

The menologe in the painting of the pronaos from the church of Dečani monastery (Serbia)

Petru SOFRAGIU

*Assist. Prof. PhD
Faculty of Orthodox Theology
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, ROMANIA*

Abstract:

This article is a description of the main themes of narthex decoration from one of the most known monuments of the medieval Serbia, Dečani located in the region of Metohija, which preserves Byzantine art from XIVth century during the reign of Serbian King Stefan Dečanski. I have examined the architectural features of the Raška style and provided an iconographic analysis of the menologe theme of narthex frescoes. Also I have pointed out stylistic elements of compositions, the theological significance and I have brought into the limelight the peculiarities and similarities with other monuments from Atonite and Moldavian churches that have been decorated after this period in Byzantine heritage.

Keywords: *narthex, menolog, aghiografia, Raška, Dečani*

1. Introduction

The oldest literary source that reflects a historical truth related to martyrdom of a saint, used as a model of this kind, is the encyclical letter of the Church of Smyrna, from 156 – Martyrium Polycarpi – which records not only the torments and the death of Bishop Polycarp but also their justification, as it results from the saint's prayer before dying:

Je vous bénis de m'avoir trouvé digne, en ce jour et à cette heure, de prendre rang au nombre de vos martyrs en buvant la coupe de votre Christ, pour ressusciter à la vie éternelle de l'âme et du corps dans l'incorruptibilité de l'Esprit Saint (I bless you for having found me worthy, on this day and at this hour, to take your place among a number of your martyrs by drinking the cup of your Christ, to resuscitate to eternal life the soul and the body in the integrity of the Holy Spirit) (Delehaye 1921: 81).

Unlike other types of biographical writings, hagiography does not necessarily seek to provide a comprehensive historical presentation of a

saint's life. The purpose of hagiography is a soteriological one - the purpose of writing the lives of the saints is to guide those who read them on the road to salvation. Therefore, hagiographic writings often do not include details that we commonly find in biographical works, such as the date of birth, the period of childhood, the career followed and so on. Rather, elements of the saint's life are included as a living icon of Christ, as one who guides us to the richness of life in Christ. In Western Europe, hagiography was one of the most important dimensions of the study of history in the medieval period.

The freedoms that Christianity acquired under Constantine the Great favoured the emergence of a new literary-oratorical genre, the panegyric, made up of the praises brought to the martyr at the time of his commemoration. The writings on the tortures endured by the martyrs, interpreted and critically commented upon, were regarded as ways of presenting the cruelty by which the Roman society punished its "delinquents", a category in which, in addition to those who broke the law, slaves and Christians (Mijovic 1973: 161). For Christians, the types of bullying far exceeded anything that historical sources mention. The unimaginable variety of martyrdom modes, the maximum brutality of the riders gestures and the unusual serenity in enduring the torments by the victims became heroes with high Christian qualities were exalted in the epic literary texts of the time and expressed with interest in art (Cincheza-Buculei 2007: 27).

The theme of the menologe although it is specific to the codex, as an illustration subordinated to the written text, from the moment it entered the monumental painting and, especially, from the moment of its imposition, starting with the fourteenth century, it played a decisive role in the reorganization of the iconographic programs that they adopted. In the 9th and 12th centuries, a considerable number of illustrated manuscripts appeared in parallel with the construction of religious buildings and monumental painting. From this period, more than one hundred manuscripts are dated precisely, both according to the paper containing the rosin and also based on stylistic and paleographic analysis. The most illustrated texts were the Gospels, lexicons, psalms and homilies of the Holy Fathers. The menologe, the menologium or the menaia containing the lives of the saints presented in the order of the

liturgical calendar were also made, but in smaller numbers than the other groups. Hagiographical portraits have often been represented in manuscripts illustrated with the liturgical calendar. In this sense, one of the Byzantine manuscripts dating from the end of the 10th century with the richest illustrations is the Menologion of the Byzantine emperor Vasile II Bulgarocton (976-1025). The content of his texts is not really a menologe, but a version of the Synaxarion in Constantinople, starting from September until February. It contains about 430 thumbnails, almost on each page, all made on a gold background. The compositional balance between the image and the text (Melniciuc-Puică 2010: 12) makes it unique between the other calendar cycles: each occupies half a page, and each thumbnail depending on the content has been created to occupy a certain space, so that each text in the synaxarion has been modified to occupy exactly 16 lines on every page. The thumbnails include numerous illustrations of the great holidays, of the translation of the relics, of the portraits of patriarchs and of the whole figures of saints having elaborate architectures or refined landscapes in the background. Most of the illustrations, however, are scenes of martyrdom and torture, astonishing both by the degree of violence and also by the refinement of the artistic achievement, without mocking (Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, vol. II, 1991: 1341).

