

AN ATTEMPT TO INTERPRET POETRY FROM THE PSALTER. THE WALL COMPOSITION OF THE VAULT BUILT IN THE 19TH CENTURY IN THE CHURCH OF DOLNA VERENITSA

Katerina. I. DYULGEROVA,
Orthodox Theology Faculty, University of Veliko Tarnovo
E-mail: iksora@abv.bg

Abstract: *The report examines and analyses the unique and specific in nature wall decoration in the additionally constructed 19th-century narthex of the church in the village of Dolna Verenitsa. The emphasis in this study is placed on the allegorical rosette created on verses from The Psalter with calendar and cosmogonic interpretations which, in the form they are written/painted, are not found in churches constructed at the same time in the region; and which are of particular interest for iconographic studying due to their singular nature. Emphatic is also the choice of the psalm, and composite references to other churches displaying similar images.*

Key words: *Dolna Verenitsa, Psalter, wall composition, mural*

St. Nikola church in Dolna Verenitsa (Fig.1) was built in several stages. The original building probably dates back to the late 16th - early 17th century; it is a small, dug into the ground stone church - nave with a semi-cylindrical vault and wide semicircular apse. A feature in the interior of the church is the tapered profiles of the apse and of the niches located on the north and south walls. It is possible that these elements represent Gothic influence which penetrated the local Orthodox architecture through old Catholic churches in Chiprovtsi, Zhelezna and Kopilovtsi (Gergova, 2006: 343-364).



Fig.1. General view from the southwest to St. Nikola church



Fig.2 Part of the wall decoration of the vault

In the early 19th century the western wall was removed and the nave was extended and expanded, which doubled its volume. Later narthex was added, which belongs to the third stage of the reconstruction of the church. Currently, the church is declared to be a cultural monument of national importance. Information about the church is taken from the detailed surveys of B. Dyakovich (1904: 25,26), A. Vasilev (1950: 91,92) and I. Gergova (1983: 7-9), which is too general and it does not cover the murals which are the subject of our present study. In the scientific literature, as it becomes clear from our analysis, only V. Mardi-Babikova (1971:6,12) mentions the decoration of the vault in the overall description of the scenes and murals in the church. Mardi - Babikova refers the murals from the vault to the 19th century, and the painters are identified as representatives of the Tryavna School. She divides them into parts which include (from west to east): The god of hosts, All-seeing eye, Virgin Hodegetria¹ (Popova, 1998: 32-41) and frieze with images of prophets. This judgment is not quite right and needs reasonable adjustments. This will focus on the first two parts (which are the main theme of the report), with the idea to prove that united logically belong to a common scene; statement that presupposes and requires reasoned and thorough investigation. This reasoning is not quite right and needs some justified corrections. Thus, we are to focus on the first two parts (which are the main topic of the report), with the idea to prove that being united logically they belong to a common scene; statement that presupposes and requires reasoned and thorough study.

This paper aims at exploring and analyzing the unknown so far composition on the vault of the 19th century nave found in the church in Dolna Verenitsa. (Fig.2). In general, the composition consists of a large circular medallion carried by four flying angels and the image of the God of hosts.

¹ Iconographic type – St. Mary the Unfading rose.

The medallion is located in the central part of the arch and consists of two concentric circles. In the centre of the medallion is the All-seeing eye with rays of lights. It is surrounded by four different types of "twigs". There is a ring-shaped rosette, the smaller circle is surrounded by the images of the twelve months of the year and the symbols of the respective zodiac signs. Inside the big circle the following inscription can be read: тГ совершилъ е,,си' зарю' и,, сл҃нце, тГ сотворилъ е,,си' всѣ- предѣли и,, земли' жатв? и весн? тГ создалъ е,,сти - " салw'мъ о҃гг: се'иѣ е,,сть двенадес-тъ мес-цеиѣ вък?пѣ собра'ни <)¹ Oriented to the west in the composition the day and the night are symbolically depicted as the sun and moon. The relevant inscriptions in light of the shining of the sun and into the dark, star-studded background of the moon are as follows: тво'иѣ е^сть де'нь и и,, тво-' е^сть но'щъ. Above them the God of hosts is painted in a rainbow of clouds, making the gesture of blessing with his both hands.

