The depiction of the Vision of saint Peter of Alexandria in the sanctuary of Byzantine churches

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The article deals with the factors that have influenced the frequent depicting of the ‘Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria’ in the sanctuaries of Byzantine churches from the beginning of the thirteenth century. It also discusses the theological messages of this scene. The preserved examples of the ‘Vision’ from the thirteenth century have been inventoried and described, after which the iconographic characteristics of depictions from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have been given. The examples from the sanctuaries of post-Byzantine churches have also been added to the catalogue of scenes.

Key words: Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria, Byzantine painting, iconographic program of the sanctuary

In the recently published book on the iconographic subject of the ‘Melismos’, it is stated that the representation is addressed primarily to clerics, as it appears only in the sanctuary (holy bema) and indeed in the lowest position in the semi-dome of the apse.1 Study of the iconographic subject of the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria prompted the reasonable questions as to why this representation too was depicted in the sanctuary and what message its presence in this particular sacred space transmitted during the Late Byzantine period.

In the ‘Life and Martyrdom of the Holy and Glorious Martyr of Christ Peter of Alexandria’, which was translated into Latin by Anastasius Bibliothecarius (the librarian, † ca. 347),2 it is recorded that when St. Peter was imprisoned in the reign of Diocletian (284–305), he was visited by a delegation of members of the clergy who entreated him to receive Arius into the fold of the Church. Then, St. Peter, after having said ‘...Ἄρετος και εν τω νυν αἰώνι τω τω μέλλοντι έσται κεχωρισμένος εκ της δόξης Ιησού Χριστού του υιού του θεοῦ (Arius, both in the present time and the future will be cut off from the glory of Jesus Christ the son of God)’, recounted to them his Vision. According to his narration, that evening he had been visited by a boy of about twelve years old, with radiant face and wearing a linen colobium rent in two in front, on the neck and chest down to the feet, which he held with both hands on the chest to hide his nakedness. When Peter asked ‘Lord, who has torn your tunic’, the boy replied, ‘Arius’, and advised him not to accept Arius in communion.3

Gabriel Millet, in his article on the ‘Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria’, refers to the four versions of the saint’s life and argues that St. Peter’s Vita was composed one century after his martyrdom; in dealing subsequently with the depiction of the Vision, he cites certain examples and links the representation of it with the liturgical subject of the ‘Melismos’.4 Later, Ivanka Akrabova-Zhandova presented fourteen examples of the subject from monuments in Bulgaria,5 while Christopher Walter, associating the representation of the Vision directly with the depiction of the First Ecumenical Council, distinguished it as purely doctrinal in content.6 Likewise, Michael Altripp, discussing the decoration of the prothesis and the diakonikon, and the depiction of the Vision of St. Peter in these spaces, notes that the subject in the holy bema is related directly to the Divine Liturgy.7 With regard to representations of the subject in the Menologia of churches, Pavle Mijović observed that wherever the Menologion is depicted together with the Ecumenical Councils the representation of the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria is in direct relation to the representation of the First Ecumenical Council, which is part of the Paschal Cycle, since it is celebrated on the seventh Sunday after Easter.8 Equally important is the interpretation that the representation of the Vision in the Byzantine illuminated codices of the Menologion of Symeon Metaphrastes projects St. Peter of Alexandria’s struggles against the heretic Arius.9

Several ecclesiastical authors refer in their homilies to St. Peter’s Vision, in order to castigate the Arian Heresy or heresies in general, such as Germanos of Constantinople (d. 730/742) in the homily “To Deacon Anthimos”,13 Eutychios of Alexandria (877–940),14 Theophanes Kerameus (twelfth century) in his fifth homily,15 as well as Manuel Philes (ca. 1275 – ca. 1345), who dedicated an epigram to the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria.16

