

Ljubica Vinulović

The Miracle of Latomos: From the Apse of the Hosios David to the Icon from Poganovo. The Migration of the Idea of Salvation

Abstract

The main preoccupation of this paper will be iconographical analysis of depictions of the Miracle of Latomos, and the way in which this scene migrated from Greece to Bulgaria and Serbia. Firstly, we will discuss the historical background of the Miracle of Latomos and its composition, which is very specific in Byzantine art. Given the fact that it is depicted only three times in Byzantine art, in the mosaic in the apse of the church of Hosios David in Thessaloniki, in the mural painting in the ossuary in Bachkovo monastery in Bulgaria and in the double-sided icon from Poganovo, it has aroused great interest among art historians. The mosaic from Hosios David was discovered in 1927, and since then to (up until) the cleaning of the Icon from Poganovo in 1959, the composition of the Miracle of Latomos has had various, interpretations. We will try to explain how this composition has changed its iconography over the centuries and also discuss the question of patronage of the Icon from Poganovo. We will use the iconographic method and try to prove that this composition in all three cases has eschatological character.

Key words: *Miracle of Latomos, Theodora, Thessaloniki, Hosios David, Ossuary in Bachkovo monastery, Icon from Poganovo, Virgin Kataphyge, John the Theologian, Helena Mrnjavčević*

The Miracle of Latomos can be traced back to the end of the third century AD, and it is closely related to the city of Thessaloniki and to princess Theodora who was a daughter of August Maximian, co-ruler with the Emperor Diocletian, who ruled in Milan during the fourth century.¹ This information is probably inaccurate. Theodora lived in Thessaloniki. At that time, August Galerius was ruling in Thessaloniki, so most likely, Theodora was the daughter of Galerius. At the end of the third century she was secretly baptized, during an era in which Christians were still murdered and persecuted by the Roman authorities.² Under the pretext that she was ill, and that she needed peace,

1 V. Grumel, La mosaïque de 'Dieu Sauveur' au monastère du 'Latome' à Salonique (découverte en août 1927), *Échos d'Orient* 29 (1930), 157-175, 161; T. E. Gregory, *Maximian*, in: *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Vol. 2, ed. A. P. Kazhdan et al., London 1991, 1321.

2 V. Grumel, La mosaïque de 'Dieu Sauveur', 164; Г. Суботић, Икона василисе Јелене и оснивачи манастира Поганова, *Сопителња* 25 (1993), 25-40, 26.

she asked her father for permission to erect a palace in the upper part of the city's walls. The palace had a bathroom, the central part of which ended with a semicircular apse.³ She ordered an artist to depict the Virgin Mary in mosaic technique in the apse. One morning when the princess went to see how the work was going, she saw something strange. In the apse was an image of Christ and not an image of the Virgin. During the night the Virgin's image miraculously turned into the image of Christ, seated on a rainbow encircled by the mandorla and four animals – symbols of the four evangelists.⁴ This miraculous transformation of the Virgin's image into Christ's image, is called The Miracle of Latomos. Theodora thought that happened because of God's will, and forbade the artist to change the mosaic. The mosaic was covered with mortar to be hidden, because some of her servants told her parents that she was a Christian. When they found out what had happened, her father ordered her arrest and she was locked up in the tower. The palace was burnt to the ground, but the mosaic stayed preserved by God's will. The place where the palace stood was named Latomia, according to the Greek word for stone, because the whole palace was built of stone. In 1921, the church was dedicated to the local saint Hosios David.⁵ Today, in the apse of this church Theodora's mosaic can be seen. The mosaic stayed preserved during the Ottoman period because it was covered with mortar. The Legend of the Miracle of Latomos was registered in two medieval manuscripts. The first manuscript, which tells the story of the Miracle, today is kept in Moscow in the Patriarchal Library.⁶ The second manuscript is from 1307, and today it is treasured in Kosinitca. The *Diegesis* manuscript from the twelfth century, written by monk Ignatius, tells the story of the Miracle in Hosios David. The manuscript tells the story of monk Senoufias who came from the mountains of Nitria to the monastery of Hosios David.⁷ He was praying in front of the apse to see Christ in the form in which he would appear at the End of the Time. One day while the monk was alone in the church, a storm raised and shook the ground and foundations of the church. The mortar fell down from the walls,

3 V. Grumel, La mosaïque de 'Dieu Sauveur', 164.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 167; O. Špehar, The cruciform church on Caričin grad: Thessalonian architectural influence on the central Balkans in VI century, *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti* 42 (2014), 61-76, 67.

