with the greatest genuineness. That means a milestone in “Natural History”, with the added circumstance of pretending nothing more than inducing believers in the veneration of the Baptism of Christ through an icon.

It is very suggesting to compare these images of the background landscapes with those of the icon in Plovdiv: Nativity (left background landscapes with Magi), 1837, Saedinenie, Plovdiv region Plovdiv Icon Gallery, City Art Gallery²⁵. The analogy is obvious.

Related icons (seven snakes)

At this point, the topic of the seven snakes (Fig. 4) and the authorship of the icon just described is addressed. So, we move on to consider a few icons that show the seven snakes’ type. This allows placing the specific subject being addressed into context.

In those icons the typical stone slab from which the seven snakes emerge can be seen. They are: Baptism of Christ, Kostandin Shpataraku, 18th century, 39x27 cm, National Museum of Medieval Art, Korçë, Albania²⁶ (also fishes, crab, and personification of Jordan river); Baptism of Christ, Ioannis Tzetiri, 1812-14, 47,4x34,7 cm, Epistyle icon of the iconostasis of the cathedral of the

²⁴ We discussed this point in our lecture: M. Gallés, *Camels and landscapes in the orthodox iconography of Saint Menas through the ages. An extraordinary transect in an unpublished Balkan 19th century icon*. The Natural and the Unnatural in the Early Medieval World, The Eighteenth International Conference of the Australian Early Medieval Association, University of Sydney and Online, September 28–29, 2023.

²⁵ We were able to enjoy this icon and take some detail pictures of it during our visit in February 2024.

²⁶ M. Milella & T. Piccolo, *op. cit.*, 142-143.

Dormition of the Virgin, Castle, Berat, kept in Onufri Museum, Berat, Albania²⁷ (also fishes); and Baptism of Christ, workshop of Ioannis Tzetiri, ca. 1800, 45x34 cm, Church of Saint Nicholas at Perhondi, Berat, kept in Repository of the Berat Directorate of National Culture, Albania²⁸ (also fishes, stone slab addressed to the right).

It is time to jump to Bulgaria to establish conclusive relations. For this reason, Bulgarian icons are considered. The first one is: Baptism of Christ, 18th – 19th centuries, National Art Gallery, Museum of Christian Art, The Crypt, Sofia, Bulgaria²⁹. It is a simple small size icon from the Tryavna Icon Painting School which conveys a delicate balance in which the mountains in the background and the rocks in the foreground seem to surround a lake with undulating waters rather than the classic Jordan River. Most relevant for the purposes of this paper, the simplicity of the stone slab, the design of the snakes, and the arrangement of Jesus' feet allow important analogies to be drawn. The second one is: Baptism of Christ, 19th century, 39x27 cm, icon of the village of Saedinenie³⁰, Tryavna Icon Painting School, Plovdiv Bishopric, Bulgaria³¹. From an iconographic point of view this icon closely resembles the one we are considering. No doubt that it is very close to it. Perhaps the most relevant thing are its seven extremely filiform snakes with disproportionately large (dragon) heads. And, the third and last icon in this approach is the Baptism of Jesus, from Lesura, Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God, the end of the first half of the 19th century, 38x29 cm³². This icon is, plainly, "identical" to the one we studied. Certainly, there are differences (size, ...) but the likeness is such that there can be no doubt that its author is the same, replicating the same model (Fig. 5). If we disregard the effect caused by dirt and deterioration of varnish on this icon, at first glance it appears to be exactly the same. Only when paying close attention to the details do the differences become evident. So, no doubt that the author of the icon being studied is the "Master of the Church of The Dormition of the Mother of God in Lesura"³³.

²⁷ K. Giakoumis, *Water in Arts and Crafts in the Berat Region, 4th century B.C. to 19th century A.D.*, Tirana 2015, 202-205.

²⁸ K. Giakoumis, *op. cit.*, 206-208.

²⁹ We were able to enjoy this icon and take some detail pictures of it during our visit in February 2024.

³⁰ It is surprising how often this population recurs: first with the Nativity (landscapes), and now with Baptism (type). It should be possible to establish some relationship, if nothing else, of a secondary order.

³¹ П. Тотева, *Икони от Пловдивски Край*, Sofia 1975, no page number/no plate number but the only Baptism.

³² Р. Савова Касабова, *Икони от Врачанския край*, Sofia 1977, 38, pl. 63.

³³ Unfortunately, we do not know his name. Hence the more generic denomination of "Master of the Church of The Dormition of the Mother of God in Lesura" based on the identification not only with the icon of the Baptism of Jesus (most striking) but with the other icons of the same Church: Р. Савова Касабова, *op. cit.*, pls. 56-66 (eleven icons, all with the same size). In this regard, before coming across the Baptism, the image of Palm Sunday (pl. 59) was very helpful. The facial features of Christ - also, and even more so, those of the apostle Paul (?) - clearly show the characteristic feature of facial elongation of characters. Not forgetting the execution of feet and hands.

