

The Sacred Scripture and the Symbolic Representations in the Early Christian Figurative Mosaics from the Balkans

Balkanlar'daki Erken Hristiyan Figüratif Mozaiklerinde Kutsal Yazılar ve Sembolik Temsiller

Marina PERSENG*

(Received 20 February 2024, accepted after revision 21 September 2024)

Abstract

It is a well-known fact that the figurative images in the Early Christian art are generally in conformity with the basic Sacraments, specific texts in the Old and the New Testament and the liturgy and rituals, which were performed in the churches. In the recent 40 years many new publications have been devoted to the pavement mosaics from the Balkans but they deal mainly with limited number of monuments from a separate contemporary state. As in Late Antiquity the borders between the provinces and both empires (Western and Eastern) were quite different from the contemporary ones, therefore the picture shown when tracing this aspect of research is not adequate and not complete if the we do not concern the ancient boundaries of the provinces, and do not consider the Balkans as one artistic area, but with many different traditions and influences. For this purpose, the mosaics not only from the well-known artistic centres of Greece have been gathered together, but also from Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and the European parts of Turkey. This provides new opportunities for a multifaceted study of the topic of the Early Byzantine liturgical practice from a formal, symbolic and theological point of view and emphasizes the importance of the figurative mosaic images and the inscriptions associated with them, which directly or symbolically reflects the Holy Scripture as well as it reveals the mysterious nature and the specific features of the rituals of the Early Christianity.

Keywords: Early Christian art, Early Christian mosaics, Holy Scripture, Eucharistic symbols, Balkans.

Öz

Erken Hristiyanlık sanatındaki figüratif imgelerin genel olarak temel ayinler, Eski ve Yeni Ahit'teki belirli metinler ve kiliselerde gerçekleştirilen liturji ve ritüellerle uyum içinde olduğu bilinen bir gerçektir. Son 40 yılda Balkanlar'daki mozaik döşemeleri hakkında pek çok yeni yayın yapılmış, ancak bunlar esas olarak ayrı bir çağdaş devletin sınırlı sayıdaki anıtlarıyla ilgilenmiştir. Geç Antik Çağ'da eyaletler ve her iki imparatorluk (Batı ve Doğu) arasındaki sınırlar çağdaş olanlardan oldukça farklı olduğundan, araştırmanın bu yönünün izini sürerken gösterilen resim antik sınırları ilgilendirmiyorsa ve Balkanlar'ı tek bir sanatsal alan olarak değil, birçok farklı gelenek ve etkiye sahip olarak değerlendirmiyorsa yeterli ve tam değildir. Bu amaçla bu çalışmada sadece Yunanistan'ın tanınmış sanat merkezlerinden değil, Arnavutluk, Bulgaristan, Makedonya ve Türkiye'nin Avrupa bölgelerinden de mozaikler bir araya getirilmiştir. Bu, Erken Bizans ayin uygulamaları konusunun resmi, sembolik ve teolojik bir bakış açısıyla çok yönlü incelenmesi için yeni fırsatlar sağlamaktadır ve Kutsal Vasiyeti doğrudan veya sembolik olarak yansıtan figüratif mozaiklerin ve bunlarla ilişkili yazıtların önemini vurgulamaktadır. Kutsal Yazılar, Erken Hristiyanlık ritüellerinin gizemli doğasını ve kendine özgü özelliklerini de ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erken Hristiyan sanatı, Erken Hristiyan mozaikleri, Kutsal Yazılar, Efkariyati sembolleri, Balkanlar.

* Marina Perseng, New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria.  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9945-1543>. E-mail: perseng@abv.bg

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that the figurative images in the Early Christian art are in generally in conformity with the basic Sacraments, definite texts in the Old and the New Testament and the Liturgy and rituals performed in the churches. In the recent 40 years many new publications have been devoted to the pavement mosaics from the Balkans, but they deal mainly with limited number of monuments from a separate contemporary state. In this way, if the Balkans are not taken as a whole, the picture shown is not adequate and not complete since in Late Antiquity the borders among the provinces and the Western and Eastern empires were quite different from the contemporary ones (Fig. 1). For getting the real picture it is necessary to gather the mosaics from Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and the European parts of Turkey. This provides new opportunities for a multifaceted study of the topic of the Early Byzantine liturgical practice from a formal, symbolic and theological point of view and emphasizes the importance of the figurative mosaic images and the inscriptions associated with them, which directly or symbolically reflect the Holy Scripture as well as to reveal the mysterious nature and the specific features of the rituals of the Early Christianity (Mathews 1982: 134).



Figure 1
Map of the Late Antique provinces on the Balkans. Map by V. Dinchev.

However, before entering the Early Christian image system, we should have in mind that these images and scenes have their origins and early developments in the pre-Christian epochs of Classical and Hellenistic Greece, Judaism and Rome (Kitzinger 1977: 67), which determines the syncretic infusion of its iconographies developing new semantics (Figs. 2-3).

Figure 2
El-Khirbe, Samaria, synagogue, mosaic, ritual vessels. Photo by Y. Magen.

