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## **THEOLOGICAL, ARTISTIC AND ETHNOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST**

*Abstract:* Epiphany, Bogojavlenie or Vodici (in Macedonian) celebrated on 19/6 January, the day of Jesus' Baptism, as well as the following day which is dedicated to St. John the Baptist, are one of the most important holidays in the orthodox and the traditional calendar of Macedonians. This text examines two key elements of these holidays - the Baptism and the figure of the Baptist, examined through a few interconnected, but still not identical levels: the theological, the artistic (focusing upon the differences in the representation and understanding of the above mentioned elements in the Western and the Eastern - Byzantine art, using examples from Macedonia) and the level of traditional, above all, Macedonian culture.

*Key words:* St. John the Baptist, theology, Western and Byzantine art, ethnology (Macedonian folk culture), Baptism, Godfather, purification, identity.

Until the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Birth and the Baptism of Jesus were celebrated on the same day. (Evdokimov 1972) This is because according to St. Jerome: "In His Birth the Son of God revealed himself to the world in the hidden way, and in his Baptism He shows himself in the visible way." (qt.after Evdokimov). The Evangelists wrote about the Revelation of the Holy Trinity at the time of the Baptism: The Son was present in human form; The Father appeared in the form of a voice saying "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (*Mt. 3:16-17*), while the Holy Ghost was manifested in the form of a dove (*J.1:33*). As the Epiphany, the Baptism of Christ is one of the Twelve Great Feasts in Orthodox liturgy. This is why a representation of this event is to be found in every Orthodox church as a painted fresco and as an icon in the second upper row of the iconostas, where it is used in the liturgy for January 19<sup>th</sup>.

Probably the oldest image of Christ's Baptism is to be found on the wall of St.Cecilia's Crypt in the Callistine Catacombs in Rome (2/3 century). The subject is specific to Christianity: its pictorial iconography developed out of the ritual of baptism in combination with gestures taken from antique images. Undergoing this sacrament was equivalent to conversion – beginning a new life by entering the Christian community. Based on early images in the catacombs, one can assume that early Christian neophytes stepped naked into a pool of water, immersed themselves completely and, after emerging, donned white robes as a sign of purification. Baptisteries with their hexagonal or octagonal shapes were reminiscent of tombs and mausoleums, expressing the symbolic understanding of baptism as a death and resurrection into a new life. (Walter 1982) St.Paul calls baptism burial saying "Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death" (*Rom.6.3*) St. John Chrysostom tells us that "being baptised and immersed and then emerging is a symbol of the descent into Hades and return thence."(*Hom.1 Kor.,40*) In baptism sin is buried into the water says St.Gregory Nazianzen in his Oration on Holy Baptism. And also he is telling that "World recognises three Births for us: namely the natural birth, that of Baptism, and that of the Resurrection".(*Or.XL.I*)

The early images from catacombs and from Ravenna baptisteries (Orthodox Baptistery 430-458 and Arian Baptistery ca. 500) already contain the basic pictorial model for later Orthodox representations of the scene. A white dove, illustrating the words of the Gospel according to John, is shown over the head of Jesus, while St. John the Baptist places his hand on Christ's head. On the mosaic in the dome of the Arian Baptistery Christ is still pictured as a beardless youth (as on the first Christian images where Christ was shown as a Shepherd in imitation of Roman mitologic scenes with Hermes). Jesus is flanked by St. John on the left and an equally large personification of the Old River Jordan: together, the three figures form an image of the three ages of man. This figure of the old river god taken from ancient art remained in icons depicting the Baptism. In Psalms we read: "The sea saw it, and fled: Jordan was driven back." (*Ps.114.3*) This is the literary source and explication for the presence of Jordan river personification and sometimes for the personification of the Sea.

