

SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL
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- 9 *AnnaLinden Weller*
Narrative & Verisimilitude in Byzantium – an Introduction
- 15 *Baukje van den Berg*
‘The Excellent Man Lies Sometimes’: Eustathios of Thessalonike on Good Hypocrisy, Praiseworthy Falsehood, and Rhetorical Plausibility in Ancient Poetry
- 37 *Stanislas Kuttner-Homs*
L’historien comme témoin: le “je” historiographique est-il le garant de la vraisemblance dans l’Histoire de Nicétas Chôniatès?
- 61 *Markéta Kulhánková*
Scenic narration in the *Daniel Sketiotes Dossier* of spiritually beneficial tales
- 81 *Jonas J. H. Christensen*
I was there. Constantine Akropolites’ Typikon
- 95 *Jakov Đorđević*
Experiencing Resurrection: Persuasive Narrative of the Pictorial Program in the Ossuary of the Bachkovo Monastery
- 125 *David Konstan*
Sin: The Prehistory
- 141 *Adam Goldwyn*
Theory and Method in John Tzetzes’ *Allegories of the Iliad* and *Allegories of the Odyssey*
- 173 Book Reviews

Editorial

In this third volume of the Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, we are happy to welcome a guest-editor, Dr AnnaLinden Weller, who has edited five articles from a conference that she organized at Uppsala University in 2016 within the frame of the ‘Text and Narrative in Byzantium’ research network. The articles are written by Baukje van den Berg, Stanislas Kuttner-Homs, Markéta Kulhánková, Jonas J. H. Christensen and Jakov Đorđević, provided with an introduction by AnnaLinden Weller. In addition, the journal includes two more articles – one by David Konstan, based on his 2016 lecture in memory of Professor Lennart Rydén, and one by Adam Goldwyn – and two book reviews.

In October 2018, Modern Greek Studies in Lund will organise the 6th European Congress of Modern Greek Studies, and according to the number of submitted abstracts it promises to be an interesting event for scholars from many countries around the globe to come together.

The journal is open for unpublished articles and book reviews related to Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies in the fields of philology, linguistics, history and literature. It is published in collaboration with Greek and Byzantine Studies at Uppsala University and we welcome contributions not only from Scandinavian colleagues, but from scholars all around the world.

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Experiencing Resurrection: Persuasive Narrative of the Pictorial Program in the Ossuary of the Bachkovo Monastery

Jakov Đorđević

How persuasive were medieval visual narratives in relation to their contemporary audience? Should we consider the persuasiveness as the rightful property of images whenever they were bound to possess it by the will of those who ordered or crafted them with that exact purpose? W. J. T. Mitchell argued against such notions in his provocative essay *What Do Pictures Really Want*. He urges us to search for a picture's own desires, separated from those that belonged to its creator or ideator, thus recognizing it to be an active participant in the communication with its viewer. It is possible that some pictures might not have had the ability to stir the desired response in the audience from the very beginning, i.e. the reaction their donors or artists strived for. On the other hand, the relation between image and spectator is not immune to change. As time passes, different generations of onlookers take turns, one after another, whereas pictures live on. Some even continue to live in different spatial contexts. Hence, these spatiotemporal

* I would like to thank Professor Ingela Nilsson and Dr. AnnaLinden Weller for giving me the opportunity to present this paper at the conference “To see, to report, to persuade: narrative & verisimilitude in Byzantium”, where I was able to discuss my research further with other participants who generously offered their comments and suggestions. I am immensely grateful to Professor Jelena Erdeljan and Professor Biserka Penkova for their help in providing me with the permission to see the Bachkovo ossuary in person. Also, special thanks to the anonymous reviewer who did a wonderful job commenting on the article. This study contains some of the results achieved in the project no. 177036, supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

changes bring new audiences with altered or completely foreign cultural backgrounds, which unmistakably results in new responses.¹ However, unmodified spatiotemporal context still does not guarantee a unified response. Categories such as gender, social class, creed, and age can all play a part in fashioning beholders' reception.² Therefore, the fact that a visual narrative was intended to be designed as a trustworthy or convincing representation of certain event(s) does not mean that it necessarily succeeded in achieving that goal. Hence, instead of only discussing the authority (credibility) of the chosen subject matter of an image (including its sources and reasons which determined its selection), we should also consider in greater depth the pictorial means employed in engaging the viewer with the encountered representation, as well as interrogate the viewer's "cultural identity" and the precise context in which that encounter was taking place.

While discussing didactic literature in the West, Aron Gurevich argued that utilization of clichés and familiar topoi was highly desirable during the Middle Ages, since they communicated verisimilitude to the broader popular audience.³ It seems that verisimilitude was founded on recognition: familiarity with the delivered thoughts, expected reactions of the characteristic types of characters⁴ and firm belief in the supernatural, whether perceived as miraculous or marvelous, were all contributing to the listener's/reader's acceptance of the narrative as highly believable or trustworthy. Furthermore, Gurevich also argued that in such context "the most minute nuances, even seemingly insignificant shifts of accent, were recognized much more acutely than today."⁵

Can medieval visual narratives also be considered in light of this

¹ Mitchell 1996. See also Belting 2005.

² Cf. Camille 1993.

³ Gurevich 1988, 10–11.

⁴ In encountering the living dead, for example, it was expected that (stereotypical) heroes of popular tales (or hermits in their *vitas*) would react differently to ordinary people in that same situation. See, for instance, numerous excerpts from Icelandic sagas in Lecouteux 2009, where ordinary people are usually frightened to death or go insane when they unexpectedly encounter a revenant. By contrast, St. Macarius is using the corpse animated by demons as a pillow (Jacobus de Voragine 2012, 89–90).

