ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME, OR DO THEY? REPRESENTATION OF THE BODY IN THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NAVE DECORATION OF THE CHURCH OF ST ATANASS IN ARBANASSI, BULGARIA

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The walls and ceiling of the nave of the Church of St Atanass in Arbanassi, Bulgaria, are covered in tightly packed compositions. In most compositions the body is only suggested rather than explicitly represented.

By contrast, from the seventeenth century the Roman Church encouraged the realistic portrayal of the human body through the Baroque style, which spread throughout Europe. However, realistic depiction of the body did not appear in Bulgarian art and church decoration until the nineteenth century.

This paper will argue that the adherence to what appears to be an archaic tradition of representation was for neither wholly theological nor purely aesthetic reasons, but was instead a symptom of the struggle for dominance between Rome and the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

KEYWORDS: body, seventeenth century, church decoration, Bulgaria, Western influences.

INTRODUCTION

The decoration of the nave of the Church of St Atanass is characteristic of a seventeenth century Bulgarian parish church. The walls and ceiling are covered in tightly-packed figurative compositions arranged in registers in accordance with the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which closely follows a pattern established in the Byzantine era in which the registers emphasise a theologically established hierarchy. The upper register, occupying the centre of the ceiling, has images associated with the high heavens: Christ and the heavenly host. The next two registers, painted on the walls, contain compositions representing scenes from the lives of Christ and the Mother of God. These are organised thematically in groups called Cycles, such as the Christological and Mariological Cycles of the Great Feasts of the Church, as well as the Cycles of the Passions of Christ and the Cycle of Pentecost. The lower register is composed of images of minor saints.

The aim of the research is to seek an explanation for the mode of representation of the human body displayed in the scenes from the nave and to analyse to what extent this mode was maintained by the Eastern Church. The underlying hypothesis is that adherence to what appears to be an archaic tradition in the portrayal of the body cannot be explained simply by the Ottoman occupation and the presumed isolation of the Eastern Orthodox Community from contemporary developments in West European religious art[1]. Moreover, it will be argued that this adherence was neither wholly theological nor purely aesthetic, but was instead a symptom of the struggle for dominance between Rome and the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Initially the iconography and the representation of the body in the scenes selected from the programme of the Church of St Atanass will be discussed. This will be followed by an examination of seventeenth century images on the same themes, but from the Western tradition. The focus will be on discerning any characteristic differences between the representation of the body in Arbanassi and in the Western examples. The investigation will then seek to ascertain the reasons behind the differences through an examination of the historical context and its influence. Connections between the relevant social, political, economic and cultural circumstances will be sought and their effect on the preferred style of representation will be considered.

DEPICTION OF THE BODY
IN THE CHURCH OF ST ATANASS

In the majority of the scenes from the Church of St Atanass the figures are dressed and the shape and movement of their bodies are suggested only by the draping of the clothes. It is in three scenes that highly stylised male bodies have been depicted in flesh. One of these scenes is *The Baptism of Jesus,* from the Christological Cycle of the Great Feasts. Here Jesus is portrayed standing in the middle of the River Jordan, on a slab that symbolises the door of Hell under which there are seven snakes[2]. Scholars associate this part of the composition with the seven deadly sins and Christ's triumph over sin. The twelve fishes in the river represent the twelve apostles. Opinion is divided over the meaning of the smaller, semi-naked figure of a man immersed or swimming in the water. It is considered either to represent those who have been baptised in Christ and have therefore had their sins washed away or to be a personification of the River Jordan[3]. On the left bank of the river there is a tree with an axe at its base, referring to the parable of a fig tree, in which every fruitless tree is cut down and burned by its owner. The parable refers to the Last Judgement, when the deeds of believers will be assessed and they will either inherit eternal life or be condemned to the fires of Hell forever[4].

At the top of the composition is a star-like shape, identified as the grace of God from which the Holy Spirit proceeds in the form of a dove. St John the Baptist is portrayed in a monk's robe and at the moment when he stretches out towards Jesus, most likely in a ritual gesture of blessing. On the other side of Jesus are four adoring angels in long robes, two of them with veiled hands, waiting on Jesus, holding his clothes. In general, scholarship maintains that the compositional type of this scene is known to have developed gradually during the centuries, but cannot be directly associated with any particular historical time or site[5].

This composition found in the Church of St Atanass is similar in style to the one in the Church of the

1 Ljuben Prashkov, *Stenopisi v Tzurkvata Rozdestvo Hristovo* [*Murals in the Church of the Nativity of Christ*], Sofia, 1979, p. 3–12.

