

Nagy MÁRTA

DRAGON SERPENTS OF THE TREE OF THE CROSS

Key words: *Dragon, Serpent, Dragon serpent, Cross, The Tree of the Life, The Tree of the Cross, Cherubim, Seraphim*

The title of this study can be divided into four elements: cross, tree, dragon and serpent. Referring to the first element, we will discuss the other three elements. Being Christian art, in the *conceptualisation* of two of these elements – the tree and the serpent – the so-called Story of the Fall of Man is referenced, which features two trees and a serpent (Gen. 3). According to Christian theology, the trees in the Creation story are precursors to the cross of Christ, while the dragon is a derivative of the serpent.

The four motifs can also manifest themselves as *works of art*, indeed in a very spectacular way in a type of altar cross made of wood or with metal cladding reminiscent of the original carvings, which flourished in the Balkans and reached its apogee in the 16th – 17th century. This type is apostrophized as a flowering cross by the Bulgarian researcher Elena Genova¹ (Fig. 1).

Flowering crosses are very attractive to the eye. The strict straight line of the cross stalks intersecting each other intertwine with a rich ornamentation which runs gracefully and is mostly composed of leafy branches and tendrils, and sometimes supplemented with narrower geometric borders, and often with animal shapes.²

The altarpiece made of boxwood (Fig. 2. a; Fig. 2. b), 61 cm high and featuring 120 medallions, which is the subject of the study, is also a representative of this type. The object is divided into two units. The larger upper unit is the actual cross with images depicting the events of the Salvation story and saints. The ends of the horizontal stem and the apex of the vertical stem are each decorated with a leaf shape,



1. *The Blessing Cross*, 1707, Iviron Monastery, Athos. In *Treasures of Mount Athos*, Managing ed. Athanasios A. Karakatsanis, Ministry of Culture, Thessaloniki, 1997, 9.46, 350.

¹ Елена Генова, *Църковните приложни изкуства от XV-XIX век в България*, АИ "Арх & Арт", София, 2004, 62.

² This type of flowering cross can suggest plant, animal and human – the unity of the created world.



2. a. *Altar Cross*, 1558, according to the date carved on the piece, Bozsó Collection, Kecskemét, photo Péter Walter



2 b. *Altar Cross*, 1558, according to the date carved on the piece, Bozsó Collection, Kecskemét, photo Péter Walter

with a smaller leaf ornament in each of the upper intersections of the two branches. An angel's head unfolds from each of the apexes of the leaves crowning the vertical branch, while two dragon serpents appear in the S-shape of the lower part of the vertical branch, supporting the horizontal cross stalk with their backs.

The lower unit of the altar cross is the handle holding the cross. On one side is carved the figure of St. Simeon, and on the other the figure of St. Sava, while on the handle two larger and two smaller dragon serpents twist. The heads of the upper pair each support an angel's head.

Let us examine the ornaments of the altar cross separately.³

The Tree of the Cross. The altar cross is a floral cross. The idea of the flowery-flowering cross was based on the legend that the cross of Golgotha was buried by the Jews and yet flowered⁴. The tree that turns into a flower is the tree that gives life, the Tree of Life.

The identity of the flowering Tree of Life and the cross is preserved in the church rite. On the feast of the *Exaltation of the Holy Cross* or *Flower Sunday*, the cross is surrounded by flowering branches, or the cross itself is often braided with branches of a palm or, or sometimes, an olive tree.

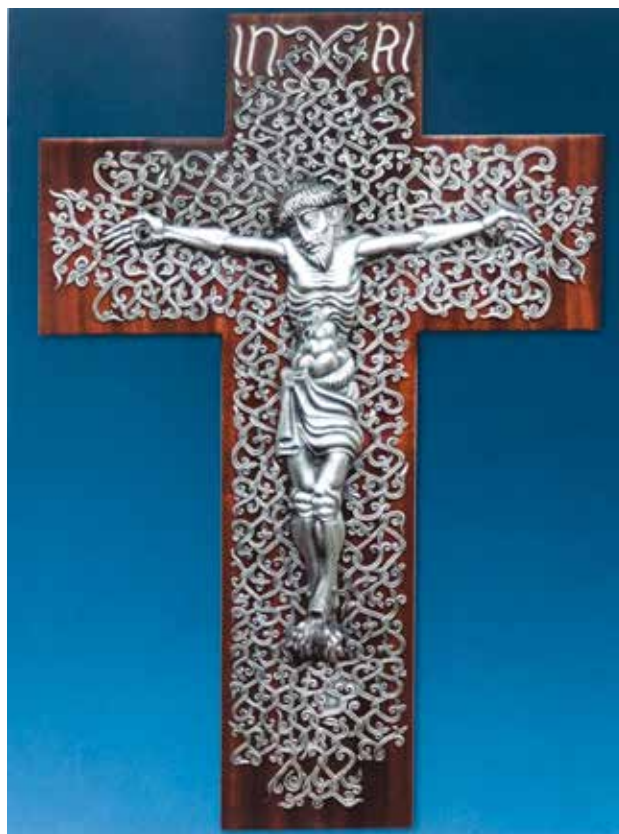
Christian theology regards the Tree of Life in Paradise as a foreshadowing of the cross of Golgotha, while the legend⁵ also describes their physical identity: Adam, facing death from a sickness, sends his son Seth to Paradise to bring him the fruit of immortality from the Tree of Life. The angel guarding the Garden of Eden does not comply with this request, but sends a branch from the tree to be placed in Adam's mouth at his death and thus buried with him. A tree grew out of the branch, and according to tradition, the cross of Christ was later cut from it. On the altar cross⁶ in Győr, which dates from the 18th century, three branches protrude from the mouth of Adam at the foot of the cross, which also refers to other versions of the legend. One of these captures the sym-

³ The examination of the scenes, iconography and style of the medallions decorating the cross is not the subject of the present study.

⁴ E. Генова, idem p. 62, footnote 8.

⁵ Cited in Katalin Dávid, *A kereszt teológiai és ikonográfiai értelmezése az első évezredben* (An Analysis of Christian Theology and Iconography in the First Millennium), Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 2011, 167.

⁶ Noted in Katalin Dávid, *Magyar egyházi gyűjtemények kincsei* (Treasures of the Collections of the Hungarian Church), Corvina Kiadó, Budapest, 1981, illustration no. 34 (XVIII. sz. közepe, magyar mester, Szent Ignác-templom, Győr, 18th cent. Hungarian master, Church of St. Ignatius, Győr).