Figure 3
Tivoli, Hadrian's Villa, mosaic, drinking doves of Sosos. Photo by Musei Capitolini.



The first official iconographic programs related to the Christian faith were created during the Constantinian period reinforced by the legendary figure of Constantine the Great, becoming the sacred prototypes of the Late Antique Christian visual system and influenced its development in later periods (Popova 2016a: 171-172). The best-preserved images are in several baptisteries, churches and Early Christian tombs and chapels (Kitzinger 1951: 86, 91-92). However, numerous fragments show that such a repertoire was used not only in religious buildings (Fig. 4) and facilities but also in public buildings (baths, praetoria, residences of the emperor, etc.) and private houses from the Early Christian period (Elsner 2003: 119). There is a growing duality, as behind the ancient illusory lies the Christian understanding of the world which intensifies the transformed semantics of a conditional image that will become typical for the Middle Ages. The Pagan elements in the plots reduced at the end of the 4th century and especially in the 5th century AD, when the scenes acquired stylistic and compositional characteristics, completely adapted to the Christian theological thought. All the images, symbols and scenes that participate in the decoration of the Early Christian religious buildings participate directly in the liturgical rite, which is why they carry messages related to Biblical and Gospel texts. Some of these messages are strictly specific and are read during the liturgical rite, passing or standing next to the images or the scene itself, while others are figurative references to a particular event described in the Bible. For this reason, the scenes, symbols and individual images of the floor mosaic decoration are highly sacred and have a holy character. Such scenes and images are: *The Source of Life*, *The vessel or the glass of Wine*, *The Vine*, *The Eucharistic Bread*, *The Good Shepherd* and others.

Figure 4
Naples, Baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte, mosaic, deer drink from the rivers of Paradise. Photo by G. Abatino.



The Source of Life/ The Fountain of Life/ Vons vitae

The Source of Life has a complex symbolic character, which makes it the most used fundamental scene related to the Christian sacraments - the Eucharist and Baptism (Fig. 5). We must emphasize that Jesus in the Early Christianity was considered as the true Source of Life. It is symbolically present in the scene in the various semantic associative chains built around Christ: Jesus – Source – Salvation – Eternal Life – Paradise; Jesus – Source – Resurrection – Immortality; and others.

The iconographic program of scene *The Source of Life* is a figurative projection of Psalm 42 of the Old Testament (Jensen 2011: 57), including several main figural motifs: in the middle of the composition there is a fountain, pool with fountain or late antique vessel, on both sides of which are usually depicted



Figure 5
Stobi, episcopal basilica, mosaic, the source
flanked by hinds. Photo by B. Aleksova.

two flanking zoomorphic figures, birds and plants. The vessel is presented in variations - crater, chalice, kantharos, luterion or as a pool with a fountain and more. Jets of water gush out of it or a vine with bunches, lotus twigs, ivy or other vegetation emerges. The main zoomorphic images flanking the vessel are in different combinations: two deer, deer and hind, two hinds, two bulls, two lions, two peacocks, two lambs, two pigeons, two pheasants and others. The choice of species of animals and birds flanking the vessel, apart from inherited traditions and current influences, mainly corresponds to and depends on the Old Testament and New Testament texts, in addition to the visual and religious traditions of the province. It should be emphasized that despite the various combinations of figural motifs that may be involved in the scene, the symbolic content is preserved and is invariably associated with the Biblical Psalm 42 (Fig. 6).

In the Early Christian image system, the iconography of the scene *Source of Life* was finally accepted after AD 313, with other iconographies appearing that included individual elements adopted from the ancient repertoire. During this period the scene has a poly semantic character, as in addition to Psalm 42, it is also connected with the initiation, ritual of ablution, Baptism, Resurrection and Salvation – in the baptisteries; with the pure Orthodox faith, the sacrifice of Jesus, the righteous in Paradise, etc. – in the basilicas; with the victory over Arianism – in some Episcopal residences and in the mosaic decoration of monuments created during the Theodosian period; with the idea of the Christian Cosmos, fertility and well-being – in private homes; with the Salvation and a happy afterlife - in the martyrium (Popova 2016: 155-156) and the murals of Early Christian tombs.

Figure 6
Heraclea Lyncestis, episcopal basilica,
mosaic, The Source of Life. Photo by E.
Dimitrova.



Psalm 42¹ is one of the main texts from the Bible, around which the liturgical image system is built: *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God!* (Psalter 42:1²). This text must be read obligatory by the bishop before he enters the altar space and begins the main part of the service. For this reason, as previously established, it is also the most used scene of a Eucharistic character in the floor mosaic decoration, although it does not formally depict bread and wine as the main participants in the sacrament. As mentioned, in *The Source of Life* scene, not only a hind, a deer or both zoomorphic figures can be depicted, but also other animals and birds semantically related to the Psalm and the Eucharist - a lamb, a bull, a lion, peacocks, doves, etc. As in the pre-Christian periods, so in the Early Christianity, there is no need for patterning in the selection of certain animals and vessels, and each region has its own preferences in this regard (depending on previous traditions and current influences) (Jensen 2011: 89-90).