The earliest depiction of the Vision, which is at one associated with the Divine Eucharist and didactic in character for the priests holding the scroll and celebrating the liturgy, is in the miniature of the liturgical scroll in the monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem (no. 109), which is dated to the late eleventh-early twelfth century.17 In the left margin of the scroll, Christ, as a boy, stands on the right and almost beneath a baldachin, and with his right hand downwards points to Arius, while with his left he holds in check his torn chiton and bows towards St. Peter and Arius. On the left stands Peter with his right hand lowered and pointing to Arius, while he uplifts his head towards Christ. Depicted in the right margin of the scroll is the beheading of St. Peter. Both these representations frame the prayer of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, which refers to the *metaepespes* of the Holy Communion.18

The representation of the beheading of St. Peter corresponds visually to the meaning of the first part of the Liturgy prayer, while that of the Vision to the terrible mystery the saint experienced with the appearance of the *Theanthropos*. The figure of Christ in rent chiton declares that Arius, through his teaching, denuded Christ of his divinity.

In monumental painting the subject is depicted in the space of the prothesis or the diakonikon, mainly from the early thirteenth century. The earliest extant example is in the church of St. Nicholas at Melnik in Bulgaria (ca. 1200).19 Christ as an adolescent boy stands on the right beneath a baldachin and turns to the left where St. Peter of Alexandria stands in pretal vestments.20 Beneath Christ’s feet lies Arius, to the right. Next in chronological sequence is the representation in the prothesis of the monastery of St. John Kalybites in Euboea (1245 or slightly later).21 Christ, standing and wearing a red chiton, turns to the left and has his right arm stretched towards the Scroll, while that of the Vision to the terrible mystery the saint experienced with the appearance of the *Theanthropos*.

The representation is a two part scene, the lower part depicts the vision of St. Peter, the upper part of the scroll the beheading of St. Peter. Among the elements of the lower part the Vision is introduced through the Scroll, while the scroll is introduced through the Vision. The scroll is represented as a teaching scroll, the treatise of St. Peter, in order to castigate the Arian Heresy or heresies in general, such as Germanos of Constantinople (d. 730/742) in the homily “To Deacon Anthimos”, Eutychios of Alexandria (877–940), Theophanes Kerameus (twelfth century) in his fifth homily, as well as Manuel Philes (ca. 1275 – ca. 1345), who dedicated an epigram to the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria.

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Fig. 2. Elsson, church of the Virgin Olympiotissa (late 13th c.).

hand on his chest. On the left stands Peter, outstretching his right hand towards Christ, while holding a closed codex in his left. The lower part of the representation is destroyed.

The most detailed thirteenth-century representation of the Vision is in the prothesis of the church of the Virgin Peribleptos at Ochrid (1294/1295; fig. 1). On the left, against a backdrop of buildings, Christ as a boy stands upon a square dais and turns to the right, blessing St. Peter with his right hand, while holding his torn diaphanous chiton with his left. On the right, Peter extends his right hand towards Christ in a gesture of speech, while with the left he supports a closed codex. In the middle of the representation is an altar table, upon which is a closed codex. Behind it is a vaulted-roofed dais and turns to the right, blessing St. Peter with his right hand downwards in a gesture of speech, while with the left he supports a closed codex. In the middle of the representation is an altar table, as in the Chilandar katholikon (1321), in the church of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple at Kučevište (ca. 1331), in the parekklesion of St. Arsenije the Serbian in the church of the Virgin Hodegetria at Peč (ca. 1335; fig. 3), in the church of the Virgin at Mateče (1348–1352; fig. 4a and 4b), and in the church of the Virgin at Leskovik, Albania (late fourteenth century).

In those Byzantine literary sources which preserve the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria there is no mention of Christ appearing to Peter upon an altar table. Consequently, G. Millet rightly observed that this detail was added to the representation of the Vision when the iconographic subject was placed in the space of the sanctuary. It is interesting that only in the post-Byzantine texts of Damaskenos the Studite (sixteenth century) and Dionysios from Founra (ca. 1670 – ca. 1745) is Christ described as appearing standing upon an altar table.

One reason why the iconographic subject of St. Peter’s Vision was associated with the Divine Eucharist is the saint’s urging of Achilas and Alexander not to accept Arius ‘in communion’, that is, not to receive him again into the body of the Church, so that he be kept far away from the altar table where the body of Christ as God incarnate is celebrated in the divine hypostasis in which Arius did not believe. This insistence of Peter and the word ‘communion’ are referred to in the saint’s Vita and in the other texts describing his Vision.