3. *The Cross of the Tree of Life* (Csaba Ozsvári), 1991. In István Árkossy, *Ablak az égbe. Ozsvári Csaba ötvösművészete* (Window to the sky. Csaba Ozsvári's goldsmith art), Magyar Napló, Budapest, 2017, p. 60.

bolic and physical connection between the cross of Golgotha and the Tree of Knowledge⁷. According to this version, Seth receives a branch not from the Tree of Life but from the Tree of Knowledge. On his father's grave, a branch sprouts forth into a row of three branches, one of which was carved into the cross of Christ. The 18th century proskynetarion – the icon of the Holy Land – preserved in Jászberény also presents individual moments from the story in detail: 1. Lot irrigates the three-branched tree; 2. the devil tries to drink out the water used for the irrigation; 3. Solomon orders the cutting of one of the branches; while in the final scene (4), which bears the inscription TOY ΣΤΑ/Β/ΡΟΥ (Of the Cross), two servants carry a branch reminiscent of an elongated board, the future Cross of Christ.⁸

⁷ Cited in *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon* (The Hungarian Catholic Encyclopaedia), vol. I-XI, gen. ed. Dr. István Diós, Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 2001, VI. p. 562.

⁸ Jászszági görög kereskedő szentföldi zarándoklata és zarándokikonja a XVIII. századból (Greek merchant's pilgrimage to the Holy Land and proskynetaria from Jászszág), in Márta Nagy, *A bizánci ikontól a nyugati barokkig* (From Byzantine Icons to the Western Baroque), Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 2008, pp. 32-33, motif 31, fig. 142.



4. *The Miracle of St. George with the Dragon*, 15th century, Russian icon, In Михаил В. Алпатов, *Древнерусская иконопись*, Искусство, Москва, 1984, plate 22.

The identity of the Tree of Life in Paradise and the cross of salvation is also represented by early Christian depictions, such as the mosaic of the Roman basilica of S. Clemente – which is living vegetation –, Armenian roadside crosses, khachkars, or contemporary works (Fig. 3).

Different cultures consider the Tree of Life to be the same as the World Tree. The World Tree penetrates the earth with its root, living in the earth with its trunk, and with its branches in the celestial sphere, connecting the vertical units of the world¹⁰, becoming the axis of the world. From these mythical world-views, the World Tree was transferred to Christian culture. It appears in the Book of Daniel, when Nebuchanezar tells the prophet his dream: 4.10 [...] I saw, and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, and

⁹ Cited in Katalin Dávid, *A kereszt teológiai és ikonográfiai értelmezése az első évezredben* (An Analysis of Christian Theology and Iconography in the First Millennium), Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 2011, p. 167.

¹⁰ *Szimbólumtár. Jelképek, motívumok, témák az egyetemes és a magyar kultúrából* (Store of Symbols. Symbols, Motifs and Themes from Universal and Hungarian Culture), Ed. József Pál and Edit Újvári, Balassi Kiadó, Budapest, 2005, p. 135.

the height thereof *was* great. 11. The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth: 12. The leaves thereof *were* fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it *was* meat for all: the beasts of the field had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heaven dwelt in the boughs thereof, and all flesh was fed of it.”¹¹

The renowned religious historian Mircea Eliade points out that the symbolism of the World Tree, the cosmic tree, lives on very strongly in the cross of Golgotha. The author illustrates this idea with a Byzantine song – one of the many translations of it –, which is sung at the *Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross*: “*the tree of life planted on Calvary, the tree on which the King of ages wrought our salvation*’, *the tree which springing from the depths of the earth, has risen to the centre of the earth*’, and ‘*sanctifies the earth unto its limits*.’”¹².

So far, we have tried to interpret one of the motifs of the dragon-serpent altar cross, the Tree of the Cross.

Now, let us turn to the *dragons*. Twelve dragon figures appear on the altar cross we are analysing (Fig. 2. a; Fig. 2. b).

Who and what kind of creatures are dragons? Dictionaries describe them as mixed creatures¹³, fairytale animals¹⁴, but as Géza Róheim states, they were created from the characteristics of existing animals, taking into account their way of life¹⁵, and in the Christian so-called “high arts” they derive from

¹¹ Dan. 4: 10-12. The translations from the Bible in the original Hungarian of this article are taken from *Szent Biblia, azaz: Istennek Ó és Újtestamentómban foglalt egész Szent Írás*, trans. Gáspár Károli, Brit és Külföldi Biblia-Társulat, Budapest, 1934. The English translations are from the King James version of the Bible, 1604 (1611).

¹² Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991, p. 162. The Hungarian-language Orthodox liturgy also preserved the idea of the identity of the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Cross: “*The real Tree of Life planted on Golgotha, on which the King of Eternity worked for our salvation; exalted today in the midst of the earth, he sanctifies the borders of the world and inaugurates the abode of the resurrection*” In Hymnologion. Magyar Ortodox Énekeskönyv I. köt. (Hungarian Orthodox Songbook vol. I), translated and compiled by Dr. Theol. Feriz Berki, Magyar Orthodox Adminisztrátúra, Budapest, 1969, p. 228.

¹³ *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon* (Hungarian Catholic Encyclopaedia), idem vol. XI. p. 890.

¹⁴ Dr. Herbert Haag, *Bibliai Lexikon* (Biblical Encyclopaedia), Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 1989, p. 1562.

¹⁵ Géza Róheim, *Sárkányok és sárkányölő hősök* (Dragons and dragon-killing heroes), Ethnographia XXII. (1911) book 3, pp. 129-141.

three types of reptile¹⁶: the giant snake, the dragon lizard, and the crocodile.

A reptile appearing in a 15th century Russian icon (Fig. 4) appears to illustrate a 6th century description of a dragon by the Alexandrian author Aetios Amidenos:

35. *The dragon. The dragon is not venomous. He kills with his strength and crushing power. Many dragons live in Ethiopia and Lycia, differing in colour, some being black, others yellow, and still others grey. Some are five elbows long, others are ten, others are thirty elbows, but they also tell of larger ones. Their whole bodies are covered with rough scales, they have large eyes, and above their eyes there is a awning-like bulge, and under their chin there is a kind of protrusion called a pogon. [...] Its mouth is large, its tongue is protruding, its teeth are large, similar to those of a wild boar, so it is used for wool carding*¹⁷. Under the heading “The Dragon,” the ancient author describes a reptile similar to the non-venomous *giant snake*, such as the boa, anaconda, and python.