Also, at the end of the 10th century, a high dignitary from the Byzantine imperial court compiled a collection comprising pieces of information about the lives of 148 saints, each day in the church calendar corresponding to at least one saint's life, or more saints, that is, the Lives of the Saints lined up calendaristic by day. Simeon the Chancellor and the Magistrate, also known as the Metaphrast; he was a high dignitary at the royal court of Constantinople and a famous hagiographer or composer of Lives of Saints. He worked in the middle and second half of the 10th century, probably dying towards the end of this century. He served as a chancellor under the emperors Nichifor Foca, Ioan Tzimisches and Vasile II (976-1025). According to Michael Psellos, Simeon was born of a wealthy and noble family in Constantinople, shone in all the sciences of the time and led the business of the Byzantine Empire in a time of great flowering. Psellos relies on Simeon's hagiographical work of art. This work justifies Simeon Metaphrast's "literary reputation and holy aura"

and “the boundless admiration enjoyed in Byzantium over the centuries (Stăniloae 1976: 279). Efreem the Little, the Georgian biographer of Simeon from the end of the 11th century, says that the naive simplicity of the lives of saints up until then was no longer to the taste of the readers of the refined era in which Simeon lived. This is why he undertakes a stylistic renewal of these Lives by “paraphrasing” the previous texts. By this he achieved a “true hagiographical revolution”. This menologe has been copied many times, “especially since the middle of the century. In the eleventh century, emperors, intellectuals and many monastic places had it, wrote it and used these texts” (Hogel 2002: 158). He gave old stories a rhetorical stylization, intended for liturgical readings. The collection made up of Symeon Metaphrast is also known as the metaphrastic menologe, attributing also a liturgical use, these hagiographic texts being read aloud during the morning services every day of the feast day in the monasteries.

The manuscripts illustrated by this menologist include around 43 copies. The illustrations of these volumes are copies of those of the Menologist of Vasile the second, only the text being different. The types of illustrations are: 1) a frontispiece with the portraits of all the saints in the volume, 2) an image of a saint / saint at the beginning of the text, 3) a portrait of a saint / saint at the beginning of the text about his / her life (Ševčenko 1990: 181). The latter type predominates in better-kept editions, and in this category a variety of formats can be observed; 3a) a thumbnail with a frame placed above the title, 3b) a thumbnail without a frame above the band and the title, 3c) a thumbnail without a frame in or around the title, 3d) a thumbnail added at the end of the text. A martyrdom scene could substitute a portrait or be added at the end of the text. In general, there are two main trends in the tradition of manuscript illustration: portraits and martyrdom scenes. A mixed version of the manuscript that has both iconographic categories was discovered. Ševčenko suggests that a number of images of martyrdom can be found in the menus of churches in Serbia, such as Dečani, for example, monuments erected by the Serbian imperial family.

The appearance and development of the manuscripts illustrated with scenes from Menologist constituted a model, or landmark for mural artists and painters, who took on different compositional solutions, elaborating

complex scenes according to the lines and forms of the architecture. One of the oldest churches with scenes from Menologist is that of the 40 Saints of Velik Târnovo from Bulgaria, which was built in 1230. Since the fourteenth century, scenes from Menologist appear in the churches of Thessaloniki, Serbia (Dečani) but also in the Romanian Country (St. Nicholas from Curtea de Argeș, Cozia), and later in Moldova, starting with the 16th century, in Dobrovăț (Scenes from the first 6 months of the Menologist in the repository) (1503), St. Nicholas of the Probota Monastery (1532) and St. George Suceava (1532-1534), Moldovița and Sucevița monasteries (1601).

