

The Unusual “Flight into Egypt”: on the rare iconography of Strophe 11 (Οἶκος Λ) in Post-Byzantine Akathistos cycles¹

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The iconography of the first twelve strophes of the Akathistos hymn is considered to be standard². This is true for the selection of subjects, but the representation of these subjects could deviate considerably. What were the sources of those deviations? and how and why did they emerged?

To provide answers to these questions we will discuss one such case, namely the unusual type of the illustration of Strophe 11 which occurs among several Post-Byzantine Akathistos cycles *πα ερ* 16th century.

The text of Strophe 11(Οἶκος Λ) of the Akathistos Hymn tells the story of how Christ brought the light of truth into Egypt so the idols have fallen, and the saved Egyptians are glorifying the Virgin with epithets referring to the book of Exodus³. Because of strong emphasis on the Egyptian theme, most of the Akathistos illustrators had used for this strophe the scene of the "Flight into Egypt" in the variety of its types known in byzantine iconography⁴.

In some cycles the Child is carried by Joseph in other – by the Virgin. In some – personification of Egypt and a crowd meet Holy Family at the gates of the city in other – the city is represented alone

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² Cf. Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *L'illustration de la première partie de l'Hymne Akathiste et sa relation avec les mosaïques de l'enfance de la Kariye Djami*, in *Byzantion*, Vol. 54, 1984, p. 650.

³ “Λάμψας ἐν τῇ Αἰγύπτῳ φωτισμὸν ἀληθείας ἐδίωξας τοῦ ψεύδους τὸ σκότος· τὰ γὰρ εἰδῶλα ταύτης σωτήρ, μὴ ἐνέγκαντά σου τὴν ἰσχὺν πέπτωκεν· οἱ τούτων δὲ ρυσθέντες ἀνεβόων πρὸς τὴν Θεοτόκον· «Χαῖρε ἀνόρθωσις τῶν ἀνθρώπων· χαῖρε, κατάπτωσις τῶν δαιμόνων· χαῖρε, τῆς ἀπάτης τὴν πλάνην πατήσασα· χαῖρε, τῶν εἰδώλων τὸν δόλον ἐλεγξάσα· χαῖρε, θάλασσα ποντίσασα Φαραῶ τὸν νοητόν· χαῖρε, πέτρα ἢ ποτίσασα τοὺς διψῶντας τὴν ζωὴν· χαῖρε, πύρινη στῦλε ὁδηγῶν τοὺς ἐν σκότει, χαῖρε, σκέπη τοῦ κόσμου πλατυτέρα νεφέλης· χαῖρε, τροφή τοῦ μάνα διάδοχε· χαῖρε, τρυφῆς ἀγίας διάκονε· χαῖρε, ἡ γῆ τῆς ἐπαγγελίας· χαῖρε, ἐξ ἧς ῥέει μέλι καὶ γάλα· χαῖρε, νύμφη ἀνύμφευτε. ” “Shining upon Egypt the light of truth you dispelled the darkness of falsehood, for her idols, O Saviour, fell down unable to endure your power, and those who were saved from them cried to the Theotokos: "Hail, elevation of humans; Hail, downfall of demons; Hail, you who trampled upon the delusion of error; Hail, you who refuted the deceit of the idols; Hail, sea that drowned the spiritual Pharaoh; Hail, rock, giving water to those who thirst for life; Hail, pillar of fire, guiding those in darkness; Hail, protection of the world, wider than the cloud; Hail, food, following after manna; Hail, minister of holy joy; Hail, promised land; Hail, from whom flow milk and honey; Hail, bride unwedded” (Leena Mari Peltomaa, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn*, Leiden, Boston, Köln, 2001, p.10-11)