The cylindrical-bodied giant snake with wings i.e. a flap of skin, on its sides, with legs ending in claws is the *dragon lizard*, also known as the *flying dragon*¹⁸. They are often flat-bodied, pulling themselves around like crocodiles with clawed legs.¹⁹

The reptiles of the altarpiece we are examining ((Fig. 2. a; Fig. 2. b). bear the hallmarks of the giant snakes, or dragons, as the ancient author named them (their bodies are long and cylindrical, their eyes are large, with bulges above them, their teeth are strongly emphasized, and their tongues are protruding).

However, in the mixed creatures called dragons, it is not just the “biological” characteristics of the three prototypes that are mixed. The observer of the work of art is less able to detach himself from the symbolic meanings of the serpent and the dragon, most of all, of course, from the role of the serpent in Scripture.

¹⁶ In applied arts, works in precious metals, miniatures, and icon wall carvings they were mixed with features of other living creatures – birds, fish, lions, etc.

¹⁷ *The 16-volume Medical Encyclopaedia*, Book 13, chapter 35, cited by Zoltán Kádár and Anna Tóth, *Az egyszarvú és egyéb állatfajták Bizáncban* (The Unicorn and Other Animal Types in Byzantium), Typotex Kiadó, Budapest, 2000, p. 117.

¹⁸ Such reptiles, for example, can be seen in the 14th century Russian icon *Saint George and the Dragon*, referred to in Михаил В. Алпатов, *Древнерусская иконопись*, Искусство, Москва. 1984, plate 56.

¹⁹ For example, under the feet of St. Phanourios in the icon from Mount Sinai dating from 1688, referred to in *Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, gen. ed. Konstantinos A. Manasfis, Ekdotike Athenon, Athens, 1990, illust. 95.



5. *Dragon with the Tree of Life*, 13th century, Drawing from the relief above the side door of the Chapel of St. James at Sopron. Source: [https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Szent_Mihály-templom_\(Sopron\)](https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Szent_Mihály-templom_(Sopron))

The main sin of the serpent is that, in spite of the divine prohibition, it encouraged Eve to spoil the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 3: 1-5), thus initiating the Calvary of the human race. In addition to his wickedness, many other attributes of the serpent are revealed from Scripture. In John’s vision, he considers the serpent to be the same as the dragon: *And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, [...] he was cast out into the earth*, (Rev. 12: 9). It is even clear from John’s words that the same creature, the devil, is hiding in both the serpent and the dragon. An illustrative example of this is the 12th century Armenian miniature²⁰, in which St. George struggles not with the dragon, but with the devil himself.

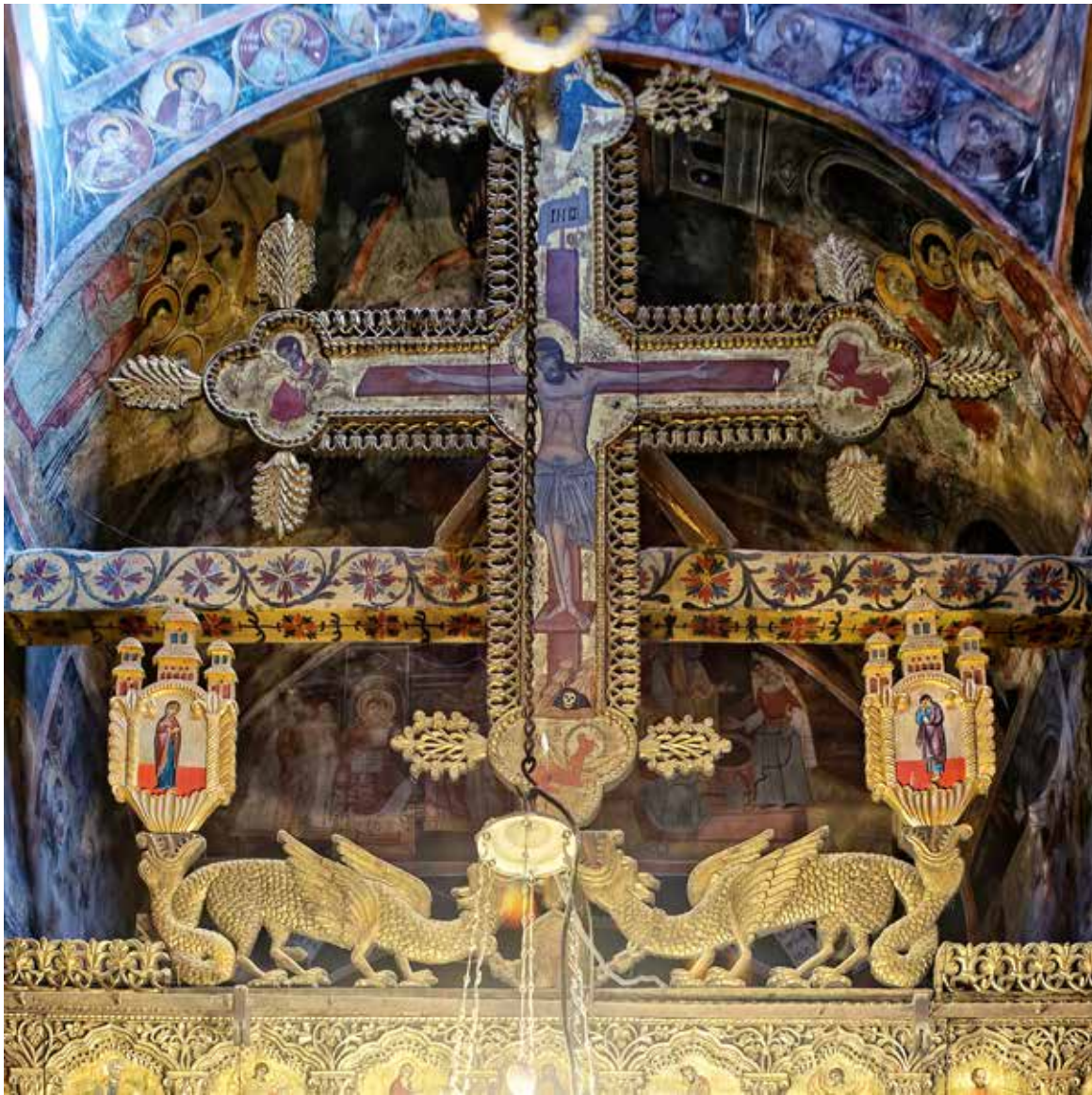
In the present state of our research, it can be concluded that an evil dragon serpent, considered an instrument of Satan, appears on the Tree of Life-World Tree-Tree of the Cross we are examining.