In all the representations of the subject in monumental painting, Christ is depicted with torn chiton, faithfully following the literary sources. The Lord’s rent garment in his appearance to St. Peter symbolizes the schism in the body of the Church, which Arius would cause with his teaching, which denuded the Lord of his divinity. In most representations Christ holds his chiton with his left hand, while he outstretches the right in a gesture of speech towards Peter, and turned towards Christ and outstretching his hands in a gesture of supplication.

During the fourteenth century the representation of the Vision inside the sanctuary of churches appears very frequently. Twenty-two monuments have been identified in which the three persons of the subject are in almost the same pose as in the thirteenth-century monuments. Christ stands on the right or the left, opposite him is St. Peter and below is Arius. In a few monuments essential differences are observed in the figures’ pose, with Christ standing in frontal pose upon an altar table, as in the Chilandar katholikon (1321), in the church of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple at Kučevište (ca. 1331), in the parekklesion of St. Arsenije the Serbian in the church of the Virgin Hodegetria at Peč (ca. 1335; fig. 3), in the church of the Virgin at Mateče (1348–1352; fig. 4a and 4b), and in the church of the Virgin at Leskovik, Albania (late fourteenth century).

25 V. J. Djurić, S. Ćirković, V. Korč, Pecka patrijarhija, Beograd 1990, 162, 169.
26 E. Dimitrova, Manastir Matejča, Skopje 2002, 121–122, fig. 24, t. XXIII–XXIV.
28 G. Millet, La Vision, 106.
29 Өнөмдөө: Даймоподын төөсүздөөгөнүн Сүүлдөгү, Логос АП сөзү Төрөлүнүн, ТНП Писем, (M. Soljakov, Atenas s. d., 500).
only in the church of the Virgin at Leskovik does he hold the chiton with both hands,\(^\text{32}\) in accordance with the text of his Vita.\(^\text{33}\) Usually the Lord’s torn chiton is white, although more rarely it is red, as in the church of St. John Kalybites in Eu- boe:\(^\text{34}\) and of St. John the Baptist at Archangelos in Rhodes (fifteenth century).\(^\text{35}\) Obviously, the red colour is a reminder of the Passion of Christ and the red mantle placed upon him by the soldiers in the praetorium (Matthew 27:27–29). The depiction of Christ wearing a torn chiton exhorts the officiating priests not to be led astray into thinking that they celebrate the bread and the wine only in remembrance of the Lord, but that this is in reality the imperishable body of the Theanthropos Christ. It reminds them also that just as the Lord appeared to Peter of Alexandria humbled in torn chiton, so the bread and the wine appear humble, which are, however, transubstantiated into the imperishable body of the Lord Jesus Christ, God incarnate, according the Nicholas of Me- ron (d. 1160/1166),\(^\text{36}\) Nicholas Kabasilas (ca. 1322/1323 – d. after 1391)\(^\text{37}\) and Gregory Palamas (ca. 1296–1359).\(^\text{38}\)

According to the Life of St. Peter of Alexandria, Christ appeared in the Vision as a twelve-year-old boy with a face so radiant it illuminated the entire space. This detail was rendered visually by enclosing the figure of Christ within a mandorla, as observed in the church of St. Nicholas Tzoita in Kastoria (ca. 1360)\(^\text{39}\) and the church of the Virgin at Zaum in Ochrid (ca. 1361).\(^\text{40}\) The mandorla is formed from two ellipses in shades of blue, from which project triangular rays, three to the right and three to the left. The three triangular rays of the mandorla can be interpreted securely as an artistic device aimed at emphasizing that Christ was one of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, as mentioned by Gregory Palamas in his 35th Homily on the Transfiguration.\(^\text{41}\) The three-rayed mandorla surrounding the twelve-year-old Christ in the representations of the Vision of St. Peter was depicted probably under the influence of Hesychasm, which speaks in particular of the ‘uncreated’ (aktistos) light.\(^\text{42}\)

