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Notes on Benče manuscript and the Paleologan art inspiration

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ABSTRACT

Antique allegoric figures are part of the renewed interest towards classicism in Palaeologan art. This is not so common to find in medieval illuminations coming from the region and the cultural centers of medieval Macedonia. The Four Gospels (Tetrevangelium) from the church of Holy Archangels in Benče, Makedonski Brod, discovered in 1988 is one of the rare examples of manuscripts that contain illuminations with renewed interest towards classicism. It is written in semi uncial script and contains 360 folios. Each Gospel is preceded by a full page masterly illumination of the corresponding Evangelist. Their style has been described as neo byzantine and Balkan style in the short descriptions accompanying the booklets regarding this manuscript. The colors used are light green, red, blue and light brown that resembles gold. Each evangelist has next to him the image of the muse, the inspiration represented as small female figure with a kind of shall making an arch above her head. The background is painted in yellowish-orange color. The architecture and the thrones follow the fashion of the late 13th and 14th centuries. St. John and his pupil resemble the saints depicted on the pendentives of Holy Archangels, Lesnovo. The wall behind St. Mark has light drawing of cat like-human face. The roof of one of the buildings in this illumination is semi barrel. The time when

the manuscript was written is probably when archbishop Prochorus was the head of the Ohrid Archbishopric (ca.1525-1550).

*Keywords: manuscript, illumination, village Benče,
Makedonski Brod, evangelists' portraits, Ohrid Archbishopric,
Paleologan style*

Literature authors' portraits originate in the classical secular tradition of the author portrait, which was often the only illustration in a classical manuscript to begin a manuscript with.¹ A very few examples of Late Antique secular author portraits survive. Some portraits follow the conventions of the Late Antique consular portrait, frequently used for the Emperors. There are a lot of preserved ivory consular diptychs to prove this; the earliest preserved one is dated in 406.² Fortune telling tracts may have also been used as models for evangelists' portraits³. Illustration of such model, copied from the original (which is not preserved), can be seen in the Chronograph of year 354 (Portrait of Constantinus II), or Missorium of Theodosius I of year 384, copied in a later Carolingian illuminations of the Evangelists. Late Antique evangelist portraits are usually standing figures, as in the ivory panels of the Throne of bishop Maximianus;⁴ or more frequently seated on a large throne, placed on a pediment, or turned to God-symbolized by light where from they receive their wisdom and truth, holding a book (opened scroll), yet not writing, or holding the stylus, and certainly he may be involved in writing. Their position is under an arch or within a simplified architecture, usually domed structure, or when St. John or St. Mathew is concerned, within a cave (in front of a cave). Sometimes the evangelist is joined by the ktetor or the ruling emperor (king).

¹ Bologna (2000), 50.

² The chronology of such diptychs is related to a decision issued by Theodosius in 384 to confine their use to consuls only, while their end is marked by the consulship's disappearance under the reign of Justinian in 541. See Cameron (2013), 174-207, 178.

³ <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/view/all/what/MS.+Ashmole+304>, accessed 15. 10. 2017.

⁴ Gerke (1973), 219.

In the insular art of the 7th to 10th centuries, evangelist portraits in manuscripts show the seated classical models, at full-length, either looking out at the viewer or writing at a table or desk. They were derived from unknown classical prototypes, similar to those in the *Codex Amiatinus* and *Saint Augustine Gospels*.⁵ The architectural frame varies from a simple niche to a more elaborated background suited to the evangelist activity.