⁴ On the iconography of Strophe 11 see: Josef Myslivec, *Ikonografie Akathistu Panny Marie*, in *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, T.V, 1932, s. 121; Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *L'illustration de la première...*, p.687-689; Alexandra Pätzold, *Der Akathistos-Hymnos: Die Bilderzyklen in der byzantinischen Wandmalerei des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart, 1989, s. 26-8; Μαρία Ασπρά Βαρδαβάκη, *Οι μικρογραφίες του Ακάθιστου στον κώδικα Garrett 13*, Princeton, Αθήναι, 1992, σ. 68-71; Ruth Fabritius, *Außenmalerei und Liturgie. Die streitbare Orthodoxie im Bildprogramm der Moldaukirchen*, Düsseldorf, 1999, S. 212-3; Е.Б. Громова, *История русской иконографии Акафиста. Икона “Похвала Богоматери с Акафистом” из Успенского собора Московского Кремля*, Москва, 2005, с. 270-271; Ioannis Spatharakis, *The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin*, Leiden, 2005, p.138-139. On the iconography of the “Flight into Egypt” see: Н.В. Покровский, *Евангелие в памятниках иконографии преимущественно византийских и русских*, Москва, 1892, с. 137-145; Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconography of the Cycle of the Infancy of Christ*, in *The Kariye Djami*, Vol. IV: *Studies in the Art of Kariye Djami and its Intellectual Background*, Princeton, 1975, p. 226-9.

or simply omitted. Despite those and others differences all these illustrations share one peculiar iconographic motif – always the Virgin is represented seated on a pack animal.

However there is a group of Post Byzantine examples showing definitely another scheme. It represents the Virgin not seated on a pack animal, but standing on her feet. She holds a Child on her arms. Joseph is depicted marching behind. In front of the Holy Family one can see a group of kneeling Egyptians stretching their hands to the Virgin and Christ. The action unfolds against the mountains with the city in between or on architectural background.

There are only four examples of such an unusual illustration known to us. The location and dating of the earliest examples – St. George church in Suceava (1532-34)⁵ (il. 1) and Humor monastery (1535)⁶ (il. 2) suggest that this iconographic scheme may have originated in Moldavia in 1530's or earlier. The mural of Lavriv monastery (1540s) gives evidence that in the next decade this iconography was distributed to the nearby Galicia (il. 3)⁷. And the third Moldavian example – mural on the bema vault of Sucevița monastery⁸ sets the terminus post quem for the further distribution at about 1600. Most likely this type of illustration of Strophe 11 was restricted to 16th century Moldavian and Galician Akathistos cycles only.



1. Suceava, St. George, Strophe 11

⁵ On St. George church in Suceava see: Sorin Ulea, *Datarea frescelor bisericii mitropolitane Sfintul Georghe din Suceava*, in *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei*, T. XIII - H.2, 1966, p. 207-321.

⁶ On Humor monastery see: Vasile Drăguț, *Humor*, Bukarest, 1973.

⁷ Actually in Lavriv only small segment of the composition had been preserved in the south compartment of the west wall of the narthex. But even this it vanished after 1984 (from this year comes the last photo known to us). On the better photo from 1964 reproduced here one can see what should be the feet of Joseph and the Virgin. Only recently this fragment was attributed to Akathistos cycle. Cf. Назар Козак, *Втрачені фрагменти стінопису церкви св. Онуфрія в Лаврові*, in *Бюлетень Львівського філіалу Національного науково-дослідного реставраційного центру України*, Вип. 9, 2007, с. 35–38. On the Akathistos cycle in Lavriv see also: Constantin I. Ciobanu, *L'iconographie de l'Hymne Acathiste dans les fresques de l'église St. Onuphre du monastère Lavrov et dans la peinture extérieure moldave au temps du premier règne de Petru Rares*, in *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire de l'Art. Série Beaux-Arts*, T. XLVII, 2010, p. 3-24.

⁸ On Sucevita monastery see: Corina Nicolescu, Ion Miclea, *Mănăstirea Sucevița*, Buurești, 1977.



2. Humor, Strophe 11



3. Lavriv, Strophe 11

This scheme definitely has no precedents among earlier representations of the “Flight into Egypt” scenes⁹. It has not been unnoticed by early scholars but only few of them shared their insights on its sources. Joseph Myslivec suggested it to be an offspring of an earlier scheme of the illustration of this strophe known only by two Late Byzantine manuscripts – one in the State Historical museum in Moscow (Synodal. gr. 429) dated to 1360s and the second a copy of the first from Escorial in Madrid (Escorial Cod. R. I. 19.) dated some four decades later¹⁰. Both illustrations depict the Virgin in front of the walled city however missing the Child on her arms and Joseph behind¹¹. Recently Constanta Costea also pointed to Synodal. gr. 429 as possible source of the standing pose of the Virgin suggesting that other Palaiologan examples of the illustration of Strophe 11 also took part in the development of the new scheme supplying some other iconographic elements (like group of Egyptians meeting Holy Family, etc.)¹².