From the above text we understand that this is very clear visualization of verses from the Psalter (which also incorporates the Zodiac). At the end the following psalm is given: salw'ma o'g // // // // // Psalm 73 and the rest part of the text corresponds to 16-17 verse of it.² Only this part of the text concerning the twelve months of the signs (the basis for their inclusion in the whole composition) is not among those verses. Most likely it was later added by painters with a particular reason, which is to be justified. Psalter³ consists of 150 psalms, divided into 20 kathisma and five books. Psalms are religious songs used in worship. Seventy-third Psalm falls within tenth kathisma, third book and is titled "Doctrine of Asaph".⁴ Asaph is from Levitical family and he is a head (leader, conductor) of the choir at the time of David (I Chronicles / I Chronicles 16; 5,7; II Chronicles/I Chronicles 29:30) (Kidner, 17,51,57; arch. Bazhanov, 1993: 80) and in most cases under his name (in the title) it is meant his choir. The psalm is a deplorable song about the destroyed church in Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. The prophet describes the plight of Jerusalem and the Jewish people. He prays for protection and revenge on the enemy. For this purpose it is shown how powerful God is and how effortlessly the enemy can be humbled; the visible enemy kills a man, while the

¹ The inscriptions are read by Hristo Andreev.

² See The Bible. Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, S., 1992.

³ More details about the Psalter: origin, meaning, division, different translations, etc.. See Ivan Markovski, *Introduction to the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament*. Slovo, S., 1992, p. 286-292.; V, *Liturgika* University publisher St. Kliment Ohridski, S., 1996, p. 82, 123, 147-148.; Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Commentary on the Old Testament*, Psalms 1-72, BCSU, S., 2001.; Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Commentary on the Old Testament*, Psalms 73-150, BCSU, S., 2002.

⁴ This is translated according to the synodic edition. The Septuagint (LXX), translated it as a "psalm of reason" and the revised edition of the Bible translated it as a "lesson".

invisible one kills the soul with injustice and lawlessness and its weapon is ignorance. The composition which is the focus of our study corresponds to 16-17 verse from the Asaph Psalm and the meaning behind them is the God as Creator, not only as Redeemer. Their author preaches: "Yours is the day and yours is the night: you have found all the world's limits the Moon and Sun; Thou hast set all the borders of earth, Summer and winter didst. The meaning is that in the centre of the Christian religion is the God who creates all things visible and invisible, and under His will it either exists or not. Everything is God's creation and as such is God's will, logic and providence. So in the visualization of the psalm it illustrates the relationship between Creator and creation; God's omnipotence concerning the establishment of the eternal laws of nature, the change of day and night, the seasons, the full annual cycle after cycle of life (Monk Evtimii Zigaben, 2004: 861-878.; Kidner, 324-332). According to Arseniy from Cappadocia, retold by Athos old Paisii, the psalm is read in peace and war to protect the villagers and when the enemy has surrounded the village In Orthodox worship verse 1 - 2.12 of 73rd Psalm is used in the second antiphon of the Liturgy for the feast of the Lord's Cross Exaltation. It is in the second group of great prokeimena which are sung in the vespers after the feast (Ps. 73: 4).

From the foregoing, we conclude that the painter (or painters) created an exact copy of the biblical text and depict all the important characters and events. God of hosts¹ (to whom the entire text of the psalm is directed) is depicted as the Creator of everything; blessing, with triangular nimbus symbolizing St. Trinity with the inscription: Everlasting. The sun and the moon are positioned on both sides of the Father and symbolically recreate the alternation of day and night as a metaphor of strength and durability or the constantly repeated cycle (Ps. 32: 4; Rev. 7:15). (Kovacheva, 2012: 44) They are two of the luminaries associated with certain signs of the Zodiac that are rulers (Shtekin, 2004: 33). The all-seeing eye is in the centre of two concentric circles. The first association we make is with Christian symbolism (iconography) of the circle which symbolizes eternity, infinity and perfection; symbolizes the world in its cycle, measuring time by days, months, seasons and years (Kovacheva, 2012: 34). Circular movements are perfect, unchangeable, without beginning or end, without modifications; this undoubtedly makes it a symbol of the time. The circle symbolizes the sky, its movement is circular and inviolable; more

¹ Associated with the first image of the Holy. Trinity; according to a translation (the Septuagint) means "the Lord of hosts." It appears in Russian art throughout 16c., As the foundation of the iconography is the image of Jesus Christ Denman. He embodies the idea of God as all-powerful ruler of all earthly and heavenly forces, as presented in the Bible all the stars and cosmic phenomena. In Bulgaria this iconographic type enters through 17c. ("St. Spas" - Alinski Monastery, 1626).