2 Svetla Rutževa, *Iconography and Style of the Wall Paintings in the Church of St Atanassi:* unpublished doctoral thesis, Veliko Turnovo: University of Veliko Turnovo, 1997, p. 50.

3 *Ibid.,* p. 50.

4 Svetla Rutževa, *op. cit.,* p. 50.

5 *Ibid.,* p. 51

Nativity of St John the Baptist (1546) in the Monastery Dionysiou on Mount Athos. The Arbanassi artists may have been familiar with the Athonian example either because they themselves came from Mount Athos or because they had visited it.

It is known that groups of artists travelled to the different parts of the Ottoman Empire, following commissions and disseminating the already established themes and compositions. Research indicates that these groups were not fixed entities, and the number and identity of their members varied[6]. The artists who decorated the nave of the Church of St Atanass may have travelled to Arbanassi as part of the cortège of Athonites going to the Synod in Moscow in 1665, and may have been personally commissioned by the Metropolitan Gerasim II Kakavelas[7]. This suggestion arises from the coincidence that the wall paintings in the nave are estimated to have been executed between 1665 and 1667[8]. Moreover, the availability of funds allowed Athos to become the greatest artistic focus of the Orthodox world in the first century and a half after the Ottoman conquest, and artists who were considered to have any notable talent either worked on Athos or were trained there[9]. Thus either of the

1. *The Baptism of Jesus,* a seventeenth century wall painting from the Christological Cycle of the Great Feasts in the nave of the Church of St Atanass, Arbanassi, Bulgaria. (© Elza Tantcheva 2004)

Jėzaus krikštas, XVII a. sienų tapyba iš kristologinio Didžiųjų švenčių ciklo Arbanasio Šv. Atanazo bažnyčios navoje, Bulgarija (© Elza Tantcheva 2004)

aforementioned scenarios is plausible, suggesting that the Arbanassi composition of *The Baptism of Jesus* might have been directly influenced by the Athonian scene on the theme.

The other two scenes in the nave of the Church of St Atanass, in which the human body is portrayed, are from the Cycle of the Passion of Christ. These are *Jesus on the Cross* and *The Descent from the Cross.* The composition used for *Jesus on the Cross* includes not only Jesus, but also the two thieves that were crucified with Him [image 1]. At the foot of the Cross are Mary and St John, together with some other persons who cannot be identified. Scholarship considers that the composition is based on the text of the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus[10]. It seems that this type of composition was often employed in seventeenth century church decoration – most significantly in the churches

6   Robin Cormack, 'Painter's Guide, Model-Books and Craftsmen: or Memory and the Artist?' in: M. Bacci (ed.), *L'artista a Bisanzio e nel mondo Christiano-orientale*, Pisa, 2007, p. 11–29.

7   Petko Stephanov, 'Gerasim II Kakavelas – Turnovo Metropolitan and a Patriarch of Constantinople during the Seventeenth Century,' in: *300 Godini ot Chiprovskoti Vustanie* [*300 Years Since the Chiprovtzi Uprising*], Sofia: Bulgarian Academy Press, 1988, p. 156; Konstantine Dinkov, *Istoria na Bulgarskata Tzurkva* [*History of the Bulgarian Church*], Vratža, 1953, p. 64–68.

8   Hitko Vatchev, *Enoriiskiat Hram v Turnovskata Metropolia* [*Parish Churches in the Turnovo Metropolitanate*], Sofia: Borina, 2005, p. 191–192.

9   Until the end of the fifteenth century the community relied on the generosity of foreign rulers – Russian, Moldovan, Wallachian and Serbian – just for its survival. Their donations mainly helped to retain monastic estates that were confiscated in 1454 by Mehmed II, in breach of earlier agreements. However, by the beginning of the sixteenth century all of these principalities, except Russia, had become Ottoman vassals, which made the monasteries dependant on donations from the newly emerging Christian merchant community within the Empire.

10   Svetla Rutževa, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

of Karlukovo (1602) and Alinnski (1616) monasteries in Bulgaria and in another parish church in Arbanassi, that of the Nativity of Christ (1638–1681).

However, the elements of the composition found in the Church of St Atanass show some departures from the traditional model in the interpretation of the crucifixion of the thieves. Here the artist attempted to present their bodies from an unusual angle. The thief to the right of Jesus is depicted with his back towards the viewer, an interpretation that can be seen in the main church of the Monastery of St Philanthropinon (1562) in Ioannina, Greece. The other has his hands nailed just above his head. Otherwise the composition follows closely the overall iconographic model developed in Byzantine times.