⁵ Gurevich 1988, 10–11.

insightful observation, especially when taking into account that fresco programs depicting scenes from saints' *vitas* could also be perceived, at least on some level, as didactic in character and intended for a wider public? Depictions of the Last Judgment, being visions of forewarning, could also be included into this category. Can "iconographic clichés" and familiar compositional arrangements of scenes with similar "plots" (e.g. deathbed scenes of different saints) indicate "verisimilitude" of medieval visual narratives if we take them to be appropriate analogies to the mentioned features of didactic literature? This is likely since they were relying on recognition of the familiar visual forms, already regarded as believable or convincing. This would hence imply greater sensitivity to every iconographic detail where "seemingly insignificant shifts of accent" directed "reading" of the image (i.e. interpretation) in different directions. However, the "beholder's share", to use the term of Ernst Gombrich, has to be considered as well. In achieving persuasion, the visual program had to rely on a viewer's own experiences fashioned by the cultural context he was living in. The fresco program of the Bachkovo ossuary offers an excellent case study for the interrogation of these problems; however, because of the general complexity of the present subject, the current discussion can only be related to those visual narratives that were embedded in sacred spaces.

Preparing to pass the threshold

The monastery of Mother of God Petritzonitissa, now known as the Bachkovo monastery, remains one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Bulgaria to this day. Its spiritual and cultural significance, connected to Georgian monasticism, has been carefully discussed and studied, continuously attracting scholarly attention.⁶ It was founded in 1083 by Gregory Pakourianos, a military leader and, according to the *Alexiad* by Anna Komnene, a loyal confidant of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, since he had helped the father of this Byzantine princess seize the impe-

⁶ See Bakalova *et al.* 2003, 11–27. On Georgian identity see also chapter twenty-four in the *typikon*, Pakourianos 2000, 547.

rial throne.⁷ However, the monastery's ossuary was built sometime later in the 12th century, which is why it was not mentioned in the typikon we know of today.⁸ The two-storey building, comprised of a crypt on the lower level and funerary chapel on the upper, to this day serves its original purpose of monastic burial. While the chapel was designed for funeral services, the crypt was intended to hold the bones after bodily decomposition was completed in the small cemetery that was placed next to the ossuary. Bones were stored in the floor holes covered with wooden doors which could easily be opened whenever earthly remains were to be placed in them, or most likely during the memorial services which were performed in the crypt (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Naos of the crypt in the Bachkovo ossuary. (Photo: author)

In order to enter the crypt's naos, the final abode for the remains of the deceased monks before the general resurrection takes place, one has to pass through the narthex and encounter the well-preserved fresco program. In the 12th century, this space originally had openings in the west

⁷ Bakalova et al. 2003, 11–12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

and north walls that were eventually walled up in the 14th century, along with the portico of the upper chapel.⁹ Newly formed niches were then frescoed without violating the original concept of the pictorial program.¹⁰ Like other liminal spaces that marked transition from the outside world to the consecrated place, “decoration” of the narthex had crucial importance in setting the right atmosphere and preparing monks’ minds for the experience that was ahead of them.¹¹ The vault and all surrounding walls were covered with scenes from the Last Judgment.¹² A depiction of the General Resurrection of the Dead can still be seen on the west wall, with newly resurrected bodies standing in their tombs or being vomited by birds, sea creatures, or terrestrial beasts. On the vault above, the sky is shown as if it was being folded like a scroll by an angel, clearing the view for the undisturbed gaze upon the seated figure of Christ (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Resurrected men are approaching Christ the Judge. Vault of the narthex, crypt of the Bachkovo ossuary. (Photo: author)

⁹ Ibid., 30, 32.

¹⁰ Ibid., 118.

¹¹ Cf. Schroeder 2012.

¹² For detailed iconographical analyses, see Bakalova et al. 2003, 63–65.

The Great Judge is surrounded by his heavenly court, with special emphasis on the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist as the main intercessors for humankind. Immediately underneath, on the east wall, a vision of Paradise is encompassing the niche above the entrance into the crypt's naos (fig. 3). Amidst the flowery Garden of Eden, seated Abraham and the Good Thief are placed next to the image of the Virgin Mary on a throne with angels by her side. This peaceful depiction must have been in striking contrast with the now-lost scenes on the south wall, where the fiery domain of the damned once stood. This is evidenced by traces of red on the wall's surface, which still creates a sharp coloristic contrast to the green fields of Paradise.



Fig. 3. Paradise; Apostles are approaching the Gate of Paradise; Angels are measuring souls. East wall of the narthex, crypt of the Bachkovo ossuary. (Photo: author)

How these lost images would appear in the past might be easier to grasp by comparing the ossuary's program to other near-contemporaneous representations of the Last Judgment. A perfect example is one icon dating from 11th or 12th century that was painted by a Sinai

monk from Georgia.¹³ It depicts all the scenes that can still be seen in the Bachkovo crypt, likely including those that are now lost as well. However, what becomes apparent at first glance is that the composition of the icon is formed by symmetrical placement of antithetical events: on Christ's right side are those dominated by the righteous, while mainly infernal affairs brimming with figures of sinners appear to his left. The same arrangement is present in the exonarthex of the Mileševa monastery, where scenes from the Last Judgment are also distributed all over the surrounding walls.¹⁴ This idea of contrasting imagery implies that the lost frescos of the damned on Bachkovo's south wall once corresponded to the long procession of the elect on the north wall. Therefore, it seems plausible that this antithetical connection was achieved with the analogous ill-fated procession of sinners that progressed in the opposite direction toward the west, where representations of the torments of hell must have stood before.¹⁵