In two monuments this is established by a mosaic inscription with a quote from the same Psalm. Such are the monuments from the basilicas in Storgozia and Salona (Fig. 7). In Salona, *The Source of Life* scene is presented in the catechumenum (or consignatorium) adjacent to the double basilica. In the center there is a kantharos filled with water, from which two stags are drinking, and above and between the animals and the vessel there is an inscription in Latin, which is a quotation from Psalm 42: *Sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum / ita desiderat anima mea ad Te Deus* (Dyggve 1951: 33-34).

In Storgozia, *The Source* is not depicted, instead a tabula ansata with a Latin inscription is placed in the presbytery (Beševliev 1964: 34). The mosaic inscription is again a quotation of Psalm 42 and shows the following text: *[Intr] oibo ad altarem Dei [Ad Deum] qu [i lae] t [ifica] t [iuventutem meam*, such as V. Beshevliev and later V. Gerasimova-Tomova connect it with a quotation of Psalm 42:4 and fill in the missing letters (Gerasimova-Tomova 1989: 90-93). In front of the inscription, a mosaic composition is placed, in which there is an

1 In some translations of the Bible, it is Psalm 41 or 43, but the text itself does not change.

2 All quoted texts from the Bible and the Gospels are from the edition of Bible 1998, Sofia.



Figure 7
Salona, Early Christian basilica, catechumenum, mosaic (reconstruction), The Source of Life with Psalm 42. Photo by M. Buzov.

image of *Christogram* repeated several times. Although one of the main symbols of the Eucharist, as well as of the Christianity in general, *The Cross* and/or *The Christogram*, is usually avoided to be placed on the floor, with few exceptions, such as the one mentioned here. It is the placement of *The Christogram* next to the mosaic inscription of Psalm 42 that replaces *The Source of Life* scene, since both are a figurative projection of the Savior. In addition, in this way the sacred space of the chancel is emphasized, which is extremely important from a liturgical point of view.

Two of the studied mosaic compositions stand out, which, in addition to Psalm 42, are connected with other Psalms. *The Source of Life* is also presented in the diaconicon of the Episcopal Basilica in Lychnidos: two lambs around a kantharos, and in the lower part, at their feet, a lion and a snake are depicted (Fig. 8). Between them an inscription in Greek is placed: ΚΑΙΚΑ / ΤΑΠΑΘΗΣΙΣ / ΛΕΟΝΤΑΚΑΙ / ΔΡΑΚΟΝΤΑ (Tutkovski 2014: 132) and the text is a quote from the Old Testament, Psalm 90: *the lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet* (Psalter 90: 13). In a Eucharistic context, the scene is one of the most saturated with Early Christian symbolism, as it combines the projections of Psalm 42 and Psalm 90. The image of a serpent and its derivatives in the decorative mosaic program during the Early Christianity changed its connotation. In the earlier period, the serpent image was smaller and mainly part of a pastoral,



Figure 8
Lychnidos, episcopal basilica, diaconicon, apse, mosaic, The Source of Life with Psalm 90. Photo by M. Perseng.

bucolic scene. In the later periods, it becomes one of the main elements present in the composition and is transformed into the image of evil, the devil, negation. This is one of the new themes that make up a new visual program that can be traced to the end of Late Antiquity, with significance also in the following period of the Middle Ages.

Unparalleled mosaic composition with more complex iconographic program is presented in Scampa (Fig. 9), including in addition to *The Source of Life*, male and female figure, waterfowl, rabbit that eats grapes and more (Muçaj 2009: 89-91). Thus, the scene carries additional messages related to Psalm 104, called *Praise of God the Creator: You made springs flow in wadies that wind among the mountains. They give drink to every beast of the field; here wild asses quench their thirst. Beside them the birds of heaven nest; among the branches they sing. You water the mountains from your chambers; from the fruit of your labor the earth abounds. You make the grass grow for the cattle and plants for people's work to bring forth food from the earth, wine to gladden their hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread to sustain the human heart* (Psalter 104:13-18) In this way, the Eucharistic messages of Salvation and Eternal Life are united with the gratitude to God, the Creator of all earthly goods and joys. It is important to note that these are the only plots combining both psalms discovered so far in the Balkans, and in the Eucharistic context the Early Christian symbolism is most prevalent in these scenes.

Figure 9
Scampa, Early Christian basilica, central nave, mosaic, *The Source of Life*. Photo by E. Omari.



Numerous examples with the scene *The Source of Life* from Thrace, Macedonia, Inner Dacia and all other provinces on the Balkans confirm the idea that the transition from Pagan to Early Christian period was smooth and the theme was syncretically transformed and woven into the Early Christian symbolism. The most significant difference is manifested in the completely new spiritual understanding of the image of *The Source* as the Savior himself, of the Paradise and of the soul of the Christian believer dwelling it etc.