The parallels with the scene in the Monastery of St Philanthropinon can perhaps be explained by an alternative theory of the origins of the artist who painted the Arbanassi nave. This theory suggests that the artists were not Athonites, but were from Epirus[11]. It is based only on an hypothesis that Hellenised Albanian Christians from the Epirus area settled in Arbanassi after the failed uprising of Skanderbeg[12]. However, even if this hypothesis can be accepted in principle, the origin of the artists cannot be proved, as their names cannot be identified. They would have given an indication of their ethnic origin. Instead, it could be argued that, because of the nature of the artistic groups that operated within the Ottoman Empire, it is likely that at some stage at least one or more members of the group had visited or worked at the Monastery of St Philanthropinon. It is known that artists at the time had their own collections of copies or sketches of existing compositions which they used, sometimes with greater or lesser alterations, to suit the particular commission[13].

11 *Ibid.*, p. 189.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 188–189.
13 Robin Cormack, 'Painter's Guide, Model-Books and Craftsmen: or Memory and the Artist?', p. 11–29.

The final scene examined in this research is *The Descent from the Cross*. It depicts the moment when a man hands over the body of Jesus to Mary, the Mother of God. According to all four gospels, this man must be Joseph of Arimathea. He is not venerated in the Eastern Orthodox Church, and thus is depicted without a halo. There is also another layman who, if the text in the gospel of John is taken into consideration, is likely to be Nicodemus. In addition, the artist depicted a group of women; all four gospels bear witness to their presence. The overall scheme of the composition is known to have developed in miniature painting from the early Komnenos era, in the eleventh century, but was adopted fully into church wall decoration a century later. The earliest preserved example of this composition is in the Church of St Panteleimon (1164) (known as Pantaleon in the West) in Nerezi, Serbia, suggesting a stable continuity of the interpretation.

In all three scenes the style of depiction of the human body is similar and follows the Byzantine mode of representation where anatomy is suggested by linear drawing. This outlines some key elements such as the end of the ribcage, some of the ribs and some major muscle groups, but the three-dimensionality of the human form is suggested sparingly by a few highlights. In the Church of St Atanass attention to accuracy of anatomic detail is low. The most anatomically accurate representation can be found in *The Baptism of Christ*, where a few highlights painted on the form are suggestive of the three-dimensionality of Jesus's body. Its least accurate representation is in *Jesus on the Cross*. Here, in an attempt to suggest a more unnatural position of the bodies of Jesus and the thieves as they hang on the crosses, the artist has distorted their bodies. For example, in the body of Jesus his diaphragm and related muscles appear painted just on one side of the body in an apparent attempt to denote movement in that direction. The body looks awkward and somewhat misshapen. The same effect can also be observed in the depiction of body of the thief to the right. In the

body of Jesus in *The Descent from the Cross*, although most of the suggested anatomy is reasonably correct, the representation of the arms is disappointing as they are no more than lines painted in flesh colour.

It becomes apparent from the examination of the nave decoration of the Church of St Atanass that not only are the individual scenes arranged spatially within a framework that has been devised in the Byzantine era, but also the style and iconography of those scenes follow the established Byzantine patterns. Consequently, the style and the frequency of representation of the human body in the decorative system of the nave followed the Byzantine tradition in which the human body is represented infrequently and in a highly stylised way, with little regard for anatomic accuracy.

NOTING THE DIFFERENCES
BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST
IN THE DEPICTION OF THE BODY

By contrast, since the Renaissance, the portrayal of the human body in the West has been grounded in the advanced and advancing studies of anatomy[14]. From the seventeenth century the Roman Church adopted the Baroque style, and by then anatomy was an established field of study[15]. It could be argued that the intimate understanding of the body's construction and the mechanics of its movements gained in the Renaissance gave almost limitless artistic freedom in the way the body could be represented. Consequently, the Baroque style displays an increasingly dramatic, yet highly realistic portrayal of the human body. More often than

not, the drama was associated with the unusual angle at which the body was depicted. An examination of a couple of master works from seventeenth century Western ecclesiastical art will give some idea of the mode of representation and, to provide a base for comparison between the representations of the body in Arbanassi and in the West, the selected works explore the themes found in the scenes of the nave of the Church of St Atanass. The pieces chosen in for this purpose are Guido Reni's *Baptism of Christ* (1622–1623) and Rembrandt's *Descent from the Cross* (1634)[16].