St. Peter of Alexandria, who stands opposite the Lord, is represented as an old man with rounded beard and curly hair, always vested in a cross-diapered phailonion as Patriarch of Alexandria;\(^\text{43}\) usually he turns his gaze towards the adolescent Christ and outstretches both hands in a gesture of supplication. In very few monuments, such as the Gračanica monastery (1319–1321; fig. 5),\(^\text{44}\) the katholikon of the Chi- lendar monastery (1321) and the church of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple at Kučevište (up to 1331), with his left hand he supports a codex,\(^\text{45}\) in St. Athanasius of Mou- zaki in Kastoria (1383–1384; fig. 6) he holds an open scroll inscribed with the words «Τίς του χιτόνα, Σώτερ διδάσκει» (Who tore your chiton, Saviour?),\(^\text{46}\) while in the church of St. Nicholas of the Nun Eupraxia, in the same town, the Prayer from the Liturgy of the Presanctified (fig. 7).\(^\text{47}\)

As noted, already from the first half of the thirteenth century Arius is depicted lying prone, covering his face or head with both hands, in the lower part of the representation of the Vision, as in St. Nicholas at Melnik and the Periblep- tos church at Ochrid, as well as in several fourteenth-century churches, such as St. Nicetas near Skopje (after 1321),\(^\text{48}\) Gračanica,\(^\text{49}\) the church of Virgin at Matei- na crkvata Sv. Nikita (ca. 1335).\(^\text{50}\) Obviously, the red colour is a reminder of the Passion of Christ and the red mantle placed upon him by the soldiers in the praetorium (Matthew 27:27–29). The depiction of Christ wearing a torn chiton exhorts the officiating priests not to be led astray into thinking that they celebrate the bread and the wine only in remembrance of the Lord, but that this is in reality the imperishable body of the Theanthropos Christ. It reminds them also that just as the Lord appeared to Peter of Alexandria humbled in torn chiton, so the bread and the wine appear humble, which are, however, transubstantiated into the imperishable body of the Lord Jesus Christ, God incarnate, according the Nicholas of Methone (d. 1160/1166),\(^\text{51}\) Nicholas Kabasilas (ca. 1322/1323 – d. after 1391)\(^\text{52}\) and Gregory Palamas (ca. 1296–1359).\(^\text{53}\)

Fig. 3. Peć, church of the Virgin Hodegetria (chapel of Saint Arsenije) (ca. 1335).
of Hell, as in St. Panteleimon at Orchid (ca. 1320–1330)\textsuperscript{52} and the Hypapante monastery at Meteora (1366/1367),\textsuperscript{53} or being devoured by the wolf or the dragon of Hell, as in the church of Virgin at Leskovik.\textsuperscript{54} The dragon is a figure that features frequently in representations of the Last Judgement and the Heavenly Ladder, devouring some human sinner.\textsuperscript{55} A new iconographic element in the representation of the Vision is the figure of Christ stepping on the coiled dragon-wolf devouring Arius, as preserved in fifteenth-century monuments, such as the churches of Virgin at Velestovo (1444)\textsuperscript{56} and in Matka, Skopje (1496/1497).\textsuperscript{57} It is noteworthy that in the Life of St. Peter there is no mention of the appearance of Arius in the saint’s Vision. Nonetheless, he was depicted in the representation, and in prone pose, in order to denote Peter’s struggles against the heretic Arius and to transmit the message that every heretic should be expelled from the body of the Church. Philotheos Kokkinos, Patriarch of Constantinople (1081–1118), states that Arius imitated the dragon τον της μανίας επόνυμον (synonymous with frenzy)\textsuperscript{58}, while in the kathisma of Matins on the feast day of St. Peter (24 November), Arius is likened to a wolf.