The Vessel or the Glass of Wine or Water, The Vine and The Vine Tendrils

In the Gospel of Luke, the apostle quotes the words of Christ, which are fundamental in the Eucharist, to its ritual, to the liturgical objects and elements actually used (Luke 22:19-20). These Gospel messages establish the wine and bread as the basic elements necessary for the affirmation and fulfillment of St. Communion. It should be noted that water and wine carry close, sometimes similar messages addressed to the Eucharist, Baptism and many Early Christian notions. Thus, water and wine as a semantic oppositional couple are together in the Early Christian rituals and respectively in their figurative representations. The New Testament texts also give grounds for this (an example is the description of *The Wedding at Cana*, when Jesus turned water into wine). In the Eucharistic scenes, in order to distinguish the liquid in the vessel, the wine and the water are shown in different colors - blue or gray for the water, respectively, and red, reddish-brown or their nuances for the wine (Fig. 10).

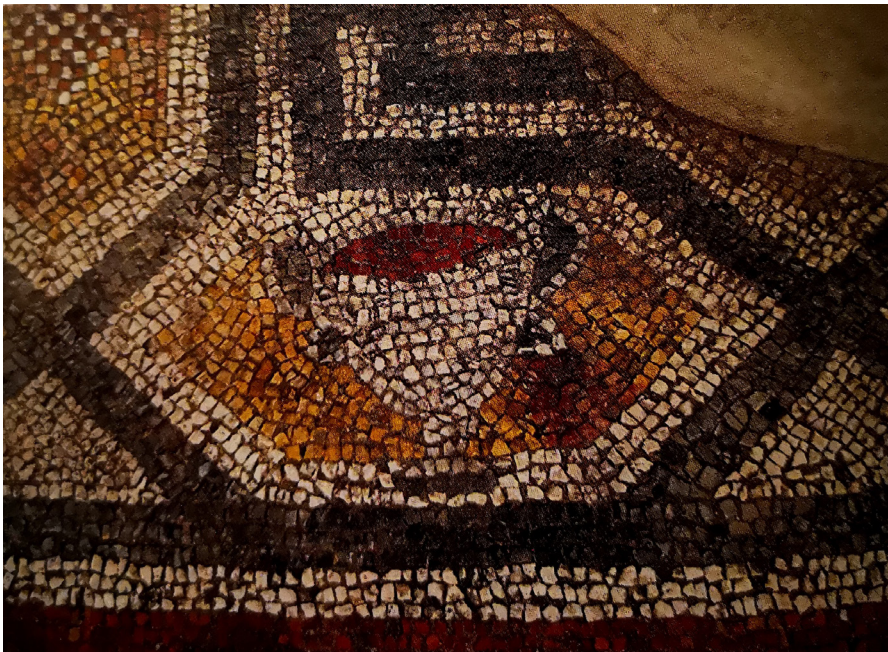


Figure 10
Augusta Traiana, private house, tablinum,
mosaic (fragment), ancient vessel with wine.
Photo by A. Mihaylov.

The presented vessels have a long history of use in the pagan and eastern cult rituals. In this way, they are repeatedly depicted in mosaics, murals and reliefs from all the preceding and during the Late Antique periods (Grabar 1963: 76-81). It should be emphasized that symbolically the ancient vessels are in fact a reduced image of *The Source of Life* and as such are mainly related to Psalm 42, but they also carry the messages of Psalm 75: *But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another. For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is full of mixture; and he poureth out of the same: but the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them* (Psalter 75:7-8).

The general tendency for the use of various types of vessels such as chalice, skyphos, kantharos, krater, luterion, etc., depicted in the mosaic compositions, is related to the copying, transformation and combination of earlier prototypes used in Roman and Late Antique cult art (Popova 2016: 178). For this reason, these vessels generally resemble real liturgical objects, although they become categorically a symbol sign in the Early Christian image system. On a semantic

level, they are transformed into a universal symbol with a long life in the Christianity: of the sacrifice of Christ, the redemption of the sins of mankind, St. Communion, forgiveness, receiving God's grace and blessing as well as others.

The connection between wine and the vine tendrils is also established by the Gospel texts: *I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing* (John 15:5). Therefore, the wine for St. Communion is symbolized not only by the vessel and the glass, but also by the vine tendrils (separately and together) (Fig. 11). For these reasons, the wine can also be represented by images of vines and/or grapes. In this way, they are present in many figurative scenes from mosaic monuments in the Balkans. These motifs are one of the most syncretic in Christian art, permanently interwoven and invariably used in the Eucharistic decorative programs.

Figure 11
Parthicopolis, episcopal basilica, narthex,
mosaic, the vine. Photo by R. Pillinger.



The Eucharistic Bread

The Eucharistic Bread and the associated discourse *The Bread of Life* are an integral part, the essence of the sacrament of St. Communion. Its importance is emphasized by many biblical texts and the earliest representations found in Christian tombs, on frescoes, reliefs of sarcophagi (Bisconti 2011: 57-60). For example, *The bread* or *The bread baskets* are depicted in the scenes representing *The Last Supper*, *The Breaking of the Bread (Fractio Panis)*, *The Miracle with the Fish and the Five Loaves*, etc. It should be noted that, above all, the presence of bread emphasizes its liturgical function, which derives from the words of Christ recorded in the Gospel of John: *Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. I am the Bread of Life* (John 6:48-49).

