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REFLECTION OF THE ISLAMIC AND SASSANID ART ON THE ANICONIC DECORATION OF BYZANTINE WALL PAINTINGS IN CAPPADOCIA

The Roman region of Cappadocia was an important province of the Byzantine Empire,¹ especially from the 7th century onwards, when it became a battle land where the Arabs had met with the Byzantines for almost three centuries.² From the second half of the 9th century until the battle of Manzikert in 1071, the Byzantine Cappadocia lived its golden period; the majority of the churches and their paintings were completed during this period.³ Starting from the second half of the 11th century, with the raids of the Seljuk Turks, Cappadocia became part of the Turkic states. This turbulent but very rich historical development reflected on the social, economic and artistic structure of the region.⁴

The numerous Byzantine churches of Cappadocia are mostly decorated with mural paintings, where emphasis is given to figurative compositions,

¹ L. Giovannini, *Rock Settlements*, Arts of Cappadocia, ed. L. Giovannini, (Geneva 1971), 67; J. E. Cooper, M. J. Decker, *Life and Society in Byzantine Cappadocia*, New York 2012, 16-17.

² G. Jerphanion, *Une Nouvelle Province de l'art Byzantin: Les Eglises Rupestres de Cappadocia*, Vol. 2, Part: 2, (Paris 1942), 396; C. Jolivet-Levy, *Les Eglises Byzantines De Cappadoce, Le Programme Iconographie de l'apside et de ses Abords*, Paris 1991, 1; R. Ousterhout, *A Byzantine Settlement in Cappadocia*, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies XLII*, (Washington 2011), 15; R. Warland, *Byzantinisches Kappadokien*, Darmstadt / Mainz 2013, 16-17; G. Ostrogorsky, *Bizans Devleti Tarihi*, trans. F. İşıltan, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara 2015, 78.

³ Jerphanion, *op.cit.*, 400; S. Kostof, *Caves of God*, Oxford University Press, New York 1989, 27; L. Rodley, *Cave Monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1985, 4; Levy, *loc.cit.*, 1991.

⁴ Jerphanion, *op.cit.*, 396-397; Rodley, *loc.cit.*; Kostof, *op.cit.*, 29.; N. Thierry, *The Rock Churches*, Arts of Cappadocia, ed. L. Giovannini, (Geneva 1971), 130; Y. Ötügen, *Ihlara Vadisi*, Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, Ankara 1990, 4-5; N. Asutay *Fleissig, Templonanlagen in den Höhlenkirchen Kappadokiens*, Frankfurt 1996, 6; N. Çorağan, and others., *Türkiye'nin Kültürel Mirası-1*, T.C. Anadolu Üniversitesi Yayını No: 2597, 66.



Fig. 1. Soğanlı, Karabaş church 10th-11th c., south arch, photo, author, 2017.

Сл. 1. Соанлу, Карабаш црква 10-11 век, јужни лук, фото, аутор, 2017.

mainly the Christological scenes. As the earlier Constantinopolitan models and scenes are placed inside the rock carved churches within different kind of frames.⁵ These are particularly noteworthy for their ornamentation of different kinds such as floral, geometric, abstract and so on. In this paper, we would like to take some of them into consideration in order to delineate their probable origin and diffusion. First, we would like to pay attention on the pseudo-kufic⁶ ornament, which is a well-known decorative motif in Byzantine art inspired by the particular type of

Islamic calligraphy known as kufic.

The kufic script, the earliest Islamic style of handwriting, was used by the early Muslims to write especially the Holy Koran. The script was called kufic because it was thought to have been developed at the city of Kufah in Iraq, an early center of Islamic culture.⁷ The word “kufi” stands for; regular, angular, upright and horizontal letters and geometric lines that are formed as the Arabic letters. In addition, it is thought to be the source of Arabic writing and there are different opinions about how it spread.⁸

During the period between the Macedonian and Komnenian dynasties, Islamic motifs were seen in Byzantine art. Especially, the medallions with animal and hunting scenes were used in textiles and silk. This is a typical Islamic and early Iranian motif deriving from Sassanid visive culture. A similar situation has been the tendency to use these eastern cuts and motifs in formal and expensive clothes during this period. With the 1204 Latin Invasion of Constantinople, these motifs are decreased.⁹

Pseudo-kufic started to be seen in Byzantine artworks as of the beginning of the 9th century, especially in the architectural decoration; it is blended by the combination of vertical, angular corners and horizontal shapes and also

⁵ Kostof, *op.cit.*, 156.

