

MURAL PAINTING IN THE CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL IN JUGLINDJA, SOUTHERN ALBANIA. THE ABSID REPERTOIRE

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Abstract

This study analyses the iconographic features of the wall paintings in the Orthodox church of St. Michael in Vithkuq, in southeastern Albania. During the 17th and 18th centuries, under Ottoman rule, a large number of Orthodox churches were built in this region of Albania. The construction of these churches was the result of many factors, including economic, religious, and political influences. The church of St. Michael, also known as the Church of the Archangels, is one of the earliest churches from this period. It reflects strength in architectural dimensions and a high level of iconographic and artistic quality in its interior wall paintings.

The repertoire of wall paintings within this church is mostly subject to clear religious rules. However, its iconographic program includes specific themes and motifs that are worth studying, as they convey messages and important information directly related to the political context of the painting period. In summary, this study will explore the iconographic program of a significant area—the apse—of this early church of the Archangels. Through analysis, we aim to create an informative overview of the typical iconographic elements of the apse in Orthodox churches, as well as highlight innovations and specific features of the iconography in this important church.

Keywords: 17th-18th century; post-Byzantine art; Orthodox church; apse iconography.

Introduction

The wall paintings of the churches of Vithkuq, created in the 16th-18th centuries, are a vivid testimony to the artistic, spiritual, and cultural interaction that took place in the territory of modern southern Albania. Located in the historical region of Korçë, Vithkuq served as a significant centre of Orthodox culture, preserving and transforming the Byzantine artistic tradition under Ottoman rule. Churches of this region were decorated with frescoes that amaze with the richness of iconographic subjects and the skill of execution, combining Byzantine stylistics with local cultural motifs. Despite their importance, these post-Byzantine masterpieces have been overshadowed in broader studies of Balkan and European religious art. The artistic tradition in Vithkuq developed during a turbulent historical period marked by Ottoman rule, which had a significant impact on the social, political and cultural aspects of the region's life. In this context, local artisans faced the challenge of preserving and reinterpreting the Byzantine artistic heritage in the new reality¹. They successfully adapted key principles of Byzantine art, in particular canonical iconographic subjects and stylistic approaches, integrating them with local elements, such as folk-art motifs, specific symbols and ornaments². Thus, Vithkuq's frescoes became a vivid example of the synthesis of traditional Byzantine aesthetics with unique regional influences, which ensured their expressiveness and originality.

¹ZENELI 2023, 110

²SHKIRA 2022, 28

Explanation

The “Church of the Archangels” (commonly known as the Church of St. Michael) is the oldest and largest preserved church in Vithkuq. According to an inscription, painted in large black letters on a white background above the southern door inside the church³, its construction began in 1682 (Fig. 1). The date of the frescoes, October 1, 1728, is inscribed separately, to the left of the southern door⁴.



Fig. 1: Inscription inside, above the southern door.

The architecture of “St. Michael” in Vithkuq provides an extensive surface for mural painting (dimensions: 15.5 m x 9.5 m), with the entire basilica fully painted inside. This includes the central nave with three domes, the coverings of the side aisles, the single and wide apse with its two domes over the “Prothesis” and “Diakonikon”, the western wall separating the nave from the narthex, the southern and northern interior walls, as well as the inner surface of the narthex wall, which is the opposite side of the church's western wall.

The lighting inside the church is very dim, as even the few windows it has are sealed.

The fresco painters of this church, painted in 1728, remain unknown⁵.

In this study, we will attempt to decipher and describe the iconographic themes depicted in the interior of “St. Michael” Church in Vithkuq, focusing particularly on the apse area, insofar as these are still discernible.

³ The inscription above the southern door inside the church:

ΑΝΗΓΕΡΘΗ ΕΚ ΒΑΘΟΝΓΗΣ ΕΠΙ ΕΤΥΣ ‘ΑΧΠΒ’ / 1682 / . ΚΑΙ ΑΝΗΣΤΟΡΙΤΕΙ Ο ΘΕΙΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΑΝΣΕΡΤΟΣ ΝΑΟΣ ΟΥΤΟΣ ΤΩΝ ΠΑΝΜΙΓΙΣΤΩΝ ΤΑΞΙΑΡΧΩΝ ΜΗΧΑΗΛ ΚΑΙ ΓΑΒΡΙΗΛ. ΔΕΙΑ ΕΞΟΔΟΥ ΤΩΝ ΕΥΡΙΘΕΥΤΩΝ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΠΟΛΗΤΙΑΣ ΤΑΥΤΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΔΕΙΑ ΣΥΝΔΡΟΜΗΣ ΚΑΠΟΥΤΕ ΚΑΙ ΜΟΧΘΟΥΣΤΑΥΡΟΥ ΙΕΡΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΙΚΟΝΟΜΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΕΠΙΤΟΠΙ ΚΥ ΚΥ ΧΡΥΣΑΝΘΟΥ. ΙΕΡΑΤΕΥΟΝΤΟΣ ΤΩΝ ΕΥΛΑΒΕΣΤΑΤΟΥ ΙΕΡΩΝ.

