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ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE HAGIOGRAPHICAL ICON OF ST. NICHOLAS IN THE MUSEUM OF MACEDONIA

*To my dear and respected
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Key words: St. Nicholas, Museum, icon, hagiographical cycle, consecration, miracles

Abstract: *The subject of this article is the hagiographical icon of St. Nicholas in the Museum of Macedonia, dating to the first quarter of the 17th century, with an unknown origin. The central part of the icon features a full-length depiction of St. Nicholas, flanked by the busts of Christ and the Mother of God, who are holding the Gospel book and the omophorion. Twelve scenes from the life of St. Nicholas are arranged around the central figure on all four sides. The article will provide a thorough description and iconographic analysis of the icon, along with analogies and comparisons of specific details and episodes with related material from a broader geographical region and time span.*

The hagiographical icon of St. Nicholas in the Museum of Macedonia, dating from the first quarter of the 17th century, is of unknown origin.¹ The central part of the icon features a full-length depiction of St. Nicholas, flanked by the busts of Christ and the Mother of God, who are holding the Gospel book and the omophorion. Twelve scenes from the life of St. Nicholas are arranged around the central figure on all four sides (Fig. 1). The icon was first published by Viktorija Popovska-Korobar in the extensive and representative catalogue of the museum's icon collection.²

St. Nicholas is one of the most famous and widely venerated saints. Born on March 15, 270, in the

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¹ Inventory number of the icon: 353; dimensions: 96.7 x 52.5 x 4 cm. For the history of the foundation of the Museum's collection and the deposition of the icons, see: Поповска-Коробар 2004: 7-9.

² Поповска-Коробар 2004: 273, кат. 83. Considering that this issue of the magazine is dedicated to Dr. Viktorija Popovska-Korobar, I would like to express my deepest respect and affection for her through this article.

port city of Patara, in the province of Lycia in Asia Minor, he spent his life in the city of Myra (modern-day Demre). As a Bishop of Myra, he participated in the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325), and died on December 6, 343.³ Numerous churches are dedicated to St. Nicholas, who is known as a swift helper and rescuer from every trouble and misfortune, as well as a protector and wonderworker. In the post-Byzantine period, the number of such churches increased significantly.⁴ Many studies have been written about the saint, particularly concerning his life and miracles,⁵ most of which refer to illustrated vitae in certain churches⁶ or on icons.⁷

The representation of the cycle of St. Nicholas on Macedonian territory extends beyond churches specifically dedicated to him; it also appears in churches with different dedications. The oldest example of his vitae is found in the south nave of the church of St. Nicholas in the village of Manastir in Mariovo

³ Delehaye 1902: col. 281-284; Поповић 1977: 179-224.

⁴ Пурковић 1939: 166-168; Петковић 1965: 68.

⁵ From the extensive literature on this subject, we distinguish: Anrich 1913; Anrich 1917; Myslivec 1948: 55-93; Ševčenko 1983; Ševčenko 1999: 149-165; Măgureanu 2003: 155-159; Лидов 2009: 135-155; Гагова 2011, 100-125; Smirnova 2011: 397-406; Баччи 2011: 296-317; Верецагина 2012; Ševčenko 2015: 75-103; Špehar, Tomić Đurić 2015: 244-246; Бугаевский, Виноградов 2018: 90-104.

⁶ Кесић-Ристић 1995: 311-317; Митревски 2002: 111-135; Пенкова 2007: 367-387; Митревски 2007: 175-184; Пајић 2011: 615-629; Пенкова, Тотоманова 2013: 3-6; Рајић 2015: 171-194; Серафимова 2016: 185-201; Семенова 2016: 208-219.

⁷ Βασιλάκη 1994: 229-245; Χατζηδάκη 2001: 393-416; Пејић 2007: 193-198, сл. 1-2; Στρατή 2015: 585-592.