In order to distinguish the bread used as a bloodless sacrifice, it must be emphasized that it has distinctive features such as shape, size, color and a seal that is placed on it (Galavaris 1970: 18-21). The seal on the Prospora - the Eucharistic bread, also has a round shape, and its surface is divided into several fields, with a central cross or the so-called Lamb - the Son of God, with the Greek letters *IX*, the initial letters of the name of the Messiah - Jesus Christ (Fig. 12). In this way figuratively and symbolically, it is emphasized that this is the true body of the God, offered as a bloodless sacrifice. The establishment of the specific shape and color, and especially the sign of the cross on the loaves, whether in a basket or in an antique vessel, emphasizes its role as Eucharistic bread, and distinguish them from the prevalent motif - a vessel or basket with fruits.

As a universal symbol, the Eucharistic bread contains the message of the Salvation of mankind, a message that also arise from the biblical tests: *For the bread of God is the One coming out of heaven and giving life to the world* (John 6:33). No images of the Eucharistic bread have been found on the pavement mosaics from the Balkans so far, however such images have been discovered in Jerusalem, Aquileia, etc. It should be highlighted that the plots including the breads date mainly from 4th century AD to the time of Theodosius II, when strict rules and prohibitions were established for the use of sacred symbols of faith on the floor (Popova 2018: 140). However, we can assume that the trays without any object on them could symbolized the Eucharistic breads and wine based on the similarity of some forms and elements of the so-called 'silver dishes', although very strongly treated in decorative manner (Fig. 13). These are not real depictions of trays, and the reason is similar to that of the bread. These themes are part of compositions, mainly of geometric-ornamental character, yet the form is recognizable and can be related to a real liturgical object - a tray for Eucharistic bread.



Figure 13
Augusta Traiana, residence, representative hall, mosaic (fragment), silver dish. Photo by A. Mihaylov.

Another image associated with bread is that of the fish. Establishing the connection between the fish and St. Eucharist is described in the Gospel texts in which it is presented as a projection of the Resurrection of Christ (Uvarov 2001: 104, 133). It appears when the Savior himself appears to his disciples: *Then*



Figure 12
London, British Museum, bread seal. Photo by the British Museum.

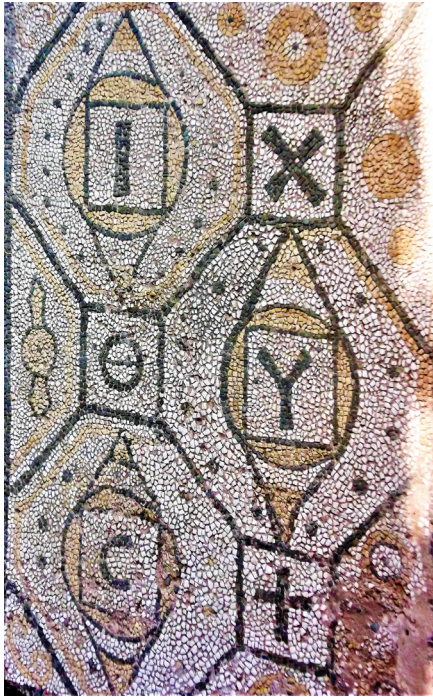


Figure 14
Stobi, episcopal basilica, mosaic (fragment), IXΘΥΣ. Photo by M. Perseng.

Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye any meat? They answered him, No. And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes (John 21:5-6).

Images of fish are found in the art of all ancient cultures. In Thrace and Ancient Greece this image represents the water element, trials, transitions and other concepts. In Egypt the fish is important as a protector of the dead and the resurrection after death. In Syria it is associated with the cult of Atargatis in which the initiates accept her flesh as a symbol of the divine in themselves. Thus, in Paganism the fish is a collective image, embodying the water element, trials, transitions, rebirths and resurrection of the dead (Uvarov 2001: 59, 90). Its transition to the Early Christianity took place effortlessly and naturally became one of the earliest and most important Christian symbols. The usage of this image can be traced back as early as the middle of the 2nd century AD. In the following periods of development, it grew and established itself as an invariably present motif in decorations of Christian religious buildings, more specifically in mosaic decorations. This is related to the meaning of the word itself, as in Greek the word “Ιχθύς” (“fish”) is an acrostic of God’s name – *Ιησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ* (Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior). The first inscriptions with IXΘΥΣ are found in the oldest tombs from the Early Christian period where they are part of epitaphs. There are examples in the Roman catacombs of Priscilla, Peter and Marcellin and others (Bisconti 2018: 55-56). This inscription is also present in mosaic decorations, such as the Episcopal Basilica in Stobi, the Basilica in Storgozia and others (Fig. 14). The representations of one fish or two and more can be frequently used in the mosaic repertory.

It should be accentuated that not all fish are the personification of the Eucharistic bread. They can be part of the scene representing the creations of the Earth and the Ocean, as well as indicate a transitional state - from proselyte to neophyte (Fig. 15). Their definition as substitutes of liturgical objects is established mainly by placing them next to or in the chancel similarly to the example from the Basilica of Bishop Joannes in Parthicopolis, or when they are adjacent to other motifs and scenes with Eucharistic character, such as kantharos, *The Source of Life*, *The Vine* etc.