These arguments look convincing but a better explanation can be provided by considering the peculiar feature of the illustrated Akathistos cycles to similize the illustrations of the neighboring strophes. Let us explain this in more detail. In all the Akathistos cycles with no exceptions the first strophes are illustrated with the scene of the “Annunciation”¹³. For the illustration of Strophe 5 and 6 two figure compositions of “Visitation” and the “Doubts of Joseph” are used, often with very similar structure¹⁴. The Strophe 8 and Strophe 10 representing the scenes of the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem and their return to the East both share the cavalcade as their common iconographic motif¹⁵. Even in the second part of the Akathistos hymn that is more diverse from the iconographic point of view there are many such examples especially among the illustration of Strophe 23 and 24¹⁶.

⁹ It might be mentioned here the well known 5th century mosaic on the triumphal arch of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome representing the Holy Family in front of the city (André Grabar. *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*, Princeton, 1968, il.139). In this scene the Virgin is on her feet. But there are many differences with above mentioned unusual Post Byzantine illustrations of Strophe 11. In Santa Maria Maggiore mosaic Christ is represented not on the hands of His Mother but on his feet and the inhabitants of the city are not kneeling but standing. Besides it seems impossible that Post Byzantine iconographers in 16th century Moldavia could get to know an Early Byzantine iconographic scheme without any intermediate source. And we have no evidence of the later iconographic development of the scene represented in Santa Maria Maggiore. Finally, it is not clear what the subject the mosaic is actually depicts. Some scholars believe it might be the meeting of the Holy Family with Afrosios the governor of the city of Sotin. However there are plenty other interpretations definitely out of the Flight into Egypt story. For example basing on strong iconographic evidences Suzanne Spain identified the figure of the emperor as King David and the figure of the desert man as the Prophet Isaiah (Suzanne Spain, “*The Promised Blessing*”: *The Iconography of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore*, in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 61, № 4, 1979, p. 519-25).

¹⁰ Joseph Myslivec, *op.cit.*, s.121.

¹¹ Due to the omission of Christ and Joseph this scheme should not be treated as Flight into Egypt. As have been suggested by Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne and lately by Ioannis Spatharakis it might be an attempt to create an illustration basing exactly on the text of Strophe 11 but misunderstanding its first words as reference to the Virgin while they refer to Christ (Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *L'illustration de la première...*, p. 687-8; Ioannis Spatarakis, *op.cit.*, p.138-9).

¹² Constanța Costea, *Sub semnul Miresei nenuntite. Despre reprezentarea Imnului Acatist în Moldova secolului XVI-lea* in *Ars Transsilvaniae*, XIX, 2009, p. 102.

¹³ The scene of the “Annunciation” commonly illustrates first three strophes. But in many Post Byzantine cycles from Muscovy and Moldavia this scene is also used as illustration for Strophe 4. The earliest example of this solution is present on the Late Byzantine icon from the Dormition cathedral in Moscow (late 14th century). More numerous examples are from the 16th century onwards (Ferapontov monastery, the icon of the Virgin Tihvinskaya from Pskov museum, the icon of the Annunciation from Yaroslavl museum, Probota, St. George and St. Demetrius in Suceava, Humor, Moldovita, Arbore, Voronet, icon from Kirov museum, Novodievichy monastery and other).

¹⁴ This is especially obvious when in both scenes there are no additional personages and in the scene of “Doubts” Joseph and the Virgin are represented standing in front of each other. As a good example may serve murals in Ferapontov monastery (1502) where both scenes are juxtaposed on nearby slopes under the central dome.

¹⁵ For example in the murals of St.Trinity church in Cozia (c. 1386) and on the icon from the Dormition cathedral in Moscow (late 14th century) these scenes can be distinguished only by the direction of movement.

¹⁶ Perhaps the most famous example is from St. Demetrius church in Markov monastery (c. 1380) where these strophes are illustrated with the scenes of the veneration of icons.