Arranged as such, the visual program of the crypt's narthex was undoubtedly designed to enhance the viewer's experience. As Alexei Lidov recently argued, "The primary natural property of a Byzantine icon is that it does not imply a border between the image and the viewer which in modern European art is always present. Also, there is no image-viewer opposition; the image is produced in the space preceding the pictorial plane. In other words, it emerges out of flatness into the sphere of communion with the observing person present in the church as a matter of principle. This is what the ideal icon should be like."¹⁶ These observations are of immense help in defining and understanding the space of the Bachkovo crypt's narthex. Moreover, with them in mind, it is not hard to imagine a twelfth-century monk in this setting. When entering the crypt, as if stepping onto a stage, he would find himself below the representations of the newly resurrected men painted on the vault, shown to be going toward the Great Judge (fig. 2). The monk

¹³ On this icon, see Lidova 2009, 82, 85–86, 89 and fig. 5 for the image.

¹⁴ Radojčić 1982.

¹⁵ A procession of the damned with angels who are violently forcing sinners towards Hell is depicted on the south wall of the exonarthex in Mileševa. See *ibid.*, 184.

¹⁶ Lidov 2016, 20.



Fig. 4. Procession of the elect; Donor portraits. North wall of the narthex, crypt of the Bachkovo ossuary. (Photo: author)

would inevitably mirror their path in order to approach the door placed in the east end. By advancing through this space, he would also join the long procession of the elect along the north wall (fig. 4). However, the awareness that saintly figures were led by the group of apostles depicted on the east wall, as if they were preparing to pass the entrance into the crypt's naos at any moment, would transform the perception of this doorway, making it look like the gates of paradise (fig. 3). This would also explain the unusual absence of the fiery cherubim from the scene of the Garden of Eden above, who should ordinarily be guarding the heavenly entrance. Since the actual door below was a substitute for the gates of paradise, there was no need for this otherwise necessary iconographical detail. The remaining red surface in the right part of the composition of Paradise was most certainly unfitting to display the figure of the fiery guardian, not only because of the dimensions, but because he would then be positioned toward the damned instead of the elect. I am inclined to think that the still existing red surface on the east wall represents the fiery river that was supposed

to be perceived as the upper part of the stream that was extending on the south wall, undoubtedly with the characteristic, now lost, images of the angels who are violently forcing sinners toward the depths of Hell.¹⁷ This would consequently underline the notion that only the chosen can pass the threshold. Seen in this light, the figures of angels with scales on the right side of the doorway would be perceived as double-checking everyone before letting them pass.¹⁸

Taking into account that monks were entering the crypt in order to perform memorial services or to lay down new bones of their deceased brothers, it would be valid to assume that rarely would one person have walked this path alone without one's fellow-monks, who would again mirror the surrounding frescos. Therefore, gathered in a group, monks would eventually come to stand before the image of the Virgin Mary in the niche, a placement which amplified not only her holiness but also the liminality of the passage below. By the Middle Byzantine period, the Virgin Mary was associated with different metaphors that identify her as the guardian of the threshold of sacred space. Perhaps the most relevant for the present discussion are the two verses from the *Akathistos Hymn* proclaiming her to be the "opener of the doors of Paradise" and the one "through whom Paradise was opened".¹⁹ Encountering a representation of the enthroned Theotokos positioned in the niche, amidst the flowery

¹⁷ For the representations of the Last Judgment in the 11th and 12th centuries, see Angheben 2002; Ševčenko 2009.

¹⁸ I would like to note here that while one figure on the right side of the doorway is unmistakably the representation of an angel with scales, the other, highly damaged one, is very unusual for it seems that it lacks wings. The arrangement of garments might even suggest a female saint. However, to my knowledge, there is no any other example in Byzantine visual culture that could provide a suitable parallel. The scene of weighing of souls always contains up to two angels and there is no example of any saint attending the act of measuring. Nevertheless, the interpretation delivered in this paper would remain the same even if the figure in question was not that of an angel. For the scenes of weighing of souls where two angels are represented, see Ševčenko 2009, fig. 14.1 and 14.13; and for the images of this scene connected to the gates of paradise, see *ibid.*, fig. 14.3, 14.4, 14.6.

¹⁹ Krueger 2011, 37. See the same paper for other examples as well. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of these associations of the Virgin Mary and the threshold of holy space in Byzantine imagination.

Garden of Eden, would raise true awareness in the monks about the sacredness of the place that lay ahead of them, which in turn would demand the right attitude and seriousness of both body and mind before entering the crypt's naos.²⁰ Nevertheless, the very act of passing through the threshold may have also been consoling to monks, easing the fear of future judgment, since the very fact that they were able to pass the threshold of Heaven enumerated them among the blessed.

After the openings in the south wall were walled up in the 14th century, donors of the monastery and ossuary were depicted in the newly formed niches—one with portraits of Gregory Pakourianos, his brother, and a model of the church (the monastery's catholicon) between them, and the other one reserved for portraits of two monks, most likely the donors of the ossuary's pictorial program (fig. 4).²¹ They also belong to the overall spatial composition of the Last Judgment, despite being later additions. It seems that their hand gestures, directed toward the Virgin and Christ above them, as well as the displacement from the wall-plane of the procession of saints, mark them as those who are approaching the moment of their judgment.²² Conveniently imitating the representations of the niche tombs, these portraits were meant to remind the passing viewers to pray for the donors.²³

The experience that the narthex of Bachkovo's ossuary offered to its viewers was far from unique. The program of the exonarthex in Mileševa was also designed to trigger awareness and affect the monks through kinetic bodily perception. However, its complexity as a whole still remains to be studied.²⁴ It is particularly insightful to compare the crypt's

²⁰ Cf. Schroeder 2012, 122–123.