In Reni's *Baptism of Christ* the personages are the same as in the Arbanassi scene – Christ is standing in the River Jordan, with St John the Baptist depicted on the bank. Three rather than four angels wait upon Jesus but, again, two of them hold his clothes. At the top the dove of the Holy Spirit descends from a star-like shape. However, there is a significant difference between the Reni and the Arbanassi depiction of the human body and the arrangement within the compositional space. While in Arbanassi St John is fully dressed in a monk's cassock, in Reni's work he, like Jesus, wears only a loincloth. In the foreground, Jesus stands with his head lowered as St John pours water from the baptismal cup. Their bodies occupy the greater part of the centre of the compositional space, creating a complex focus as well as admiration for the perfection displayed in the human body.

The body of each saint is also an example of a detailed anatomical study that is presented with subtle mastery. Moreover, the stillness of the frontally represented Arbanassi bodies is replaced in Reni's work with a realistic depiction of the perspective changes in their bodily forms. This indicates an interest in how the body works and how it helps to express, together with the facial expression, a state of mind at a particular moment.

14 It is widely accepted that the Renaissance period lasted from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. During that period Mundino de Luzzi presented his detailed drawings and explanations of human anatomy in a book called Anathomia (1316). This was the first book on the subject. Later, Leonardo da Vinci conducted meticulous studies for twenty years beginning in the 1480s.

15 During the seventeenth century anatomical studies continued to progress. In 1631 Rembrandt painted the anatomy lesson of Dr Tulp, and in 1656 – the anatomy lesson of Dr Deijman.

16 The picture by Reni is now in the collection of Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria, while Rembrandt's picture is in the collection of the Hermitage, St Petersburg, Russia.

The depiction of the human body is even more dramatic in Rembrandt's *Descent from the Cross* (1634)[17]. The focus is on the body of Jesus, which is painted as the most intensely lit part of the crowded composition and placed on a dark, almost black background, providing even a greater emphasis. He is portrayed in a way that leaves no doubt that the body being lowered by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus is that of a dead man. The inability of the body to support itself and its weight is suggested by the realistically represented slumped and uncomfortably twisted flesh and the visible effort depicted in the portrayal of Joseph and Nicodemus. The representation of the body observed here is again in contrast with the rigid form of Jesus leaning on Mary, the Mother of God in Arbanassi. Here the body of Jesus is presented to the viewer in a somewhat sketchy form.

While this comparison of the representation of the human body in both the Reni and the Rembrandt compositions and the Arbanassi nave scenes on the same theme identifies the main difference that the respective modes of representation favoured by the Eastern and Western Churches brought to the portrayal of the body, it does not explain why that difference occurred.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since the beginning of the twentieth century Bulgarian researchers maintained that the Ottoman conquest in 1393 was the key factor in the conscious preservation of the Byzantine iconographic tradition through the first four post-Byzantine centuries[18]. In a broader sense

the demonstrated stability of form was linked to the struggle of the Church to safeguard Eastern Orthodox Christian identity under Ottoman rule, where the belief system of the conqueror was completely different.

However, within the Ottoman system of governance the population was divided by its religious conviction rather than its ethnicity into two major groups: the Muslims and all the others. Those others were part of the *millet* system[19]. Orthodox Christians formed *millet rums* and were governed directly by the Eastern Orthodox Church, which in turn was answerable to the Ottoman administration. They were granted a degree of autonomy in their communal affairs and allowed to operate schools, religious establishments, and courts based on their own customary law. Hence, it is difficult to argue that the safeguarding of the Byzantine iconographic tradition by the Eastern Orthodox Church was a survival tactic, as the Eastern Orthodox Christian identity was not threatened under the Ottoman administrative system. Therefore, there must have been other factors responsible for the delay in accepting the Baroque representational system. The factors that may have influenced the representation of the body in the Arbanassi nave, apart from the Eastern Orthodox Church itself, could have been the patrons who commissioned the decoration and funded the works, and the artists who executed their orders.

Because of the continuous expansionist policy of the Ottoman Empire and the resultant wars within the European territory, it is easy to suppose that neither the patrons nor the artists had the opportunity to become acquainted with cultural or other developments within Western Europe. However, there is plenty of evidence that Orthodox Christians as well as Armenians and Jews became involved in commercial

17 In 1633 and 1634 Rembrandt produced several painted and etched versions of this subject. This canvas can be regarded as the final stage of that quest. There is also a later 1651 version on the theme.

18 Bogdan Philov, 'Arbanassi', in: *IBAD*, No. 4, 1915, p. 220–229; Idem, *Starobulgarsko Izkustvo* [*Early Bulgarian Art*], Sofia: Science and Art, 1993, p. 12–13; Dimitar Kostov, *Arbanassi*, Sofia: National Enlightenment, 1959, p. 10; Hitko Vatchev, '*Tzurkvite prez XVI–nachaloto na XVIII vek*' [*Parish Churches from the Fifteenth to Early Eighteenth Century*]: unpublished doctoral

thesis, Archaeological Institute and Museum of BAN, 1998, p. 56–59.