About snakes

In order to address the issue of snakes, since the icons considered in this paper can perfectly serve as a reference for what concerns Orthodox iconography, we proceed to briefly paying attention this topic in Western iconography³⁴. The aim is not so much to provide an exhaustive approach as to shed light on the interpretation of the images that have been looked upon up to now, especially regarding the unpublished icon that has been described.

To do so, the first step is putting forward a preliminary consideration. The Orthodox Church does not persuade people not to read the Revelation book. It does caution people to read it with a solid background knowledge of the rest of the Bible, especially the New Testament, and with a basic understanding of the times which produced the Revelation book.

So, let's go for the Revelation texts that talk about the possible seven snakes. They are Revelation 12: 3-6³⁵, and Revelation 13: 1-4³⁶. The reference to "an enormous red dragon with seven heads", repeated as "It had ten horns and seven heads", seems a good starting point to fit with the iconographic topic. It could well be that the seven-headed reptilian monster is nothing else than a fantastic representation of evil. Considering the rest of the text, its location under the stone slab/cheirograph would make perfect sense. The sequence evil - snake(s) - Adam (cheirograph) as the foundation for Christ, the New Adam, being baptised (Epiphany - Divine Revelation - God Making Himself Known) therefore is quite suggesting.

The topic is illustrated by means of illuminations from ancient Western manuscripts. For this purpose, a book in the Galería de las Colecciones Reales,

³⁴ During the preparation of this paper, we had the opportunity to attend J. Farugia's presentation, "The imagery of evil and sin in Gregory of Nyssa's homilies", at the International Congress *The Cappadocian Fathers and their times: tradition and innovation*, held in Barcelona, on 7-9 November 2024. In that lecture the author spoke at length about the traditional figures of the dragon, the serpent, and the many headed beast (classical and biblical literature and popular till the Middle Ages) always represented as evil creatures (in mainstream literature).

³⁵ "Then another sign appeared in heaven: *an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who "will rule all the nations with an iron scepter."* And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days". (Italics are the author's)

³⁶ "The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. *It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast.* People worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?". (Italics are the author's)

Madrid³⁷, is considered. The two shared illuminations are that of Mary holding out her Son to an angel, and Saint Michael the Archangel piercing the dragon with a long spear. In the first, Mary stands on a crescent moon, under the watchful gaze of the monster. This monster has the body of a dragon, seven heads, and a long tail that also ends in an additional head. In the second, Saint Michael corners the same monster - previously aggressive/on the lookout, now on the defensive - who drags its headed tail as if defeated.

Another interesting image that could be kept in mind is that of the Beato de Fernando I y Doña Sancha in the Biblioteca Nacional de España³⁸. We highlight the detail reproduced in the 2023 calendar published by the BNE: A colourful seven-headed snake terrifies a group of haloed figures, probably the twelve apostles, who are shown prostrate before the wild monster (snake) that occupies two thirds of the pictorial field³⁹.

The Woman of Babylon/Whore of Babylon (sitting on a seven-headed monster, holding a Chalice, and spitting blood), polyptych of the Apocalypse, Jacobello Alberegno, 1360 - 1390, Accademia, Venezia⁴⁰, provides an attempt to represent that kind of fearful creature, in this case more a quadruped with the seven snake-heads that a legendary monster dragon-type⁴¹.

After this brief Western review, two remarks on Orthodox iconography are made in order to frame what has been discussed so as to evidence the limits for this subject. One is a topic somehow similar to that of the seven snakes in Baptism. And the other is a reflection on the scarce references to the seven snakes in the bibliography. As for the first, the topic of Christ Expelling Seven

³⁷ *Apocalipsis figurado de los duques de Saboya*. Ordered by Amadeus VIII, Duke of Savoy (1383-1451) and Charles I, Duke of Savoy (1468-1489). Artists: Jean Bapteur and Pèronet Lamy (folios 1-25), Jean Colombe (folios 26-49), Thonon (Haute Savoie) 1428-1435 (25 first folios) 1485-1490 (24 last folios). Ms. Vitrinas I. Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial (RBME). Latin language, French Gothic script in two columns, with texts in black ink (Apocalypse) and red ink (Berengaudus' commentary). 42x27cm, 49 folios. Manuscript on fine parchment, illuminated by 187 miniatures with natural pigments and decorations in gold and silver.

³⁸ *Beato de Fernando I y Doña Sancha*. (BNE Vitr/14/2). It is one of the most beautiful copies of the Commentaries on the Apocalypse, written around 776 by a monk named Beato from the monastery of Santo Toribio de Liébana. Although the original codex of Beato is not preserved, around forty manuscript copies have come down to us, not all of them complete, which have been called, by semantic extension, Beatos. The BNE preserves the codex commissioned in 1047 by King don Fernando and doña Sancha, it is decorated with 98 miniatures, and made by Facundo, probably in San Isidoro de León.

³⁹ There is a second image of the seven-headed snake, a double page, which presents iconographic similarities with that of Mary and the dragon already mentioned.