²¹ Bakalova et al. 2003, 122–123.

²² These portraits set in the niches enabled construction of a separate scene which was not interfering with the one “in front of it”, i.e. the procession of saints. This spatial arrangement in two separate wall-planes enabled the notion of separate scenes unfolding simultaneously in different “places”. On the other hand, on the flat surface of an icon, painters had to devise scenes of the Last Judgment in different rows, one below the other, in order to imply simultaneous unfolding of different activities in separate places.

²³ On Byzantine niche tombs, see Brooks 2002.

²⁴ There are three portals in the exonarthex of Mileševa which lead to other parts of the

narthex to the aforementioned Sinai icon, since its painter portrayed himself standing before the gates of paradise, leading the group of the elect. This was one of six votive icons painted by the monk Ioannes, four of which were calendar icons, i.e. representations of Christ's full entourage whose members were presented with this gift.²⁵ Honoring them with this gift, Ioannes undoubtedly expected their intercession on the Day of Judgment.²⁶ How exactly he perceived the Last Judgment icon is harder to determine. It is likely that it held a concrete role in achieving positive outcome before Christ's throne, but in exactly what way poses yet another question. Nonetheless, it can be argued with certainty that this image of an eschatological vision, with Ioannes' embedded portrait among the elect, must have had a comforting effect on the monk, lessening his fears, in the same way that the program of the crypt's narthex in Bachkovo affected its entire monastic community. By entering the crypt's narthex, monks of Bachkovo Monastery were also becoming part of an icon—a spatial one.²⁷ The pictorial program presented them with the opportunity to relive the future event, without a doubt a well-known narrative to every monk from various possible sources,²⁸ with comforting implications existing alongside the overall seriousness of the eschatological vision. Nevertheless, the program of the narthex was only spiritual and mental preparation for what lay ahead.

monastery's catholicon. Particularly interesting is the one on the south wall because it is surrounded by frescos depicting hell torments. Were these images specifically connected to the experience of the south chapel to which this portal leads? It remains to be seen.

²⁵ Lidova 2009, 80–81, 83, 89.

²⁶ Ibid., 83, 85.

²⁷ The term was introduced by Alexei Lidov in his study on the performativity of the icon Hodegetria in the public life of Constantinople (2006, 349–372).

²⁸ Though the Book of Revelation first comes to mind, which was not accepted as a canonical text until the 14th century, there were other influential texts in Byzantium, like the passages from the Book of Daniel or Ephraim the Syrian's *Sermon on the Second Coming of Our Lord* which are also important for the understanding of such iconography. See Ševčenko 2009, 250, 253; Radojčić 1982. On drawing on various written and oral sources and bringing them together into play in front of an image, see Lewis 2006, 96.



Fig. 5. Resurrection of dry bones. West wall of the naos, crypt of the Bachkovo ossuary. (Photo: author)

Virtual experience of bodily resurrection

By passing the threshold, monks of Bachkovo monastery would enter the gloomy space of the crypt's naos. Unlike the frescos of the narthex, which belong to a single composition—a unified image stretching through space—the pictorial program of the naos was composed of scenes that do not seem to be part of a distinct narrative.²⁹ The west wall is dedicated to an event that took place in the biblical past, but speaks of the ultimate future: the Resurrection of Dry Bones, a vision witnessed by the prophet Ezekiel, is rendered in the upper part of the wall (fig. 5), leaving space underneath it for fresco-icons. The fresco-icons are also found right below the monumental representation of the Deësis, which dominates the apse in the east (fig. 6). They might be associated with the growing practice of the Komnenian period which involved placing

²⁹ For detailed iconographical analyses of the fresco program in the crypt's naos, see Bakalova et al. 2003, 59–63.



Fig. 6. Deësis. Apse of the naos, crypt of the Bachkovo ossuary. (Photo: author)

sacred images of holy protectors and intercessors in connection with the tombs.³⁰ While virtually nothing is preserved of the painted prophets on the vault, fragments of heavily damaged standing figures of saints on the north and the south wall still remain. They were meant to be understood as a unified whole, gathered to perform the commemorative service for the dead. As such, images of holy bishops and deacons in liturgical garments can be discerned on both walls to the east, and frescos of holy monks, somewhat better preserved, to the west.³¹ It is easily noticeable that this mirroring of the actual action which took place in the crypt

³⁰ By carefully choosing representatives of the major church seats the notion of the universal Church, i.e. the whole community of saints, was realized. Hence, the whole heavenly court was supposed to protect the earthly remains of the deceased monks as well as to intercede for them before Christ. For the identity of saints on these fresco-icons, see *ibid.*, 61–62. For the practice of placing icons in connection with tombs, on the example of Isaak Komnenos, see Marsengill 2012, 203–204.

³¹ Bakalova et al. 2003, 63.

would amplify not just the notion of the real presence of saints, but of their active intercession for the dead buried here.³²

Taking into account that depictions of the Deësis are the only succinct representations of the Last Judgment showing solely Christ the Judge and two intercessors for humankind—the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist—frescos of the crypt’s pictorial program were interconnected through themes related to death. Because of their daily practice of finding a hidden network of associations between different passages of sacred texts from which deeper meanings could be obtained,³³ it is certain that monks would immediately perceive the binding links between images in the ossuary’s naos. And yet, the Resurrection of Dry Bones is a rarely depicted scene. How well would an ordinary monk in 12th-century Byzantium be familiar with the biblical narrative of Ezekiel’s prophetic vision? Having in mind that these exact passages (Ezekiel 37:1–14) were read annually during the services of Holy Saturday,³⁴ the answer would be: well enough, at the very least.³⁵ Narratives can be spoken just the same as they can be written or visually depicted, and monks were able to hear the stunning prophecy every year, immediately after the delivery of prayers praising Christ’s resurrection. The context in which the story-telling is unfolding can be crucial in orchestrating its apprehension.³⁶ Therefore, Ezekiel’s vision would not only be known to the monastic audience, but its comprehension would be linked to all the salvific notions implied by Christ’s resurrection. Consequently, the biblical prophecy of resurrection of dry bones would be understood as referring to the particular group of resurrected dead—the blessed ones or, more precisely, the Chosen people.³⁷

³² For the intercessory figures of saints in some other funerary fresco programs, cf. Marinis 2011, 328–330; Emmanuel 2002, 220–221.