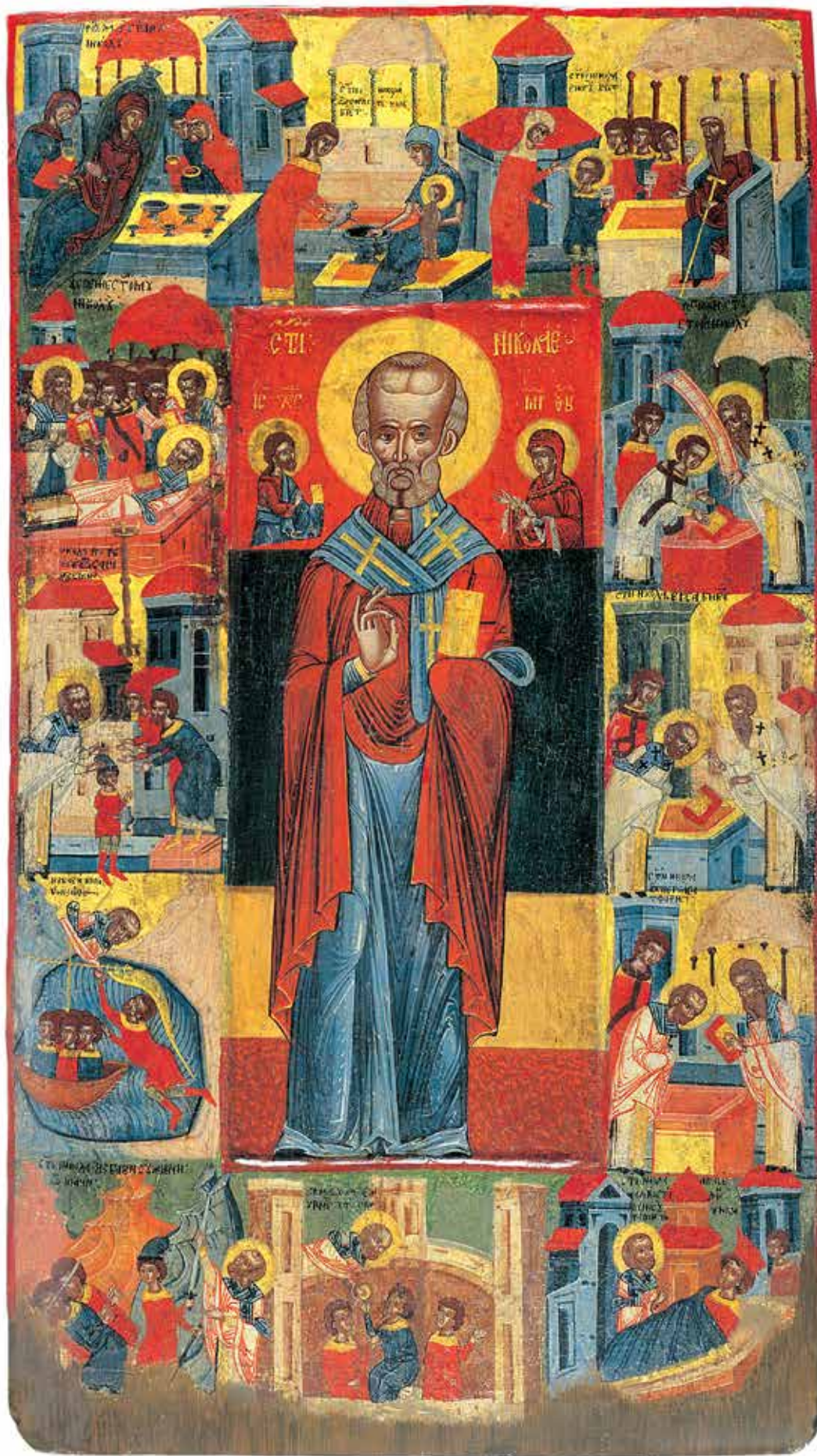


Fig. 1. *The hagiographical icon of St. Nicholas, Museum of Macedonia, first quarter of the 17th century (Photo: Denko Todorovski)*



Fig. 2. *St. Nicholas with his vitae*, Icon Gallery in Ohrid, middle of the 14th century (Photo: Milcho Georgievski)

(1271), where seven scenes are preserved.⁸ This is followed by the cycle in the diaconicon of the church of St. George in Staro Nagorichane (1317/18), which contains eleven scenes.⁹ Other notable examples include the cycle with nine scenes in the west compartment of the church of St. Nicholas in Psacha (c. 1365-1371)¹⁰ and the depiction of thirteen scenes from the narthex of the church of St. Demetrios in Marko's Monastery (1376/77).¹¹ In the post-Byzantine period, the cycle from the narthex of the church of St. Nicholas in the Monastery of Toplica (1534/35) is included, featuring fifteen scenes.¹² This is followed by the cycle in the prothesis of the church of St. George the Victorious in Mlado Nagorichane (late 16th century), where four to five scenes remain.¹³ The narthex of the church of St. Nicholas in the Monastery of



Fig. 3. *St. Nicholas with his vitae*, Monastery of Slepche, near Prilep, 1666 (Photo: Darko Nikolovski)

Shishevo (1630) includes a total of fourteen scenes depicting seventeen events,¹⁴ while the cycle in the porch of the Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Zrze (1635/36) consists of twelve scenes.¹⁵

On the other hand, the icons of St. Nicholas with his vitae, or even with several scenes, are much more numerous, although only a few have been published. One of the oldest Macedonian examples is the vita icon in the Icon Gallery in Ohrid (middle of the 14th century), originating from the church of Holy Mother of God Peribleptos (St. Clement) in Ohrid, with nine preserved scenes (Fig. 2).¹⁶ Next is the despotic icon from the Oreoc Monastery (1595), which contains only one scene,¹⁷ followed by the vita icon from the church of St. Nicholas in Vranishta, near Struga (early 17th century), with eight preserved scenes.¹⁸ There is also the hagiographical icon of St. Nicholas from

⁸ Коцо, Миљковиќ-Пепек 1958: 88-90; Ševčenko 1983: 36, 38, pl. 13.3, pl. 13.7; Костовска 2020: 276-288.

⁹ Ševčenko 1983: 42, pl. 21.1-21.11; Тодић 1993: 74.

¹⁰ Ševčenko 1983: 50, pl. 35.1-35.9; Ђорђевић 1994: 174.

¹¹ Ševčenko 1983: 50, pl. 36.1-36.13; Томић Ђурић 2019: 349-361.

¹² Митревски 2002: 111-135; Митревски 2009: 94-111; Спахиу Јанчевска 2021: 152-169.

¹³ Машниќ 2007а: 134; Машниќ 2012: 22.

¹⁴ Василески 2011: 227-229; Серафимова 2016: 185-201.

¹⁵ Митревски 2007: 175-184; Голац 2019: 222-238; Василески 2020: 163-171.

¹⁶ Djurić 1961: 99-100, no. 25, pl. XXXVII; Ševčenko 1983: 50-51, pl. 37.0-37.9; Georgievski 1999: 59-60, cat. 22.

¹⁷ The Birth of St. Nicholas is the only scene depicted on the despotic icon from the Oreoc Monastery, see Машниќ 1996: 36, сл. 6; Машниќ 2007б: 78, ск. на стр. 79.

¹⁸ Cvetkovski 2014: 261-267.



Fig. 4. *St. Nicholas, and the busts of Christ and the Mother of God:*
 a) Museum icon ; b) Ohrid icon; c) Icon from Slepche, near Prilep

the Monastery of Slepche, near Prilep (1666),¹⁹ with thirteen scenes (Fig. 3). Hence, our iconographic analyses and analogies will focus mainly on icons, including those from a broader region and time span.