⁶ In 2018, we presented a comprehensive paper on this subject in Athens at the 38th Symposium on Byzantine and post-Byzantine Archaeology and Art. M. Kaya, M. Kalafat Yılmaz, *Cultural Interactions In The Middle Period in Cappadocia: Art Of The Border Or Border Of The Art?*, 38th Symposium on Byzantine and Post Byzantine Archaeology and Art, (Athens 2018), 70.

⁷ A. Alparslan, *Kufi*, Eczacıbaşı Sanat Ansiklopedisi 2, Yem Yayın, (İstanbul 1997), 1067; D. Batterham, *The World of Ornament*, Taschen, Köln 2015, 184-186; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kufic-script> Access: 23.11.2019.

⁸ Y. Zenun, M. Serin, *Kufi*, TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi 26, (Ankara 2002), 342.

⁹ O. Grabar, *Islamic Influence on Byzantine Art*, The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium 2, Oxford University Press, (New York 1991), 1018.

Fig. 2. Göreme / Avcılar, Yusuf Koç church 11th c., naos, photo, author, 2016.

Сл. 2. Гореме/Авцилар, Јусуф Коџ црква 11 век, наос, фото, аутор, 2016.



Fig. 3. Erdemli, Eustathios church, 13th c., north west corner, photo, author, 2017.

Сл. 3. Ердемли, црква св. Евстатија, 13 век, северозападни угао, фото, аутор, 2017.



Arabic kufic geometrical characteristics. Therefore, it turned into a meaningless and fake writing.¹⁰ For many different arrangements, pseudo-kufic has been an extremely suitable decoration. We can understand that this decoration is seen in Byzantine art for two main reasons; one of these reasons is the presence of a Muslim Arab colony in the 9th and 10th centuries in Athens, which includes Byzantine artists and merchants. The other reason is that in this period, the major cities of Byzantine textile production, Tebai (Thebes) and Corinth imported a large amount of Arabic and Persian products, which influenced the local artists as it is visible on a slab from the church of Panaghia in Makrinitza.¹¹

In Byzantine art, we have encountered pseudo-kufic ornaments on brick decorations, wall paintings, ceramics, manuscript illuminations and architectural sculptures.¹² According to researchers, there are significant similarities be-

¹⁰ S. D. T. Spittle, *Kufic Lettering in Christian Art*, The Archaeological Journal CXI, (London 1955), 137; S. Pedone, V. Cantone, *The Pseudo – Kufic Ornament the Problem of Cross - Cultural Relationships Between Byzantium and Islam*, Opuscula Historiae Artium 62, (2013), 122.

¹¹ In addition to these two main factors, war, trade and travel are also thought to play an active role. See also: G. C. Miles, *Byzantium And the Arabs: Relations in Crete And the Aegean Area*, Dumbarton Oaks Papers 18, 1964, 31; Furthermore, it is known that the main source in this sense is the Sassanid art. See also: Miles, *op.cit.*, 29. See also for the slab detail from the church of Panaghia in Makrinitza: Miles, *op.cit.*, fig. 79.

¹² Miles, *op.cit.*, 29-30.



Fig.4. Güzelöz (2 b) Emin church 13th c., vault in the south nave, photo, author, 2017.

Сл. 4. Гузелоз (2б) Емин црква 13 век, свод јужног брода, фото, аутор, 2017.



Fig. 5. Church of Archangelos in Ürgüp / Cemil, 13th c., the west column of north and south nave, photo, author, 2017.