19 *Millet rum* is a term used for an Orthodox Christian confessional community in the Ottoman Empire. See Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

enterprises that were associated with Western Europe elsewhere outside the Ottoman Empire. Research shows that a combination of particularly favourable legal circumstances that occurred in the sixteenth century led to the rapid development of Arbanassi and the consequential increasing prominence of this predominantly Christian settlement in the seventeenth century. In 1549 the town and the surrounding lands became part of the estate of the Grand Vizier, Rustem Pasha[20]. Shortly afterwards Arbanassi became a free, autonomously governed place, responsible only and directly to the Sultan[21]. The citizens of the town were now exempted not only from direct taxes, but also from any other obligations, except their duties to the landlord[22]. An Imperial Act from around 1555 made the free status final and absolute[23]. The Act made the landlord legally responsible to assist them in achieving the greatest economic progress possible.

The realisation of the economic potential offered by the above legal arrangements was greatly assisted by the strategic geographic position of Arbanassi. It is situated in the Balkan Peninsula, in the central part of the present territory of Bulgaria. It was built on the top of the hills above, about four kilometres from the capital of the second Bulgarian Kingdom, Veliko Turnovo[24]. It is thus in very close proximity to one of the main international crossroads in the territory of Bulgaria. It is known that the merchants of Arbanassi traded both within the Ottoman Empire and increasingly with other parts of Europe, Russia and Asia[25]. In Europe they had interests in Venice, Florence, Transylvania, Dubrovnik, Hungary and Poland. Some of those merchants even became heads of international commercial companies in Sibiu and Braşov[26]. Others became involved in the commercial life of Persia and India[27].

The economic success of the town, its protected status, the confessional unity of the population, and especially its proximity to the Metropolitan town of Turnovo determined the favoured place of Arbanassi within the autonomous administrative arrangements of the Eastern Church. The focus of religious life clearly shifted from Turnovo to Arbanassi. Because of this, patriarchs of the Eastern Church visited this town rather than Turnovo[28]. The most significant of these visits was the joint delegation of 1666, which included the patriarchs of Antioch, Jerusalem, Serbia and Georgia. Consequently, by becoming a powerful commercial and cosmopolitan ecclesiastical centre for

20 The Grand Vizier was only one step removed from the absolute power of the Sultan and they, together with the military ruling classes, governed the Empire.

21 Christo Gandev, *Istoria na Bulgaria* [*History of Bulgaria*], Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Science Press, Vol. IV, p. 125–144.

22 Halil Inalcik, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire (1300–1600)*, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 96–97. See also Bisera Tzvetkova, 'Turski Dokumenti za statute na njakoi selishta vuv Veliko Turnovskata Oblast prez XVII vek' [Turkish Documents about the Status of Some Settlements in the Veliko Turnovo District in the Seventeenth Century], in: *Spisanie na Natzionalnijat Istoricheski Muzei vuv Veliko Turnovo* [*Journal of the National Historical Museum of Veliko Turnovo*], No. 3, 1966, p. 63.

23 Dimitar Kostov, *op. cit.*, p. 12 and 21. The 'imperial act' provided sufficient protection to the village during the time when state power was exceptionally centralized. It read, '...incomers, whatever their rank and position may be and to whatever social category they may belong, are not to enter the boundaries of these free and independent settlements by force'. (Translation into English is mine).

24 The First Bulgarian Kingdom lasted from 684 to 1018, when Basil II (The Bulgarian Slayer) finally subjugated the Kingdom. In 1185 Veliko Turnovo ('Great Turnovo') or just Turnovo (often transliterated as 'Tarnovo') became the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, after the successful uprising organised by the nobles Ivan Asen and Peter. It is accepted that this Kingdom lasted until the Ottomans conquered Vidin in 1396, although Turnovo fell in 1393.

25 Kemal Karpat, *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History: Selected Articles and Essays* (*Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia*), Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 1974, p. 111.

26 Stojan Maslev, *Turgoviata mezdu Bulgarskite Zemi I Transilvania prez XVI–XVII vek* [*Trade between Bulgarian Lands and Transylvania in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century*], Sofia: Science and Art, 1991, p. 131–135.