³³ Cf. Schroeder 2012, 121, 126; Papalexandrou 2010, 120.

³⁴ Der Nersessian 1962, 217; Cutler 1992, 57; Velkovska 2001, 37–38.

³⁵ It would not be impossible that some monks knew these passages by heart. On memorizing texts in Byzantium, especially in the monastic context, see Papalexandrou 2010, 119–120.

³⁶ Harris 2012, 51.

³⁷ See Cutler 1992, 57–58; and cf. Der Nersessian 1962, 217; Velkovska 2001, 37–38.

The scene in the Bachkovo crypt is notably plain, composition-wise: in front of the two hills, an enlarged figure of the prophet with an open scroll is approaching a group of resurrected men, who are comparably smaller in size. This simplicity of visual narration must have been purposeful, because this is how all the represented aspects were amplified with an intention to intensify the viewer's experience. That the resurrected figures are rendered only in the shades of red in front of an oddly red mountain, thus almost merged with the background, is not of small importance. In an illuminated miniature of the same scene from the 9th century in *Parisinus graecus* 510 (fol. 438v), it is still noticeable that the dead, although badly damaged, are painted in grisaille.³⁸ This indicates that they are in fact mere specters waiting to receive their lost flesh.³⁹ While the heap of bones and the dead are separated in the miniature, these two elements are joined together in the Bachkovo ossuary, emphasizing the exact moment of enfleshment, the very process of metamorphosis. But why is the mountain painted red? It is useful to compare it with some similarly rendered "landscape" details found in the frescos of the upper chapel.

The frescos of the crypt and upper funerary chapel at Bachkovo were painted around the same time, and it is beyond any doubt that their programs are products of sophisticated planning, devised by the same individual(s). One only needs to see the fresco arrangement in the upper narthex⁴⁰ to notice this immediately: while representations of Mandylion and Keramion were usually positioned so they face one another, spatially "narrating" the story of the miraculous reduplication of Christ's face in Edessa,⁴¹ the centrally positioned Mandylion on the west wall in the narthex of the funerary chapel faces, instead of Keramion, the fresco which refers to the legend of miraculous appearance of Christ's image

³⁸ On this miniature, see Brubaker 1999, 286–290, and fig. 44; Der Nersessian 1962, 216–217, and fig. 13.

³⁹ Brubaker 1999, 287.

⁴⁰ On the fresco program of the funerary chapel in Bachkovo and its narthex, with the iconographical analysis, see Bakalova et al. 2003, 65–83.

⁴¹ See Lidov 2007.

at Latomos monastery.⁴² According to the legend of the miracle of Latomos, a mosaic of the Virgin transformed itself into an image of Christ in Majesty; and Christ in Majesty is the very image rendered above the fresco of the Virgin in a lunette on the east wall of the upper narthex in Bachkovo.⁴³ Positioned to face the Mandylion, the relic with power of reduplicating the holy visage, these three images were interconnected as if to recreate the miracle of Latomos. On the other hand, Christ in Majesty is the vision of the Great Judge, yet another Last Judgment theme in Bachkovo, which is here witnessed by prophets Ezekiel and Habakkuk who are portrayed in the bottom of the fresco.⁴⁴ Interestingly enough, Ezekiel is standing in front of the red hill, unlike Habakkuk who is on the other side of the composition.

Two additional scenes with distinctly red parts of the landscape can be found in the chapel's naos. One is a fresco of Christ's Baptism, where John the Baptist is standing on red ground in contrast to the angels on the other side of the river, and the second is the Transfiguration, where the prophet Elijah is standing on a red mountain as opposed to the figure of Moses. Obviously, the peculiarity of the crypt's fresco (the red color of the mountain in the Resurrection of Dry Bones) is not entirely unusual in the context of the Bachkovo ossuary. These curious "stage designs" might have been employed as spatial markers with the purpose of distinguishing particular actors in different scenes. In case of the upper chapel, those were figures of the prophets. Liz James has argued the necessary role of colors in completing the mimesis in Byzantium, noting they were considered to be "visible manifestations of light."⁴⁵ Moreover, they could bear different symbolic meanings depending on the context.⁴⁶ Hence, red could be the color of blood and life, but also the color of fire and light.⁴⁷ The red marble square panel beneath

⁴² Bakalova et al. 2003, 83.

⁴³ On the miracle at Latomos and representations of Christ in Majesty, see Pentcheva 2000a.

⁴⁴ Bakalova et al. 2003, 81–82.

⁴⁵ James 2003.

⁴⁶ James 1991, 83, 85

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 81, 84.