Figure 15
Klapsi, Early Christian basilica, mosaic scheme, creation of the Ocean. Photo by P. Asimakopoulou-Atzaka.



Related to the fish is the image of the fisherman, which is supported by many Biblical texts, as well as by the theological precepts of the church fathers and the Late Antique thinkers. It is through the New Testament texts that the symbolism

of the fish is connected with the Holy Apostles, whom the Savior himself calls *fishermen of men* (Mark 1:17). Again, in the Bible it is mentioned: *Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish* (Matthew 13:47). A composition depicting the image of the fisherman is present in the Basilica in Agia Paraskevi (Fig. 16), another example is the mosaic composition in the southern annex of Basilica A in Amphipolis (Assimakopoulou-Atzaka 1998: 364).



Figure 16
Agia Paraskevi, Early Christian basilica, mosaic (fragment), fisherman. Photo by P. Assimakopoulou-Atzaka.

The connection between the fish, the wine and the bread from one side and Jesus Christ from the other side, in their symbolic projection related to the Eucharistic sacrament is expressed by St. Clement of Alexandria (quoted later by Tertullian, Origen, St. Nola and others) through comparing Jesus with *real bread and freshwater fish* (Schaff 2013: 347). This makes the fish meaningful as a Eucharistic sacrifice and part of the Eucharistic sacrament. The Eucharistic symbolism projected in the image of the fish is irrefutable in this sense, it is part of important biblical scenes such as *The Satiety of the people in the wilderness with five loaves and two fishes* (Mark 6:34-44) and *The Repast of Christ and the Apostles on Lake Tiberias* (John 21:9-22). These stories are often depicted in the catacombs, merging with *The Last Supper* scene and thus acquiring a multi-layered meaning associated with Salvation, Resurrection and Eternal Life.

The Christogram and The Cross

Cross forms are represented in mosaics, wall paintings, reliefs, and drawings throughout the Ancient period, and their meaning is associated with the orientation of different levels - spatial, temporal and spiritual. It is often difficult to distinguish the Early Christian cross from the cruciform forms of the Pagan art. We identify it as a Christian sign when it is of rare iconography, repeated several times in the composition, or emphasized graphically or in color. The cross was adopted as the main Christian liturgical symbol in the 4th century AD. It is mentioned in the New Testament texts, both as a formal presence and as a symbolic projection of the Resurrection, the Sacrifice and the Salvation. In his epistles the Apostle Paul says: *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God* (Corinthians 1:18).

The christogram is a monogram of Christ, consisting of three crossed lines, with the Greek letter ρ written on the top of the middle line. Thus, the sign contains the two initial letters X and P of the Greek name of the Saviour - $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$ (Christ). It is most often represented in a circle, with both the Greek letters α - alpha and ω - omega present on both sides, in most cases. The christogram should be taken as a symbol, a sign that arises with the advent of Christianity and is related to what is said in Revelation: *I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty* (Revelation 1:8), as well as: *And I saw another angel coming up from the east with the seal of the living God* (Revelation 7:2). It gained popularity under Constantine the Great who replaced the Roman eagle with it on his labarum/standard. In addition, the emperor ordered it to be written on the shields of the army before the battle on the Milvian Bridge with Maxentius in 312. In the Early Christianity, the symbol is found in epigraphy, reliefs of sarcophagi, mosaics and murals (Volbach - Himer 1958: 83-86). Later it became a symbol of the Incarnation and the Nativity (Uvarov 2001: 145).

The Cross, respectively *The Christogram* are extremely important symbols in the Christian worldview and therefore their depiction on the floor was usually not acceptable and even officially banned, although there are exceptions. In the mosaic monuments from the Balkans, *The Christogram* is depicted in many basilicas, alone or next to a quotation from the Scripture like in Basilica № 1 in Storgozia with Psalm 42. *The Cross* is rarely presented only in several Christian buildings: basilicas, baptisteries and magistrate and private houses (in a private house in Augusta Traiana, cross patée; in a building of undetermined function in Pautalia³ (Fig. 17), Greek cross; in the Episcopal Basilica in Stobi, Greek cross; in the House of Felix in Serdica⁴, Greek cross). It should be emphasized

Figure 17
Pautalia, building with unidentified function,
mosaic (fragment), cross. Photo by A. Lirsch.



3 The building was designated as a basilica or a christian's private home. See Popova 2018: 150.

4 In the scientific literature it is assumed that Felix's house was most likely the residence of an imperial official or the bishop of Serdica. See Popova 2018: 150.

that in baptisteries the shape of the pool is often planned as a cross of different types, and at the bottom there is also a mosaic cross like in the Basilica No 1 in Mikrevo in Southwestern Bulgaria.

The scenes involving *Christogram / Cross* as part of *The Source of Life* are extremely semantically saturated, as they are located in the most important sacral places in the basilica and baptistery – in the apse, the chancel or in front of the piscina itself (the Basilica No 1 in Mikrevo, Basilica A in Amphipolis, the Baptistery in Butrotum). In this way, the scene, in addition to its universal meaning, also has polysemantics, expressing the apogee of the ritual and obtaining the blessing and the promise of Eternal Life.