27 Christo Haritonov, Gergana Chohadšieva, Svetla Rutževa, *Arbanassi*, Sofia: Borina, 2003, p. 10–13.

28 Ivan Tutundjiev, *Turnovo Metropolitanate in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century*, Veliko Turnovo: Turnovo University Press, 1996.

the Eastern Church, Arbanassi had all the key preconditions to develop as a flourishing centre of Eastern Christian culture.

Arbanassi houses a cluster of five parish and two monastic churches, the naves of all of which were decorated in the seventeenth century[29]. One of the parish churches, that of the Nativity of Christ, contains a scene that leaves no doubt that its patrons were aware of the visual tradition of the West and in particular of Catholic Italy[30]. In the decorative programme of the outer narthex a scene, which can be described as a secular portrait of a donor and his son, was included, although both figures are highly stylised and lacking in detail, even compared to the biblical scenes surrounding them. Moreover, there is a tomb in the same area in the floor, considered likely to be associated with one of the sitters in that portrait[31]. It should be be borne in mind that there is no tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Church either of secular portraits being incorporated in church decoration or of burials inside a church building[32]. It can be suggested that the patrons not only were familiar with the subjects and the style of painting of the period, but some of them, as in the case of the donor portrait and the tomb, also dared to commission new forms.

Furthermore, interaction and trade with the West was not just a seventeenth-century phenomenon. There is evidence that those connections increased during and after the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (1522–1560). Consequently, examples of Western religious art were imported by Christian merchants[33]. Western artefacts such as lamps as well as painted and printed holy images began to appear even on Mount Athos. Thus it can be suggested that the artists of the Eastern Church must have become familiar with the general stylistic developments in the West at least in the sixteenth century.

Clearly discernible Western stylistic influences can be detected in some interiors of significance to the Eastern Church, in the decoration that can be dated to the sixteenth century. For example, a Cretan painter who signed Theophanes the Painter worked in St Nicholas Anapausa (1527) in Meteora[34]. There, in his representation of the Last Judgement, the anatomy of the nude body can be discerned in *putti-* and *bambini*-like figures[35]. Those elements can also be detected in some of the later wall paintings of Theophanes the Painter in the Monastery of Stavronikita on Athos (1546)[36].

ROADS LEADING AWAY FROM ROME

Despite this, in the decorative system of the Church of St Atanass, as in the seventeenth century decoration of other churches including those on Athos, the visible signs of exchange between the visual culture of the East and the West were either toned down or disappeared. Upon close examination it seems that the adherence to what appears to be an archaic tradition of representation was neither for wholly theological nor purely aesthetic reasons, but was instead symptomatic of a reaction to Rome's continuous attempts to achieve dominance over the patriarchate of Constantinople and the rest of the world. Evidence of the first major diplomatic effort in this direction is to be found in the decisions of the Council of Florence in 1439.

With Pope Eugene IV presiding over the gathering and in the presence of the Byzantine Emperor, John

29 Elena Manova, *Bulgarski Stenopici XVI–XVII* [*Sixteenth – Seventeenth Century Bulgarian Wall Paintings*], Sofia: Science and Art, 1985, p. 7–11.

30 Elza Tantcheva, 'At the Crossroads of East and West: Donor Portraits in the Church of the Nativity of Christ in Arbanassi', *Ikonotheka*, in: No. 22, Warsaw, 2010, p. 56–69.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 56–69.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 56–69.

33 Elena Manova, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

34 Svetla Rutževa, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

35 Bisera Penkova, 'Za Njakoi Spesivichni Osobenosti v Bulgarskoto Izkustvo' [On Some Specifics of Bulgarian Art], in: *Problemi na Izkustvoto* [*Questions in Art*], No. 1, 1999, p. 3–8. Putti and bambini are representations of young children or babies which became very popular in Baroque art. Putti are often winged, cherub-like figures.

36 Svetla Rutževa, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

VIII Palaiologos, the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Patriarchs of other Eastern Churches, the Council agreed about the reunification of the Latin and Byzantine Orthodox Christians, acknowledging the Pope's supreme authority over the Christian world in exchange for providing protection for Byzantium against the growing threat of the Ottomans. Nevertheless, in reality, on the one hand, the West offered very little protection, and on the other, the anti-Western lobby prevailed in the Eastern Orthodox Church, which included many Athonites, and the treaty was not implemented[37]. More importantly, they viewed the attempt to push the Eastern Church into reunion as hostile and ultimately rejected even the concept of any form of exchange and cooperation. The Athonian elite formed a view that began to regard the Latin Church as another enemy that needed to be resisted[38].