However, the serpent in Scripture is not exclusively a being tempted to sin. Jesus teaches his disciples, *Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves*. (Matt. 10:16). In the stories of Moses, too, the serpent receives a positive appraisal for its healing power and redemptive role²¹, as the people who look to the brass serpent erected by Moses escaped death (Numbers 21: 7-9). The brass serpent may symbolize Jesus (Jn 3:14).

Severian, the bishop of Gabala, in the 4th-5th century considered “that the snake in Paradise differed from those serpents that we now despise and avoid; he was Adam’s closest friend and imitator of human

²⁰ See Ermone Zabel Martaian’s reworking of an Armenian glass painting: <http://ermone-martaian.ro>

²¹ Katalin Dávid, *A teremtet világ misztériuma. Bibliai jelképek kézikönyve* (The mystery of the created world. Handbook of Biblical Symbols), Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 2002, p. 135.



6. Golgotha Cross-composition with the amphislaenaks, 1711,
The iconostasis of the Monastery of St. Naum, Ohrid. Unknown photographer

behaviour [...]”, and only became an enemy of God when incited to do so by the Devil.²²

The few examples quoted highlight the contradictory perception of the serpent in Christian culture, but undoubtedly the predominance of condemnation.

The figure of the serpent, or dragon, is ambivalent in pre-Christian cultures. It is a universal symbol, part of the mythology and folk tales of all peoples throughout the ages. Their roles are different, but they are all strong, powerful beings. From the rich range, we can refer to one of the myths of creation in Mesopotamia, in which originally the only existing beings were Abzu and Tiamat – the representatives of

the primaeval waters and chaos – and Marduk (himself a descendent of the primaeval waters).

However, Marduk killed Tiamat. He created the sky from one half of her body and the earth from the other, and people from his blood. The cosmogonic narrative (*Enuma Elis*) imagines Tiamat in the form of a serpent or a dragon²³. From it, as the world emerged from Chaos, so order arose from the Cosmos. In addition to the role of the underlying entity of the world, the serpent/dragon also plays a protective role beside the creative god Marduk.²⁴

²² PG 56:485-88 here cites *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 1-3, Alexander P. Kazhdan ed. in chief, Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford, 1991, vol. 3, 1920.

²³ *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others), Ed. and Introduction and Notes by Stephanie Dalley, Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford, 2000, The Epic of Creation, 233-274. Symbols), idem p. 414.

²⁴ *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon* (Hungarian Catholic Encyclopaedia), idem XI, p. 890.; Mihály Hoppál, Marcell



7. *Lamasthu next to the Tree of Life*, 9th century B.C., Alabaster relief from the Palace of Nineveh. In Dr. Herbert Haag, *Bibliai Lexikon* (Biblical Encyclopedia), Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 1989, p. 963.

The nature of the serpent/dragon is similarly contradictory in Egyptian, ancient Greek, and other cultures²⁵, although it also has a clearly guardian role in them as well. In the history of the Hesperides, for example, the tree that produces the golden apples of immortality, the tree of life in the Garden of Hera, was guarded by a dragon named Ladon, as well as by the nymphs. Moreover, as the constellation of Draco, he is also the guardian of the world axis, for Hera raised the dragon to the sky as a reward for her heroic struggle with Heracles.²⁶

Jankovics, András Nagy, György Szemadám, *Jelképtár* (Store of Symbols), Helikon Kiadó, Budapest, 2000, pp. 118-119; *Szimbólumtár* (Store of Symbols), idem pp. 270; 334.

²⁵ According to Nándor Várkonyi's remarkable observation, the Central American Indians, the Chinese, and the Indians only see him as the embodiment of benevolent power, while the Semitic and Indo-European peoples see him embodying evil and destruction. Nándor Várkonyi, *Szíriai oszlopai* (Columns of Syria), Széphalom Könyvműhely, Budapest, 2002, pp. 572-573.

²⁶ *Szimbólumtár* (Store of Symbols), idem pp. 210-211; 414. In Bulgarian folk belief, the snake is considered the upholder of the cosmic order, whose huge form supports the Earth. Павлин Чаушев, *Изображения на змия и змей върху пафти от севера България (от началото на XIX до началото на XX в.)*, Университетско издателство „Св. Св. Кирил и Методий“, Велико Търново, Списание: Епоха, том 22, бр. 2. (2014), p. 575.

The dragon is also a guardian creature in the Scandinavian myth; its true role is contradictory, as it preserves the source of the World Tree (Yggdrasil) while chewing the roots of the same tree²⁷. In the two narratives mentioned, the dragon joins the Tree of Life-World Tree as a new motif, and becomes its guardian. He appears in a work of art – now in a Christian medium – in a relief above the entrance to the southern gate of St. James's Chapel in Sopron, on which the World Tree-Tree of Life is guarded by two dragons (Fig. 5).

With reference to the appearance of the dragon serpents in cultural history, it can be asked in what role they appear on the examined altar cross? Are they symbols of the Chaos that underlies the world, the guards beside the World Tree-Tree of Life, or the ancient serpents that tempt the ancestors as the manifestation of the devil?

Considering their physical characteristics, two types of dragon serpents appear on the altar cross (Fig. 2. a; Fig. 2. b) which is the subject of this study. Six dragons on each side and even three smaller dragon heads have found their way into the body of the upper larger dragon serpent.

On the upper unit, i.e. on the cross itself, two amphislaena appear²⁸ (Fig. 2. a; Fig. 2. b), while on the

²⁷ *Szimbólumtár* (Store of Symbols), idem p. 271.

²⁸ H. Sachs, E. Badstübner, H. Neumann, *Christli-*



8. *Choros*, 14th – late 16th century, Pantokrator Monastery, Athos. In *Treasures of Mount Athos*. Managing ed. Athanasios A. Karakatsanis, Ministry of Culture, Thessaloniki, 1997, 9.67, p. 372.

handle are four “simpler” dragon serpents, the latter with the characteristics described earlier.