Albert M. Friend suggested in 1927 that the poses of the evangelists were modeled either after the standing orator or seated philosopher statues of Antiquity, often placed on display at the theatre. Friend suggested that the niche framing the evangelists was inspired by the scaenae frons of Roman stage that housed statues of celebrated men, gods, muses.⁶ He distinguishes six specific poses borrowed from Ancient sculpture employed for the sacred authors throughout the 10th and 11th centuries. Other scholars distinguish two more poses.⁷ Kurt Weitzman accepted and further developed Friend's analyses and opinion on evangelist's portraits as inspired by theatre scaenae frons. He also analyzed the mythical figures representing wisdom (further in the text referred to as muses)⁸. Joyce Kubiski, speaking about the evangelists' portraits, argues that scaenae frons was not the only structure for a statue, it could be streets, basilicas etc.⁹

Anachronic scrolls and scroll-boxes, and a small writing-stand with a single support, dolphin-shaped or even in the shape of male antique sculpture survive well into the Middle Ages,¹⁰ sometimes misunderstood by the artists (represented upside down etc.). Perhaps due to the secular origins of the evangelists' typology, halos are less usual than in other types of image. An arch behind the author, often with curtains hanging across it, in some examples close to the classical

⁵ Bowersock, Brown, Grabar (1999), 727.

⁶ Friend (1927), 115-150; Friend (1929), 3-46.

⁷ For the detailed bibliography see Kubiski (2001), 46, endnote 2.

⁸ Weitzman (1971), 112, 113, 115.

⁹ Kubiski (2001), 42-43.

¹⁰ British Library, The Askew Gospel Book, Add MS 5111-12. See <https://www.bl.uk/greek-manuscripts/articles/art-in-greek-manuscripts>.

models, gradually turns into a decorative framing device for the whole scene.

Among the earliest surviving evangelist portraits is the Rossano Gospels, from the 6th century, written under Byzantine rule in Italy. Here St. Mark is writing on a scroll and female symbolic figure of wisdom (muse) is standing in front of him.¹¹



Rossano Gospel, Syria, 6th cent., Cathedral Library in Rossano, Italy.
Source: Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century (MET).

One of the earliest painted images of St. Mathew in the Republic of Macedonia comes from the baptistery of the Episcopal basilica, Stobi, dated in the second half of the 4th century.¹² St. Mathew words have

¹¹ Weitzmann (1979).

¹² Blaževska, Tutkovski, Dimitrova (2012), 32-33. Here in the north-eastern conch the evangelist Matthew was depicted with the adjoining inscription ΕΥΑ [ΓΓΕ Λ] ΟC ΜΑΤΘΕΟC, positioned under the semi-circular arch of the edifice which belongs to the scenery of the composition. With a gospel in his left hand and a gesture of blessing in his right, he addresses a group of men located to the left of him.

been also frequently inscribed on the decorative sculpture, especially on the abacus of the capitals and door lintels (Stobi, Konjuh, Ohrid).¹³

In the Eastern Orthodox world, the Gospel Book remained a primary focus for illumination, and Evangelist portraits, derived from contemporary Byzantine versions, are dominant representations among the earliest Slavonic manuscript illuminations such as the 11th-century Ostromir Gospel, and Dobreišo Tetrevangelium. In the West the portraits continued to be found in Bibles, more often as the picture at the start of each Gospel.¹⁴

The connection with Antiquity (classicism) in Byzantine and post-Byzantine art may be realized in two ways: firstly, a detail copied from an ancient work or a later copy of it is inserted into a composition of a basically Byzantine structure, or the ancient model is copied approximately, so that the result remains Byzantine, although it retains something of its ancient provenance. Thus, the scenery appears completely unrealistic, with false proportions and the confusion of interior and exterior.¹⁵ In our Benče manuscript Antique allegoric figures are part of the renewed interest towards classicism in Palaeologan art and the later renewal of some of its characteristics. Such figures are represented also next to the early Christian writers, like in Holy Archangels, Lesnovo. The architectural context of the compositions is also very powerful element of the picture. Holy Archangels in Lesnovo is great example of the classicistic stylistic characteristics¹⁶ that in the region of Macedonia started with Holy Virgin Peribleptos ensemble.

¹³ Filipova (2005).

¹⁴ Bologna (2000); Calkins (1983).

¹⁵ Papastavrou (2010), 183-209, 198-199.