In the central part of the museum icon is the depiction of the frontal and full-length figure of St. Nicholas (С҃ТЫ НИКОЛАЕ~). He is shown with a familiar physiognomy, as an old man with white hair, a receding hairline with a central curl, a high and bulging forehead, and a short rounded beard. He is clad in episcopal vestments comprised of blue sticharion, above which are the dark red phelonion, and the omophorion adorned with yellow crosses. Saint Nicholas makes the gesture of blessing with his right hand while holding the Gospel book in his left hand. He is flanked by the busts of Christ (IC XC) and the Mother of God (MHP ΘY). On the left is Christ, in a red chiton and a blue himation, blessing St. Nicholas and handing him the Gospel book. On the right is the Mother of God, dressed in a dark red maphorion, handing the omophorion to St. Nicholas with both her hands. The background is divided into four zones in a combination of cinnabar, dark green, ocher, and crimson with brighter red splashes (Fig. 4a).

The earliest surviving examples of St. Nicholas with the small busts of Christ and the Mother of God date from the 11th century, although it is believed that the iconography was conceived in the 9th century.²⁰

On published vita icons of St. Nicholas on Macedonian territory, the busts of Christ and the Mother of God returning the episcopal insignia to the saint are also shown on the Ohrid icon (middle of the 14th century) (Fig. 4b),²¹ and on the icon from Slepche, near Prilep (1666) (Fig. 4c).²²

The hagiographical cycle on the museum icon begins on the left side of the upper zone with the scene *The Birth of St. Nicholas* (ρόждаε[с]т[во] с҃томл̄/никóл̄) (Fig. 5a).²³ On the left side, Nonna, St. Nicholas' mother, is depicted seated on a diagonally positioned bed, wearing a crimson cloak over a dark blue dress. On the right side, two maids hold vessels that they offer to the mother, while on the left side, another young maid is shown with a bowl in her veiled hands. A table with six dishes of varying sizes, arranged in two rows, is placed next to the bed. Behind the wall partition on the left side, there is a building with a flat roof, while on the right side, another building with a gable roof is depicted, and between them, a ciborium is shown. The scene illustrating the birth of the saint has a very simple iconography, reduced to the most basic elements and figures.²⁴

²¹ Georgievski 1999: 59-60, cat. 22.

²² From personal observations.

²³ Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

²⁴ On the written sources and the iconography of this scene, including the two miraculous events that occurred immediately after the birth of St. Nicholas, see Ševčenko 1983: 66-69.

¹⁹ Николовски 2006.

²⁰ Ševčenko 1983: 79; Ševčenko 2015: 79, n. 2.



Fig. 5. a) *The Birth of St. Nicholas*; b) *The Bathing of St. Nicholas*, Museum icon

The Bathing of St. Nicholas (СѢТЫ НИКОЛА / ѿроче дѣтѣ : колѣ / вѣтѣ~), is depicted as a separate scene (Fig. 5b).²⁵ The newborn is held by a seated midwife in a dark blue dress with short sleeves and a headscarf. At the same time, she checks the temperature of the water in the basin with her right hand. On the other side, a young girl in a red dress with a yellow collar pours water into the basin from a vessel with a spout. Behind the wall partition, a ciborium rises, while the background across the entire upper zone of the icon is yellow. This scene does not depict the first bath miracle of the newborn Nicholas, manifested by several hours of standing in the basin.

This version of the bath episode is not very common, although similarities can be found in the scene *The Birth of St. Nicholas* on the vita icon from the Vatican Museums (16th century),²⁶ on the icon of Saint Nicholas from Urisiu de Jos, Mureş County (16th century),²⁷ and on several Russian icons from the 16th and 17th centuries.²⁸

The last scene in the upper zone of the icon is *The Schooling of St. Nicholas* (СѢТИ НИКОЛА / книгѣ ѹчет) (Fig. 6).²⁹ On the right side of the classroom is the teacher, seated on a chair with a high rounded back and his legs leaning on a footrest. Behind him is a ciborium placed upon seven pillars. Portrayed as a monk, the teacher holds a cane in his left hand, while



Fig. 6. *The Schooling of St. Nicholas*, Museum icon

with his right hand he points towards the young Nicholas, the only figure depicted with a nimbus. The saint is dressed in a short dark blue tunic with a yellow collar, and red boots. In his left hand, he holds a small writing tablet inscribed with the letters of the alphabet. St. Nicholas turns his head towards his mother Nonna, depicted in a red dress and a white headscarf. In front of the bench, placed between the saint and the teacher, are three classmates, dressed in red and dark blue tunics, with two of them also holding small writing tablets inscribed with letters. A domed temple rises behind the saint and his mother.

The teacher on the museum icon is depicted as a monk, referring to the theological education of St. Nicholas, which he began at the age of six,³⁰ as opposed to the teacher's representations in classi-

²⁵ Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

²⁶ Muñoz 1928: 15, Tav. XXXII; Myslivec 1948: 57, obr. 20.

²⁷ Dumitrescu 2017: fig. 12.

²⁸ Лидов 2009: рис. 14; Преображенский 2011: 494, 503, ил. 3, ил. 8, ил. 9; Задорожный, Шалина 2011: 532, ил. 7.

²⁹ Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

³⁰ Anrich 1913: 4-5.



Fig. 7. a) *St. Nicholas is consecrated deacon*; b) *St. Nicholas is consecrated priest*; c) *St. Nicholas is consecrated bishop*, Museum icon

cal robes.³¹ The teacher as an ecclesiastical figure in Macedonian examples is often present in the wall painting,³² as well as on the Ohrid icon (middle of the 14th century),³³ on the vita icons from Vranishta (early 17th century),³⁴ and from Slepche, near Prilep (1666).³⁵ St. Nicholas at school is usually accompanied by his mother, by his father, or, less commonly, by both parents.³⁶ On the icon from Slepche (1666), he is accompanied by his mother,³⁷ while on the icon from Vranishta (early 17th century) both parents are present.³⁸

The cycle continues on the right side of the icon with three scenes illustrating the consecration of St.