Christ's feet in the fresco of the Communion of the Apostles on the south wall, next to the apse, must have been crafted deliberately, so as to refer to the Eucharist. On the other hand, the red ground on which the last Old Testament prophet John the Baptist stands can be interpreted as an indication of his violent martyrdom, whereas in the case of the prophet Elijah, the same color might be connected to the fire symbolism.⁴⁸

Seen from this point of view, it is tempting to think that the red paint in the scene of Resurrection of Dry Bones in the crypt is used with an aim to emphasize one particular biblical verse from Ezekiel's prophecy (37:8): "the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above." Just like the aforementioned coupling of figures of the transparent dead and bones emphasized the moment of enfleshment, the red color could do the same by referring to blood, veins, flesh, and life. On the other hand, the entire mountain is red, as well as the spectral bodies. In this case, it seems that the "iconography of shapes" is worth questioning too, since the shape of the red mountain is widening toward the bottom like a stream resembling the fiery river of the Last Judgment. Could it be that this was done with this particular purpose in mind? If it is acknowledged that the fresco of Ezekiel's vision faces the monumental Deësis in the east, it becomes apparent that the newly resurrected men were meant to be perceived as those who would soon enough stand before the throne of Christ, awaiting their judgment. Therefore, these two scenes can be considered to belong to a single composition, so the fiery river might have looked like a natural part of the whole. Actually, the inclusion of the fiery stream not only further enhanced the Last Judgment iconography of the fresco program in the crypt's naos, but it also provided a spatial perspective of its arrangement: the fiery river is behind the transparent *resurrecting* figures that are expected to leave its (dangerous) vicinity in order to approach the Great Judge placed on the opposite wall.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ One can remember the chariot and horses of fire (2 Kings 2:11), or, more importantly, the episode with the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18:38–39).

⁴⁹ On the forewarning character of this "mountain of flames", see the last section of this paper where it is considered in the context of the historical circumstances of the 12th century.

Moreover, once the viewer is taken into consideration within this spatial context, the performative potential of the crypt's naos becomes strikingly apparent. Cognitive studies have shown that the act of viewing is a fully embodied experience in which "brain and body function together to shape what we think we see."⁵⁰ Monks attending memorial services must have stood before the open holes in the floor that were filled with bones and skulls. Moreover, by standing upright above the bones in the posture of prayer, they would actually mirror the resurrected figures on the west wall. The enactive approach suggests that "perceptual experience depends upon sensorimotor knowledge acquired through physical action" or, to put it simply, drawing on our experience of interacting with the environment through physical actions—such as moving through space which gives us multiple points of view—we are able, for example, to perceive overlapping objects in images as being one in front of the other.⁵¹ Accordingly, the elaborately painted frame in the borders of the above-mentioned illumination of *Paris. gr. 510* creates the effect of "seeing-in", i.e. it appears as if the frame is in front of the depicted scene. Such visual rendering of the miniature unequivocally separated the viewer's space from that of the vision, subsequently cancelling any possible impression of active participation in the scene for the spectator. In other words, he was merely a passive witness of the event. On the other hand, the compositional plainness of the fresco in Bachkovo's crypt highlights the figures in front of the simply devised landscape, intentionally emphasizing the similarity between the depicted scene and the real space of the naos—heaps of skulls with men (monks) grouped above them. Therefore, the image on the west wall would be perceived as a spatial extension of the actual space of the crypt, adding yet another heap of earthly remains to the already existing ones. Contrary to the viewer of the miniature of *Paris. gr. 510*, monks in the Bachkovo ossuary actively participated in the scene. By this deliberate blurring of boundaries between the image and the spectator, which was further enhanced through performance of the ritual, the entire naos of the crypt

⁵⁰ Sheingorn 2010. On cognitive approach in art history, see also Roodenburg 2012; Gertsman 2013.

⁵¹ See Sheingorn 2010.

was transfigured into the valley of dry bones, the place of resurrection of the Chosen People. The fact that the representation of a building symbolizing the Heavenly Jerusalem, present in two earlier renditions of this scene,⁵² was completely omitted from the fresco does not come as a surprise: Bachkovo's ossuary as a whole was that very building—the place of the elect. Any architectural representation would have been a “visual pleonasm”.

However, the implications marked by the nude body in a monastic context should not be overlooked. There are preserved accounts with detailed instructions on how to prepare the monk's body for the funeral, which expressly state that seeing it in the nude is not permitted.⁵³ It is also important to note that, in Byzantine visual culture, while the image of a soul was usually rendered as a sexless naked being, the image of a resurrected body always bore gender traits, even when depicted as nude.⁵⁴ in the fresco of Ezekiel's vision, traces of beard can still be discerned on several figures. Relying on cognitive studies, David Defries has pointed out that some exaggerated physical details that were described in early medieval miracle accounts might have been employed to induce a specific response in the audience.⁵⁵ Is it possible to approach the visualization of bodily nudity in a monastic context as a type of “exaggeration” that would be able to spark particular desired responses as well? If nakedness was absolutely rejected by the monastic (public) sphere, its visualization must have triggered a strong reaction, whether that was a positive or a negative one. The mirroring postures of the bare resurrected, or better yet *resurrecting*, men of the fresco would invite the gathered monks to identify themselves with the painted blessed. Even though the monks came here to pray for the departed brothers, they could experience the whole service as their own

⁵² The one is the ninth-century miniature from *Paris. gr.* 510, and the other a tenth-century ivory plaque from the British Museum. On the architectural representations in these scenes and their meaning, see Cutler 1992, 49, 52, 56–57.

⁵³ Velkovska 2001, 38.

⁵⁴ Cf., for example, the naked figures of the damned in the parekklesion of the Chora Church, Underwood 1958, fig. 20–22.