Amphislaenae are also special within the group of dragon-type mixed beings, as both ends of their serpentine bodies end in the head. They are most common in medieval Western art, but not uncommon in Eastern Christian depictions. Such a mixed creature appears, for example, in the iconostasis of the St. Naum Monastery in Ohrid from 1711 (Fig. 6), or in the 14th-15th century Rostov-Yaroslavl miniature²⁹, etc.

The roots of the amphislaena composition (with cross monsters) are to be found in scenes from Middle Eastern mythologies in which the World Tree-Tree of Life is guarded by anthropomorphic or zoomorphic creatures, snakes, dragons, lions, and “cherubs” with

che Ikonographie in Stichworten, Koehler & Amelang, Leipzig, 1988, pp. 100-101.

²⁹ Reported in Г. И. Вздорнов, *Искусство книги в Древней Руси*, „Искусство”, Москва, 1980, 9/9. ill.

human bodies, birds’ heads, and wings, arranged symmetrically. The latter appear in the 9th century BC alabaster relief from the palace of Nineveh (Fig. 7).

The composition was transferred to Christian art in this interpretation, with the tree of life primarily interpreted as the cross of Jesus (Fig. 8), or – reminiscent of ancient Eastern ideas – God himself and with Him, the Tree of Life, were included between the two sentinels (Fig. 9). The role of guardian and the distancing of the forces of evil features strongly in the scenes themselves, on the one hand, and also in their placement above the entrances above holy places, as in the churches in Csempesz-kopács (Fig. 10) and Berkovitsa³⁰, and at the Royal Door³¹; but they also guard the Episcopal Throne, wells, and even the life to be born, through women’s belt buckles (пафта), primarily in pregnant women³².

In Byzantine art, Eastern influences intensified during the Iconoclastic Controversy (8th-9th centuries), when they were able to adopt the dragon motif, which preserved the Tree of Life, which was already primarily considered a cross, in a symmetrical arrangement. Christian art boldly adopted the composition, as the Tree of Life is also preserved in the Bible. God himself commanded it to be guarded: *So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.* (Gen. 3.24).

In the Christian context, however, the guardian role of the dragon elements in the composition was overshadowed by the harmful roles assigned to them in Scripture. The works of art presented, on the other hand, suggest that – as M. Eliade explains – Christian art used the archetypal images of universal humanity, but “The revelation conveyed by the Faith did not dispel the ‘primary’ meanings of the images; it simply added a new value to them.”³³ The primary meaning of the dragon serpent – Eliade’s conception,

³⁰ Reported in Валентин Ангелов, *Възрожденска църковна дърворезба (Семантичен анализ)*, Издателство на Българската академия на науките, София, 1986, p. 21.

³¹ On the 19th century Royal Door of Tavalichevo Church. Reported in В. Ангелов, *Възрожденска църковна дърворезба*, idem p. 129.

³² П. Чаушев, *Изображения на змия и змей върху пафти*, idem pp. 572-573.

³³ M. Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, idem p. 159.

the PICTURE – in which the world-founding, guardian, and retaining role of the mixed being was manifest was so strong that this new interpretation did not erase it. It continued to live as a hiding place, and not only in folk culture.

The primary meanings of the archetype are also referred back to in the dragons of the examined altar cross (Fig. 2. a; Fig. 2. b). On the upper units, the amphislaena-dragon serpents describing the S-line hold the horizontal branch of the cross with the upper curvature of the “S” while supporting the vertical branch with the downward-running line of the “S”. That is, they hold the World Tree-Tree of Life-Cross.

In the same movement their lower jaws move to support the square ends of the vertical stem of the cross³⁴. The heads of the two dragon snakes at the lower end of the cross seem to complete, and close the composition, and form its basis.

Dragon serpents play a protective role on floral crosses, as Bulgarian researcher Elena Genova points out³⁵. In other works, dragon guards are replaced by lions³⁶.

The retaining, guarding role represented by the amphislaena-dragons of the upper unit is reinforced by the dragon serpents of the lower, handle, unit (Fig. 2. a; Fig. 2. b). The handle itself physically forms the pedestal of the cross (it can also be lifted out from under it, as it was made as a separate unit). With their symbolism, the retaining function is also emphasized by the dragon snakes woven on the handle. Their movements follow the form of the number eight. The number eight is a universal symbol, referring to cosmic equilibrium, the order of the universe³⁷; but the horizontal eight also refers to eternity as a sign of mathematical infinity. It is also a marked number in Christianity. According to the Jewish reckoning, Jesus was resurrected on the eighth day, so in Patristics, according to Origenes³⁸, the eighth day is a symbol of eternal life.³⁹

³⁴ This square shape appears in a similar size at the ends of the beams of the cross, closing the ends, and also appears in a larger size at the junction of the beams.

³⁵ E. Genova, *Църковните приложни*, idem p. 63.

³⁶ For example, in the table cross by Masters Nyikola and Paul dating from 1611, НИМ (National History Museum), reported in E. Genova, *Църковните приложни*, idem, p. 64.

³⁷ *Jelképtár* (Store of Symbols), idem p. 195.

³⁸ Origen is cited in Magyar Katolikus Lexikon (The Hungarian Catholic Encyclopaedia), idem vol IX, p. 909.

³⁹ According to another interpretation of the symbol, following the seven days of Creation, the eighth day – a bitter time, but on the path to redemption – is a transition into the other life, which never ends. Gergely Nacsinák, *A Tigris szeme: a szír kereszténység szent helyei* (The Eye



9. *Shepherd's crook of Arsenije Stojković, Serb Bishop of Buda, 1880-s.* Photo Attila Mudrák. Szerb Ortodox Egyházi Múzeum (Serbian Orthodox Church Museum), Szentendre

“The idea that dragons form the basis of the cross is old. It reflects the oldest cosmopolitan myths of world creation”,⁴⁰ notes Valentin Angelov, referring

of the Tiger; Holy Places of Syrian Christianity), Kairosz, Budapest, 2016, p. 146.