¹⁶ Gabelić (1998), St. Gregorius Theologos, St. Athanasius the Great, St. Basil the Great, figs. 74, 76 and 77. The style of the main artist in the nave of the church, who is most skillful, according to Gabelić is following the work from the end of the 13th and early 14th cent., like the Virgin Olimpiotissa in Ellasson or Virgin of Peribleptos in Ohrid. In the narthex of the same church the painter's style shows clear influence of the classical phase of Palaeologan painting of the second decade of the 14th cent. This stylistic tendency in painting will reappear in Dečani, Treskavec and St. Demetrius in Peć in the last two decades of the 16th cent. See Gabelić, *op.cit.*, 278, 283.

In the second half of the fifteenth century the art of miniature painting in Europe was most profoundly changed, and the illuminators of this period were to a certain extent the precursors of modern painting. One of the changes, apart from the modern cloths worn by the presented figures and contemporary architecture in the background, is, like in Italian late gothic art, the replacement of gold backgrounds by designs in colors, and then by real landscapes.¹⁷ In what used to be Byzantium, printed books had to be imported from Western Europe, so the tradition of copying texts by hand continued for centuries, especially in monasteries.¹⁸

The 16th and 17th centuries, icon painting in Macedonia shows several rebirths of works inspired by the Palaeologan style and great icon painters who possessed extensive knowledge of the Palaeologan treatment of human figures and architecture.¹⁹

This is not so common to find in the late medieval and later illuminations coming from the region and the cultural centres of Macedonia. One of the rare manuscripts with visible Paleologian art influences is the Four Gospels (Tetrevangelium) from the church of Holy Archangels in Benče, Makedonski Brod, discovered in 1988 by Mihajlo Georgievski. It is written in semi uncial script and contains 360 folios, h. 15, w. 21,5 cm, and 7,5 cm thick (University Library in Skopje, MS 167). It was restored in the 18th cent. The preserved binding is original. The inks and pigments used in the manuscript have been analyzed by Micro-Raman spectroscopic analysis and two types of water stamps have been recognized, dated in 1504 and 1518. "The use of pigments in ornaments compared with miniatures is somewhat different in *Benče* book, suggesting they were done by different persons/painters or depiction of sacral themes of the miniatures canonically required the use of more

¹⁷ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09620a.htm>, accessed 10.09.2017.

¹⁸ Cillian O'Hogan, Greek manuscripts in the 16th century, British Library online article, <https://www.bl.uk/greek-manuscripts/articles/greek-manuscripts-in-the-16th-century> accessed on 10.10.2017

¹⁹I will mention here by name only the painter Joanis Theodor of Gramosta and his followers. See Viktorija Korobar, Followers of the painter Joanis Theodor of Gramosta in the mid 16th century, in: *Na tragovima Voislava Djurića*, Beograd, 2011, 313-324.

expensive/elaborate pigments.” The leaves with the evangelists’ images are added few years later to the manuscript.²⁰

In the past, the monasteries created abundant libraries, which stored old manuscripts of great significance for the cultural history of the Balkan nations. The oldest and most valuable manuscripts written and once part of the church libraries on the territory of Macedonia nowadays due to numerous wars, plundering etc. are to be found outside of Macedonia.²¹ This makes the manuscript from Benče very important.

Each Gospel of the Benče Tetrevangelium is preceded by a full page masterly illumination of the corresponding Evangelist. Their style is described as Neo- Byzantine and Balkan style.²² The colors used are light green, red, blue and light brown that resembles gold. There is an image of a muse-inspiration next to each evangelist, represented as small female figure with a veil making an arch above her head. The background is painted in yellowish color. The architecture and the thrones follow the fashion of the late 13 and 14th centuries. It is obvious that the painter is not so skillful when drawing the architecture or it may have been his assistant doing the background. The text the evangelist or his assistant writes (in the case of St. John) is Cyrillic, and so are the inscriptions in the upper left or right corner of the illuminations. It is

²⁰ Nastova, Grupče, Minčeva-Šukarova et al. (2012), 1729–1736.