⁵⁵ Defries 2016, 241.

future resurrection. Nudity of the painted bodies could trigger their bodily awareness, a sense of felt embodiment which, coupled with other sensations,⁵⁶ would engage them in experience of future bliss. Shimmering candlelight, scent and smoke of the burning incense, and the sound of singing prayers were all brought together in the gloomy space, while monks were standing before the monumental figure of the enthroned Christ. Candlelight and sweet-smelling incense were associated both with resurrection and Paradise,⁵⁷ while the sound of sung prayers might have been perceived to come from the officiating holy figures on the south and north walls as much as from their surrounding brethren;⁵⁸ they were all gathered before the Great Judge and his heavenly court, whose members were interceding on the monks' behalf. The entire space was a spatial icon of the Last Judgment.

There is no information on precise dates when memorial services were performed in the crypt. It is unlikely that commemorations of recently deceased monks would have taken place here, as they would still lie buried in the nearby cemetery. However, days reserved for the general commemoration of the dead seem particularly apt, especially the Saturday of Souls before the Meatfare Sunday.⁵⁹ The reason behind this assumption is that the Meatfare Sunday is a feast devoted to the Last Judgment and, hence, also known as the Sunday of the Last Judgment.⁶⁰ Sarah Brooks has pointed out that, according to the eleventh-century liturgical typikon for the Evergetes monastery, monks were supposed to sing the canon for the dead before the tombs that were situated in what seems to be a crypt below the church.⁶¹ Following vespers on the Saturday of Souls, monks descended to perform this commemorative service. This Saturday service in the Bachkovo monastery would introduce monks to the Sunday feast, allowing them to relive the Judgment Day in

⁵⁶ On the importance of the senses in fashioning perception, see Caseau 2014.

⁵⁷ See Kotoula 2013, 191–192; Caseau 2014, 93.

⁵⁸ Cf. Gerstel 2015.

⁵⁹ On the commemorative services in Byzantium, see Brooks 2002, 189–241, esp. 238–241; Marinis 2017, 93–106.

⁶⁰ Ševčenko 2009, 255, n.17.

⁶¹ Brooks 2002, 238–239.

the most direct way. All narratives of Christ's Second Coming that might have been known to a monk from scriptural references, homiletics, poetic works, and apocrypha were animated in his "embodied mind" by the service which directed the experience of the pictorial program.⁶² It was Robert Ousterhout who wrote: "The combination of monumental narrative and liturgical reenactment could combine to evoke the real presence of biblical events, transporting the worshipper from transient, linear time into eternal, divine time."⁶³ It seems that persuasiveness of a visual narrative depicted in a sacred place depended primarily on its capacity to vividly interact with the ritual. It was relying on the mutual stimulus between the two (image and rite). Through active participation in the ritual performed in the Bachkovo ossuary, the viewer would be able to "enter" and simultaneously participate in the pictorial program as if reliving the eschatological vision, gaining the experience of the future event.

The rites performed in churches were animating their sacred spaces together with all representations contained in them. It is not surprising, since ritual practices determined the arrangement of saintly figures and scenes of holy history within the space of a church. This consequently means that even the images in modestly frescoed churches were surely persuasive enough in the eyes of the gathered congregation. However, more elaborate "illusionistic" and other pictorial features, like the ones utilized in the Bachkovo ossuary, offered greater eloquence: the ability of conveying variety of additional and more complex "storylines", which ultimately further enhanced the experience of the faithful. Nevertheless, it is only a question of the "level" of persuasiveness which an image in a sacred place conveys, and not the question of the existence of its ability to persuade.

Upon leaving the ossuary

There is a reason why the "high degree of persuasiveness" of the fresco program in the Bachkovo crypt might have been particularly desired at

⁶² Cf. Harris 2012, 51.

⁶³ Ousterhout 1995, 63.

the time of its creation. As shown by the stylistic analysis, the ossuary was painted in the second half of the 12th century,⁶⁴ at the time when the Bogomil heresy still posed a big problem in Byzantium.⁶⁵ Even though Emperor Alexios I was determined to suppress them, by the reign of Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180) a new form of Bogomilism had developed, professing belief in absolute dualism. Moreover, it was connected to the region of Philippopolis (ancient Plovdiv), in which vicinity the Bachkovo monastery was, and still is, situated. This new *ordo* was known as the Church of Drugunthia.⁶⁶ In the course of the 12th century Bogomils of Drugunthia adopted episcopal government and obviously had high aspirations: they not only succeeded in disseminating their new teachings and hierarchical organization to the very capital of the Empire, where they had supporters even among the Latin population, but accomplished missions sent from Constantinople to Western Europe.⁶⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the fear of Bogomilism was present in Byzantium long after their leader was burned by Emperor Alexios I. Instances of false accusations of heresy in the first years of Manuel Komnenos' reign testify to that fear.⁶⁸ In this context one should also observe discussions on the creation and corruption of matter and on the relationship of body and soul by Michael Glykas, which were almost certainly provoked by the Bogomil doctrine,⁶⁹ because repulsion toward the body and the rejection of its resurrection were among the main traits of Bogomil beliefs, which contested the official church dogma.⁷⁰

It is interesting to note that some accounts that speak of actions taken against this Manichean current emphasize persecution by fire. It is particularly unusual that this punishment was decreed even by the Holy Synod of Constantinople during the Patriarchate of Michael II of Oxeia (1143-1146), since such harsh penalties were supposed to be sentenced

⁶⁴ Bakalova et al. 2003, 104–116, 123.

⁶⁵ Stoyanov 1994, 146–150.

⁶⁶ On Bogomils of Drugunthia, see Hamilton 2004, 51–56.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 59–60, 78–79, 99.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 46–47; Angold 1995, 490–491.

⁶⁹ Magdalino 1993, 372.