⁴⁰ В. Ангелов, *Възрожденска църковна дрърезба*, idem p. 43. According to the more general view in the literature, the dragons/snakes appearing next to the cross placed on top of the icon wall are the embodiments of Satan being defeated by cross and by Christ. descending to the underworld. Мирјана Ђоровић-Љубинковић, *Средњевековни дуборез у источним областима Југославије*, Научно дело, Београд, 1965, p. 62. Szilveszter Terdik provides a fine derivation of the interpretation of the symbol: Szilveszter Terdik, *A máriapócsi kegytemplom építésére és belső díszítésére vonatkozó, eddig ismeretlen források* (Previously unknown sources for the architecture and interior decoration of the Church at Mariapócs), A Nyíregyházi Jósza András Múzeum Évkönyve L. (2008), pp. 539-540. The theology teacher Miklós Gyurkovits drew my attention to the thought of the great figure of the Alexandrian school, Origen. According to this, Satan was not created as a bad angel, but became evil through his own free will (in László Vanyó, *Az ókeresztény egyház irodalma* / Literature



10. Relief above the side door of the Church of St. Michael at Csempezkopács, second half of 13th century. Source: www.vasiertektar.hu/s/3297/csempezkopacsi-templom

to the dragon cross compositions on the Balkan icon walls, adding that this certainly does not contradict the role of guard. A beautiful example of this late liturgical art is the previously mentioned shepherd's staff of Arsenije Stojković, the Serbian bishop of Buda (Fig. 9), on which the snake holds (Earth) and protects (God).

The life and life path of the two medieval saints, Simeon and Sava, appearing on the stalk cannot be ignored. The creators of Serbian statehood and church are protected as a foundation by the dragon snakes that weave around them, who are themselves foundations.

The altar cross, which is the subject of the study, is a very well-thought-out composition (Fig. 2. a; Fig. 2. b). Dragon serpents accompany the angel heads on both units, although it is impossible to decide whether they are four-winged cherubs or six-winged seraphim, given that only two of their wings appear. The indistinguishability/identity of the cherubim and seraphim is symbolized by the angel of the Vatopedi Monastery in Athos (Fig. 11), who has six wings like the seraphim but is human-legged, with four faces like the cherubim. Nor does Scripture distinguish them exactly. In the Old Testament in Ezekiel, in the section describing the "Appearance of the Glory of

the Lord on the Cherubim," strange mixed beings appear with four wings, four cheeks, calf legs, and human hands (Ezek. 1, 5-11). In Isaiah (Is. 6, 2) six-winged seraphim "stand" "above" the throne of the Lord. Despite the fact that the author uses the word "they stand," nothing else is revealed about the appearance of the seraphim. In the book of Revelation, John writes of four living creatures, so we might think of cherubim, yet he mentions six wings each, which used to belong to the seraphim (Rev 4, 6-8).

The fact that the angel and the dragon serpents belong together is striking on the lower unit, on the handle, but is also evident on the upper unit, on the cross itself, and follows from the symmetrical arrangement of the three figures.

The combined appearance of dragon serpents and cherubim/seraphim in Christian art is not derived from the devil. We have selected from a number of examples. On the blessing cross of the Xeropotamou Monastery in Athos, the dragon, leaning on a horizontal cross stem, grows out of the upper seraphic head, holding a bud in its mouth, from which another seraphic head unfolds (Fig. 12). On the Royal Door



11. Drawing of a cherub from a wall painting in the Vatopedi Monastery at Athos, 1213. In Mihály Hoppál, Marcell Jankovics, András Nagy, György Szemadám, *Jelképtár* (Store of Symbols), Helikon Kiadó, Budapest, 2000, p. 24.

of the Old Christian Church/, Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 1988. I. 408-409, referring to Orig. De princ. III, 6,5; I, 6,31) but in the end times he will return under the power of God, *that God may be all in all.* (1 Corinthians 15:28). In other words, Satan and the serpent tempted to evil will be emerge in a transformed state. The church rejects the Origenist doomsday idea. The phrase "Christian iconography depicts the defeated devil as a snake and a dragon" in the "Dragon" entry of the *Szimbólumtár* (idem p. 415) indicates that the snake/dragon is only a tool in the hands of Satan. Incidentally, the latter could also appear in many other animal forms in medieval art.

of Tavalichevo Church (Fig. 13), each of two pairs of dragons encircle an angel's head. In the window frame of the southern façade of the Kalenica monastery in Serbia, a six-winged seraphim hovers over two intertwined dragon snakes (Fig. 14).

Let us suppose the angels of the altar cross are cherubim. The Hebrew word “cherub,” means the fulness of knowledge or the outpouring of wisdom. Justifiably, their job is to provide the highest service. “Indeed, they belong to the very first trinity of the nine angelic orders, along with the seraphim who immediately surround the throne of the Lord.”⁴¹ They appear only once in the New Testament⁴², but several times in the Old Testament, mostly as guard-beings, such as by the ark: *And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat* (Exodus 25:18); in the temple of Solomon with the palm tree considered to be the tree of life in ancient times: *And he carved all the walls of the house round about with carved figures of cherubims and palm trees and open flowers, within and without* (1 Kings 6:29); within the Holy Holies were two statutes of cherubim made of olive wood, each ten cubits high (I Kings 6:23) turned towards the sanctuary; but they appear in the curtain of the temple, woven into tent sheets (II Chron 3:14), and even on the wings of the gate (I Kings 6:32).

These mixed beings are sometimes seen by the prophet Ezekiel as having two faces – a human face and a lion's face (Ez, 41:18) – and sometimes with four faces having four wings, human hands, straight legs, and feet like a calf (Ezek.1, 5-11).⁴³ Their precursors were figures of the ancient Near East: in Assyria, the “lamashtu”, the winged lion or the bull colossus with a human face, who stood as a protector at the entrance to temples or palaces, and in the Neo-Babylonian period a human - or animal-headed winged being with a human body, the “apkallu”-s,⁴⁴ appeared as the guardians of the Tree of Life (Fig.7).

⁴¹ Pszeudo-Dionisziosz Areopagitész, *A mennyei hierarchiáról* (On the Hierarchy of Heaven), trans. Péter Erdő, in *Az isteni és az emberi természetről. Görög egyházatyák* (On Divine and Human Nature. Greek Church Fathers), Selected by Katalin Vidrányi, Gede Testvérek Bt, Budapest, 1994, II. p. 229.

