**THE HAGIOGRAPHICAL ICON OF ST. NICHOLAS FROM THE CHURCH IN VRANIŠTA, STRUGA COUNTRY**

By Sašo CVETKOVSKI

**Abstract**: In the text, the hagiographical icon of St. Nicholas from the church in Vraništa, Straška country is examined for the first time. The icon is one of the few hagiographical icons of St. Nicholas from the medieval art of Macedonia. Due to its monumental dimensions, narrative display of the cycle, and despite the present damage, it must have been an icon with a richly illustrated cycle of St. Nicholas. According to its stylistic characteristics, we date it to the early 17th century.

Amongst the few post-Byzantine icons from the church of St. Nicholas at the village Vraništa which were almost unknown to the researchers of the art from the time of the Ottoman rule, by its significance, iconographical, stylistic and artistic features stands out the hagiographical icon of the patron of the church St. Nicholas.1

It is a proscenium icon, bigger in size, unfortunately by now severely damaged and with lost almost half of the original icon-writing. The icon contains the usual set-up and scheme when it comes to this type of hagiographical icons. In the middle of the icon is St. Nicholas in full size, wearing a bishop’s robe holding a closed Gospel in his hand and around his depiction are painted more of the scenes from the life and the miracles of the saint. (pic1; fol.1)

St. Nicholas whose image dominates the center, the central field of the icon, is painted in full length, frontally with red felon and omophorion, under the omophorion around his neck is visible the richly ornate epitrachil. (pic.2) In his left hand he holds closed Gospel with decorated covers and blesses with his right hand. The background of this central field of the icon colorful is divided into two levels, bright red at the top and pale green at the bottom. Underfoot of St. Nicholas in particular separate field of ocher was once written the donors’-patrons’ inscription, of which now we only recognize a few letters whose meaning can not be interpreted.

Around this central motif, i.e. the figure of St. Nicholas, according to the dimensions and the space that originally gave the icon, were probably depicted between 12 and 14 scenes from the hagiography of the saint, his life and miracles. Today are preserved only 8 of the scenes.

The cycle begins in the upper left corner of the icon with the composition of the **Birth of St. Nicholas** within whose framework is presented the episode of the bathing and miracle of the newborn, which stood for several hours in his bath with hands raised to the sky.2 (pic.3) The cycle continues with the composition **St. Nicholas goes to school** (стий ин[к][о]ла) …И ВОДИТСЕ [8]ЧЕТИ… presented in its traditional iconography- on a throne is seated his teacher, a monk with an alaf and a cap on his head, and a crutch in one hand- and opposite of him seats the little st. Nicholas with a written plate in his hands, accompanied by his parents.3 (pic.3) At the upper right corner of the

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1 Besides this hagiographical icon of the patron st. Nicholas, at the church are kept also the icons of the archangel Michael, the small icon with a bust depiction of the leader of the leader of the Heavenly armies from the end of the XVI century, the icon of the Virgin with Christ from the XVII century, as well as the royal doors from the middle of the XVI century, studied and published, (С. Цветковски, Царски двери од XVI век во црквите во Струка и Струшко, Јубилеен Зборник - 25 години митрополит Тимотеј, Охрид 2006, 356-358, сл. 5-7). This icons are now at display at the permanent museum exhibition at the museum in Vraništa.


3 N.P. Ševčenko, op. cit., 70-75
The icon is depicted the ordination of st. Nicholas into deacon, ( nikolaos xeortontite dia- konos) an act performed by one senior bishop in the company of another younger bishop and two deacons. The event takes place under a canopy or vault construction that leans on pillars.4 (pic.3)

The cycle continues along the right edge of the icon with the composition of the ordination of st. Nicholas into priest, (δ ιερ ο nikolaos xeortontite iereos) conceptually similar to the previous, senior bishop who consecrates St. Nicholas, deacons and priests attending the act, and repeated identically is the surrounding as well.5 (pic.4)

With this composition ends the part of the hagiography dedicated to the life of St. Nicholas. The next is the composition St. Nicholas calls in to the dream of the Emperor Constantine (δ αγιο π nikolaos anoestatins o ptanerba) and with it starts the section devoted to his miracles, which in the original concept of the icon significantly dominated. In the central part of the composition is painted raised death-bed on which lies the Emperor Constantine in royal robe and crown on his head, under the bed is one of his sleeping servants and above the presentation of St. Nicholas.6 (pic.5) the rest of the scenes from the right edge of the icon are

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5 Ibid, 82-85
6 Ibid, 117-119
so much damaged that can not be traced. At the left part of the icon the cycle continues with the scenes of the Miraculous appearance of St. Nicholas in the dream of the eparch Evlavius, (Николаев чудеса ко- стадион) which by its iconography is almost identical to the previous scene, raise upon a deathbed is the eparch, and the representation of the saint above him. (pic.6) It is interesting that the inscription written in church-Slavic language with quite bad dictus of the letters, suggests that the scene marks the appearance of Constantine, which is wrong, and probably dues to the poor knowledge of the language and the text of the life of one of the aides of the zograf. Above that scene is depicted one of the most painted and more famous miracles of the saint, st Nicholas saves the three men from death. (…избави трй мъже) In a rocky landscape three men are depicted, high-born and with their eyes covered slightly bended to the executioner who swings his raised sword, but in that moment miraculously appears st. Nicholas and holds the sword with his hand, preventing the unjust suffering of these noble men.7 (pic.7).