What was the historical context of the Orthodox Church, which contributed to the placing of the iconographic subject of the Vision in the sanctuary? As is well known, heresies never ceased to plague the Church. In the eleventh century, in particular, six groups of heretics were active.\textsuperscript{59} It was in this century that the most important explanation of the Divine Liturgy was written by Nicholas (Theodore) of An-
be found unworthy of it. In the fifteenth century, Symeon of Thessalonike (d. 1429) writes the best-known ‘Explanation of the Divine Liturgy’, a treatise which resembles a textbook for instructing priests.

We observe that the Orthodox Church defended itself against the various heresies by publishing treatises interpreting the Divine Liturgy, guiding both clergy and laity, such as Nicholas of Methone with his treatise ‘To the hesitating priest, guiding both clergy and laity’, such as St. John Climacus’s ‘The Ladder of Divine Ascent’, and such as Symeon of Thessalonike’s ‘Explanation of the Divine Liturgy’, a treatise which resembles a textbook for instructing priests. 

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The Church’s struggle against the heretics was expressed also in the domain of the visual arts. The iconographic subject of the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria has been infiltrated by elements that are not referred to in the narration of the Vision and which advocate the view that, beyond the historical substrate of the representation, this has acquired also a doctrinal – anti-heretical and a liturgical character. This investment was made with the intention of teaching the celebrant priests that, «Ο ους εν ειδε τον άρτον τούτον και πίνε το ποτήριον του Κυρίου ανάξιος, ένοχος έσται τον σώματος και του άιματος του Κυρίου» (Whoever unworthily eats this bread and drinks the cup of the Lord will be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord).65

The main element that has infiltrated into the representation of the subject and which is not included in the Life of St. Peter is the altar table, with or without baldachin. Its depiction is not only liturgical in character but also a reminder to the celebrant priest that upon it is the body of the Θειοσαρησθησαν Χριστος. And when Christ is depicted within a mandorla, then his divine nature is emphasized more overtly. The presence of Arius in prone pose not only signifies the fall of the heretics, but also that it is very easy for the priest, if he is not careful, to find himself in the same position as Arius. This endeavour is even more obvious when Arius is shown being devoured by a Hell Dragon or consumed by fire.

One unique representation in Late Byzantine art, which is par excellence didactic-catechetical in purpose and is addressed to the clergy, is that of the ‘unworthy priest’, which is in the sanctuary of the church of the Holy Trinity, in the village of Agia Triada near Rethymnon (early fifteenth century). Depicted here is an angel dressed as a deacon, holding in the right hand a chalice, covered with a veil, and in the left a large paten, balanced on his bowed head. The angel-deacon walks on bended knees over a priest in pose of proskynesis-repentance, accompanied by the inscription «Ο ανάξιος τρέπεται» (The unworthy priest).66 The priest wears a grey cassock and a white head-covering. The angel has taken the holy gifts from the priest’s hands, obviously because he was unworthy to hold them. The direction of the priest’s body is opposite that of the concelebrant hierarchs and opposite to the altar table. It is very possible that the presence of the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria in the sanctuary of churches in Crete echoes also the continuous exhortations of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the efforts of the emissary priests to keep alive and to strengthen the Orthodox morale of the local priests and laity, oppressed by the Latin bishops in the Venetian-held territory. Following the struggles of the Cretan Metropolitan of Athens and primate of Crete, Anthimos the Confessor, the Ecumenical Patriarchate had sent to the island around 1380 the monk and man of letters Joseph Bryennios

64 PG 155, 177, 749.
65 PG 101, 452, 456; PG 135, 517; PG 155,749.
66 PG 102, 452.
67 I. Spatharakis, Οι τοιχογραφίες του ναού της Αγίας Τριάδος στο ομώνυμο χωριό του νομού Ρεθύμνου και οι εκκοσμητικοί υδατοπίγκτες τους, in: Αντίφωνος. Αναταξιά στην καθηγητή Ν.Β. Δρανδάκη, Thessaloniki 1994, 294, fig. 10.
Koukiaris S., *The depiction of the Vision of saint Peter of Alexandria in the sanctuary of Byzantine churches* (ca. 1350–1430/1431), who remained there for twenty years, teaching and writing. Through his preaching and his saintly life, Bryennios won the respect and reverence of the eminent monks and objectant authors of Crete, Joseph Philagres, Neilos Damylas and Athanasios.68 Furthermore, the Ecumenical Patriarch will surely have taken measures to reinforce and encourage the Orthodox clerics and laymen in other regions under Frankish and Latin rule, such as Euboea and Rhodes, where the representation of the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria in the sanctuary has been located.