Сл. 5. Ургуп / Цемил, црква Светог архангела Михаила, 13 век, западни стуб северног и јужног брода, фото, аутор, 2017.

tween the Seljuk weavings and Byzantine architectural sculptures. To illustrate, the pseudo-kufic decorated Seljuk silk weaving located in the Textile Museum of Washington D.C.¹³ has the same characteristic features as the pseudo-kufic ornament seen on the marble cornice at the east end of the church of Theotokos (10th century) in the Hosios Lukas Monastery.¹⁴

Pseudo-kufic decoration has been widely used in the churches in the central and western Greece region during the Middle Byzantine period in Greece in the architectural sculptural decoration and in the wall paintings.¹⁵

On the aniconic wall paintings of the Cappadocia region, we see a large variation of pseudo-kufic on the wall paintings dated to 11th-13th centuries. The earliest examples in the region are the Soğanlı Karabaş church (10-11th century) (fig. 1) and Göreme Yusuf Koç church (11th century) (fig. 2). In both churches, the forms were highly geometrized. Yusuf Koç church also attracts attention with its flowered and floriated¹⁶ kufic forms. Indeed, here, the letters

¹³ Miles, *op.cit.*, fig. 86.

¹⁴ Miles, *op.cit.*, 30.; Also see the photo: Pedone, Cantone, *op.cit.*, fig. 2.

¹⁵ Miles, *op.cit.*, 24.

¹⁶ Flowered kufi is known to be of Fatimid origin. For detailed information see also: A. Grohmann, *The Origin and Early Development of Floriated Kufic*, *Ars Orientalis* 2, (1957), 184. In addition, flowered kufi is thought to be developed mostly in the western

are evolved into a palmette form. In addition, the pseudo-kufic motif of Göreme Çarıklı church (11th century) as well as the Soğanlı Karabaş church (10-11th century) and the Göreme Yusuf Koç church (11th century) are more geometrized and used in the bordures.

In the twelfth century, the use of pseudo-kufic was reduced on the wall paintings of the region, and as a result of carried out on-site research, we have identified that the usage of such motifs increased again as of the thirteenth century. Some of these later examples are visible in the Eustathios church in Erdemli (fig. 3), Emin church 2b in Güzelöz (fig. 4) and church of Archangelos in Ürgüp / Cemil (fig. 5), Kırk Şehitler church (church of the Forty Martyrs) in Ürgüp / Şahinefendi¹⁷ dated to the 13th century.

It is necessary not to ignore the ornaments that mimic the pseudo-kufic script used in Turkish Islamic art examples too. We can find beautiful examples in the Medrese of Karatay and Sadrettin Konevi Mosque in Konya, in Küçük Ayasofya mosque and Taş Medrese in Akşehir, in Gök Medrese of Amasya, Kızıl Minaret and Huand Hatun mausoleum in Aksaray and in the Bayburt Ulu Mosque (13th c.).¹⁸ Would the use of kufic writing only for decorative purposes in Anatolian Turkish states be an effect of Byzantine art? Or were the Byzantine artists the creators of this particular decoration?¹⁹ It is difficult to assert any opinion before further research.

Another motif we encountered on the Byzantine wall paintings of Cappadocia is the heart shaped motif, or *palmette* in the outline of the heart.²⁰ Although this ancient motif comes from Persian art, it has developed in the Sassanid art. An earlier example of the motif is a silver layer belonging to the Persian period, and today it is in London British Museum.²¹ The heart-shape, which was most likely derived from ivy-leaves, appears in many forms and genres of Byzantine art, especially on textiles and enamels, but also in architectural decoration.²² The roots of this motif extend to the Classical art. However,

countries of Islam such as Tunisia and Egypt. See also: M. Şahinoğlu, *Anadolu Selçuklu Mimarisinde Yazının Dekoratif Eleman Olarak Kullanılışı*, Türk-İslam Kültürü Kaynak Eserler Dizisi I, (İstanbul 1977), 17. For information on the differences between flowered and floriated kufic form see Grohmann, *op.cit.*, 183-184.

¹⁷ Also see the photo: M. Restle, *Byzantine Wall Painting n Asia Minor*, Vol. 3, Irish University Press, Shannon 1967, fig: 428.