Perhaps the most beautiful example of a *Baptism* scene in Macedonia is the one in Kurbinovo, on the south wall of the Church of St. George (1191). Like other paintings in this church it is monochrome with deep indigos and ochre. In the centre of the Baptism composition Jesus is standing naked in the River Jordan (it's personification is of the figure of a small young man with a vase in his hand), the banks of which are surrounded by rocks. Sharp ornamental rows of rocks reach up in a soft line above Christ's shoulders. He stands with His whole body covered by the water in what recalls an image of a cave or even a grave.

Unhallowed water was seen as a symbol of death: Jesus purifies it by entering this dark "floating tomb" (*hydatoistros taphos*). In Christian theology the Flood is taken to mean Death which would be conquered by the coming of the Son of the God. Jesus is blessing the waters of the Jordan with His right hand, by this He changes it into the healing Holy Water "The source of life water" (*Ap.21., J.4.14*). The liturgy of this day also includes the blessing of the water. "By His entering into the water the fire is lit in Jordan," (Tatian, 88,3). The Lord is a Purifying Light himself. This day is called also Day of the Lights." (St. Gregory Nazianzen, Or.XI,4;Or.XL,24).

In the *Baptism* icons Christ is often painted as the source of light. An example of this is the famous ikon from Ochrid ikonostas of St.Kliment church (now Bogorodica Perivlepta) from the beginning of XIV century (in Ohrid ikons collection). Painted on a golden background it is constructed on negative inversion of the colors. All shapes are dark, especially the waters covering Christ's body. From this darkness a light is emerging with light lines describing the body of the Redeemer. It was said that He came to "give the light to them that sit in the darkness and under the shadow of death"(Tatian, Diatessaron).

On later icons of the Baptism one can see God the Father's presence in a circle or semicircle of light, and the ray of light descending directly onto Christ's head. Sometimes God's hand pointing to Jesus is seen, but there is no tradition of showing more of God's person, as opposed to Western like Giotto's Baptismal scene showing God Father from the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (1304-1306) or Giovanni Bellini's painting (1500-1502, S.Corona, Vincenza).

The most important meaning of the picture for Orthodox Christians is the Revelation, the Recognition of the Son of God by mankind in the person of the Witness - Saint John. In canonic icons the number of persons in the scene is strictly limited: symmetry and simplicity are used to achieve the solemnity of the image. This is not the case in the development of Western iconography where the number of heavenly or worldly witnesses was increased to make the composition more powerful. This case is in El Greco's Baptismal compositions (like those from Prado 1596-1600 from Rome Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica around 1597 or from Toledo Hospital de s. J.Batista 1608-1614) one can observe the vision of God the Father enthroned in his Glory assisted by a heavenly crowd of angels (which probably came from El Greco's own interpretation derived from Spanish mystical literature). In Byzantine Baptismal compositions, on the right bank of the river, angels bowing in adoration attend the scene with their hands covered as a sign of the greatest respect (although for the contemporary viewer they might seem to be waiting with towels for Jesus to come out of the water - they are here playing the part of the catechumen's family holding the white robe to be put on after the sacrament). On different images St. John places his right hand on Jesus' head in a sign of blessing and transmission of the Holy Spirit, or pours water on Him, or – in the older examples – helps Him come out of the Jordan. Ultimately, the laying on of the hand came to dominate although it doesn't reflect the real ceremony of baptism (Walter) On Western images the Saint pours water from a shell or a vessel, while on eastern icons the gesture is probably connected with the descending of the Holy Spirit.

The real differences lay of course in theological concept of Baptism, and the images reflect them fully. The humble submission of the sinless Son of the God asking to be baptised was never shown in Byzantine art. Baptism was seen as the moment of the Recognition of God, Revelation. Even depicting the naked Jesus, one of the rare opportunities for the Byzantine painter to work on a nude, does not have any real connection with life studies of the human body. The effort is rather to present the divine body – abstract in line and finished in form.