2. The menologist in the painting of the pronaos from the church of the Dečani monastery

The church with the dedication of Christ Pantocrator of the Dečani monastery was built in the 14th century by the Serbian king Stefan Dečanski, in the inscription above the western entrance to the narthex it is mentioned that the construction was completed between 1346-1347. The founder's tomb is dated in 1330, however the following year the king dies and he is buried in the monastery. The church later becomes its mausoleum, its relics still being worshiped by both Orthodox and Albanian believers alike, due to the belief that it would have the power to cure barren women and folly. Stefan Dušan the successor and his son succeeded him to the throne and continued the work until 1335, but the mural paintings were not completed before 1350. The church was built in a period when the medieval Serbian state was marked by numerous changes: territorial expansion, when King Dušan became emperor, when the Serbian church was elevated from the rank of archiepiscopacy to that of patriarchy, and when in 1349, even before the paintings were completed, the most important legislative act of the South Slave nations - Dušan's Legal Code was adopted. These changes are reflected in the frescoes from Dečani, and those who dealt with the design and implementation of the iconographic program were portrayed in the mural painting. As far as it concerns the architecture, the church is the last building in the style of the Raška school, style formed at the end of the 12th century. The first monument that belongs to this group is that of the church of the Virgin of Studenița, followed by that of the church Banjska,

who served as a direct model for the architect from Dečani. An innovation in the architecture of this monument, unlike the previous ones (Studenica), is that of the narthex as an integral part of the building, as well as the integration of the chapels in the space of the nave like some collaterals, resulting in a church with five naves.

The main theme of the mural paintings of the Dečani is that of the Menologe. The richest Menologe in the Serbian medieval churches can be found at Dečani. Previously, at the Gracaniča the artists Mihail Astrapas and Eutihie only painted the first two months of the church year - September and October on the pillars supporting the narthex arches and those of the large dome of the nave. At Dečani, the Menologe includes an illustration of almost all the saints and martyrdom scenes for the first 3 months - September, October and November. From the rest of the months - December, January, (February is missing), March, April, May, June, July and August, a much smaller number of martyrdom scenes are present compared to the first 3 months. The generous architectural surfaces of the three naves of the narthex, the church being one of the largest churches in the Balkans, allowed the artists to develop the theme of Menologe much better than other previous monuments. Their narrative talent reaches its climax, some scenes of martyrdom are full of originality and unprecedented details in mural painting, marking the end of the domination of the Paleontological Renaissance style and a synthesis gained over 50 years of experience. The first scenes of September, the days 1-2 of September (Fig. 1) are represented in the upper part of the east window of the eastern dome of the central nave, just above the monumental Christ Pantocrator above the entrance to the nave. The rest of the scenes from September continue to circulate in the upper parts of the south windows and then the northern ones along the central nave, comprising 25 episodes (missing from September 11, 12, and September 13), the martyrdom scenes sometimes having the upper part of the composition and holy / holy bust. October starts from the third register of the south window of the central dome, just below the scene of the miracle of Saint Michael in Colose (Fig. 2) the beginning of a new month not being marked or signaled by a symbol (new moon, sun or zodiac signs). October, like September, contains 25 episodes, the martyrdom scenes being alternated at a certain interval of saints standing, especially in the

area of the arches of narrow spaces where space has not allowed painters to place a martyrdom scene with more characters.

November begins with the representation of the Saint Doctors Without Silver - Cosma and Damian on the fourth register of the north window of the central cap (see the Menologe's mapping) and adds a total of 26 episodes, missing the days of 20, 21, 22 and 23. Starting with December, the calendar includes fewer episodes, so this month only adds 11 episodes, illustrating the martyrdom scenes and saints from December 1-10 (Fig. 4) and skipping the rest of the days until December 29 - respectively The massacre of the children killed by Herod's command from the rear of the eastern dome's window of the southern nave, just above the theme of the Genealogical Tree of the Nemanjia dynasty. The month of January includes a smaller number of episodes, respectively the dates of January 13, 14, 15, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, these being located on the eastern wall of the southern nave, just above the theme of the Genealogical Tree, below the scene with Massacre of the children killed by Herod's command (December 29). No episode with a saint or martyrdom scene is illustrated in February, and only one episode is represented in March, the one on March 3 with the martyrdom of three martyrs, the saints Eutropius, Cleonic crucified and St. Vasilisc beheaded, a composition located just above Christ the Teacher on the right of the portal. From April, the dates appear 22, 24, 25 and 26 - St. Teodor Sicheot, St. Sava Stratilat, St. Ap. Mark and Vasile the bishop of Amasya. All the characters are included in a common composition located in the bezel above the stone inscription and the western entrance. From June the data of 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 27, 28 and 29 appear, from July only the data of 15, 16 and 17 appear. The menologe ends with the data of 25, 26, 27, 28, August 29 and 30 (Cutting of the head of St. John the Baptist and St. Felix) - comprised in two compositions located to the left of the stone portal, just above the Virgin Mary. Also in the Menologe in the eastern dome of the north nave of the narthex are represented a number of 16 scenes from the life of Saint George, scenes which I have mentioned earlier in the chapter dedicated to scenes from the life of the saint of dedication.