Nicholas as a deacon, as a priest, and as a bishop,³⁹ derived from liturgical practice.⁴⁰ All three scenes are reduced to three figures and are represented with very similar iconography, except for differences in the appearance of the participants and the buildings on the background. It is understandable that there are visible differences in the age, as well as in the vestments of St. Nicholas, which reflect the stages of his ecclesiastical career.

In the scene *St. Nicholas is consecrated deacon* (ΔΙΑΚΟΝΕΣΤΡΟ/ Σ[Υ]Β[Ε]ΤΟΜΟ ΝΙΚΟΛΑΪ),⁴¹ the bishop holding an open scroll in his hands is represented on the right side (Fig. 7a). The Holy Table, covered with a red cloth and the Gospel book placed on top, is in the center. To the left is the young and beardless St. Nicholas as a deacon, dressed in a white sticharion and dark blue orarion, bending towards the bishop. St. Nicholas is escorted by another deacon in a red sticharion with a yellow collar, while in the background on the left side, there is a domed building, and behind the bishop is the ciborium.

The next scene is *St. Nicholas is consecrated priest* (ΣΤΙ ΝΙΚΟΛΑ ΕΡΕΑ ΒΙΒΑΤ) (Fig. 7b).⁴² The saint is depicted as a priest with the physiognomy of a mid-

³¹ On the significance of the teacher's portrayal as a layman, and on the sources according to which he was "far less intelligent than Nicholas" or a "simple peasant", see Ševčenko 1983: 72, n. 6.

³² The teacher as a monk is depicted in Staro Nagorichane – 1317/18 (Ševčenko 1983: pl. 21.2), in Psacha – c. 1365-1371 (Ševčenko 1983: pl. 35.1), in the Monastery of Toplica – 1534/35 (Спахиу Јанчевска 2021: 156-157, сл. 92), and in Zrze – 1635/36 (Митревски 2007: 178, сл. 1; Голац 2019: 225; Василески 2020: 164).

³³ Ševčenko 1983: pl. 37.2.

³⁴ Cvetkovski 2014: 261, pic. 3.

³⁵ From personal notes.

³⁶ Nancy P. Ševčenko provides numerous examples in which one or both parents accompany the young Nicholas to school, see Ševčenko 1983: 73.

³⁷ From personal notes.

³⁸ Cvetkovski 2014: 261, pic. 3.

³⁹ On the iconography of the rite of consecration, see Walter 1982: 88, 91-95, 130-136; and on the iconography of the scenes related to the consecration of St. Nicholas, see Ševčenko 1983: 76-85.

⁴⁰ Мирковић 1926: 106-108, 114-118 (for a deacon), 118-120 (for priest), 107-108, 121-127 (for a bishop).

⁴¹ Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

⁴² Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

dle-aged man, dressed in a sticharion, an epitrachil, a white phelonion, and an omophorion with crosses. With veiled hands, he bends towards the bishop, who is blessing him. St. Nicholas is accompanied by a deacon in a red sticharion and dark blue orarion, while the Holy Table, on which the Gospel book is placed, is in the center. In the background, there is a building with a flat roof on the left side and a white domed building on the right side.

The third scene *St. Nicholas is consecrated bishop* (СѢТИ НИКОЛА́ АРХИЕ́РЕА СѦ ТФОРИСТЪ),⁴³ has a similar iconographic and compositional scheme to the two previous scenes. On the left side is St. Nicholas, characterized by his high forehead, a receding hairline with a central curl, and a short rounded beard that will become his recognizable physiognomy. Clad in episcopal vestments and with veiled hands, he bends towards the officiating bishop, who blesses him with one hand while holding the Gospel book in the other hand. As in the previous scenes, the two main protagonists are depicted with nimbus. The consecration is attended by a deacon dressed in a red sticharion with a dark blue orarion. In the background on the left side, there is a building with a flat roof, while on the right side, there is a ciborium (Fig. 7c).

The scene is reduced to just one officiating bishop and one deacon, although usually several bishops and other members of the clergy participate in the ordination ceremony.⁴⁴ The inscription contains the word ‘archbishop,’⁴⁵ similar to the inscription in the same scene on the icon of St. Nicholas with scenes from his life at the National Archaeological Museum in Sofia (16th century).⁴⁶ The three scenes depicting the saint’s promotion in the church hierarchy are almost indispensable in his illustrated vitae.

The next three scenes in the lower zone of the icon illustrate the miraculous events related to the rescuing of the innocent men. One scene depicts the rescue of three men from execution, while the other two scenes are related to the three generals Nepotianus, Ursus, and Harpilion (*Praxis de stratelatis*). These scenes tell the story of the three generals who, by or-



Fig. 8. *St. Nicholas appears to Emperor Constantine*, Museum icon

der of Emperor Constantine, successfully quelled a revolt in Phrygia and, along the way, witnessed the rescue of three falsely accused men from execution. When they returned in triumph to Constantinople, they were highly honored, but then some evil people, out of envy, slandered them to the eparch Ablabius, whom they bribed. By denouncing them as traitors, Ablabius succeeded in persuading the emperor to imprison and sentence them to death.⁴⁷ The events are usually illustrated in six scenes: St. Nicholas saves three men from execution, The three generals in prison, St. Nicholas appears to Emperor Constantine, St. Nicholas appears to Ablabius, The three generals come before Emperor Constantine, and The three generals thank St. Nicholas.⁴⁸ Despite the reduced selection of only three scenes, the events on the museum icon are not arranged in chronological order.