Furthermore, as the Ottomans simultaneously fought wars with Europe and worked towards increasing trade with the West, from the end of the sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth century the Catholic Church attempted yet again to take advantage and sent waves of missionaries to the Ottoman territories occupied by Eastern Orthodox

Christians[39]. This time the effort was to convert them rather than work towards a formal union. Evidence is found in the notes of travels around the northern parts of the Bulgarian province of the Ottoman Empire by the Catholic bishop and historian Peter Bogdan from the mid-seventeenth century. Apparently he was impressed by the size of Arbanassi, which comprised 1,000 houses[40].

Initially this Roman activity provoked a counter mission sent by the Athonian monasteries. Establishing a visible presence in the landscape was one of the counteracting strategies, and intensive building of monasteries, churches and chapels followed. A monk called Pimen from the Zographou Monastery, an icon painter himself, is supposed to have contributed to the establishment and decoration of fifteen monasteries and 300 parish churches within and around Sofia. He became the most celebrated Orthodox missionary[41].

Conserving the form of Byzantine art became the second part of the strategy for the preservation of doctrine[42]. A directive was given by the Church Synod to benefactors and artists to maintain the 'purity' and the 'true' nature of any drawn or painted images by using Greek and Russian examples from the past only as references[43]. As a result of this policy, the

37 From its establishment, Athos was regarded as one of the greatest strongholds of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Its first foundations, which appeared in the tenth century, were the result of the combined initiative of visionary monks and pious Byzantine emperors and nobility. The Monastery of the Great Lavra was established in the second half of the tenth century, with the help of lavish gifts of money and precious objects from the Emperor Nikephorus II Phokas (963–969). The Monastery of Iviron was founded in about 980 with the patronage of Emperor Basil II (976–1025). All Orthodox nations of any significance acquired and maintained foundations on Athos from the Middle Ages. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the monastic establishment became cosmopolitan, with the appearance of the first Slavic monasteries, housing respectively Russian, Serbian and Bulgarian monks. The first known Slavic monastery was founded by Zelianos and became a Russian monastery in 1142; the Monastery of Chelandariou became Serbian in 1198, and in the thirteenth century the Monastery of Zographou became Bulgarian after the establishment of the Second Bulgarian Tzardom (1185–1396).

38 Konstantine Dinkov, *op. cit.*, p. 75–79.

39 Victorja Popovska-Korobar, 'Predstavata na Sveti Nikola Novi vo Slimnichkiot Manastir [The Depiction of St Nicolas the Neo in the Slimnica Monastery], in: *Sbornik Srednovekovna Umetnos* [*Journal of Mediaeval Art*], [online], 2006, t. 5, [cited 2016-04-03], http://www.academia.edu/4405627/_Претствата_на_свети_Никола_Нови_во_Слимничкиот_манастир_The_depiction_of_St_Nicholas_the_Neo_at_the_Slimnica_monastery_.

40 B. Dimitrov, *Peter Bogdan – Bulgarski Istoric i Politic ot XVII bek* [*Peter Bogdan – A Bulgarian Historian and Politician of the Seventeenth Century*], Sofia, 1984, p. 164.

41 Victorja Popovska-Korobar, *op. cit.*

42 Geyorgy Gerov, 'Vodata kato granitža' [Water as Borderline], in: *Vuprosi na Iskustvoto* [*Questions in Art*], No. 2 , 2002, p. 31–57.

43 Russia, which had received Christianity from Byzantium in the tenth century, was still a Metropolitanate of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and so effectively under its jurisdiction. The Russians had rejected the decisions of the Council of Florence, thereby proving their loyalty to the Church. Russian art was considered to be doctrinally sound. See Ljuben Božkov, *Bitovi*

2. *The Baptism of Jesus,* a nineteenth century wall painting from the decoration of the main church of the Rila Monastery, Bulgaria. (© Elza Tantcheva 2016)

Jėzaus krikštas, XIX a. sienų tapyba Rilos vienuolyno centrinėje bažnyčioje, Bulgarija (© Elza Tantcheva 2016)

representational system of the Eastern Church began to show some signs of stagnation. Even members of the Cretan iconographic school, who were close to Europe, remained conservative in their approach and only very few of them adopted new themes or made changes to the traditional form of representation, and not until after the seventeenth century[44]. Therefore, the mode of representation of the body chosen by the patrons and the artist of the Church of St Atanass in Arbanassi appears to have been chosen in response to the threat posed by the Latin Church rather than as an aesthetic preference. This choice could be seen as a political rather than an entirely theologically based statement.

Elementi v Stenopicite na Tzurkvite v Arbanassi [*Domestic Elements in the Wall Paintings from the Churches of Arbanassi*], Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Science Press, 1985, p. 99–132.