In the light of all these evidence one may ask the question whether such a similitization might took place in the case of the unusual illustration of Strophe 11? Could this scheme be inspired not by the Palaiologan tradition of illustrating Strophe 11 but by the illustrations of nearby strophes in the same cycle?

We suggest a positive answer to both of the questions. Thus looking on the facades of Suceava and Humor one may notice that the illustration of Strophe 11 is similitized to the illustration of nearby Strophe 12 representing the scene of the “Hypapante”. The left part of both compositions are almost identical since they represent Joseph and the Virgin (il. 4). The right part of the unusual illustration also finds its match among Akathistos illustrations: the kneeling Egyptians are very similar to the kneeling Magi in the illustration of Strophe 9 representing the scene of the Adoration. In Sucevitsa on the vault of the bema the illustration of Strophe 9 and Strophe 11 are located side by side (il. 5).

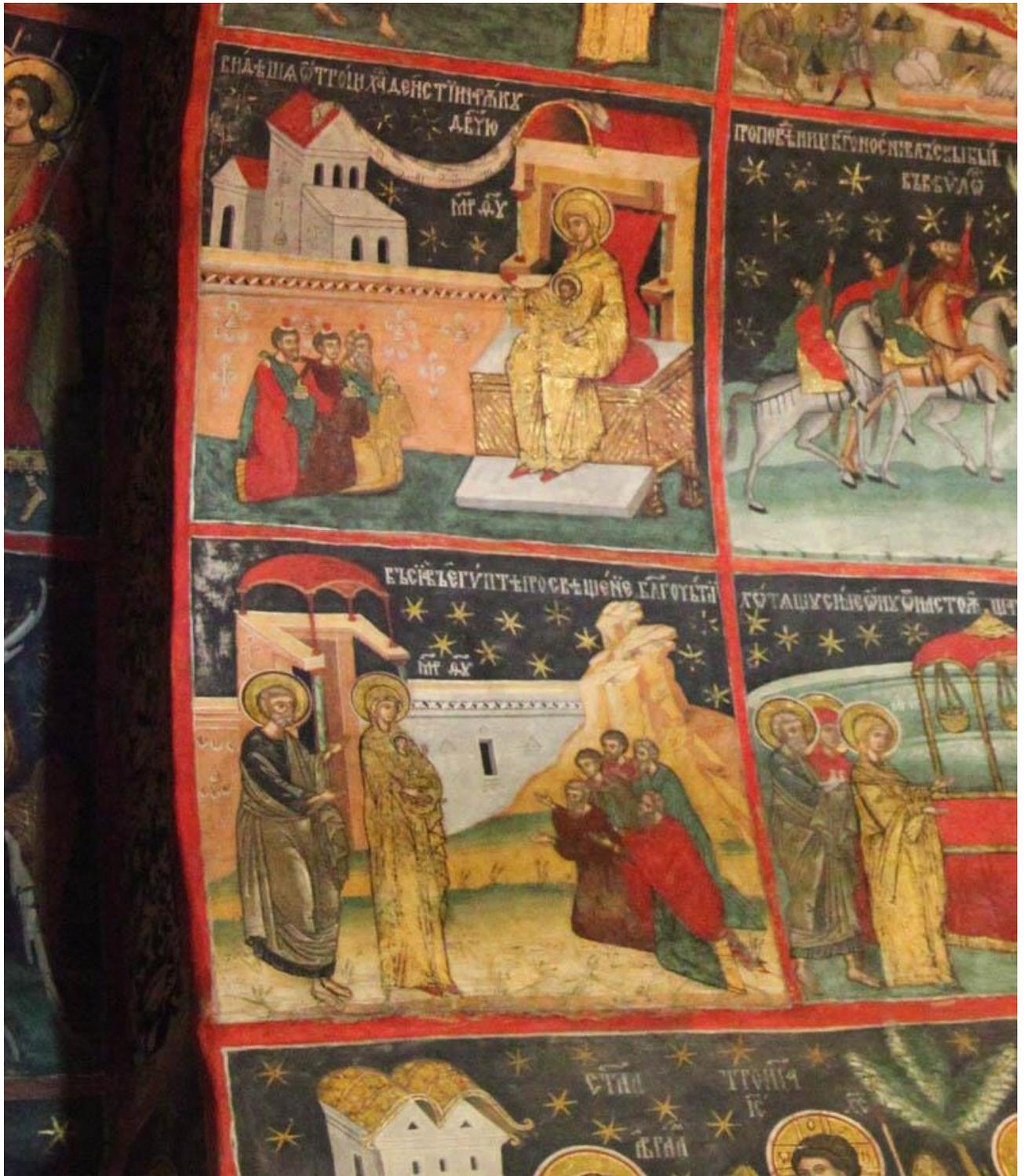


a



b

4. a. Humor, Strophe 11, fragment ; b. Humor, Strophe 12, fragment



5. Sucevita, Strophe 9 and 11

All these leads us to the conclusion that invention of the new iconography of Strophe 11 have been mostly the matter of visual considerations.

Another thing worth to notice is that the text of Strophe 11 in the process of this invention played little or actually no importance. The central episode of this text is the fall of idols¹⁷. In the majority of the Akathistos cycles in the illustrations of Strophe 11 they are shown like small figures falling

¹⁷ The detailed analysis of Strophe 11 see: Leena Mari Peltomaa, *op.cit.*, p. 167-73.

from the roofs¹⁸. But there are now idols in the unusual Post Byzantine scheme we have discussed. Not even in one single example. If the text of the strophe might have inspired the illustrators they would definitely included this episode. But they didn't.

This case study is important for at least two reasons. First, it suggests that in the search for the sources of the unusual scenes in the large illustrated cycles of (Post) Byzantine iconography (like the Akathistos cycle for example) we should pay attention not only to the preceding iconographic tradition but also make close look at the other scenes in the same cycle. Second, it shows that in the art of illustrating the text not always the text stimulated iconographers to invent new images but another images as well. Since at least for the iconographers images sometime might be more important than the texts.