The first is the scene where *St. Nicholas appears to Emperor Constantine* (СѢТИ НИКОЛА́ АВИ СЕ/ ЦАРЮ КОСТАДИН/ ПЪНИ СЪЖНИ СѦ ТЕМНИЦЪ).⁴⁹ Emperor Constantine, shown with dark hair, a short dark beard, and a red crown on his head, lies on a bed covered with a dark blue blanket. Next to the bed on the left side of the scene stands St. Nicholas, who orders the emperor to release the unjustly accused generals from prison (Fig. 8). Behind the bed is the depiction of the imperial servant, and in the background, there is a basilica-type building combined with two domed buildings.

⁴⁷ Anrich 1913: 67-96, 129-130, 161-167, 224-227, 252-262, 278-282, 404.

⁴⁸ Ševčenko 1983: 104-108, 109-114, 115-119, 120-122, 123-126, 127-129.

⁴⁹ Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

⁴³ Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

⁴⁴ On this rite of the Eastern Orthodox Church, see Goar 1960²: 249-256; Мирковић 1926: 108, 121-127; Paris 1930: 276-308; Ševčenko 1983: 81.

⁴⁵ The word ‘archbishop,’ although in Greek, can also be found in few examples of monumental painting, as in the same scene in Curtea de Argeș – last quarter of the 14th century (Ševčenko 1983: 78. On the dating of the frescoes in the narthex of Curtea de Argeș, see Dumitrescu 1989: 135-142), and in the Monastery of Toplica – 1534/35 (Спахиу Јанчевска 2021: 157-158).

⁴⁶ Паскалева 1981: 228, кат. 84; Русева 2016: 218-219; Pappulov, Petrikov 2020: 101, cat. 40.



Fig. 9. a) *St. Nicholas feeds the three generals in prison*;
 b) *St. Nicholas saves three men from execution*, Museum icon

The basic iconography of the scene with two figures, the royal bed, and the architectural backdrop, has its earliest representation on the two Sinai icons (11th and 12th centuries).⁵⁰ The museum icon is complemented by the presence of a servant who accompanies the sleeping emperor in certain examples of this scene.⁵¹

The next scene is *St. Nicholas feeds the three generals in prison* (αβι σε ςζ[η]εμ/ χρανετ δ τε[μ]νις),⁵² which is damaged in the lower part (Fig. 9a). The three generals, dressed in short tunics with yellow collars, are probably sitting on a flat bench without a backrest, and their legs may have been clamped in wooden stocks. The general in the center has the physiognomy of a middle-aged man with short dark hair and a short rounded beard, and he is dressed in dark blue clothes. To his left and right are the other two generals, dressed in red tunics, who are represented as young and beardless men. Their figures are framed by a fortress with defensive towers that represent the prison. In the upper left corner, from behind the wall, appears St. Nicholas, who feeds the generals by passing bread to the figure in the center. The eldest general reaches for the bread with his right hand,

while the other two are depicted with their hands raised in a gesture of speech.

The iconography of the scene was established very early and remains almost unchanged,⁵³ except for the absence or inclusion of St. Nicholas.⁵⁴ His appearance to the three generals in prison is not as rare as previously thought,⁵⁵ and the earliest known example of his depiction is on the Kakopetria icon (second half of the 13th century).⁵⁶ Apart from the museum icon, St. Nicholas is also represented on the vita icon from the Vatican Museums (16th century),⁵⁷ the icon from Urisiu de Jos, Mureş County (16th century),⁵⁸ the icon from The National Iconographic Museum “Onufri” in Berat (16th – 17th century),⁵⁹ a Greek icon originating from Mount Athos (1605),⁶⁰ the hagiographical icon of St. Nicholas in the Treasury of the Dechani Monastery, painted by Kyr Georgije and

⁵⁰ Σωτηρίου 1956: εικ. 165; Σωτηρίου 1958: 144-147; Weitzmann 1966: 1, 6-8, fig. 1, fig. 6; Ševčenko 1983: 29-31, pl. 1.5, pl. 3.10 ; Chatterjee 2014: pl. VIII, fig. 1.

⁵¹ On the iconography of the scene, and especially on the accompanying servants or armed guards, see Ševčenko 1983: 115-119 (with examples and literature).

⁵² Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

⁵³ Ševčenko 1983: 109-114.

⁵⁴ St. Nicholas can occasionally be replaced by the figure of the prison guard, who informs the generals that they will be executed, see Βασιλάκη 1994: εικ. 1-3; Χατζηδάκη 2001: εικ. 1, εικ. 2, εικ. 5-6, εικ. 8, εικ. 13.

⁵⁵ Ševčenko 1983: 113-114.

⁵⁶ Papageorgiou 1976: 52, cat. 15; Ševčenko 1983: 113, pl. 14.9.

⁵⁷ Muñoz 1928: 15, Tav. XXXII; Myslivec 1948: 57, obr. 20.

⁵⁸ Dumitrescu 2017: fig. 19.

⁵⁹ Drishti, Çika 2003: 86, cat. 19.

⁶⁰ Măgureanu 2003: 157, fig. 5.

zograph Kozma (?) (c. 1620),⁶¹ the icon from Vratsa (end of the 17th century),⁶² as well as on several Russian icons.⁶³

What draws attention to the museum icon is that St. Nicholas feeds the generals, which is also confirmed by the inscription.⁶⁴ This can be related to the rare epithet of St. Nicholas as *Miro Krmitel* or Nurturer of the World.⁶⁵ The feeding of the generals is noted in the same scene on the Athos icon (1605),⁶⁶ where St. Nicholas hands out a wicker basket to the generals.⁶⁷ Unlike the museum icon, most examples show the generals with the physiognomy of an old man, a middle-aged, and a young man, in a prison setting that can vary depending on the creative abilities of the painters.