6 V. Grumel, La mosaïque de 'Dieu Sauveur', 165.

7 A. Semoglou, La théophanie de Latôme et les exercices d'interprétations artistiques durant les 'renaissances' byzantines, Les nouveaux signifiants de (la vision de) Dieu, in: *Byzantium Renaissance: Dialogue of Cultures, Heritage of Antiquity Tradition and Modernity*, ed. M. Janocha et al., Warsaw 2012, 231-239, 233-234; J. Snyder, The Meaning of the 'Maiestas domini' in Hosios David, *Byzantion* 37 (1967), 143-152, 146-147.

and the image of Christ appeared magically in the apse of the church. The monk thanked God and passed away.⁸ He was buried at the place where he passed away. The image of Christ in the apse is the same image which appeared in Theodora's palace's apse.

Today, the mosaic in Hosios David is very well preserved. Researchers have given differing interpretations of this composition. The center of the composition depicts Christ enthroned on a rainbow, set within the aureole of blue light. The symbols of the four evangelists holding books are emerging from the aureole (fig. 1). In his right hand Christ holds a scroll with written words.⁹ Beneath Christ's feet is a hill from which the four rivers of Paradise rise, while at his left side a male figure who is supposed to represent the personification of the Jordan River can be found. The whole scene is flanked by figures of two prophets. The right prophet is standing and holding his arms and palms opened in a gesture of amazement. The prophet on the left side is sitting on a rock, and holding a book on his lap (fig. 2). The prophets' names are not inscribed, which led to varying interpretations of their identity among researchers. André Grabar argued that the prophets are St. Peter and Paul, and that this scene represents *Traditio Legis*.¹⁰ Athanassios Semoglou considered that the prophets are the evangelists John and Matthew, and that the scene is the Second Coming of Christ.¹¹ The book, which is being held by the prophet on the left bears the words "Son of man, eat this scroll". (Reve. 10:9) This scene is closely connected to the vision of the prophet Ezekiel that he had on the River of Chebar. During his vision God showed himself in the form of light surrounded by four animals. God gave him to eat the book so that he could preach.¹² On the other hand, the prophet Habakkuk had a similar vision. God presented himself to him in the form of rays and light, like the Moon, stars and the Sun approaching him.¹³ According to their visions, we can conclude that the prophets in the composition are Ezekiel and Habakkuk, and that the composition represents The Old Testament Theophany.

8 V. Grumel, *La mosaïque de «Dieu Sauveur»*, 163; Snyder, 'Maiestas domini', 147.

9 "Behold, this is Our Lord, in whom we hope and rejoice in our salvation, he will give a rest to this house" (Isa. 25:9).

10 A. Grabar, À propos d'une icône byzantine du XIVe siècle au Musée de Sofia (Notes sur les sources et les procédés des peintres sous les Paléologues), *Cahiers archéologiques* 10 (1959), 289-304, 296.

11 A. Semoglou, La mosaïque de Hosios David à Thessalonique. Une interprétation neotestamentaire, *Cahiers archéologiques* 54 (2011), 5-16, 12-13.

12 Ezek. 1:1-8; 2:8-9.

13 Habakk. 3:10-11.

Bachkovo Ossuary

We met the composition of the Miracle of Latomos for the second time in Byzantine art, in mural paintings in Bachkovo monastery in Bulgaria. The monastery was founded around 1083 by two brothers named Pakourianos.¹⁴ They ruled in Bulgaria in the name of the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I Comnenus.¹⁵ During the same period, the monastery's ossuary was built near to the church, and it has two floors. The upper floor is the church dedicated to The Holy Trinity, while the lower floor is the ossuary with fourteen niches in the floor. The mural painting is from the twelfth century.¹⁶ In the naos of the ossuary the west wall presents the painted Vision of the prophet Ezekiel. The prophet is shown in a standing pose holding a scroll. Beside him is a broad field with skulls and bones above which several figures rise representing resurrected humans (fig. 3). This scene illustrates a part from the Book of the prophet Ezekiel. God spoke to him and took him to the place where the rambling human bones were.¹⁷ The composition represents the resurrection of the Israelites' bones. In the naos, beside this scene stands a composition of The Last Judgment, which covers the walls and the ceiling. These compositions are connected with the idea of the resurrection. On the Last Judgment Day the dead will be resurrected.