44 Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 200, 212.

Nevertheless, Baroque elements appear in the decorative programmes of Eastern Orthodox churches in the eighteenth century, after the Latin Church abandoned its missionary attempts, becoming occupied with its own problems of the loss of power over the secular world after the Enlightenment. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that these elements became well established[45]. Examination of the scene of *The Baptism of Jesus* from the decoration of the main church of the Rila Monastery is in stark contrast with the same scene from the nave of the Church of St Atanass in Arbanassi [image 2]. The same personages appear in this depiction of the biblical scene and the overall structure of the composition remains the same: Jesus in the centre of the composition, St John the Baptist on the left bank of the river, and the angels on the right bank, though instead of just three or four angels the heavenly host is suggested. The body of Jesus is presented realistically rather than schematically, as in the body in the Arbanassi nave of the Church of St Atanass. However, even in this relatively new mode of depiction of the body the Eastern Church appears to have kept distance from the over-dramatic and sensuous bodily representation adopted by Western Baroque, instead maintaining its detached gaze on the flesh.

CONCLUSION

The representation of the body in the Church of St Atanass elucidates the visual strategy of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the context of the continuous attempts of Rome to achieve dominance over the Christian world. Returning to the Byzantine mode of representation gave, on the one hand, the reassuringly familiar traditional appearance and, on the other, allowed keeping a certain distance from the human body, which is the focus of the artistic observation of Western Baroque. Consequently, the tradition became

45 Bisera Penkova, *op. cit.*, p. 3–8.

so deeply embedded that later, even in works that were stylistically rooted in Baroque, the mode of representation of the body still echoed the one seen in the Church of St Atanass.

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AR VISI KELIAI VEDA Į ROMĄ?
KŪNO VAIZDAVIMAS XVII A.
ARBANASIO ŠV. ATANAZO BAŽNYČIOS
(BULGARIJA) NAVOS PUOŠYBOJE

Elza Tantcheva-Burdge

SANTRAUKA

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kūnas, XVII a., Bulgarija, tarpkonfesinės sąveikos, Vakarų įtakos.

Šio straipsnio tikslas yra įvertinti, kaip vaizduojamas kūnas XVII a. Arbanasio Šv. Atanazo bažnyčios (Bulgarija) navos puošyboje. Iškeliama hipotezė, kad greičiausiai archajiškos tradicijos laikymosi negalima paaiškinti vien tik osmanų okupacija. Be to, tradicijos buvo laikomasi ne tik dėl išskirtinai teologinių ar estetinių priežasčių – tai buvo Romos ir Konstantinopolio patriarchato kovos dėl dominavimo išraiška. Analizė yra atliekama lyginamojo stilistinio tyrimo būdu.

Nuo XVII a. Romos bažnyčia skatino vis dramatiškesnį ir realistiškesnį žmogaus kūno vaizdavimą baroko stiliumi, kuris paplito visoje Europoje. Tačiau į Bulgarijos meną ir bažnyčių puošybą šis stilius atkeliavo tik XIX a. Tuo tarpu Šv. Atanazo bažnyčioje daugelyje kompozicijų kūnas ir jo judesys perteikti per drabužių klosčių linijas. Toks vaizdavimas yra siejamas su gerokai ankstesne bizantiškąja tradicija.

Tyrimas parodo, kad istoriškai Roma visuomet siekė įtvirtinti savo dominavimą prieš Ortodoksų bažnyčią. Vis dažnesnis importuotų vakarietiškų artefaktų ir vaizdų naudojimas garbinimui, taip pat kai kurių iš vakarietiškų vizualinių praktikų pasiskolintų reprezentacinių ir kompozicinių strategijų įvedimas galiausiai sukėlė priešišką reakciją.

Pagal šiame straipsnyje naudojamą metodologiją iš pradžių yra nagrinėjama pasirinktų Šv. Atanazo bažnyčios vizualinės programos scenų ikonografija ir aptariamas kūno vaizdavimas kiekvienoje kompozicijoje. Tada apibūdinami būdingi kūno vaizdavimo Arbanasyje ir Vakarų tradicijoje skirtumai garsių meistrų Renio ir Rembrandto paveikslų kontekste. Siekiant išsiaiškinti šių skirtumų priežastis, tyrinėjamas istorinis kontekstas ir jo įtaka. Ieškoma sąsajų tarp svarbių socialinių, politinių, ekonominių ir kultūrinių aplinkybių bei aptariamas jų poveikis pasirinktam vaizdavimo stiliui.