The last scene in the lower zone of the icon is *St. Nicholas saves three men from execution* (СѢТЬ : НИКОЛА́ ИЗБАВИ СЪЖИИ́И :/ ѿ МАЧИ́:~),⁶⁸ which is damaged in the lower left corner (Fig. 9b). In a rocky landscape near the city of Myra, where they were to be beheaded, the three men are shown bent over, wearing short red and dark blue tunics. They are depicted with their hands tied behind their backs and with rags over their eyes. Behind them stands the executioner, dressed in a simple red tunic and a characteristic dark blue hat in the form of a klobuk. He is shown with a sword in his raised right hand and a scabbard in his left hand. St. Nicholas, positioned towards the right of the compo-



Fig. 10. *St. Nicholas saves the ship*, Museum icon

sition, grasps the sword with his bare right hand and prevents the execution.⁶⁹

The rescue of the three men from execution, which begins the legend of the stratilates and took place before the rescue of the three generals from prison, has a long and well-established iconography without drastic and substantial changes.⁷⁰ The main differences are in the position of the three men, their hands tied behind their backs or in front of them, the rag over their eyes, which in some examples may be absent, the costume of the executioner, St. Nicholas grasping the sword or the hand of the executioner, and the setting of the scene, which can include walls and/or buildings.⁷¹ In examples on Macedonian territory, the variant showing the three men with rags over their eyes and hands tied in front of them dominates, especially in wall paintings.⁷² They are similarly represented on the Ohrid icon (middle of the 14th century),⁷³ and on the icon from Vranishta (early 17th cen-

⁶¹ Djurić 1961: 133, no. 81, pl. CV, Шако̀та 1984: 121, кат. 46; Matic 2016: 17, cat. 17; Матић 2017: 130-133, ил. 131.

⁶² Myslivec 1948: 57, obr. 31; Савова-Касабо̀ва 1977: 8, ил. 1; Русева 2016: 238-239.

⁶³ Myslivec 1948: 57, obr. 21; Алпатов 1978: ил. 184; Лидов 2009: рис. 13-14; Смирнова 2011: 375, ил. 16; Преображенский 2011: 494, ил. 3; Задорожний, Шалина 2011: 532, 539, ил. 7, ил. 14; Шалина 2011: 557-559, 588, ил. 9, ил. 33.

⁶⁴ This detail is noted by: Спахиу Јанчевска 2021: 162, п. 248.

⁶⁵ For example in the first zone of the south wall in the church of St. George in Vraneshtica, near Kichevo (late 15th century - early 16th century), St. Nicholas is followed by the epithet *Miro Krmitel*, see Машник 1993: 99.

⁶⁶ Măgureanu 2003: 157, n. 5, fig. 5.

⁶⁷ The detail of St. Nicholas feeding the three generals in prison is also present in the same scene in Roman – 1558 with three pieces of bread in the wicker basket for each of the generals (Măgureanu 2003: 157, fig. 4), and in the Sucevița Monastery – c. 1595 (Cincheza-Buculei 2013: 180). It has been suggested that this detail probably originates from the iconography of the scene of Daniel in the lions' den, where he is fed by the Prophet Habakkuk, see Măgureanu 2003: 157.

⁶⁸ Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

⁶⁹ On the position of St. Nicholas in this scene, see Ševčenko 1983: 108.

⁷⁰ Ševčenko 1983: 104-108.

⁷¹ Ševčenko 1983: 107-108.

⁷² Such are the examples from Staro Nagorichane – 1317/18 (Ševčenko 1983: pl. 21.9; Тодић 1998: 183, сл. 109), Psacha – c. 1365-1371 (Millet, Velmans 1969: pl. 64/126), and from the Monastery of Toplica – 1534/35 (Спахиу Јанчевска 2021: 164-165, сл. 99).

⁷³ Ševčenko 1983: pl. 37.6; Georgievski 1999: cat. 22.

ture).⁷⁴ On the icon from Slepche, near Prilep (1666), the rags are not depicted at all.⁷⁵ The representations of the three men in terms of physiognomy, age, and garments are identical to the three generals, which is a common practice rather than an unusual occurrence.⁷⁶ The selection of only three compositions is probably due to the smaller dimensions of the icon, and the rearrangements of the scenes disrupting the chronological order of events, especially in wall paintings, have been known since earlier examples.

The first scene on the right side of the icon, according to the inscription, is *St. Nicholas saves the ship* (ИЗБАВИ · КОРАБЪ БЪ ИЗ МОРЕ) (Fig. 10).⁷⁷ At sea, there is a ship with a mast rising and yellow sails billowing in the wind. A group of six young men is aboard the ship, while St. Nicholas appears from behind the rocks. He grasps the hand of a drowning man, portrayed as a middle-aged man with short brown hair and a beard, who is dressed in a red tunic.

According to written sources, there are several similar sea stories associated with St. Nicholas, so it can be challenging to determine which miraculous event is illustrated.⁷⁸ However, the depiction of the figure in the sea indicates that the museum icon represents one of the saint's posthumous miracles associated with rescuing Demetrius from drowning.⁷⁹ On Macedonian territory, this scene is preserved only on wall painting examples.⁸⁰

The next scene is *St. Nicholas rescues Basil from Saracens* (СѢТ[И] НИКОЛА ДѢТЕ/ [СПА]СЕ ѿ САРА/ [ЦЕНА] ЗЕМНА),⁸¹ which shows the moment when St. Nicholas returns the only son to the grieving parents (Fig. 11). On the left, the saint is leading the young boy in front of him. Basil is dressed in a red tunic with a yellow collar and wears a dark blue hat in the form of a klobuk, similar to the one worn by the executioner in the scene where St. Nicholas saves three men from execution. The boy holds a ewer in his right