One can venture that the general conclusion of Western artists was that they saw the Baptism as an image of Christ's inexplicable choice of the human condition. This is to be observed in many examples, one of the most striking seems to be Tintoretto's *Baptism* from the Scuola di San Rocco in Venice (1579-81). The Son of the God is bent down, kneeling in the water, turned away from us in the

darkness. The light is on his back and traces his profile on the white background of His abandoned clothes. In the foreground we can see a woman breast-feeding her baby. Far away in the background is a mass of people bathed in a strange light similar to the threads of a spiderweb: the crowd of those who have either passed away or have not yet been born.. This way Jesus seems to be joining the human family.

One can also try to compare extremes. On the one hand there is the fresco from Marcos Monastery in Susica (1377) with its almost abstract form and total exaltation of the spiritual vision. Christ is standing in deep water surrounded by sharp and high rocks. Looming above Him is St. John who bends down to touch His head with a long and inhuman arm resembling a charred stick. The halos of a group of angels form a rocklike surface, reflecting the shining circle representing God above Christ's head. His body is shaped by the light- white lines designed on the dark form circles of joints, the curve of the abdomen, abstract and ornamental lines of ribs.

On the other psychological extreme is Piero Della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ* (London, National Gallery 1448-50) which seems very serene at first glance but with no less intensity and tension. The clear and pure landscape with a crystal light and the balanced forms of classical human figures make this picture almost too real - somehow abstract. The same can be said about the emotions - they are under some kind of stoic control. What makes this picture so painful is the certainty that we are witnessing a great event understood only by Jesus and John who are surrounded by an atmosphere of total indifference. Even the angels are almost turned away from Christ and we can see some small figures engaged in conversation, and going about their business as if refusing to see what was happening. One figure is bending over to take off his white shirt that covers his head entirely.

### **Saint John in Christian Theology and Art**

John the Baptist is the second important person in the picture - one of the most venerated saints in Christianity. He is called the Precursor - Prodigiosus (in Greek) Preteca (in Macedonian) for being the last and the greatest Prophet, the Forerunner of the Christ. On certain icons one can even notice a slight resemblance to, or reflection of Christ's features in his face. But we can also see a profound difference in the expression of the Saint's face: stern and almost worried, never approaching the divine serenity of Christ - because he was a human, a solemn prophet bringing a warning to mankind. One can easily recognise the ascetic figure of the Saint in every church - he keeps his special position of the one nearest to the Jesus (in absida, on ikonostas). Because some people thought when he started baptising that he could be a Messiah himself, whereas he insisted that his mission was only that of a forerunner. "I indeed baptise you with the water, but there shall come one mightier than I...he shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with the fire." (L.3, 16,17) He came to prepare for Christ's Coming. He was "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" (J.1.19)

John was said to be a cousin of Jesus - born to an elderly couple Zachariah and Elisabeth who after many years of marriage had lost hope of having a child. When the Angel announced John's birth and his future role to Zachariah who was a priest, the latter doubted in this heavenly message and because of this became dumb for some time. The Angel said the boy would be "filled with the Holy Spirit even in his mother's womb." This detail was often depicted in Eastern and Western art by showing the two future mothers - Mary, Mother of the God and Elisabeth, St. John's mother - saluting and kissing each other. In that moment the prophecy was accomplished, Elisabeth felt her child "leap for joy in her womb" when it recognised the Saviour's presence in the voice of Mary. This scene is depicted for example in Kurbinovo Church of St. George on the south wall (1191).

John is also said to have been orphaned as a child and to have grown up alone in the desert. In this way he became a model for other hermits. He was most often presented in religious art as an ascetic - this kind of image appears as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century in one of the oldest existing icons from St. Catherine's monastery in Sinai where the saint is depicted with long unkempt hair and beard, his coarse face shining with prophetic power.

In early Christian art from the catacombs, Jesus and his disciples were presented as lambs. St. John used to be shown pointing his finger at the lamb in reference to the Gospel "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The lamb became St. John's attribute in Western art. This image does not appear in the East following the 82<sup>nd</sup> rule of the Fifth and Six

Council in Constantinople (553, 681) which decreed the replacement of Old Testament symbols used by the first Christians by the real image of God incarnate in human form. That was one of the most important theological statements concerning the theology of icons (Uspieski 1980).