²¹There are nine Glagolitic manuscripts and four fragments of Cyrillic manuscripts from the late 10th century/ 11th century; around fifteen manuscripts from the 12th century, more than a hundred from the 13th century; around 220 from the 14th century; around 120 from the 15th century, and around 170 Macedonian manuscripts from the 16th century. Apart from the *Kiev Missal* and *Glagolitic Clozianus*, which exhibit West Slavic and Croatian features, all Glagolitic texts are assumed to be of the Macedonian recension. Web resources with the scanned manuscripts are the following: <http://www.pelister.org/manuscripts/index.php>, and <http://staroslovenski.nubsk.edu.mk/>.

²²*Manuscript Slaves de la Macédoine du XIII au XIXe siècles* (guide du visitor), Musée Royal de Mariemont/ Bibliothèque nationale et Universitaire "St. Cl"ment D'Ohrid, 2012, 28-29, figures on the cover and on page 29; *Manoscritti slavi dalla Macedonia dal XIII al XIX secolo*, Biblioteca Nazionale e Universitaria "San Clemente di Ocrida" – Skopje, 2205-706 2014, 32-34.

interesting to note that apart from St. John, each of the other three evangelists is depicted with two books. They either hold or write in an opened scroll or a book and on the stand in their vicinity there is another book, or a scroll. So, both forms of gospel books are represented²³, and only St. Mathew is represented with two codexes, and unlike the other muses, his muse is smiling.

This pose or better to say model where St. John is turned aside to listen to the inspiration (the muse), or to God (light), and at the same time with his hand or finger dictates to Prochorus is to be found in many medieval manuscripts and frescoes (for instance in the Virgin Perivleptos church, Holy Archangels, Lesnovo).²⁴ Here in Benče it resembles the same stance on the pendentives of Holy Archangels, Lesnovo, only there no muse appears, but light.²⁵



John the evangelist, Tetrevangelium, Benče, Makedonski Brod

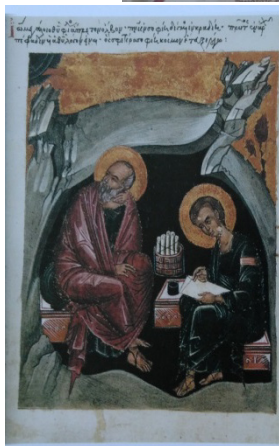
Source: <http://staroslovenski.nubsk.edu.mk/bencevsko-cetvoroevangelie-16v.html>

²³ Džurova (2007), ill. on pages 66, 79 -87.

²⁴ Buchthal, Belting (1978), 64.

²⁵ Gabelić (1998), fig. 10.

Same colors and same pose (only the right-hand gesture pointing to the disciple is different) show the illuminations from Crete, Iraklion, 1415, *Commentary of the Apocalypse* by Frederichus de Veneciis (folio 2v-3r²⁶, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimor and Vatoped, *Codex* 247, 16th cent.).



Source: wikiwand

The manuscript from Monastery of Koutlomousiu, Mont Athos, *Gospel Lectionary*, *Codex* 291 fol. 1v, made in 1576²⁷, shows facial analogy, same position of feet; similar pose of St. Prochorus, three rows of text he

²⁶ Evans, Talbot, Curcic, *et alles* (2004), 317.

²⁷ Pelekanidis, Christou, Tsioumis, Kadas (1975), 362.