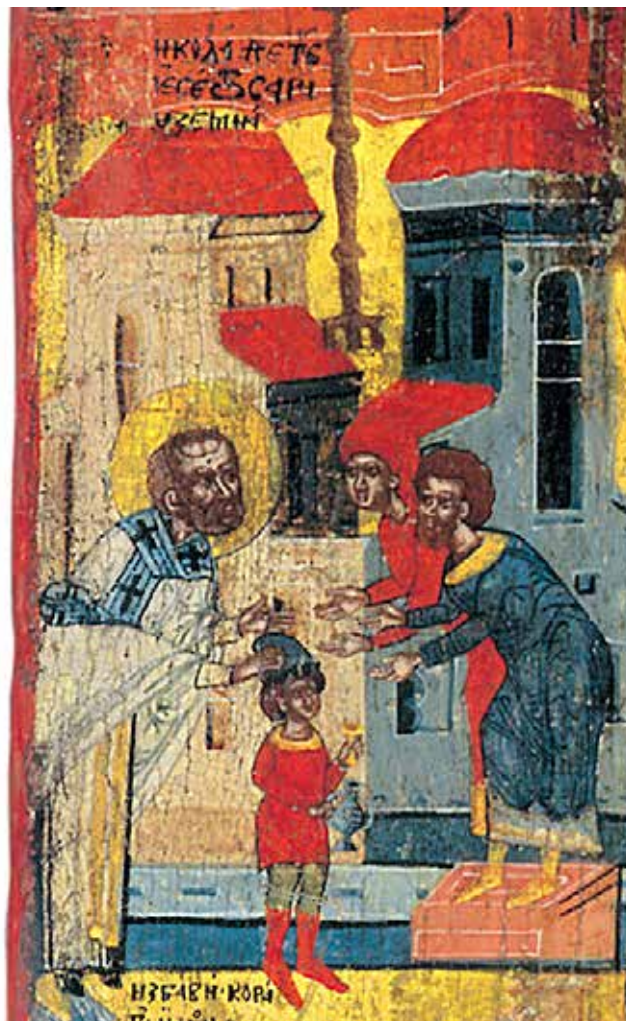


Fig. 11. *St. Nicholas rescues Basil from Saracens*, Museum icon

hand and a cup in his raised left hand. To the right are Basil's parents, who are welcoming their son with outstretched hands. His father is wearing a dark blue tunic with a yellow collar, and his mother is dressed in a red dress with a matching headscarf. They both stand on a footrest. In the background, there are two buildings with porches: one with a gabled roof and the other with a dome.

The event illustrates another posthumous miracle of St. Nicholas, this time related to the handsome boy Basil, who was abducted by the Arabs/Saracens and taken to Crete. While serving the Emir with wine, he was returned to his parents' home.⁸² The event representing the rescue of young Basil, who is depicted with a hat on his head, is also present on the vita icon from Slepche, near Prilep (1666).⁸³ Details about Basil's exotic costume, especially the specific

⁷⁴ Cvetkovski 2014: 263, pic. 7.

⁷⁵ From personal notes.

⁷⁶ Војводић 2005: 141.

⁷⁷ Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

⁷⁸ Ševčenko 1983: 95-103.

⁷⁹ Ševčenko 1983: 149; Кесић-Ристић 1995: 316, сл. 4; Pajić 2015: 191, fig. 6.

⁸⁰ The scene can be found in Psacha – c. 1365-1371 (Ševčenko 1983: 149; Ђорђевић 1994: 174), in Mlado Nagorichane – late 16th century (Машник 2007а: 134; Машник 2012: 22), in the Monastery of Shishevo – 1630, where it is reduced only to the representations of St. Nicholas and Demetrius (Серафимова 2016: 194-195, сл. 8), and in Zrze – 1635/36 (Митревски 2007: 179-180, сл. 3; Голац 2019: 237-238; Василески 2020: 167-168).

⁸¹ Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

⁸² On the iconography and the variants of the (two) scenes related to the rescue of Basil from Saracens, see Ševčenko 1983: 143-148.

⁸³ On the icon from Slepche, near Prilep (1666), are depicted two scenes related to the young Basil (from personal notes).



Fig. 12. *The Death of St. Nicholas*, Museum icon

hat, are found in some Slavic texts, which differ from those of Greek provenance.⁸⁴ The parents are typically seated at a table with a feast prepared in honor of the saint, but here they are represented in a standing position.

The hagiographical cycle on the museum icon ends with the scene *The Death of St. Nicholas* (ЗСПЕНИЕ СТОМЪ/ НИКОЛА:) (Fig. 12).⁸⁵ In the foreground, there is the bier on which St. Nicholas lies, dressed in a phelonion and an omophorion, with the Gospel book placed on his chest. Three candlesticks with lit candles are placed in front of the bier.⁸⁶ Three bishops participate in the memorial service, two of whom recite the funeral liturgy from the open books they hold. Among them is the deacon, dressed in a red sticharion with a yellow collar and a dark blue orarion. He also holds an open book, while behind them, in three rows, the group attending the funeral ceremony is depicted.

The scene representing the death of St. Nicholas, which from the 14th century realistically illustrates

⁸⁴ Гагова 2011: 121-122.

⁸⁵ Коробар-Поповска 2004: 273, кат. 83.