directly symbolizes the cosmic sky, especially when it comes to its relationship with the Earth. Moreover, the circle is a figure of celestial cycles, and more accurately it represents the tour of the planets, the year cycle of the zodiac. Concentric circles depict the degrees of existence, the hierarchies that have been created. As they are, they constitute universal manifestation of unity and unmanifested existence (Shevalie, Geerbrant, 1995: 554- 559). Assuming that the all-seeing eye is the central point of the circle, and the circle is the deployment of the central point and its manifestation, then: "All points of the circle are presented in the center of the circle, which is their beginning and their end," as it is written by Prokal. Many other authors, among them Heinrich Suzhou similarly compares the centre and the circle with the God and the creation (Shevalie, Geerbrant, 1995: 555). Should we accept the All-seeing eye as of primordial presence of God (the always watchful eye of God over the world until the Second Coming), the above judgment of Prokal expresses to the fullest the symbolism of the image of the psalm. The eye is drawn between the sides of the triangle radiating light. The triangle indicates (symbolizes) St. Trinity in unity and rays are the shining of God's glory. In specialized literature the image is known as the Eye of Providence.¹ It reminds that God is all-seeing and all-knowing; besides the human's acts, God knows their intimate thoughts, desires and feelings. The symbol is found more in the early Byzantine iconography (in the first centuries of Christianity), and in 12c. is spread in the West. The image is based on texts of the Old Testament, Psalter and the New covenant (Ps. 32:18; Ps. 31:8; Proverbs 15:3; 5:5; 4:13) and others. In the late 18th century in Russia a complex symbolic, allegorical composition was formed in iconography, originating from the text of Ps. 32:18: "Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him and who trust in his mercy". In Bulgaria the symbol became especially popular during the National Revival. Around the God's all-seeing eye the four seasons are allegorically depicted: spring, summer, autumn and winter. Spring is recreated by flowers, summer with bundles of wheat, autumn and winter can be recognized respectively by the vines heavy with fruit and the leafless branches. It is obvious that the chosen specifications match or accompany human activity in different seasons. We will pay due attention to the Zodiac to justify its presence in the visualization of Psalm 73: 16-17. The text: „се'иѣ е„сть двоенадес-тъ мес-цеиѣ вък?пэ собра'ни" which corresponds to the images of months with the zodiac signs is not a part of Psalm 73, but it is a meaningful addition to the whole composition and its presence is quite natural. Zodiac signs appeared in the Bulgarian church art in the Middle Ages, and although they are not directly related to the

¹ The church „St. St. Petar and Pavel" at village of Berende (14c.); the church „St. Dimitar" nearb Boboshevo (1488); the church „St. Stefan" in Nesebar (1599) and others.

canonical Christian literature or to the ritual, they had their own place reserved until the end of the National Revival period. Somehow "innocent" and unobtrusively astrology manages to fit in Christianity and the accompanying art (Spiridonova, 2002: 151,152). In Babylon, Egypt, Judea, Persia, India, Tibet, China, Scandinavian countries, Muslim countries and many others had some knowledge of the Zodiac and practiced astrology. Everywhere it was linked with the most important human monuments: walls, temples, churches etc. (Shevaliee, Geerbrant, 1995: 403). The signs of the zodiac are twelve (the perfect number) equal parts of the ecliptic, the visible path of the Sun across the celestial sphere. Each of these parts has its own name: Aries, Taurus, Gemini ... and corresponds to a particular month of the year. The circle of the zodiac signs is located within the solar system and is directly linked to the seasons (Shtekin, 32). The word Zodiac is mentioned even in the Bible (Job 38:32; 4 Kingdom. 23: 5; Prem. 13:12), under the name constellations, but in Christianity there is some contradiction to astrology; stars, like everything else are God's creation and the meaning and position follow the God's providence (Spiridonova, 160, 161, 168, 169; Arch. Bazhanov, 349). The presence of the Zodiac in most cases is a symbol of the passing time, but it is only valid within the human life flowing through a cycle with a beginning and an end.

Images of zodiac signs are found in miniatures and monumental painting from early Christian times. Nowadays the existing images of signs in Bulgaria can be provisionally divided into three groups. The first one is related to the composition "Wheel of Life". The idea of the eternal circle of life, the time that "ruthlessly" move following the laws of nature, and the signs symbolize months. Such a wheel can be seen in the "Nativity" church in Arbanasi (1649); "St. John the Baptist" in Bistritsa (1882.); "Blessed Virgin" church in Blagoevgrad (1888-1889). The second group includes images of the signs involved in the iconography of the "Doomsday". They are also connected with the symbolic representation of the time, but to express and demonstrate its end. They are located chaotically (the cyclicity is impaired) on a scroll sheet – sky rolled by angels. These are the churches "St. Athanasius in Boboshevo (17c.) and St. Mary of Vitosha at Dragalevtsi Monastery (1476). The third group of images with signs illustrates the connection between God - the creator and all that exists; they symbolize the months whose visualization would otherwise be difficult to achieve. Two of them are in Rila Monastery Ensemble: mural of the narthex of the main church (1845). Hermitage and "St. Luke" (1799), "St. Petka" church in Dren (1864.); "St.Spas" in Dolni Lozen (1869.); Beliova Church near Samokov (1968); "St.George" in Dolni Lozen (1874), etc. The common in all these churches is that the God is in the center of the composition, no matter in which of his appearances, framed by a belt of images of the zodiac signs (Kovacheva, 166-176).