¹⁸ R. Gün, *Anadolu Selçuklu Mimarisinde Yazı Kullanımı*, T.C. Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi S.B.E. İslam Tarihi ve Sanatları Anabilim Dalı (unpublished doctoral thesis) , (Samsun 1999), 172; N. Ayduşlu, *Bayburt Ulu Cami Minaresinin Çini Özellikleri*, Atatürk Üniversitesi Güzel Sanatlar Dergisi 20, (Erzurum 2011), 120.

¹⁹ In Islamic art, it is known that writing was used as a decorative element in almost all Islamic architecture before the Anatolian Seljuk state. Therefore, we should consider such information. For detailed information Şahinoğlu, *op.cit.*, 12.

²⁰ M. Alison Frantz, *Byzantine Illuminated Ornament: A Study in Chronology*, Art Bulletin 16, No: 1, (1934), 62-63.

²¹ S. Ghandi, *Bizans Sanatındaki Sasani Motifleri*, İstanbul Üniversitesi S.B.E. Sanat Tarihi Anabilim Dalı, (unpublished doctoral thesis), (İstanbul 1983), 236. For a photo of this work see also, Ghandi, *op.cit.*, fig. 122.

²² A. Bosselmann Ruickbie, *The Ornamental Decoration Of The Late Byzantine Besarion Cross: Medieval Cultural Transfer Between Byzantium, The West, The Islamic World*



Fig. 6. Soğanlı Tahtalı (St. Barbara) church, between 1006-1021, apsis arch, photo, author, 2017).

Сл. 6. Соанлу Тахталу црква (св. Барбаре), између 1006-1021, лук апсиде, фото, 2017.



Fig. 7. Ürgüp Theodore (Tağar) church, 11th c., south exedra, photo, author, 2017.

Сл. 7. Ургуп, (Таар) црква св. Теодора, 11 век, јужна екседра, фото, аутор, 2017.

some researchers, such as A. Frantz, pointed out that the motif entered into the Byzantine art via Sasanian²³ products, and even believes that the arch of Chosroes in Tak-i Bostan located on a column heading is a sample of the Sassanid art.²⁴ Researches showed that the rich architectural decoration of the Constantinopolitan church of Hagios Polyeuktos (6th century) contain this motif and that could have been a role model for both architectural decoration and inte-

and Russia, La Stauroteca Di Bessarione Fra Constantinopoli E Venezia, (Venezia 2017), 185. In addition, recent research shows that the motif may be used in the Byzantine art as a symbol of dynasty, as well as in the Seljuk art. See also: Bosselman Ruickbie, *op.cit.*, 2017, 186. For thoughts and detailed information on the use of the motif as a dynasty symbol, especially in Byzantine art see also: R. Ousterhout, *The Byzantine Heart*, Zograf 17, (Belgrade 1989), 36-44.

²³ The Sassanids used the heart motif for decorative purposes in various works of art, and the motif developed as ancillary elements in the Sassanid art. Ghandi, *op.cit.*, 236. Also, the motif is accepted as the source of love, courage, loyalty, sadness and joy in Christian art. G. Ferguson, *Sings and Symbols in Christian Art*, Oxford University Press, New York 1955, 67; Ghandi, *op.cit.*, 242.

²⁴ Frantz, *op.cit.*, 62-63. In addition, the inclusion of Sassanid palmette in the heart motifs became fashionable in the Byzantine manuscripts in the 10th and 11th centuries, and this popularity continued in later periods: Frantz, *op.cit.*, 63.

Fig. 8. Göreme Saklı (Göreme 2a) church, 11th c., narthex ceiling, photo, author, 2016.

Сл. 8. Гореме Саклу (Гореме 2а) црква, 11 век, свод нартекса, фото, аутор, 2016.



Fig. 9. Erdemli, church of St Nicholas (Aziz Nikolaos), end of the 10th – beginning of the 11th c., cradle vault, photo, author, 2017.