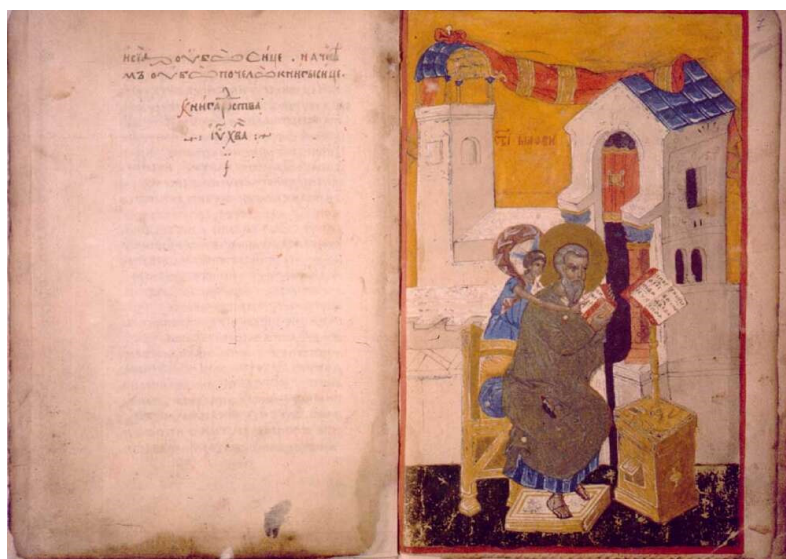
writes, only within our illumination there is no furniture since it is situated in a cave. The wall behind St. Mark has light drawing of cat-like face with human characteristics. Such masks are again borrowed from Palaeologan antique inspirations. The roof of one of the buildings in this illumination is semi-barrel. The animal drawing reminds me of the 14th cent. Ohrid icon of Annunciation with the colossi and the drown human-animal masks at the capitals.²⁸ The Gospel is represented twice, in the form of a scroll, and as a book (codex) on the stand on evangelist's left. There are analogies with the pose, the scroll, position of the feet, and similar chair with the same evangelist represented at Ms. Gr 28 (fol. 59v-60r from Oxford, Christ Church, late 14th cent.)



St. Mark the evangelist, Tetrevangelium, Benče, Makedonski Brod
Source: <http://staroslovenski.nubsk.edu.mk/bencevsko-cetvoroevangelie-16v.html>

²⁸ Nikolovski (2011), 32, fig. 33.

The face of St. Mathew resembles an evangelist from a 13th cent. manuscript illumination from Bulgaria²⁹, and the same goes for St. John, only his image from Benče is rather hairy. The same gesture of a muse holding the evangelist with her hand on the shoulder is presented in the Tetrevangelium of patriarch Sava, 1345/75 representing St. Mathew³⁰, only in our manuscript the hand of the allegory is much longer and points at the book he is writing.



St. Mathew the evangelist, Tetrevangelium, Benče, Makedonski Brod
Source:<http://staroslovenski.nubsk.edu.mk/bencevsko-cetvoroevangelie-16v.html>

As for St. Luke, his face resembles the same evangelist in the *Tetrevangelium of Patriarch Sava*, only he is younger and hairy, and our saint has tonsure. There are also similarities with the face of St. Luke from the Gospel of priest Peter.³¹ The standing columns behind St. Luke

²⁹ Ovcarov (2007), 2nd and 3rd color illustrations after page 32 (not numerated).

³⁰ Maksimović (1983), fig. 22.

³¹ Rakić (2012), 205, fig. 131. Evangelium of pop Petar, Sremski Karlovci, 1567, Arhiv SANU.

are painted the same way as in the manuscript from the Museum in Belgrade.³² They end with small impost or square capitals accented with several white lines. Two columns on St. Luke page of Belgrade manuscript stand there with no function, as if they were attached to the building behind the evangelist. The square building behind St. Luke from Benče has a roof, yet the three columns are taller than the roof and continue to go up, showing misinterpretation of older models. Thus, the roof seems like fallen inside the building.

St. Luke also shows large facial resemblance with the same saint represented in the *Gospel lectionary of Monk Roman*, Hilandar Monastery, No. 9, fol. 129v, (cat. no. 15), dated in 1360. The same goes for St. Luke from the Serbian Tetrevangelium from St. Petersburg, written in 1429.³³



St. Luke the evangelist, Tetrevangelium, Benče, Makedonski Brod
Source: <http://staroslovenski.nubsk.edu.mk/bencevsko-cetvoroevangelie-16v.html>

³² Badurina, Stelè, Mošin, et al. (1983), 142, fig. 137.

³³ Rakić, Špadier, Subotin-Golubović et al. (2016), VI.