⁷⁰ See Obolensky 2004, 134, n.3, 181–182, 228.

under the civil law only.⁷¹ Nevertheless, two episodes describing the trial of the Bogomil leader Basil and his supporters in the *Alexiad* by Anna Komnene are especially telling, as they evoke images of the Last Judgment, with Emperor Alexios I as the Divine Judge and pyres reserved for the heretics as the fiery river.⁷² According to the first one, those suspected of Bogomil heresy were ordered to choose where they wanted to be executed between the two pyres. One pyre had the cross positioned beside it while the other did not. Those who had chosen to be burned beside the cross were released, proven to be true Christians, whereas the members of the other group were thrown back into the dungeon and proclaimed to be heretics. However, even more indicative is one moment in the second episode, when Basil approached his doom and was immediately snatched away by the flames, as if they were alive.⁷³ Burning of the Bogomils is also mentioned in the *Vita* of St. Symeon (Nemanja), composed by his son and heir Stefan Prvovenčani (the First-Crowned), as the fate that some of them had to confront.⁷⁴ Regardless of whether the persecutions of these Manichean heretics by fire were true or not, it is the constructed shared imagination of the aforementioned accounts that matters. Perhaps giving away a person to flames and the utter deconstruction of the flesh that followed it seemed appropriate for those who rejected resurrection of the body. While discussing the practice of burning heretics in the West, R.C. Finucane noted that “destruction of the body was a symbol of the destruction of the soul and of the chance for resurrection.” In addition he remarked: “It is undoubtedly true that medieval theologians easily explained how God could reconstruct disintegrated bodies, making them ready for Judgment Day. But ordinary mortals are not theologians. Even among theologians and apologists there is enough discussion of the matter to suggest that not all medieval Christians were at ease with their explanations.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, that the image of the burning body, whether verbal or visual, was truly powerful

⁷¹ Hamilton 2004, 47.

⁷² See Ševčenko 2009, 266.

⁷³ For these two episodes, see Anna Comnena 1969, 496–504.

⁷⁴ Stefan Prvovenčani 1988, 71.

⁷⁵ Finucane 1981, 58.

and laden with deeper meanings and implications is attested by Hugh Eteriano, an adviser to Manuel I on Western Church affairs, in his work *Contra Patarenos*: “So it is clear that they are false apostles, heretics, antichrists, excommunicate, divided and separated from holy church, and nothing remains but that the most Christian emperor Manuel should devoutly intervene, ordering them and their followers to be sent to the fiery furnace so that they may begin to burn here who will be burnt in the everlasting fires of Hell.”⁷⁶

There are insightful studies that explain the role visual culture played in the time of struggles with the Bogomil heresy. Especially intriguing is the argument by Jelena Erdeljan, who convincingly demonstrated that the Church of the Virgin Euergetis at Studenica, founded by the Serbian Grand Zhupan Stefan Nemanja, was originally envisioned as the “ultimate sign of prevalence of True Faith against (Bogomil) heresy”. She discusses how the mystery of the Incarnation, a dogma contested by Bogomils, was “performed” through the utilization of white marble on the façade of the church—a material whose physical and visual qualities and symbolics made it pregnant with creative potential of animating sanctity.⁷⁷ This sophisticated creative planning, with its complex implications, can be easily overlooked today if the original context and its historical circumstances are dismissed. Taking into account that the Bogomils of Drugunthia were in close proximity to the Bachkovo monastery and that their advancement roughly coincides with the dating of the frescos in Bachkovo’s ossuary, it would not be surprising to find that the pictorial program of the crypt referred to contemporary religious turmoil in some manner.

The already-mentioned bodily awareness triggered by the nudity in the scene of Ezekiel’s vision might have also been accomplished by the color and shape of the mountain depicted behind the naked figures. Set before an actual mountain of flames, the figures of newly resurrected men, rendered also in red, might have seemed to a contemplative monk’s mind as if immersed into the fiery river (since depictions of the

⁷⁶ Hugh Eteriano 2004, 182.

⁷⁷ Erdeljan 2011. See also Pentcheva 2000b for another discussion on the employment of visual culture against heresies.

Last Judgment often included representations of the drowned men in the fiery stream, painted exclusively in shades of red).⁷⁸ Even though such a fate was not possible for the nude figures in Bachkovo, because they were undoubtedly representing the elect, this image may have had the ability to awaken caution in the vigilant viewer. Closely resembling burning bodies, this image might be considered as a visual parallel to the verbal recountings of the punishment Bogomils endured in contemporary sources. Thus, just a hint of forewarning against dualist teachings was interwoven with the image of resurrection, foreshadowing not only that the damned are also destined to obtain resurrected flesh and consequently endure eternal somatic agony, but also underlining that the punishment of never-ending burning was particularly intended for those who contested bodily resurrection.

It is tempting to consider the possibility that the general planning of the visual program of the Bachkovo crypt, with its careful orchestration of bodily involvement, was influenced by the anti-Bogomil sentiment, developed as a result of living in dangerous vicinity of the advancing Church of Drugunthia. Therefore, placing emphasis on the ossuary as the abode of those who awaited return of their flesh could strongly resonate with the contemporary religious struggles. Even carefully painted flowery ornaments, both outside and inside this funerary complex, marked it as the place of growth, regeneration, and blossoming. Hence, upon leaving the crypt after the service was finished, monks of the Bachkovo monastery, *persuaded* by their own experience of the eschatological vision, were becoming “New Ezekiels”⁷⁹ who were able to testify to bodily resurrection at a time when certain groups were calling this Christian dogma into question.

⁷⁸ The fiery river in the parekklesion of the Church of Christ Chora may provide a perfect example.

⁷⁹ It would not be strange for the monks to identify with the prophet Ezekiel because Old Testament prophets were often considered to be the ideal models for monks. See Krueger 2010.

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