Conclusions

The encyclopaedic characteristic of the paintings, the abundance of scenes and figures derive from the narrative talent of the artists, from the extraordinary ability to adapt on the original spatial solution (generated by architecture) both the traditional iconographic themes but also through the introduction and creation of new episodes adjacent to them. Even after four centuries from their creation, mural paintings have had a great influence on the artists who will decorate the future monuments of medieval Serbia, especially after the restoration of the Patriarchate of Péc in 1557, with some similarities to the second titular saint church with the dedication of St. Dimitrie. Chronologically this church was painted immediately after or during the same period, probably by the same group of painters who decorated the narthex of Dečani. The same artists also painted the frescoes of the arches and the pilasters in the nave of the church of the Holy Apostles of Péc.

The menologe from the Dečani narthex, both through the original compositional solutions, but also through the spontaneity of the details, have certainly provided a model for the painters of the Cretan school, who will take over some of the plastic solutions and use them in the menologes with which they will later decorate the narthex of the Athonite churches (Dionisiu, Stavronikita, Dochiaru) and those from Meteora (Roussanou, Great Meteor).

- References:

- Cincheza-Buculei, Ecaterina. 2007. „Câteva particularități ale menologului de la Sucevița”, în *Movileștii, Istorie și Spiritualitate românească*, vol. III, Artă și restaurare. Sfânta Mănăstire Sucevița.
- Delehay, H. 1921. *Les passions des martyrs et genres litteraires*. Bruxelles: Imprimerie de Jules De Meester & Fils.
- Hogel, Ch. 2002. *Symeon Methaphrastes. Rewriting and Canonization*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.
- Melniciuc-Puică, I. 2010. Abbreviations and Symbols founded in Biblical Manuscripts and Christians Icons, in „*Eur.J.Sci.Theo*” 6(3): 1-21.
- Mijovic, P. 1973. *Menolog istorijsko-unetnicka istrajivanja*. Beograd.
- *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. 1991. Vol. II. English Oxford University Press.
- Sevčenko, N.P. 1990. *Illustrated Manuscripts of the Methaphrastian Menologion*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Stăniloae, D. 1976. *Filocalia*, vol. V. Ed. I – Introducere la Simeon Metafrastul - *Parafrază la Macarie Egipteanul*. București: Ed. IBMBOR.



Fig. 1 – The menologe of September - September 1 - St. Simeon the Stylite (half-length portrait), Joshua the Right (full figure), 40 Martyrs from Heraclea (group) - the eastern window of the eastern dome of the central nave of the narthex, the church of the Dečani monastery



Fig. 2 – Menologe of September – September 6 - *The miracle of Saint Michael the Archangel in Colose*, southern window of the eastern dome of the central nave of the narthex, church of the Dečani monastery



Fig. 3 – Menologe of October – October, 18- *Bringing the relics of Saint Apostle and Evangelist Luke* (scene), southern window of the eastern dome of the central nave of the narthex, church of the Dečani monastery



Fig. 4 – Menologe of December– December 1, 2, 3 - Holy Prophet Nahum, Holy Prophet Avacum and St. John of Damascus,, Sf. Prophet Sophonie



Fig. 5 – Menologe of October - November 10- *The Great Saint Orest*, southern window of the eastern dome of the central nave of the narthex, , church of the Dečani monastery