The most widespread iconographic subject that had been crystallized already in Palaiologan times and is always placed in the sanctuary is the ‘Melismos’. With its rich doctrinal and liturgical substrate, it constituted a visual teaching to clerics, aimed at achieving a correct and active participation in the mystery of the Divine Eucharist. Also, it presents the mystery of the Divine Eucharist in the most realistic manner.

In my opinion, the representation of the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria is a didactic representation which was placed inside the sanctuary as teaching and reminder to the priests, who do not celebrate simply bread and wine but the imperishable body of Theanthropos Jesus Christ.

List of representations of the Vision of St. Peter of Alexandria in the sanctuary

1. Melnik, church of Saint Nicholas (ca. 1200).
2. Euboea, church of Saint John Kalyvites (ca. 1245).
4. Elasoon, church of the Virgin Olympiotissa (late 13th c.).
5. Euboea, church of the Virgin Hodegetria in the Caves (1311).
7. Chilandar, Mont Athos, katholikon (1321).
8. Saint Niketas near Skopje (after 1321).
10. Cutevište, church of the Virgin (ca. 1331).
12. Ohrd, church of Saint Nicholas Bolnički (1335/1336).
15. Monastery of Zaum near Ohrd, church of the Virgin (ca. 1361).
19. Ivanovo near Ruse, rock-cut church (14th c.).
20. Veroia, church of Saint Savvas of the Kyriotissa (14th c.).
21. Leskovik, Albania, church of the Virgin (late 14th c.).
22. Poganovo near Pirot, church of Saint John the Theologian (15th c.).
23. Mylopotamos, Crete, church of Saint George at Melissourgaki (ca. 1400).

27. Great Prespa, church of the Virgin Eleoussa (1409/1410).
28. Archangelos, Rhodes, church of Saint John the Baptist (ca. 1428).
31. Dolgaets near Ohrd, church of the Prophet Elijah (1454/1455).
32. Leskoets near Ohrd, church of the Assumption (1461).
33. Yevi near Ohrd, church of Saint Nicholas (1460).
34. Kastoria, church of Saint Nicholas of the Nun Eupraxia (1485).
35. Boboshevo, church of Saint Demetrios (1487/1488).
36. Kosel near Ohrd, church of Saint Nicholas (15th c.).
38. Rhodes, church of Saint Nicholas (15th c.).
39. Kastoria, church of Saint Spyridon (15th c.).
40. Agioskati, Cyprus, church of the Holy Cross (1494).
41. Megara, church of Saint George of Choreutara (15th c.).

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Представа Визије светог Петра Александријског у олтарском простору византијских цркава

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Представа Визије светог Петра Александријског често је сликана у олтару, углавном у протезису и даконикону. Сви истраживачи који помињу представљање те теме у олтарском простору исправно сматрају да је она повезана са Светом литургијом. У раду се разматрају чиниоци који су условили често сликање визије александријског архијереја у олтару од почетка XIII века, као и оно што су творци иконографског програма и живописци представам те визије желели да искажу. Наводе се и литературни извори који су допринели континуирању православних хришћана на приповест о визији светог Петра Александријског. Затим се описују сачувани примери те теме у уметности XIII века и наводе иконографске особености представа из XIV и XV века, чија је појава условљена и снажењем исихастичког покрета. Честом сликању визије светог Петра Александријског у олтару допринела је и тежња Цариградске патријаршије да стави под своју контролу образовање клирика и посећу то да их поучи томе да се причешћују непропадљивим телом Христовим. Подсећани су и на то како морају паћити да не падну у јерес сличку аријанству, ону која је учила да се хлеб и вино претварају у пропадљиво тело Исусово. На крају рада дат је каталог византијских и поствизантијских храмова у којима је насликана визија александријског архијереја у олтару.