On the upper floor of the building we can see a monumental scene with Christ in the center.¹⁸ Christ is enthroned on a rainbow, encircled with the aureole of light. In one hand he is holding a scroll. On both sides stand figures of the prophets (fig. 4). The text on the Christ's scroll is from the Book of the prophet Isaiah.¹⁹ André Grabar and Elka Bakalova argued that this composition is the vision of the Prophet Ezekiel. Grabar also considered

14 E. Bakalova, *The ossuary of the Bachkovo monastery*, Plovdiv 2003, 11-12; R. Jordan, Pakourianos: Typikon of the Gregory Pakourianos for the Monastery of the God Petritzonitissa in Bačkovo, in: *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders' Typika and Testaments*, eds. J. Thomas and A. Constantinides Hero, Washington, D.C. 2000, 507-563, 507-508.

15 В. Лазарев, *Историја византијског сликарства*, Belgrade 2004, 108; E. Bakalova, *The ossuary of the Bachkovo monastery*, 14-16.

16 В. Лазарев, *Историја византијског сликарства*, 108.

17 "Prophesy on these bones, and say to them, O you dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus said the Lord God to these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live: And I will lay sinews on you, and will bring up flesh on you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezek. 37:4-6).

18 В. Лазарев, *Историја византијског сликарства*, 108; E. Bakalova, *The ossuary of the Bachkovo monastery*, 63-65.

19 "See, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isa. 25:9).

that the painted prophets are Ezekiel and Habakkuk. The scene had its model in the mosaic from Hosios David.

The Icon from Poganovo

From the middle of the twentieth century, the Icon from Poganovo was the subject of research among scientists. This icon was kept in the crypt of the Cathedral Church of Alexander Nevsky in Sofia, in Bulgaria.²⁰ Before that, it was in the monastery of John the Theologian near Poganovo. It was recently moved to the Archeological Museum in Sofia. The icon is double-sided, and on one side the Miracle of Latomos is depicted (fig. 5). On the other side are depicted the Virgin and John the Evangelist. The Virgin bears the epithet *Kataphyge*, and John the *Theologian* (fig. 6). The Virgin's epithet is very interesting, and it does not occur often in painting.²¹ *Kataphyge* means *refuge* in Greek.²² Grabar wrote about this epithet in his work. He concluded that it was often used in poetry and less in painting.²³ Based on its stylistic features, many researchers have concluded that the icon belongs to the art of the late fourteenth century. On the other hand, the researchers have given differing interpretations of the composition of the Miracle of Latomos. Grabar has interpreted this scene as Christ as the life-giving spring. He concluded this according to the image of the Virgin and John. He connected those characters with the moment that happened during the Crucifixion. While Christ was on the Cross, John the Evangelist proclaimed that blood and water, which were spurting from Christ's wound are the life giving spring.²⁴ André Xyngopoulos presented another approach immediately after the conservation of the icon. Namely, he considered that this scene does not have a direct model in the mosaic from Hosios David, but it was depicted according to a miniature from the twelfth-century *Diegesis* text.²⁵ Demetrios Pallas argued that this icon was associated with another liturgical feast, with the celebration of The Easter.²⁶ On the other hand, Voordeckers linked the scene in the icon to The Metastasis of John the Evangelist. He considered that the prominent

20 B. Pentcheva, *Imagined Images: Vision of Salvation and Intercession in Double-Sided Icon from Poganovo*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000), 139-153, 139.

21 Г. Суботић, *Икона василисе Јелене*, 26; A. Grabar, *À propos d'une icône*, 302.