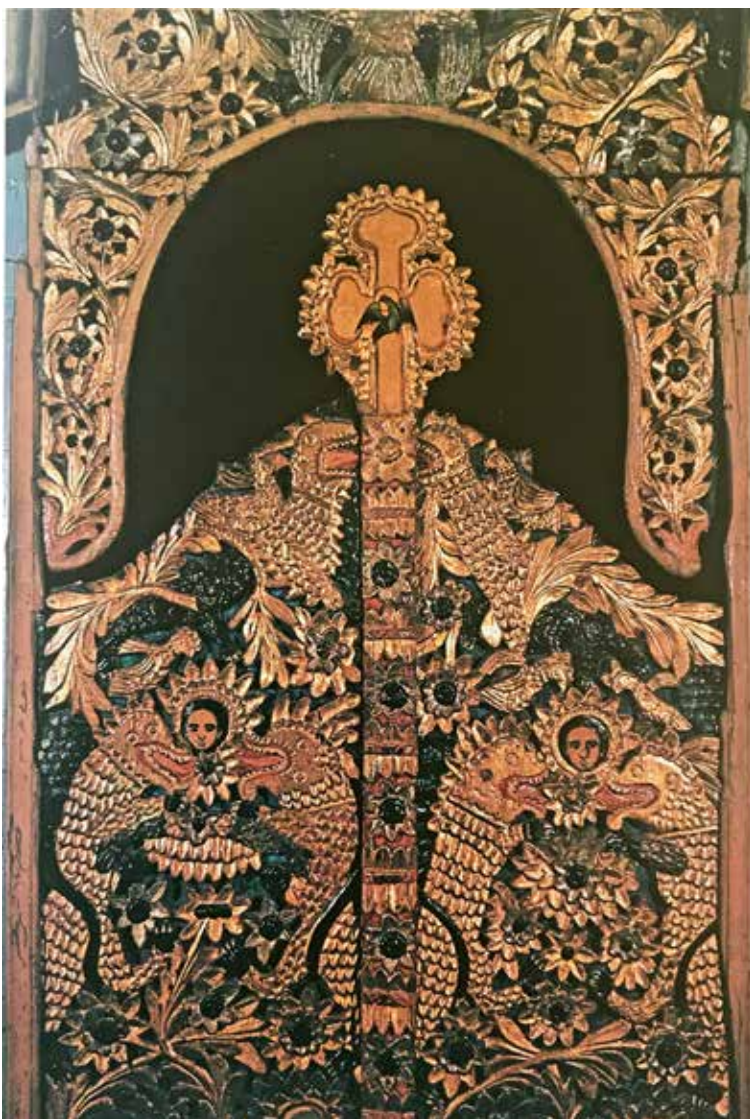
⁴² In the Letter to the Hebrews, 9,5 the “Cherubim of Glory” appear above the “smoking golden altar” and the Ark of the Covenant”. In the Book of Revelation (Rev. 4, 6-8) it is not clear whether the winged beings are cherubim or seraphim. See above.

⁴³ The myths were able to assign mixed beings to guard because they combined qualities that made them most suitable for this role.

⁴⁴ Michael Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*, Andromeda, Oxford 1996, 76-77.



12. *Blessing Cross*, 1671, Xeropotamou Monastery, Athos. In *Treasures of Mount Athos*, Managing ed. Athanasios A. Karakatsanis, Ministry of Culture, Thessaloniki, 1997, 9.45, p. 349.



13. *Royal Door*, 19th century, in the iconostasis of the church in the village of Tavalichevo. In Валентин Ангелов, *Възрожденска църковна дърворезба (Семантичен анализ)*, Издателство на Българската академия на науките, София, 1986, p. 129.

Thus, on the altar cross examined, the two heads of angels, if they are considered cherubim, appear in the same protective-guarding role as the other type of mixed beings, the amphislaenae. The latter are the guardians of the lower unit of the cross, while the cherubim are the guardians of the whole composition. They belong together strongly because of their mixed nature and role.

The winged angels of the altar cross can also be seraphim⁴⁵. The seraph is generally thought to be a winged snake⁴⁶. The word itself is the equiva-

⁴⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite also ranks them in the first three of the angelic orders, the one closest to the Lord's throne. P. D. Areopagitész, *A mennyi hierarchiáról* (On the Hierarchy of Heaven), idem II, pp. 213-259.

⁴⁶ *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible DDD*, ed. by Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter W. van

lent of the Hebrew "saraf". The meaning of the root is burn, cremate⁴⁷. Its first occurrence is in the book of Deuteronomy, where it appears in the wilderness along with scorpions as a "fiery serpent" (Gen. 8:15). In Isaiah, in the land of misery and distress, it appears as a "winged dragon" in the company of other evil animals – lions and vipers (Isaiah 30: 6). But the prophet also sees them in other forms: 1. [...] *I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up ... 2. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly* (Isaiah 6. 1-2).

In the Old Testament, then, the seraphim is a "fiery serpent," a "winged dragon," or a six-winged mixed creature with a human face. The latter are the guardians of the throne of the Lord. They are also present in this role in liturgical practice, guarding the throne of the Lord as ripidions around the altar table, as they do on the altar cross in question.

In her study⁴⁸, the Bulgarian researcher Vihra Baeva writes about the genealogy of the snake and the seraphim, their role, the etymology of the word seraph, the equal placement of the two figures in the sacred space, their identity, and the Christian actualization of an ancient archetype.