Post-Byzantine icon painting in Macedonia in the 16th and 17th cent. was to some degree inspired by Palaeologan classicism and architecture, yet it is not the case with the Slavonic manuscripts. Djurova mentions only one manuscript with evangelists' portraits that still shows characteristics of the previous Komnenian and Palaeologan illustrations (PIO 43-46, illustration 145, end of the 18th cent.).³⁴ The manuscript from Benče shows the characteristic traits of the Palaeologan renaissance: classical forms and correct proportions of the body, while the drapery follows the curves of the body. The arms of the muses that look like young girls are very elongated and thin. Three of them have blue dresses, only St. Luke's muse has red dress.

The colors used for the clothes are less vivid, but the background with its yellowish tone enlighens them to some extent, similarly to the icons where the golden paint is used. The nuances of two colors are used to make the lines of the folds and the volume, along with the white. The painter shows good taste for combining complimentary colors. The color of the chiton of the evangelist and his himation reflects the color of the dress (or the color of the veil) of the muses. The incarnate is very realistic and skillfully painted and indicates the painter may have also been painting icons. A large part of the icons in the 16-18th century period is filled with the urban architecture, and within the fortified city the church becomes dominant, with large central dome.³⁵

According to the water signs on the paper and the spectral analyses the manuscript from Benče has been written in the early 16th century, when the head of the Ohrid Archbishopric was archbishop Nicholas III, or Zaharias, while the illuminations may have been painted also in their time, or in the time of Archbishop Prochorus (ca.1525-1550). The latter was one of the most eminent archbishops from the period of the Turkish rule who enabled the blossom of the scriptorium in the monastery of St. John the Forerunner in Slepče near Demir Hisar. Slepče is 73 km away from Makedonski Brod and the manuscript written there may have been brought to the local church in Benče at certain point of time. Archbishop Prochorus portrait in the church of St. George in the Ohrid village of

³⁴ Džurova (2007), 218.

³⁵ Korobar (2004).

Vrbjani³⁶ resembles a lot the portrait of St. John the Evangelist in the Benče Tetrevangelium.



Source: wikiwand

In the early 18th century the painter David from Selenica would make another comeback of the Palaeologan style inspirations and that was the end of these popular style reminiscences in the Macedonian sacral painting.³⁷

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³⁶ Angeličin (2010), 367-375, fig. 5, 369.

³⁷Korobar (2005), 53-72.

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Белешки за Четвороевангелието од Бенче и палеолошката уметничка инспирација

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Македонски Брод, портрети на евангелисти, Охридска
архиепископија, палеолошки стил*

Во 16 и 17 век иконописот во Македонија покажува неколку појави на обновување на моделите на палеолошкото сликарство во опусот на неколку вешти сликари, кои многу добро го познаваат палеолошкото третирање на човечката фигура и архитектура од 13 и првата половина на 14 век. Ова подоцна нема да биде честа појава во илуминациите создавани во културните центри на Македонија и во регионот. Еден од овие ретки ракописи е Четвороевангелието од Бенче пронајдено пред 30 години во црквата Св. Архангели во селото Бенче, Македонски Брод. Ракописот е пишуван во почетокот на 16 век со семиунцијално писмо и има 360 страни, со димензии 15X21,5X7,5 см. Заведен е под број MS 167 и ја има оригиналната корица, а е реставриран во 18 век. Пигментот користен во илуминациите бил подложен на спектроскопска анализа. Хартијата содржи водени знаци што се датираат во 1504 г. и 1518 г. Содржи четири илуминации на евангелистите за кои наоѓам аналогии во цртите на лицето или позата на фреските или претставите на евангелистите од Свети Архангели, Лесново, Евангелието на поп

Петар од Сремски Карловци, Тетраевангелието на патријархот Сава од Хиландар, ракописот од Музејот во Белград, Српското тетраевангелие од Петроград, како и во еден ракопис од Бугарија. Времето кога е пишуван (1506 г. според водениот жиг на хартијата, но може да е и малку подоцна) и годините непосредно потоа кога му се додадени илуминациите е веројатно за време на владеењето на охридските архиепископи Никола III или Захарие, односно времето на архиепископот Прохор (околу 1525 – 1550 г.). Неговиот портрет во црквата Св. Ѓорѓи Врбјански многу наликува на портретот на евангелистот Јован од Четвороевангелието од Бенче.