22 A. Grabar, *À propos d'une icône*, 302.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*, 351-389; Pentcheva, *Double-Sided Icon from Poganovo*, 141-142; John. 19:34.

25 A. Xyngopoulos, *Sur l'icône bilatérale de Poganovo*, *Cachiers archéologiques* 12 (1962), 341-350.

26 D. Pallas, *Die Passion und Bestattung Christi, der Ritus. Der Ritus-das Bild*, Munich 1965, 147-160; B. Pentcheva, *Double-Sided Icon from Poganovo*, 141-145.

figure on the icon was John the Evangelist, and that the icon was set on the iconostasis as a title icon.²⁷

The Miracle of Latomos in the Icon from Poganovo is depicted in a different way from that in the mosaic in Hosios David and Ossuary in Bachkovo. Christ Emmanuel is depicted enthroned on a golden rainbow, surrounded with the aureole of blue light. Mandorla is composed of seven blue rings. Christ is dressed in a golden chiton, and he raises his right hand while in the left hand he holds an open scroll with written words.²⁸ His arms and feet bear marks of the Crucifixion. Around him is the inscription: "Jesus Christ of the Miracle of Latomos."²⁹ Christ is encircled with the symbols of the four evangelists. They emerge from the fifth ring of the mandorla. Above their heads their initials are inscripted. In the lower zone of the icon, below Christ is a mountainous landscape with a water basin, where seven fish swim. The prophets flank this composition. On the right side is depicted Ezekiel in a standing position. His head and arms are raised up. His palms are open in a gesture of awe and amazement. He is depicted as an elderly man dressed in a chiton with long gray hair and grey beard. Habakkuk is represented as a young man without a beard, seated on the rocks. He holds an open book on his lap with a written text.³⁰

The whole scene is imbued with the blue light which emanates from Christ's mandorla. The composition depicted in this way can be interpreted as Theophany.³¹ Ezekiel and Habakkuk saw God in the form of light surrounded by the four tetramorphs which are actually symbols of the four Evangelists. The inscription around Christ's head and torso directly connects this icon with the mosaic from Hosios David. As we have already said, the whole composition is slightly different from that in Hosios David. In the icon Christ is depicted with wounds on his hands and feet, while in the mosaic he does not have wounds. Also, in the icon, the prophets' names are clearly inscribed, while in the mosaic they are not. Given the fact that Christ is depicted with wounds, it is clear that this scene indicates the moment after the Crucifixion.

27 E. Voordeckers, *L'interprétation liturgique de quelques icônes byzantines*, *Byzantion* 53/1 (1983), 52-68; B. Pentcheva, *Double-Sided Icon from Poganovo*, 145-148.

28 "Behold, this is Our Lord, in whom we hope and rejoice in our salvation, he will give a rest to this house" (Isa. 25:9).

29 B. Pentcheva, *Double-Sided Icon from Poganovo*, 142.

30 "Son of man, eat this scroll" (Ezek. 3:1).

31 B. Pentcheva, *Double-Sided Icon from Poganovo*, 142-143.

The seven rings of the mandorla and seven fish that swim in the water basin point to the symbolism of the Last Judgment. Based on these facts, Gordana Babić confirmed that this scene indeed is Parousia.³² During the Revelation of John the Theologian, God showed himself to John in the form of light on a throne, surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists. She confirmed her opinion with the sentence: "Son of man, eat this scroll", which is written on the book of the prophet Habakkuk. During the vision in Patmos, God gave John the same order that he gave to Ezekiel.³³