⁸⁶ On the number of candles that should be arranged in a form of cross around the bier, see Томић Ђурић 2019: 356 (with literature).

the funeral rite of the Palaeologan period,⁸⁷ is depicted with simplified iconography on the museum icon, likely due to its smaller dimensions. The same orientation of the saint on the bier is noted in the scenes from the Ohrid icon (middle of the 14th century),⁸⁸ the hagiographical icon of St. Nicholas with Saints from Sinai (15th century),⁸⁹ Russian icons of St. Nicholas of Mozhaisk from Novgorod (middle of the 16th century),⁹⁰ and the British Museum (late 16th – early 17th century).⁹¹

The figures on the icon are elongated and slender but with correct proportions, except for the central full-length figure of St. Nicholas, which is isocephalic. Dark ocher is used for the flesh tones of the faces, transitioning to brown shadows towards the edges. Except for the eyes of the central figure of St. Nicholas, which are smaller and slanted, all other figures are characterized by large eyes. Above the saint's eyebrows, there are arched lines, and the root of the nose is highlighted with a "U" line. His high and bulging forehead is defined by two semicircular segments. The faces of the depicted figures are schematized and lack emphasized individuality. The figures are skillfully integrated into an architectural or landscape backdrop, usually arranged in a pyramidal composition. The icon is dominated by the three primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—in full intensity, along with their shades, complemented by white, black, brown, and green. The Old Church Slavonic inscriptions on the icon are written in black, while the inscription in the central part is inscribed in yellow.

Except for the second and third scenes, in which St. Nicholas is depicted as a newborn and at school age, and in the three consecrations with his different vestments and physiognomy, the saint is typically represented in a sticharion, an epitrachil, a phelonion and an omophorion in the other scenes. The cycle of St. Nicholas on the museum icon is enriched with some rare episodes and iconographic peculiarities. For instance, *The Bathing of St. Nicholas* is depicted as a separate scene, but it does not include the bath miracle. Another significant feature is the appearance of St. Nicholas in prison, where he feeds the three generals. The iconographic scheme of both scenes is more common in the 16th and 17th centuries. The icon illustrates only three scenes related to the stratilates, and deviations from the chronological order are not uncommon.

⁸⁷ Ševčenko 1983: 137-141.

⁸⁸ Ševčenko 1983: pl. 37.9; Georgievski 1999: cat. 22.

⁸⁹ Σωτηρίου 1956: εκ. 170; Σωτηρίου 1958: 155-157; Ševčenko 1983: 59-60, pl. 42.0.

⁹⁰ This icon is in the National Museum in Stockholm, see Шалина 2011: 564, ил. 12.

⁹¹ Cormack 2007: 118, cat. 21.

In the scene St. Nicholas saves the ship, the depiction of the figure in the sea suggests that the icon represents one of the saint's posthumous miracles associated with rescuing Demetrius from drowning.

According to its stylistic features, the icon bears similarities to the wall painting in the nave and the porch of the Monastery of Zhurche (1617 and 1621/22), the porch of the Monastery in Zrze (1624/25 and 1635/36), the church of St. John the

Theologian (St. Nicholas) in Slepche (1627), the church of St. Demetrios in Zhan (1634), and the paintings on the south and north doors of the Monastery of Slepche, near Demir Hisar (1637 and 1638). The stylistic features of the icon are comparable to the works of painters from Linotopi, as well as to the artistic tendencies of the early 17th century. These relationships also suggest a possible origin of the icon from the Pelagonian region.

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ИКОНОГРАФСКА АНАЛИЗА НА ЖИТИЈНАТА ИКОНА НА СВЕТИ НИКОЛА ВО МУЗЕЈОТ НА МАКЕДОНИЈА

Резиме

Житијната икона на свети Никола во Музејот на Македонија, која е датирана во првата четвртина на XVII век, е со непознато потекло. Во централниот дел е прикажан свети Никола во цел раст, а покрај него се допојасните фигури на Христос и Богородица кои му ги враќаат архијерејските обележја, евангелието и омофорот. Дванаесете сцени од циклусот на светителот се распоредени на сите четири страни околу централната фигура. Хронологијата на настаните започнува во горната зона со *Раѓањето на св. Никола*, *Капењето на св. Никола* и *Св. Никола оди на училиште*, потоа продолжува на десната страна со *Хиротонијата на св. Никола за ѓакон*, *Хиротонијата на св. Никола за свештеник*, *Хиротонијата на св. Никола за епископ*. Во долната зона се прикажани сцените *Св. Никола му се јавува на сон на царот Константин*, *Св. Никола ги храни тројцата војводи во затвор*, *Св. Никола спасува тројца мажи од меч*, а на левата страна се илустрирани завршните сцени *Св. Никола го спасува бродот*, *Св. Никола го спасува момчето Василиј од Сарацените* и *Смртта на св. Никола*.

Освен во втората и третата сцена во кои светителот е прикажан како новороденче и на училишна возраст, како и неговите различни одежди и физиономија во трите хиротонии, во останатите сцени св. Никола е типизирано претставен во стихар, епитрахил, фелон и омофор. Циклусот на св. Никола е збогатен со неколку поретки епизо-

ди и иконографски специфики. Таков е примерот со *Капењето на св. Никола* кое е издвоено како одделна сцена, меѓутоа не е илустрирано првото чудо манифестирано преку повеќечасовното стоене во садот за капење. Друга значајна карактеристика е јавувањето на св. Никола во затворот, кој истовремено ги храни тројцата војводи. Иконографската схема на обете сцени зачестува во текот на XVI и XVII век. На иконата се илустрирани само три сцени поврзани со стратилатите, а отстапувањето од хронолошкиот редослед на настаните не е невообичаено. Во сцената *Св. Никола го спасува бродот* прикажувањето на фигурата во морето јасно укажува дека всушност било илустрирано едно од постхумните чуда на светителот, поврзано со спасувањето на Димитриј од давење.

Според стилските карактеристики, иконата има сличности со сликарството од наосот и тремот на манастирот Журче (1617 и 1621/22), тремот на манастирот Зрзе (1624/25 и 1635/36), црквата Св. Јован Богослов (Св. Никола) во Слечче (1627), црквата Св. Димитриј во Жван (1634) и сликарството од северната и јужната порта на манастирот Слечче (1637 и 1638). Стилските одлики кои ги поседува иконата се блиски на делата на линотопските зографи, но и воопшто со ликовните тенденции од првите децении на XVII век. Релациите укажуваат и на можното потекло на иконата од Пелагонискиот регион.