⁴⁰ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Polyptych_of_the_Apocalypse_-_Whore_of_Babylon (24/10/2024)

⁴¹ The same topic, the Woman of Babylon/Whore of Babylon, but with an animal whose body resembles that of a dragon, can be seen in: G. des Moulins, *Bible Historiale*, Amiens, c. 1480-1485. Manuscript in French, illuminated in the workshop of the Rambures Master, 38.2x27.8 cm, 328 paper leaves, 53 large pen-and-wash illustrations and numerous painted initials. Jgrarebooks: <https://x.com/JGRareBooks/status/1782433974423359792/photo/1> (24/10/2024)



Fig. 5 Comparison of both images without considering its size.

Сл. 5. Поређење обе слике без упоређивања димензија.

Demons from Mary Magdalene⁴² is cited: in Christ Expels Seven Demons from Mary Magdalene, Church of the Dormition of the Theotokos in Zervat (1603), seven “human” demons can be appreciated; and in Christ Expels Seven Demons from Mary Magdalene, Monastery of St Nicholas in Seslavtsi (1616), also seven “human” demons can be appreciated. As for the second, we must go back and return to the icon of Gorna Oryahovitsa. In the brief description, the author makes the only approximation to the interpretation of the seven snakes that we have been able to find so far, as indicated in the corresponding footnote in this paper⁴³.

To conclude, a couple of approaches to help definitely framing the context of the reflections that have been poured into this paper. The first one comes from Paul J. Alexander’s book introduction⁴⁴. The reference to “concrete histor-

⁴² R. Rousseva, “The Scene Christ Expels Seven Demons from Mary Magdalene in Post-Byzantine Art”, *Scripta & e-Scripta* 22/2022 (221-236), pl. 2 and pl. 4.

⁴³ K. Paskaleva, op. cit., description pl. 76.

⁴⁴ “Byzantine apocalypses were indeed written for consolation in times of trouble, and they reflected the hopes and despairs of contemporaries in very concrete historical events. (...) With all its unlikely sources, however, perhaps the main impression of the Byzantine apocalyptic tradition, as it is uncovered by the author, is the extent to which it remained a concrete and creative source for the expression of political and religious thought throughout the early medieval world”. P. J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, California, 1985, 8 (Introduction by Dorothy deF. Abrahamse). The entire book can also be read in: https://byzantineprophecy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/1985_alexander_byzantine-apocalyptic-tradition.pdf (28/10/2024)

ical events” is especially suggestive, as it allows understanding why the seven snakes are limited in space and time within the iconography of Baptism. And the reference to “a concrete and creative source for the expression of political and religious thought” reinforces the idea of the role that representations, even its details, may have had in a certain context. The second one comes from Christoffer Theis’ paper abstract⁴⁵. A scenery is proposed in which the motif and interpretation of the seven heads become diluted in the stormy waters of the history of the Ancient Near East: “The presentation was surely not invented by John ...”. And later in the paper itself, “Thus, the number of seven heads can be equated with totality, in this special case the totality of evil”⁴⁶.

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СЕДАМ ЗМИЈА: НЕОБЈАВЉЕНА ИКОНА КРШТЕЊА ХРИСТОВОГ ИЗ XIX ВЕКА
ТРИАВНСКЕ ШКОЛЕ У БУГАРСКОЈ

У хришћанској иконографији епифанијска сцена *par excellence* је Крштење Христово. То је тренутак посебне божанске манифестације. Из тог разлога, међу православним хришћанима иконографски тип је одавно савршено дефинисан. Уз карактеристичне елементе (река Јордан, Свети Јован Крститељ, анђео(и), Голуб који означава Светог Духа), појављују се и други који имају већи или мањи значај у зависности од историјско-географског контекста (позадински пејзаж, секира која виси са жбуна (лозе), персонификације реке, флора и фауна реке, основа на којој је Христос представљен, или чак присуство змија...). Полазећи од описа необјављене иконе Крштења Христовог из XIX века Триавнске школе из Бугарске у барселонској колекцији икона (сл. 1), пажња је посвећена неким од ових елемената како би се пружила објашњења која омогућавају једнозначно приписивање овог малог уметничког дела реномираној сликарској школи у Бугарској: Триавнској школи. Тамо су, суптилно али врло очигледно, седам змија које се појављују испод постоља на којем стоји Христос. Наравно, обрада инкарната као и препознатљиво извођење физиономије лица, употреба злата, пејзажа, карактеристични су за поменућу школу.

⁴⁵ “The essay offers a history of the motif of the multi-headed creatures in Revelation of John 12:3 and 13:1–2. (...) But with inclusion of sources from various cultures of the Ancient Near East, it becomes obvious that the feature of multiple heads, as well as the specific number of seven heads, is a common theme in different cultures. The presentation was surely not invented by John ...”. C. Theis, “Creatures with Seven Heads in the Revelation of John – A History of the Motif in the Ancient Near East”, *Distant Worlds Journal* 5 (2020), 2020, 38–58. The entire paper can also be read in: file:///C:/Users/usuario/Downloads/77132-Article%20Text-212247-1-10-20201125%20(4).pdf (29/10/2024)

⁴⁶ C. Theis, *op. cit.*, 47.