The Vessel of the Holy Anointment

The St. Anointing is the next important Sacrament after the Communion and the Baptism, and all three are firmly connected. In the mosaic compositions the vessel for Holy Oils (*Olea Sacra*) is a symbol of the St. Anointing, which takes place after the Baptism and after the Eucharist. In this way, it is associated with Psalm 91, called the *A Song for the Sabbath: As for Your enemies, O Eternal One, their fate is obvious: those who hate You will not survive; those who practice evil will be broken in pieces. But You have made me strong as a wild ox, anointed me with the refreshing oil of Your blessing* (Psalter 91: 9-10).

The composition directly carries the message of this psalm which is the only one discovered so far on the Balkans and presented in the Basilica in Agia Paraskevi (Fig. 18). A bull/buffalo is shown, going to a vase, from which branching plant drags come out (Assimakopoulou-Atzaka 1998: 303). The vase resembles the shape of an ancient lydion, a vessel for fragrances. In all probability in the Late Antiquity the oil and the ointment were kept in similar, conditionally speaking, larger lydions, and in smaller quantities - in small well-closed round boxes (pyxis).



Figure 18
Agia Paraskevi, Early Christian basilica, mosaic, Lydion with plant tendrils. Photo by P. Assimakopoulou-Atzaka.

The shape of the ancient lydion influenced a number of vessels involved in the compositions *Source of Life* and *Vine*. The vessels are depicted wide, flared and open at the bottom and of smaller diameter at the top (the Basilica in Oreokastro). The difference lies in the open and uncovered upper part, since according to the particular iconography in this case, the water should be shown as well as the branch growing from the vessel. The influence of the lydion's shape has not been

noticed so far in the research of the Early Christian mosaics from the Balkans. Hence, we can add these vessels to the repertoire in the cases of rituals using Anointment - the Communion, the Baptism, the Ordination, etc. (Perseng 2021).

In the mosaic pavements in the Balkans we can observe also combined or synthesized several quotations of the Holy Scripture in one scene, which also carry Old Testament and New Testament messages. These are: *The Christian Cosmos* (private home in Augusta Traiana, the Palace of Polycharm in Stobi, the Basilica of Dometios in Nicopolis, the Episcopal Residence in Heraclea Lynkestis); *The Good Shepherd* (Southern basilica in Justinian Prima), *Shepherd and Flock in a Pastoral Landscape* (the Basilica in Arapaj, Basilica B and Basilica C in Byllis); *The Four Rivers of the Paradise* (the Church in Lychnidos, Basilica B in Byllis); *The Lambs - Apostles* (Basilica № 7 in Pautalia); and *The Tree of Life* (Basilica D in Byllis). The complication of the mosaic compositions, as well as the inclusion and combination in them of various symbols and images, is related to the development of art figurative language in the new environment of Christian teaching (Lidov 2014: 54). In Eucharistic context, this is indicative of the change and complication of the liturgical rite.

All these examples clearly show the universality of the Early Christian images and symbols and their direct connection to the Sacred Scripture, expressed through their multi-layered and multifunctional nature. In this way, a unified Christian image system is built, the development of which impacts the individual iconographies, which at a later stage are united and syncretized.

In conclusion, we can derive that with the St. Eucharist is associated the most intimate and important symbols of Early Christianity. This directly reflects on the images that are its projection, which is why they are called “mystical symbolism” or “symbolism of the Divine Mysteries” (Taft - Farrugia 1992: 98-99). Thus, the miracle of the Eucharist is also transferred to the scenes, images and symbols, which are extremely multi-layered in their semantics, and I consider them to be an endless source for scientific discourses and research. The Communion and its liturgical and symbolic objects and the Baptism and Anointment are represented alone mainly in 4th and first half of 5th century AD. But later, from 5th century AD onwards a new dominant phenomenon can be observed: the combination or syncretism of several more psalms or quotations in two or more visual scenes inspired by the Word in the Bible or the Gospel, with a climax in the period of Justinian I.

The development of the Christian image system has a substantial influence on the individual iconographies which at a later stage are united and syncretized. In each of them the Eucharistic messages are leading but supplemented in a symbolic context. This underlines once again the great role of the Eucharistic rite in the Early Christian Church and its fundamental significance in the Early Christian religion and art.

The overall art decoration of the Early Christian temples, the selection of certain scenes and topics, the arrangement of the frescoes, reliefs, wall and pavement mosaics in strictly defined places correspond both artistically and, above all, liturgically. Through this concept, the art program follows the theological idea of the Early Christian church, which connects the artistic image with the Word of God. The general suggestion is reinforced by the consistent reading of certain passages from the Bible when passing by specific figural scenes. In this way, art decoration acts as a symphony, in which at a particular moment an emphasis is placed on a certain motif in order to create a remarkable aesthetic-artistic spectacle based on the Christian theology.