The issue of the patron's identity aroused a great deal of interest among researchers, since it was cleaned and preserved in 1959.³⁴ On the front side are painted the Virgin *Kataphyge* and John the Theologian, and in the lower zone between their figures is in quite damaged condition the donor's inscription printed in red: "In Christ God the faithful *basilissa* Helena"³⁵ (fig. 6). Todor Gerasimov read this inscription immediately after the conservation, and concluded that the donor of the icon was Helena Dragaš, the Byzantine empress.³⁶ The icon was kept in Poganovo monastery in the church dedicated to John the Theologian. The conclusion that the donor of the icon was Helena Dragaš, Gerasimov based on medallions with inscriptions on a facade of the church. The medallions are inscribed with the names of "Mr. Constantine", "Mrs. Helen", and "John the Theologian".³⁷ He supported this theory with evidence from the historical resource. In historical texts only Constantine Dragaš had the title of *mister*.³⁸ Given the fact that the donor's inscription mentions the title *basilissa*, Gerasimov literally translated this title as an *empress*. He argued that Helena Dragaš could order the icon only after she came to the Byzantine court and after she became the empress, probably after 1395, when her father died in the Battle of Rovine.³⁹ He considered that Helena sent a gift to the monastery dedicated to John the Theologian in Poganovo in memory of her father with whom she built it.

32 G. Babić, Sur l'icône de Poganovo et la vasilissa Hélène, in: *L'art de Thessalonique et des pays Balkaniques et les courants spirituels au XVIe siècle*, ed. D. Davidov, Belgrade 1987, 57-65, 62-65.

33 Rev. 10:9.

34 Г. Суботић, Икона василисе Јелене, 25.

35 T. Gerasimov, L'icône bilatérale de Poganovo au Musée archéologique de Sofia, *Cahiers archéologiques* 10 (1959), 279-288, 284; B. Pentcheva, Double-Sided Icon from Poganovo, 141.

36 Helen Dragaš was the daughter of the Serbian ruler of the southern regions Constantine Dragaš and wife of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1391-1425). She became his wife around 1392. И. Ђурић, *Сумрак Византије. Време Јована VIII Палеолога (1392-1448)*, Belgrade 2007, 66-70.

37 T. Gerasimov, L'icône bilatérale de Poganovo, 284.

38 И. Ђурић, *Сумрак Византије*, 69-70; С. Мишић, *Историјска географија српских земаља, од половине 6. до половине 16. века*, Belgrade 2014, 48.

39 С. Мишић, *Историјска географија српских земаља*, 48.

Gordana Babić offered a different hypothesis about the patron's identity. She argued that the title *basillisa* used in the inscription could not refer to a Constantinopolitan empress. This title was applied for the wife of a despot. She came to this conclusion based on the inscriptions in documents and frescoes.⁴⁰ Babić's work opened a new line of interpretations of the icon's patron. Based on the facts she mentioned, we can conclude that the patron of the icon was *basillisa*, wife of a despot and not the Byzantine Empress Helena Dragaš Palaiologina. According to the iconography, Babić argued that the patron of the icon was Helena Mrnjavčević, a daughter of the Serbian ruler of Drama, Caesar Vojihna, and wife of John Uglješa, Serbian ruler of Serres, who was a brother of Vukašin Mrnjavčević.⁴¹ Helena had the title *basilissa* because she was a wife of a despot. According to the complex iconography of the icon, Babić drew the most logical conclusion. The composition of the Miracle of Latomos was depicted for the first time in Serbian art in the icon from Poganovo. According to this fact, Babić concluded that the patron of the icon could only be an educated and talented basilissa from Serres, Helena Mrnjavčević.⁴²

On the reverse side of the icon are depicted Virgin Kataphyge and John the Theologian. The Virgin stands on the left side, dressed in a blue maphorion. Her head is lowered, and she is in deep sorrow. She is depicted similarly to the composition of the Crucifixion. Next to her head is the inscription printed in red, *Kataphyge*. This was the first use of that epithet in Serbian art. The whole story of the Miracle of Latomos began in Thessaloniki where the cult of the Virgin Kataphyge was extremely developed. The monastery dedicated to the Virgin Kataphyge is closely linked to the torturing of St. Demetrius who is patron of the city.⁴³ St. Demetrius lived in Thessaloniki during the reign of Emperor Maximian. He was secretly preaching Christianity in the underground galleries of the church of the Virgin Kataphyge. During one of his sermons, Maximian's soldiers broke into the church and arrested him. They took him to the Emperor who was at the Hippodrome in the center of town. There he was firstly tortured and then executed. The Church of the Virgin Kataphyge has an important role in the liturgical feast in the evening before the feast day of St. Demetrius on the 26th of October.⁴⁴

40 G. Babić, *Sur l'icône de Poganovo*, 58-60.

41 *Ibid.*, 61-62.