The last scene is partially preserved, and because of it being incomplete we are being unable to identify it. From the once compositional wholeness the only one preserved is the church with a clearly profiled dome, and the walls with which the monastery was surrounded. The preserved signature Свя манастир стошон николе. points out that the depicted church is dedicated to him.(pic.8) We can very cautiously only presume that is about one very rarely painted depiction, from the Miracles of St. Nicolas, i.e. st. Nicholas miraculously enriches his monastery.

For this possible identification as an analogy we would note the homonymous composition depicted at the church of St. Nicholas, Pelinovo 1717/18.8 The textual template we find only at the Slavic hagiographical texts of the saint, from which the oldest dates from the middle of XVI century, as well as in his Service with the akatist.9

The preserved scenes from the cycle of the icon mainly follow the already familiar, and many times before painted concept which withholds the events from the birth, childhood and the introduction of st. Nicholas into the church hierarchy, i.e. the ordination into deacon, priest, we note that at the icon is not depicted the ordination into bishop. The part of the cycle where are depicted the miracles of the saint was more extensive and now there are only preserved only few of the miracles, which actually are few of the most frequently presented and famous miracles, the calling in the dream of the emperor Constantine and the eparch Evlavius as well as the rescuing of the three innocent men from execution.

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7 Ibid, 105-108.
8 П. Мијовић, Бококоторска сликарска школа XVII- XIX вијека. Зограф даскал Димитрије, Титоград 1960, 35; Ј. Радовановић, Свети Никола, житије и чуда у српској уметности, Београд 2008, 62, црт.2.
9 The text of this little known and rarely depicted miracle is printed at the Велики минеи четири са браније всерсийским митрополитом Макаријем, декабръ, дни 6-19, Москва 1904, 637-642, according to the manuscript from the middle of the XVI century, J. Радовановић, op. cit. 59, п.4, 62.
Aside of these conceptual and iconographical features, greater attention also attract the stylistic and the artistic characteristics of the icon-writing. In this manner, the icon stands out as one of the most interesting amongst the preserved works of the icon-writing from the time of post-Byzantine era in the region of Struga.

Particularly striking is the image of st. Nicholas painted with great assiduity and sense for modeling, although dominated by only one color, the dark brown which dissolves into shades of light brown and in that gradation and play of light and dark is formed the voluminosity and the plasticity of the image. His impressiveness and expressivity is gained by careful accentuation of the white strokes with the brush which segment the face especially the forehead, the cheeks and the hair defining it in short brush strokes. The nimbus around the head of st. Nicholas is gilt and additionally ornamented with thin scoring of circle and semi-circle motifs forming floral ornaments.

When painting the faces and the figures at the compositions of the cycle, the zograf calms the expressiveness of his moves dwelling only on the accenting of the faces with short brush strokes with which he defines the expression of the face.

According to these stylistically-artistic features we date the icon of st. Nicholas from the homonymous church at the village Vraništa at the first decades of the XVII century.

Characteristic for the icon from Vraništa is also the bilingualism represented into the writing of the signatures and the inscriptions of the scenes. All of the inscriptions following the hagiographical scenes along the right edge of the icon, the Ordination into a priest, st. Nicholas calls into the dream of the emperor Constantine as well as the composition underneath are inscribed on Greek language, very cautiously without the characteristically ligatures. The rest of the scenes, the Birth of st. Nicholas, st. Nicholas goes to school, the saving of the three men from death, the miraculous calling of st. Nicholas into the sleep of the eparch Evlavius as well as the next composition under it, are signed on church-slavic language, and even at first glance one gets the impression of some uncertainty with uneven letters and dictus of the words leaving the impression that the zograf haven’t known the language well.

The icon of st. Nicholas from Vraništa is one of the few preserved hagiographical icons from the time of the post-Byzantine era. By its narativeness into the displaying of the cycle it has most probably been one of the icons with most extensive illustrated cycle of st. Nicholas at all at the medieval icon-writing. The oldest hagiographical icon of st. Nicholas dates from the middle of the XIV century, and originates from Ohrid. There are 6 scenes from the hagiography of st. Nicholas illustrated on it.