Сл. 9. Ердемли, црква св. Николе, крај 10 – почетак 11 века, полуобличасти свод, фото, аутор, 2017.



rior decoration of Justinian's Hagia Sophia (532-537). This was also evaluated by the researchers as the influence of the Sassanid and early Islamic art of the early Byzantine decoration.²⁵

Considering the above information, the heart shaped motif seems to appear with the Byzantine decoration repertoire in the earlier period.²⁶ However, the widespread use started in the Middle Byzantine period with the 'Renaissance' of Macedonian dynasty (867-1056) continued during the Komnenian (1056-1204) and late Byzantine period (about 1200-1450).²⁷

The same situation also appears with the wall paintings in the Cappadocia region with the aniconic ornaments. We see the same traces of this motif in seventeen churches dated between ninth and thirteenth centuries.²⁸ The motif also appears on the local wall paintings as aniconic, bordure interiors, edge spaces of the crosses, arch brackets (in the frame with bordure), top surfac-

²⁵ V. Božinović, *Palmette in The Outline of The Heart in Sculptural Decoration of Lazarica and Ravanica: Hypothesis about origin and symbolic significance of this motif*, Zbornik radova sa naučnog simpozijuma Niš i Vizantija, (Niš 2017), 188-189.

²⁶ *ibidem*.

²⁷ Ousterhout, *op.cit.*, 43.

²⁸ One of the eleventh century examples of the motif in the region is depicted in the church of St. Nicholas (Aziz Nikolaos) in Erdemli, see the fig. 9. Also, one of the thirteenth century examples in the region is represented in the Gülşehir Karşı church (1212), see the fig. 10.



Fig. 10. Gülşehir Karşı church, 1212, the southwest column, photo, author, 2017.

Сл. 10. Гулшехир Каршу црква, 1212, југозападни стуб, фото, аутор, 2017.

es of cornice, inner and exterior arch surfaces, empty surfaces left from halos surrounding single portraits as in the case of the Soğanlı Tahtalı (St. Barbara) church (1006-1021) (fig. 6), in the niche inner surfaces as in Ürgüp Theodore church (11th century) (fig. 7) or blank faces from the iconographic landscape scenes as we have seen in Ürgüp Theodore church. Although we mainly came across with the wired palmette motifs or with interconnected rotating and twisted branches, it rarely appears as single motif as in Göreme Saklı church (11th c.), (fig. 8).

The multicultural aspect of Cappadocia is due to its strategic position: many historical sources give details of the coexistence of Christian and Muslim communities. This atmosphere must have led to mutual influences in art. So then, other cultures - Islamic, Caucasian, Syrian, Egyptian, Armenian - on account of the geographical position of the region as a melting pot and a crossroad of different civilizations, have found a place in the most peripheral through the most interesting province of the Byzantine Empire.

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ОДРАЗ ИСЛАМСКЕ И САСАНИДСКЕ УМЕТНОСТИ НА НЕИКОНИЧНУ
ДЕКОРАЦИЈУ ВИЗАНТИЈСКИХ ФРЕСАКА У КАПАДОКИЈИ

Рад се фокусира на анализу неиконичне декорације византијских фресака у Кападокији која је настала као резултат „дијалога“ између различитих култура. Посебан фокус истраживања представља мапирање одраза исламске (и кроз исламску, сасанидске) уметности на декорацију византијских цркава у Кападокији.

Због свог стратешког положаја Кападокија је вековима представљала значајан регионални центар за хришћанско и муслиманско становништва што је, самим тим, иницирало и заједничке утицаје у уметности. Подручје Кападокије у централној Анатолији је кроз историју функционисало и као веома важан монашки центар православног хришћанства. Будући да су бројне монашке заједнице биле настањене у непосредној близини исламских царстава и калифата, кападокијске цркве су у периоду од 11. до 13. века често украшаване са различитим псеудо-куфским орнаментима инспирисаним арапском калиграфијом. У декорацији фресака неретко је заступљен и мотив срцолике, односно „сасанидске“, палмете који је у византијску уметност највероватније ушао посредством сасанидских производа. Апликација овог мотива приметна је у декорацији кападокијских цркава између 9. и 13. века.