⁴ The separate inscription: ἐπὶ ἐτονς ‘ΑΨΚΗ , δτομβριον α / 1728

⁵ ΡΟΡΑ 1998, 161.

The figurative program of the altar area

The Virgin Mary platitera (fig. 2)



Fig. 2 The Virgin Mary Platitera

The apse, in its central dome, is dominated by the depiction of the Virgin Mary Platitera, the type of Mary depicted in prayer (orans), with a medallion of Christ Emmanuel⁶ positioned before her bust, flanked by two medallions of angels. This scene's placement in this area adheres to the traditional regulations of Orthodox church iconography⁷.

Mary Platitera, dressed in a red maphorion with gilded borders, is depicted with both hands raised in a prayerful gesture, with Christ in a white medallion before her bust. On either side of Mary and Christ are two angels within medallions, their heads bowed towards the Virgin and holding hymnal inscriptions. Together with the central dome featuring Christ Pantocrator, the apse's dome occupies a principal position in the church's decoration, reserved for the Virgin Mary.

On both sides of the Virgin Mary, the Annunciation of Saint Joachim and the Annunciation of Saint Anne are depicted.

Annunciation of Saint Joachim (fig.3)

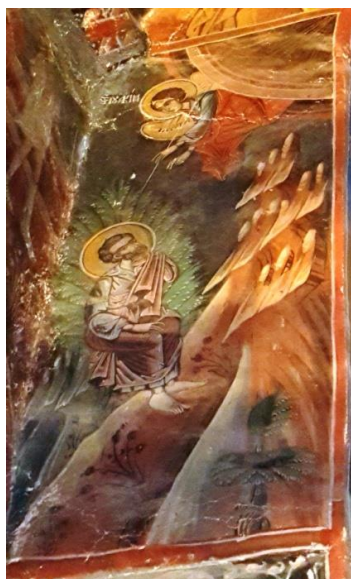


Fig. 3 The Annunciation of Joachim

⁶ WESSEL, 287-290.

⁷ Ibid.

To the left of the Virgin Mary Platitera is the Annunciation of Saint Joachim⁸, the father of Mary, in the wilderness. The composition has been wonderfully adapted to the space reserved for this depiction. Joachim is shown seated on a low rock, positioned towards the altar area, with his left hand covered by a cloth, perhaps to wipe away the tears of sorrow, and his head lifted towards the angel. The angel, appearing from above and coming with force, seems to have emerged from the sacred divine area of the altar and approaches Joachim in the wilderness, with both hands raised in a gesture of blessing. The entire scene unfolds next to the Divine Liturgy of the Angels in the altar area.

Annunciation of Saint Anne (fig.4)



Fig. 4 The Annunciation of Anne

On the other side, to the right of the Virgin Mary Platitera, is the scene of the Annunciation of Saint Anne. Just like Joachim, Anne is positioned facing the altar area, standing near a fountain, with her right hand extended toward the angel. In her left hand, she holds a scroll of writing. The angel, in a similar position to the one near Joachim, is depicted in the upper half of his body, with his right hand raised in a blessing toward Anne, while his left hand holds the staff of the messenger. The composition of the scene is restrained. The event takes place in nature, marked by sparse lines and a few trees. The fountain with abundant water to the left is the only architectural element that enriches the scene.

In this important area of the apse, emphasis is placed on the human ancestry of Mary and Christ through Anne and Joachim. Unlike other depictions in the churches of Voskopojë⁹, the Annunciation of Anne is presented here, rather than the Annunciation of Mary in this significant position of the apse.

⁸ TRADIGO, 94.

⁹ KIRCHHAINER 2007, 84, 85.