Almost identical to the scene that we studied in Dolna Verenitsa is the composition at the Assumption church in Iskretski monastery (Fig.3). It is located on the vault in the narthex of the church. Unfortunately, the mural has been badly damaged and half of the image is permanently deleted. Judging by the preserved parts of the picture and the inscription along the outer circle, we can conclude that it is a visualization of the same psalm that is the subject of our study (Ps. 73: 16-17). The composition here consists of two concentric circles in which the seasons and the Zodiac are presented. The day and the night are also recreated by the sun and the moon and angels around the circle. The murals were painted by an artist Yanachko (1843 and 1846), who is likely to have painted the murals in the church in Dolna Verenitsa. The iconographic scheme and the location of the scene in the church area are quite similar to those in the church in Dolna Verenitsa. These are all possible grounds for referring the murals in both churches to the same author!?

We should note the similarity between some elements of this study with identical ones in the so-called Eternal Calendar (Fig.4). It was painted on the wall of the school in the village of Mihaltsi (Pavlikeni) by Venko (a painter from Tryavna) in 1870. The idea for the Calendar came from Father Matei Preobrazhenski (Mitkaloto). Now it is removed, restored and displayed at the History museum in Pavlikeni. It consists of nine concentric circles, as the outermost has twelve sectors corresponding to the months of the year. In the four corners of the composition the four seasons are depicted allegorically as symbol of the human life stages. In the central circle there are two hemispheres representing the earth: sun and moon, among which is the symbol of the all-seeing eye and the following inscriptions can be read: тем естѹ де'нь естѹ нощ- (Ivanov, 2006: p. 51-58; Sabev, 2014: 165–199).



Fig.3 Mural from the Iskretski monastery



Fig.4. Eternal Calendar

The scene that we examined is part of the only preserved decoration (from 19th century) in the finished construction of the nave of the church in Dolna Verenitsa – the circumstance which obstructs the analysis of the overall iconographic program in the room. The same is true regarding its connection with the decoration of the arch and its intended purpose. Undoubtedly, the composition of the arch is a clear visualization (including the Zodiac) of verses from Psalm 73, recreated by symbols and methods of Christian art. The theme of praising God is one of the main in Christian dogma. Deployment and high parts of the church is dictated by the established mandatory hierarchy. God is the one who dominates over his creations. He is the Creator around whom all earthly and heavenly forces turn around, the first purpose of the created man is solely praising the God.

The Painter skilfully manages to recreate the eternal circle of life included in the human time framework. Time when life and death are inherent to all; to the circle which strives to "bite" its beginning.

ABBREVIATIONS

CF – A collection of folklore

BAS -Bulgarian Academy Of Sciences

NICM-National Institute of Cultural Monuments

PA - Problems of art

UP-University press

BCSU-Bulgarian Christian Students' Union

PH- Publishing house

NBU-New Bulgarian University

References:

1. Bazhanov, Nikifor (Archimandrite) (1993), *Complete Orthodox biblical encyclopedia*, v.1, elpis, VT.
2. Dyakovich, Boris (1904), *Archaeological excursion around the Danube Bulgaria*. – Folklore Collection, XX. C.,
3. Ivanov, I.T. (2006), *For the beginning of the year in the proto-Bulgarian calendar* – Hemus magazine, bk.2, 2006
4. Gergova, Ivanka (1983), *The art of the Revival period from Mihailovgrad district*, Sofia.
5. Gergova, Ivanka (2006), *St. Nikola Church, Zhelyaza* in: Nis and Byzantium.Collection. IV. Nis.
6. Kidner, Derek (2002), *Tyndale Commentary on the Old Testament, Psalms 1-72*, BCSU, S., 2001.; , Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Commentary on the Old Testament, Psalms 73-150*, BCSU, S
7. Kovacheva, Eva (2012), *„The wheel of life“ in the Bulgarian church painting*. Baricch and co. Pazardzhik
8. Mardi-Babikova, Velda (1971), *Scientifically-justified suggestion for declare cultural monuments the churches "St. Nikolai" in Dolna Verenitsa village and "St. Nikolai" in Gorna Verenitsa village*, Mihailovgrad region - NICM. S.
9. Sabev, Plamen (2014) *Father Matei Preobrazhenski – Mitkaloto and his model of Eternal calendar* – in: anniversary book „Pavlikeni –ancient and eternal“. „Faber“. V.Tarnovo.
10. Shevalie Jean; Gheerbrant, Alain (1995), *Dictionary of symbols*, v.1, I. Petrikov. S.
11. Shtekin, Georgii (2004), *Visual psycho-diagnostics*. Faber. V.Tarnovo., 2004.
12. Vasilev, Asen (1950), *Churches and monasteries in Western Bulgaria – Excavations and studies*. IV, Sofia.