¹⁸ On the fall of the idols as motif of Byzantine iconography see: Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconography of the Cycle...*, p. 228. This motif is common not only for the "Flight into Egypt" but for some scenes in the hagiographical cycles of St. George and St. Saint Nicholas.

SUMMARY

In the Akathistos cycles the *Flight into Egypt* was rather standard choice for the illustration of the 11th strophe due to its text (Οἶκος Λ “Λάμπσας ἐν τῇ Αἰγύπτῳ φωτισμὸν ἀληθείας...”). This scene is well known in Byzantine iconography in the variety of its types which share many common features, in particular the representation of the Virgin seated on a pack animal. Nevertheless in some Post-Byzantine Akathistos cycles from the illustration of the 11th strophe another scheme was applied. It represents the Virgin standing on her feet with the Child Jesus on her arms accompanied by Joseph in front of the group of the kneeling Egyptians.

There are only four cases of such an unusual illustration known to us. The location and dating of the earliest examples – *St. George church in Suceava* (1532-34) and *Humor monastery* (1535) suggest that this iconographic scheme may have originated in Moldavia in 1530's or earlier. The mural from *Lavriv monastery* gives evidence of its spread to the nearby Galicia. And the mural on the bema vault of *Sucevița monastery* sets the terminus post quem for this iconography at about 1600. This iconography, likely, was restricted to 16th century Moldavia and Galicia only.

Few scholars have shared their insights on the sources of such unusual iconography looking into the previous tradition of the Palaiologan art. We suggest another approach based on the peculiar feature of the illustrated Akathistos cycles to similize the illustrations of the neighboring strophes. Actually in the four above mentioned cases the unusual illustration of the 11th strophe is similized to the illustration of the 12th strophe traditionally representing the scene of the *Hypapante*. The left part of both compositions are almost identical representing the standing figures of Joseph and the Virgin holding the Child on her arms. The right part of the unusual illustration of the 11th strophe also finds its match among Akathistos illustrations: the kneeling Egyptians are very similar to the kneeling Magi in the illustration of the 9th strophe representing the scene of the *Adoration*.

Since in the unusual *Flight into Egypt* the central motif of the 11th strophe – the falling Egyptians idols (in the majority of the Akathistos cycles shown like a small figures falling from the roofs of the city) – is omitted, we may assume that the text of the strophe played little or actually no importance in the development of this deviation and it was mostly the matter of visual considerations.