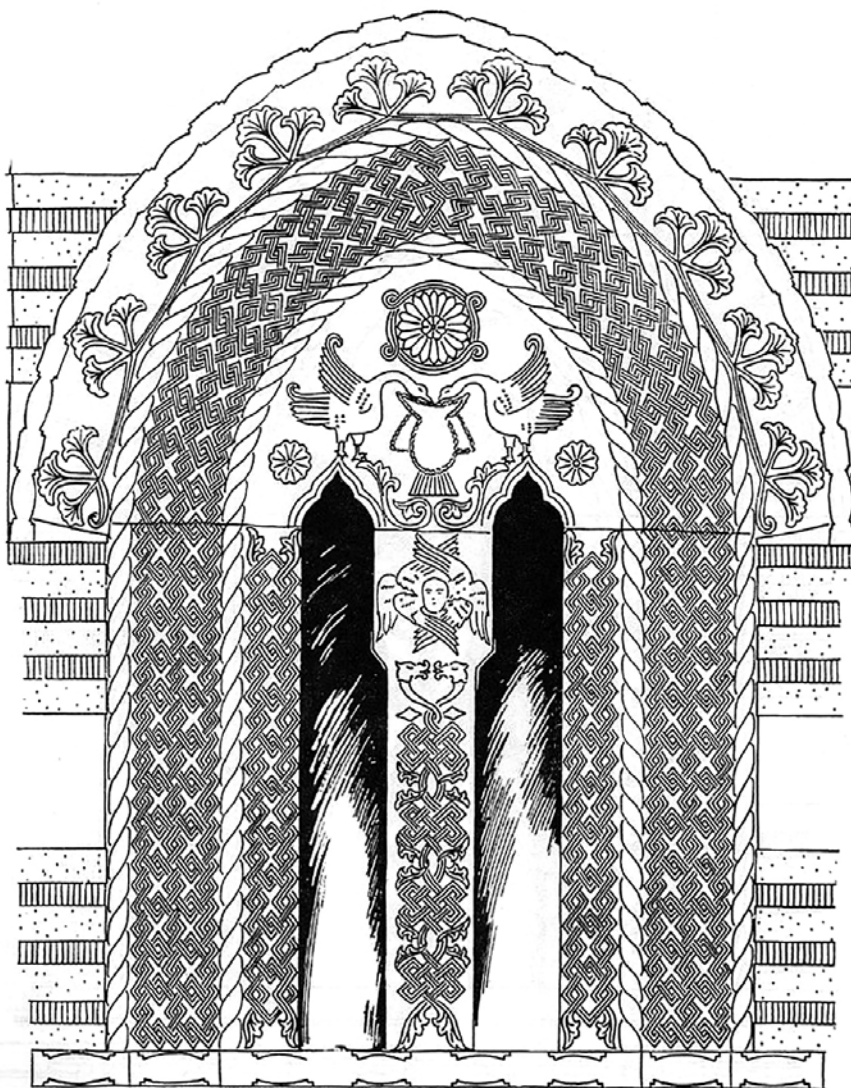
In summary, the altarpiece examined, with its ornaments – dragon serpents, angel heads and the cross itself – is the manifestation of different archetypes spanning ages and cultures.

In the first interpretation of the archetype it means the *archaic form*, the original form of something. Compared to the foreshadowing of the Tree of the Cross, the Tree of Life-World-Tree, it took on a different form, but essentially retained the expansion of the world-tree into three worlds. The dragon serpent

der Horst, Second extensively revised edition, Brill, Leiden–Boston–Köln, 1999, p. 742. I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Ida Frölich for her help with the analysis of the term 'seraph'.

⁴⁷ *Dictionary of Deities*, idem p. 743.

⁴⁸ Вихра Баева, *Ангели и змейове неочаквани паралели в полето на религиозната култура*, in Паметта за традицията. Сборник в чест на 70-годишнината доц. д-р Ангел Гоев, научен ред. Светла Димитрова, Издателство „Фабър”, ВеликоТърново. 2018, pp. 11-12.



14. Relief in the window insert on the southern facade of the Kalenića Monastery, 15th century. In Александар Дероко, *Монументална и декоративна архитектура у Средњовековој Србији*, Туристичка штампа, Београд, 1985, сл. 362, р. 224.

retains the shape of a mythological mixed creature in Christianity, similar to the cherubim. Seraphim, if they are not considered derivatives of the cherubim, first appear in the Old Testament in a form reminiscent of cherubim and partly of dragon serpents. They are both mixed beings in their outward appearance.

Let us consider the *primeval image and symbol* of the archetype.

In this respect, the cross has retained the meaning of the mythological Tree of Life-World Tree, but to

this is added the story of Jesus, the Christian interpretation of the cross. The dragon serpent and the cherub seraphim also preserve the main feature of their ancient symbolism, the role of guard.

The examined altar cross is a clear example of how the motifs of a work of art have retained their ancient archetypal meaning, in the case of dragon serpents, despite the fact that the originating culture of the altar cross examined here endowed it with a completely different meaning.

Translated by George Seel

Nagy Márta

DRAGON SERPENTS OF THE TREE OF THE CROSS

Summary

The study seeks to understand the role played by the twelve dragon snakes which appear on the so-called „floral cross” produced, presumably in the 16th century, for a Serbian patron.

The mixed creatures bearing several characteristics of reptiles are primarily reminiscent of giant snakes, or dragon snakes as they were referred to in ancient times. Amphislaenae, which belong to the dragon snake group, also appear.

In addition to its biological characteristics, the study also investigates the place of the dragon snake in Christianity and the cultures which preceded it and

its symbolic interpretation in relation to the Tree of the Cross. Its archetypal manifestations are also discussed: the World Tree - Tree of Life, the lamashtu, and the apkallu - the latter were mixed beings who acted as guardians of the Trees.

The angels (or seraphs, or cherubim?) appearing together with the dragon snakes on the carved cross are Old Testament „fiery serpents”, „winged dragons”, human-faced, six-winged mixed beings. Their role is the same as the guardians of the dragon snake, Christian actualizations of an ancient archetype.

Наги МАРТА

ЗМИИТЕ - ЗМЕЈОВИ НА ДРВОТО НА КРСТОТ

Резиме

Ова истражување има за цел да ја разјасни улогата на дванаесетте змии - змејови кои се појавуваат на таканаречениот "цветен крст" најверојатно изработен во XVI век за некој српски патрон.

Композитните суштества кои имаат карактеристики на рептили првенствено потсетуваат на циновски змии, или како што биле нарекувани во античките времиња, змии - змејови. Амфисбаените, кои и' припаѓаат на групата змии - змејови, исто така може да се забележат.

Во продолжение на биолошките карактеристики на групата, ова истражување исто така ја разгледува и улогата на змијата - змеј во христијанството и во

културите кои му претходеа, како и нејзината симболичка интерпретација во контекст на Дрвото на крстот. Нејзините архетипски манифестации се исто така обработени: Светското дрво - Дрво на животот, Ламашту и Апкалу - кои биле композитни битија кои имале улога на чувари на Дрвата.

Ангелите (серафимите или херувимите) кои се појавуваат заедно на резбаниот крст се старозаветни "огнени змии", "крилести змејови", човеколики, шестокрили композитни суштества. Нивната улога е иста како и на онаа на чуварите од групата змии - змејови, што е всушност христијанска манифестација на овој антички архетип.