From the time of the Ottoman rule as an analogy to the icon from Vraništa we can note the hagiographical icon from the Museum of Macedonia in Skopje, dating from the first half of the XVII century, and here we would also include the hagiographical icon from the museum in Korča (Albania) dated at the XV century, but with expressed stylistic features characteristically for some of the zograf workshops, members to the Ohrid artistic school from the XV century. At Kastoria, protron of the Ohrid archbishopric are preserved few hagiographical icons dedicated to st. Nicholas as well, as well as the hagiographical icon of st. Nicholas from the 1594, from the museum of Onufrius at Berat, and the hagiographical icon

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10 V. J. Djurić, op. cit., 99-100, kat. 25, pl. XXXVII; K. Balašanov, Иконите во Македонија, Скопје 1995, 202-203, кат. 33; M. Georgievski, Icon gallery – Ohrid, Ohrid 1999, 60-61, cat. 22
11 V. Поповска Коробар, Икони од музејот на Македонија, 273, кат. 83;
12 Icons from the Orthodox Communities of Albania, ed. A. Tourta, Thessaloniki 2006, 36-40, (E. Drakopoulou),
13 E.N. Tsigaridas, Kastoria Byzantine museum, Byzantine and post-Byzantine Icons, Kastoria 2002, 8-10, fig. 2
14 Y. Drishti, L. Çika, Icons of Berat, Collection of the Onufri National museum, Berat XIV-XX century, Tiranë
from the XVII century from the church of the Virgin at the village Ljubojnje, today displayed at the museum in Korča.15

As shown, the amount of hagiographical icons dedicated to st. Nicholas within the borders of the art of the Balkans from the Ottoman rule, as well as within the Ohrid archbishopric and the art of the patriarchy of Peć is much reduced, and we would point out just few of them.16 Two hagiographical icons from the monastery Dečani, the older one work of the zograf Longin from the end of the XVI century, and the second one created around 1620, by the order of the abbot Diodij17 as well as the two hagiographical icons of st. Nicholas painted by the zograf Radul, the first at 1664-5 for the church in Podvrh, and the second 1676-7 for the church in Nikoljac near Bjelo Polje.18

More numerous are the cycles of st. Nicholas at the medieval wall-paintings and as oldest one we note the one at the church of st. Nicholas at the village Manastir 1271, the cycle at Psaća, the cycle from the

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15 Y. Drishti, The Byzantine and post-byzantine icons in Albania, Tirana 2006 ², cat. 22.

16 The greater number of by now unpublished hagiographical icons of st. Nicholas from recently is displayed at the exhibition “The Joy of the Prayer”, Христијанско изкуство XIV-XIX век, at the crypt of the church of Alexander of Neva in Sofia.

17 Л. Мирковић, Иконе манастира Дечана, Старине Косова и Метохије II-III, Приштина 1963, 35-37, 46-47, сл. 35, 54; V.J. Djurić, op. cit., 125, cat.81, tab. CV; Nicholas painted by the zograf Radul, the first at 1664-5 for the church in Podvrh, and the second 1676-7 for the church in Nikoljac near Bjelo Polje.18

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М. Шакота, Дечанска ризница, Београд 1984, 120-121, сл.46; Б. Тодић, М. Чанак-Медић, Манастир Дечани, Београд 2005, 80-83, сл. 82.

porch of Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid, around 1365 and the cycle at Markov monastery 1378-9. From the late-byzantine period we note the cycles from the narthex of Toplički monastery 1535-6, the monastery Zrze and the cycle from the monastery church st. Nicholas Šiševski from 1630.19

The icon of st. Nicholas from Vraništa by its monumental dimensions and the extensiveness of its cycle occupies significant place in the icon-writing from the time of the Ottoman rule from XVI-XVII century, at the same time enriching the collection of hagiographical icons that make significant wholeness at the medieval icon-writing in Macedonia. As for the areas of Struga and the south-western part of Macedonia at all, the icon represents one more testimony for the continuity and the vivid artistic activity at the time after the death of the archbishop Prohor, one of the most prominent persons at church dignitaries from the time of the Ottoman rule at the narrowest areas of the Ohrid archbishopric.

At the time, we should note, the village Vraništa is still a part of the waqf of Jusuf Sinan Chelebi Ohrižade, which can be clearly followed in the contemporary historical sources i.e. the Turkish census books from the 1583. At these documents are noted many priests, churchmen, which points out to one founded church life and the existence of parochial churches where served the mentioned priests.