In Eastern icons St. John holds a scroll of paper with the words of his testimony, and a cross (*crux hastata*) indicative of his martyrdom. Since the 11<sup>th</sup> century or so, zografs depicted St. John very realistically as an ascetic— flat, tanned face fringed by long dark hair, half-naked with gaunt legs and arms. He is often wearing a hairshirt and standing amid a desert landscape.

Alongside this neglect of the flesh, St. John was an example of the ascetic concept of *aphateia* which means privation of worldly feelings, emotions and bounds. (Maquire 1996) According to evangelists and theologian writers his mission and type of spirituality was often connected with the prophet Elias. That is reflected clearly in the use of the same or similar iconographical elements in resembling and portraying both saints.

St. John reached the state of angelic incorporeality. This is why he was very often painted from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century as a Winged Angel (Wessel- Restle 1978). We can see one of the oldest known examples of this type of iconography in the huge image painted by famous zografs, Mikhail and Eutihije near Skopje in Banjane – in the monastery of sv. Nikita (around 1316), on the south wall on the right side of the doors. There, St. John, the “Human Angel” is standing with large wings and visible proof of his martyrdom –his severed head in a bowl. His bare legs and arms are marked by sharp lines which are like bloody wounds made by desert thorns.

The angelic motif is also present in the theological literature concerning St. John, for example a 7<sup>th</sup> century prayer by Germanus of Constantinople: “How shall we call You, O Prophet? An Angel, an Apostle or a Martyr? An Angel because you lived a disembodied life, a Martyr because your head was cut off for Christ.”

St. John’s life was a common subject in Western and in Eastern art; in Orthodox painting, his life was, alongside that of the Virgin, the most frequent theme of complete cycles. Ohrid church of Hagia Sophia his life cycle was painted on the 9<sup>th</sup> century wall decoration in the diaconicon, or the southern part of the altar. Only some scenes have been preserved. A smaller cycle showing John’s life was painted also in the diaconicon of St. Kliment (Perivlepta 1295) in Ohrid.

The special position of the Precursor is reflected in one very important iconography subject – the *Deesis* (*Parastatis*: Greek for begging or praying) One of the oldest and most important examples is found in the mosaic in the south gallery of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (1261?). (Cormac 2000). It is related to, and also appears in, Last Judgement compositions. The Mother of God and St. John the Baptist are shown inclined towards the enthroned Christ Pantocrator with their hands in a suppliant gesture, asking Him to have mercy on mankind. This image of Interceding appeared in the Templon (the predecessor of the iconostas) around the 13<sup>th</sup> century and still holds a prominent central position.

The Saint’s life ended in dramatic circumstances. For rebuking Herod’s flagrant adultery with his niece Herodias he was imprisoned and then decapitated when Herodias’ daughter Salome, at the instigation of her mother asked for the prophet’s head as a reward for her dance at Herod’s feasts. (*Matt. 6:21-28*) This became one of the most exciting subjects in visual and performing arts.

The Liturgical calendar fixed the date of John’s death at August 29, and according to ancient tradition his burial place is Sebaste (Samaria). The saint’s head was the special object of devotion, and was allegedly discovered several times thanks to miraculous interventions in different places in the East and West. The Orthodox calendar celebrates three discoveries of the saint’s holy head (24<sup>th</sup> February and 25<sup>th</sup> May). The third discovery, during the reign of Emperor Michael III (842-867) strengthened the cult of the Forerunner. He is most often shown on icons with his severed head on a plate or in a bowl. There is even a separate iconography image presenting his head alone on the plate as a separate object of private devotion (we can also mention examples from Western art such as paintings by Giovanni Bellini 1464, Musei Civici in Pesaro or Albert Bouts from beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> century, Met. Mus. N.Y.).