Liturgical Ceremony and Communion of the Apostles (fig. 5)



Fig. 5 Liturgical Ceremony and Communion of the Apostles

Below the representation of Mary, in the following cylindrical area of the apse, we find three rows of liturgical communion scenes. Directly under Saint Mary, the Heavenly Liturgy is presented, where Christ celebrates the liturgy among the angels in the heaven. Under this appearance we see the Communion of the Apostles. These scenes are divided symmetrically into the two parts of the cylindrical arch. In the row with Christ in the communion of the Apostles, the Apostles are separated by six on each side of Christ, receiving the bread and wine of communion, with hands extended forward towards Christ. In the left half with apostles, Judas can be seen at the end, who has turned his back to the others and walks in the opposite direction with the devil on his shoulders. This special presentation of this theme, we can also find in other churches of Vithkuqi and Voskopja¹⁰.

¹⁰ ROUSSEVA 2006, 169.

The liturgical Ceremony of the Holy Fathers (Fig.6)



Fig. 6 The Liturgical Ceremony of the Holy Fathers

In the lower area, the Liturgical Ceremony of the Holy Fathers continues, often accompanied in this type of depiction by Archangels Michael and Gabriel¹¹. The two Archangels are beautifully positioned at the apex of the altar's cylindrical arch, facing each other, on either side of a small altar window, beneath which is the old inscription of the church.

The depiction of these themes in the altar area creates a concrete link to the sacrament of communion celebrated in the church¹², where the priest performing the communion is seen as the successor of the divine personalities depicted near him¹³.

In the lower row of the altar, there are full depictions of bishops and deacons, as examples and predecessors of holy priests in the church.

On the right side of the altar's cylindrical area, beneath the Gathering of the Apostles, are positioned Archangel Gabriel, followed by Saint Basil the Great¹⁴ and Saint Athanasius of Alexandria¹⁵. The saints are dressed in omophorion adorned with crosses and richly embroidered mandian. Saint Basil raises his right hand in a blessing gesture while holding a scroll with his left hand. Athanasius clearly shows an open parchment, on which is written a passage symbolizing his work on the Doctrine of the Trinity¹⁶. With calm eyes, he looks at the observer, creating a direct contact with them.

On the left side of the altar's cylindrical area, Gregory Nazianzus¹⁷ and John Chrysostom (or Golden Mouth) are depicted. John blesses with his right hand in the byzantine style, while holding the holy book in his left hand. Their garments, although consisting of felon and omophorion, still feature different shades and decorations.

¹¹ Trier 1980, 170-186.

¹² KIRCHHAINER 2005, 63.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ TRADIGO 2005, 310.

¹⁵ SACHS, BADSTÜBNER, NEUMANN 2012, *Athanasius*, 48.

¹⁶ SACHS, BADSTÜBNER, NEUMANN 2012, *Dreifaltigkeit*, 104.

¹⁷ THESARI I SHENJTORÉVE 2004, 23.

Prothesis and Diakonikon (Fig.7, 8)



Fig. 7 Patriarch Melchizedek

In the northern part of the apse, in the Prothesis area, the figure of Patriarch Melchizedek is depicted, wearing a red himation adorned and a blue chiton, holding a vessel of wine in his right hand and a vessel of bread in his left. This scene is also connected to the Eucharist performed in the altar area, linking it to the divine Eucharist. Below Patriarch Melchizedek, the full figures of Patriarch Eusebius and the martyr Michael are depicted. Both are dressed in the robes of bishops, with omophorion and polystavrion, holding the holy book in one hand and raising the other in a blessing gesture.



Fig. 8 Acra Tapeinosis

In the Diakonikon area, on the opposite side of the altar, Christ is depicted in the form of Akra Tapeinosis, showing a half-figure of Christ as both dead as a human and alive as God, emphasizing His dual nature¹⁸. On both sides of Christ, St. Mary and St. John are positioned.

¹⁸SACHS, BADSTÜBNER, NEUMANN 2012, *Schmerzensmann*, 313.

Conclusion

This study has analysed the iconographic features of the apse wall paintings in the church of Vithkuq, providing a substantial understanding of their religious and cultural dimensions. The findings contributed to a deeper understanding of how local traditions, external influences, and theological concepts were integrated into the visual language of Vithkuq religious art.

A key finding of this study was the discovery of a unique hybrid style in the Vithkuq frescoes, combining Byzantine, post-Byzantine and local artistic traditions. This fusion is particularly evident in iconographic motifs such as the Announcement or the Communion of the Apostles, which combine both traditional and innovative elements. The analysis showed that these frescoes were not simply reproductions of established iconographic types, but adaptations and reinterpretations that reflected the local context and theological considerations of the Vithkuq community. The psychological depth of scenes such as the Communion of the Apostles, where Judas is burdened by the devil, reflects a sophisticated approach to narrative. This not only enhances the emotional impact of the scenes, but also makes the sacred stories more accessible and appealing to local audiences.

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