In many Early Christian texts, the space of the Early Christian temple is perceived simultaneously as the Cosmos, the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Paradise, and the body of the God. In this context, the Eucharistic scenes can be interpreted as an extremely important semantic structure in the hierotopia of the Early Christian churches (Lidov 2014: 60). As such, the most important scenes placed in the sacred areas of Christian temples are of fundamental importance for understanding the architectural form, iconography and nature of the sacred space. This symbiosis between architecture, art decoration and liturgy gives meaning to an extremely high semantic level of the whole Christian universe.

The multi-layered nature of the cultural processes during the Early Christian period is clearly evident in the monumental arts and specifically in the mosaics, manifested in the syncretism of the images and the combination of formal principles with the symbolic spiritual messages of the Christianity. The art of the Early Christianity is allegorical and symbolic in nature. The desire for immaterial depiction of the religious-theological sacraments and feelings is often intertwined with the illusionistic borrowings of the classical art, as an element of the Ancient cult of the images, which apparently penetrate in the Early Christian art. The transcendence of the Christian worldview is reflected in the art of the epoch, through the gradual neglect of the material, the sensorial influence and the natural proportions. In this way, the naturalistic, earth-based and sensory-evoked ancient art is replaced by another, accessible to the spirit, timeless and far from the foreseeable impressions. This change is a decisive turn in the history of art. A new art is born in terms of content and form, with different artistic problems, as well as in the means for their solution. It is born of the spiritual substrate of the Christian teaching and is an expression of the new perception of the world.

Bibliography – Kaynaklar

- Asimakopoulou-Atzaka 1998 P. Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, *Constitution of the Early Christian mosaic floors of Greece, T. III. Macedonia-Thrace, Thessaloniki*.
- Beševliev 1964 V. Beševliev, *Spätgriechische und Spätlateinische Inschriften aus Bulgarien*, Berlin.
- Bisconti 2011 F. Bisconti, “The Emergence of Christian Art: Old Themes and New Meanings”, A. Lazaridou (ed.), *Transition to Christianity, Art of Late Antiquity, 3rd-7th Century AD*, New York, 58-60.
- Bisconti 2018 F. Bisconti, “Simboli e Racconti. Cicli, narrazioni, abbreviazioni e sintesi nell'arte cristiana antica”, *Quaderni digitali di archeologia postclassica* 13, 49-70.
- Dyggve 1951 E. Dyggve, *History of Salonitan Christianity*, Cambridge.
- Elsner 2003 J. Elsner, “Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art”, *JRS* 93, 114-128.
- Galavaris 1970 G. Galavaris, *Bread and the Liturgy: The Symbolism of Early Christian and Byzantine Bread Stamps*, Madison.
- Grabar 1963 A. Grabar, *The Art of Byzantine Empire*, New York.
- Gerasimova-Tomova 1989 V. Gerasimova-Tomova, “The master of the Early Christian mosaic from Kailaka near the city of Pleven”, 730 years of the city of Pleven, 90-93.
- Jensen 2011 R. M. Jensen, *Living Water, Images, Symbol, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*, Brill.
- Kitzinger 1951 E. Kitzinger, “Studies on Late Antique and Early Byzantine Floor Mosaics”, *Mosaics at Nikopolis*, DOP 6, 82–122.
- Kitzinger 1977 E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making, Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art 3-7 Century*, London.
- Lidov 2014 A. Lidov, “The Rivers of Paradise and Hierotopy of the Byzantine Church”, *The Life-Giving Source, Water in the Hierotopy and Iconography of the Christian World*, 53-60.
- Mathews 1982 T. Mathews, “Private“ Liturgy in Byzantine Architecture: Toward a Re-appraisal, *Cahiers archéologiques*”, *Fin de l'antiquité et Moyen Âge* 30, 125-158.
- Muçaj 2009 S. Muçaj, *Monuments of the Christian cult in Albania*, Tirana.
- Perseng 2021 M. Perseng, *Image Symbolism in the Floor Mosaic Decoration of the Early Christian Basilicas from the Balkans*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, New Bulgarian University, Sofia.
- Popova 2016 V. Popova, “Vons vitae in Late Antique monuments from Bulgaria”, *Studia Academica šumenensia* 3, 154-198.
- Popova 2016a V. Popova, “Monuments from the Tetrarchy and the Reign of the Constantinian Dynasty in Bulgaria”, *Niš i Vizantija* XIV, 155-186.
- Popova 2018 V. Popova, “Liturgy and Mosaics: The Case Study of the Late Antique Monuments from Bulgaria”, *Niš i Vizantija* XVI, 135-160.
- Schaff 2013 P. Schaff, *History of the Apostolic Church; with a General Introduction to Gh. H.*, New York.
- Taft - Farrugia 1992 R. Taft - E. Farrugia, *Theology of the Liturgy and Theology of the Symbol*, Sofia.
- Tutkovski 2014 M. Tutkovski, “The Symbolic Messages of the Mosaics in the Southern Basilica at Plaošnik in Ohrid”, *Niš and Byzantium* XII, 129-142.
- Uvarov 2001 A. S. Uvarov, *Christian symbolism, Symbolism of the Ancient Christian Period*, St. Petersburg.
- Volbach - Himer 1958 W. F. Volbach - M. Himer, *Arte paleocristina*, Florence.