42 *Ibid.*, 65.

43 A. Kazhdan and Nancy P. Ševčenko, *Demetrios of Thessalonike*, in: *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Vol. 1, ed. A. P. Kazhdan et al., London 1991, 605-606, 605.

44 *Ibid.*

The epithet *Kataphyge* is closely linked with the life of the patron of the icon. Helena Mrnjavčević had a tragic destiny. Helena had a son, Uglješa Despotović. He died at a very young age.⁴⁵ His mother identified her grief with Virgin's grief for Christ. Through the Virgin, Helena was searching for refuge, *kataphyge* in this life. Soon after the death of her son she lost her husband. He was killed at the Battle of Černomen in the valley of the Maritsa River in 1371.⁴⁶ After the defeat of the Serbian army, the Byzantine despot Manuel II, the future Byzantine Emperor entered Serres, and Helen lost her home.⁴⁷ Then she moved to Thessaloniki. Finally, she went to the court of Prince Lazar in Kruševac, and lived under his protection for several years. But her peace didn't last for long. Prince Lazar was killed at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389.⁴⁸ After that, Helena took the monastic vows becoming nun Euphemia, and she was initially settled in Županja monastery. Later she moved to Ljubostinja monastery. Helena found refuge at the court of Prince Lazar, just as the Virgin, according to the apocryphal sources, found refuge in John's house after Christ's death.

Next to the Virgin, John the Evangelist is depicted. The written inscription next to his head is John the *Theologian*. He is depicted as an elderly man, with a bald head and grey beard, dressed in chiton. With his right hand he gestures to the other side of the icon. This iconographic type is connected with John's vision in Patmos. He is depicted as an Old Testament prophet, and the author of the Revelation, at the same time. The Battle of the Maritsa River took place on the 26th of September. On this day the church celebrates the Metastasis of John the Theologian.⁴⁹ John Uglješa shares the name of the patron saint, John the Theologian, and he died on the saint's day. Through this icon, Helena was praying for salvation of her husband's soul. After she left Serres, she moved to Thessaloniki, where she probably attended the procession on the day of St. Demetrius and heard the story of the Miracle of Latomos.

This icon has eschatological character, since Helena was praying Christ for protection through the Virgin and John. The composition of the Miracle of Latomos expands the legend of the healing power of the place where

45 M. Vassilaki, Female Piety, Devotion and Petronage: Maria Angelina Doukania Palailogina of Ioannina and Helena Uglješa of Serres, in: *Donation et donateurs dans le monde byzantin, Actes du colloque international de l'Université de Fribourg (13-15 mars 2008)*, eds. J. M. Spieser and É. Yota, Paris 2012, 221-234, 222.

46 С. Мишић, *Историјска географија српских земаља*, 42.

47 Ibid., 45.

48 Ibid., 47.

49 J. Irmischer, A. Kazhdan and A. W. Carr, John in: *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Vol. 2, ed. A. P. Kazhdan et al., London 1991, 1043.

it happened, and it could be interpreted as a wish of the patron to find peace and refuge after personal tragedy. The Second Coming of Christ represents salvation for her. During the Resurrection of the dead she will be reunited with her husband and son. According to all the facts that we presented, we consider that the icon was commissioned as a votive gift for the commemoration of the patron. Patron Helena Mrnjavčević ordered this icon for the Salvation of herself and her loved ones.



Fig. 1: The Miracle of Latomos, Hosios David, Thessaloniki, 5-6th century



Fig. 2: The Prophet Habakkuk, detail from the Miracle of Latomos, Hosios David, Thessaloniki, 5-6 century



Fig. 3: The Vision of the prophet Ezekiel, ossuary, Bachkovo, 12th century



Fig. 4: The Miracle of Latomos, upper part of the ossuary, Bachkovo, 12th century



Fig. 5: The Miracle of Latomos, Icon from Poganovo, Archeological Museum, Sophia, 14th century



Fig. 6: The Virgin Kataphyge and John the Theologian, Icon from Poganovo, Archeological Museum, Sophia, 14th century