Eastern painting was concentrated on the spiritual meaning that St. John’s personality had for Christianity; Western artists approached his life and person in a variety of ways. In the West, St. John was very often presented as a young man. In some Italian Renaissance paintings of the Madonna with Child he appears as a baby companion of Jesus (paintings by Giovanni Bellini, Raphael, Michelangelo’s *Doni tondo* or Leonardo da Vinci). There was also one very popular iconographical subject showing the saint’s solitude in the wilderness. One can recall here a few striking pictures by

Caravaggio, which are in fact portraits of naked young boys. They owe their dramatic beauty primarily to the contrast between profane eroticism and the religious subject-matter.

In Northern European painting *St. John in the Wilderness* was traditionally pictured as an adult or older person, with his attribute, the lamb being at once a symbol of God's presence in his solitude – the deserted landscape became some kind of isolated park paradise for a lonely melancholic. Geertgen tot Sint Jans paints John alone with his thoughts. St. John on Hieronymus Bosch's picture (1504-05, Madrid, Lasoro Goldiano Mus.) is lying on the ground, lost in his thoughts, and drawing something with his finger on the sand. Next to him is an odd thorny desert plant with large spherical fruit. Birds are feeding on its seeds, as if to demonstrate that the existence of a lonely philosopher can also be useful to others.

Perhaps it is only this psychological reading of Saint John's personality as deeply tragic through his awareness of how pessimistic his prophecy is for mankind that is shared by Western and Eastern painting. In Byzantine icons the Forerunner's face is restless, his eyebrows converge in a sorrowful expression, his eyes look skyward, his emaciated body is arrested in a violent desperate pose. His person is sometimes shown together with a small image of a tree and an axe, recalling his words: "For now the axe is laid to the root on the trees. Every tree therefore that doth not yield good fruit, shall be cut down, and cast into fire" (*Matt. 3:10; Luke 3:9*). One such example is the already mentioned beautiful icon of the *Baptism* from Ohrid's Perivlepta church iconostas.

### **St. John in Folk Culture**

In the frames of the folk tradition of the Macedonians, the winter saint John is one of the most important saints. The great respect that is paid to him is a result of the fact that he is connected to the establishing of (symbolic) kinship, which is equal in value as the biological one. Kinship in general was, and although subjected to changes due to the contemporary way of life it still is, at least formally, one of the major values on the value scale of the Macedonian social culture. This connection has its roots in the function of St. John in Christianity (Baptist=Godfather). However, some authors (Palikruseva, Chajkanovic) think that he is a continuity of some older, pre-Christian deity, a deity governing the blood relations. As an argument of this thesis the references quote the song of St. John from the Miak part of Macedonia (which can be found in the collection of I. S. Jastrebov from 1886), in which St. John, fighting for one of the functions in the celestial pantheon against other saints ("pantheon" of course in a metaphorical and not literal sense that would be incompatible with the Christian monotheism, as well as with the notions of folk religion, where "a saint" does not equal "God"), St. Peter, St. Ilija and St. Nedela (in the song described as "angels"), receives the area of Godfather relations. A similar motif can be found in the song "Thank God for this big miracle" that is included in the famous collection of the brother Miladinovci under the category of "Church songs" (Miladinovci 1983 : 35), where besides the above mentioned saints-angels St. Nicola is also mentioned. The last two verses of this song point towards the great respect towards St. John, that unless it is not paid (in a case where someone avoids being a Godfather) can lead to sanctions. Although being a Godfather means responsibility and obligation, it is also an honour, because in the same way that St. John is respected in the sky, his delegate on Earth - the Godfather is respected: the Godfather that gives the name of the child when it goes through the ritual of Baptising (who in folk culture can replace the priest in an absence of one, taking over his functions), but as well the so called "Godfather of St. John", a function that is related to the celebration of the Epiphany holiday (Palikruseva 1875; Kitevski 1989). The aspect that we would like to emphasise in this article is the purifying function of St. John, that we think is the key in explaining his figure. On a collective level it is visible during the rituals that are done before and during the Epiphany holiday, and on an individual level it is related to the ritual of baptism.