On the other hand the tax duties and the amounts of fine, which were relatively high - 17.740 stivers for Vraništa clearly speaks of the importance and the economy power of the village, on contrary to the village Ložani which was also part of the waqf of Ohrižade, but with far less tax obligations of some 3200 stivers.20

As according to the number of preserved icon-written works from the time of the Ottoman rule,
Сашо ЦВЕТКОВСКИ

ЖИТИЈНА ИКОНА НА СВЕТИ НИКОЛА ОД ВРАНИШТА, СТРУШКО

Резиме

Меѓу неколкуте поствизантиски икони од црквата Св. Никола село Враништа кои до неодамна беа скоро непознати на истражувачите на уметноста од времето на Османлискиот период, по својот значај иконографски и стилско-ликовни особености се издвојува житијната икона на патронот на црквата св. Никола.

Тоа е проскинитарна икона со поголеми димензии за жал сега веќе доста оштетена и со изгубен скоро половина од првобитниот иконопис. Иконата ја содржи вообичаената поставеност и схема кога се работи за житијни икони, во средиштата на иконата е св. Никола а околу неговата претстава насликани се повеќе сцени од циклусот, според димензиите и просторот што го давала иконата првобитно, најверојатно, помеѓу 12 и 14 сцени од житието на светецот, неговиот живот и чудата. Денес од нив сочувани се само 8 сцени.

Циклусот продолжува во горниот лев агол на иконата со сцената на Чудесното јавување во сон на џакон св. Никола, која се должи веројатно на слабото познавање на јазикот но и текстот на житието на некој од помошниците на зорафот.

Циклусот продолжува со сцените на Чудестото јавување во сон на епархот Евлавиј, која се должи веројатно на слабото познавање на јазикот но и текстот на житието на некој од помошниците на зорафот.
на е насликано едно од најпознатите и најчесто слики на светец, св. Никола, ги спасува тројцата мажи од смрт. Последната сцена, делумно е сочувана и поради својата нецеловитост неможеме со сигурност да ја идентификуваме. Од некогашната композиционална целина единствено е запазена црквата со ясно профилирана купола, и видините со кои бил окружуван манастир. Сочуваната сигнатура стои на манастир, укажува дека насликаната купола црква е нему посветена. Можеме со голема претпазливост само да претпоставиме дека се работи за една многу ретко слика претставена од времето на св. Никола, односно св. Никола чудесно го збогатува својот манастир.

За ова можна идентификација како аналогија би ја навеле истоимената композиција сликана во црквата Св. Никола, Пелиново 1717/18 г. Текстуалната предлошка ја наоѓаме само во словенските житијни текстови на светец, од кои најстарите датираат од средината на XVI век, како и во него- вата служба со акатист.

Сочуваните сцени од циклусот на иконата воглавном ја следат веќе познатата и многу пати претходно слика концепција која ги опфаќа наста- ните од раѓањето, детството и воведување на св. Никола во црковна јерархија, односно ракополагањето за ѓакон, ракополагањето за свештеник, св. Никола се јавува во сон на царот Константин и неидентификуваната композиција под нејзе со испишани на грчки јазик, многу внимателно без карактеристичните франтури. Останатите сцени Раѓањето на св. Никола, св. Никола оди во школа, Спасување на тројцата мажи од смрт, Чудесното јавување на св. Никола како и композицијата под нејзе, засега внимателно идентификувана како сцена каде св. Никола се грижи за својот манастир, се сигнирани на црковнословенски јазик. Забележива на прв поглед, е несигурност со неуедначени букви и диктусот на зборовите што остава впечаток дека зографот како да не го познавал добро јазикот.

Иконата на св. Никола од Враништа е една од неколкуте сочувани житијни икони од времето на пост-византијскиот период. По својата наративност во излагањето на циклусот таа веројатно била и една од иконите со најопширно илустриран циклус на св. Никола во што во средновековниот иконопис на Македонија.

Освен овие концепциски и иконографски особености, посебно внимание привлекуваат и стилско-ликовните особености на икописот. Во овој поглед иконата се издвојува како една од најинтересните сочувани дела на иконописот од времето на пост-византијскиот период во стручшина.

Според овие стилско-ликовни особености иконата на св. Никола од истоимената црква во село Враништа ја датираат во првите децении на XVII век.

Карактеристично за иконата од Враништа е и билингвалноста која е застапена во испишуване на сигнатурите и натписите на сцените. Сите натписи кои ги пратат житијните сцени по десниот раб на иконата, ракополагање за ѓакон, ракополагање за свештеник, св. Никола се јавува во сон на царот Константин и неидентификуваната композиција под нејзе се испишани на грчки јазик, многу внимателно без карактеристичните франтури. Останатите сцени Раѓањето на св. Никола, св. Никола оди во школа, Спасување на тројцата мажи од смрт, Чудесното јавување на св. Никола на епархот Евланви како и композиција под нејзе, засега внимателно идентификувана како сцена каде св. Никола се грижи за својот манастир, се сигнирани на црковнословенски јазик. Забележива на прв поглед, е несигурност со неуедначени букви и диктусот на зборовите што остава впечаток дека зографот како да не го познавал добро јазикот.