In Christianity, as well as in folk tradition, St. John introduces an end of one epoch/cycle, and he is a messenger (Forerunner) of a qualitative new period, purified of sins, liberated from all evil. In Christianity, as mentioned above, St. John is the last and the biggest old Testament prophet, whose role is to prepare humanity for His arrival. "Prepare the path of God, clean His paths", says Ev. after Marco, or in other words "purify yourself", "confess your sins and be baptised". According to the Church, St. John is an announcer of the end of the non-baptised period of humanity. In a similar way, the folk tradition perceives his day as the end of the non-baptised days of the year : "...the Earth closes

its doors after having received the souls of the departed, its surface is liberated of all evils...and Godfather John brings fertility” (Palikruseva, 1975 : 64). The main role in completing this (annual) cycle and the beginning of a new one is the one the Godfather, that is a leader of smaller or bigger groups which are called “kompanii”, “kumstva” or “bratstva”, formed according to kinship ties or territory (inhabitants of a village or one part of a village). He has a “mandate” of one year, starting from one Epiphany to the other. His main instrument is the cross - he prepares it a few days before the holiday by attaching basil and red string to it (both elements have a role of apotropeon), so that it can be attached to it up to the moment when the Godfather role is transferred to the new Godfather. The Godfather uses the cross when he says the blessings, that is when he tells formulas for fertility and health during his visits to the houses that belong to his area. The same cross is thrown into water at the very celebration of Epiphany - the one who will take out the cross is considered to be lucky, and the water in which the cross has been is considered as holy.

The above mentioned rituals, which in major part have purifying, generative and prophylactic function, have also an emphasised social function - they establish the existence and solidarity of the community. Thus, it is not an accident that the “kumstva” groups are established upon the principle of mutual participation (belonging to a certain fraternity, family or territory), that the members of the “kumstva” groups consider each other relatives, and that their relations are governed by the strict law of exogamy - the rituals in which they participate cement the feeling of belonging of each member of the “kumstvo”, “kompanija” or “bratstvo” to that very group and not to some other, cement the feeling of unity among the members and establish the *identity* of each member and the group in general. Baptising is one of the three basic rites of passage of the traditional culture (together with marriage and death). However, if the Church and the traditional perception of this ritual are to be compared, one can find nuances regarding the ultimate goal of this ritual: in Christianity baptising is a ritual of initiation of the new-born, his liberation from the inborn sin (again through using the powerful purifying symbol of water) and its acceptance into *God's flock*. The traditional folk culture perceives baptising more as an initiation of the new-born in the *human world*, the human family, which implies a huge social function of the ritual. Thus, baptising is not just a symbolic and ritual act, it is also a social moment after which the new-born is granted “a place under the sun” in the frames of the social stratification, he is granted a social role that will modify as the baby becomes a child and then an adult woman or a man, loosing some and receiving some other rights and duties. The baby at the moment of baptising receives a NAME, what has a name exists, possesses an identity that is a sum of everything that makes this person exactly that person and not someone else, a sum of which the name is an important part. If there should not be such a ritual, or it is done too late, the baby can become a demonic creature, a “navjache” - terrible threat\pressure upon the parents, but as well upon the whole community to fulfil their duty of baptising the child.

A topic for some future article could be this interesting relation purification-identity, that is present not only in Christianity and the Macedonian folk culture, but also in other religions and cultures (for example Buddhism, Hinduism etc.), in which purification is a precondition for attaining one's own identity and coming close to the deity one, no matter if this identity is a result of selfcontiusness (“enlightenment”), or if it is “implied”, that is, if it is a result of the rituals that define our roles in the frames of the community. The social is one of the basic functions of the ritual in general, that is expressed, maybe in the most beautiful way, through the celebration of the holiday dedicated to St. John.

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