

The Representation of Christ in Byzantine Hermitages: A Comparison

JENNA GONZALES

A common feature among the church decoration of Byzantine Cappadocia is the depiction of Christ in human form. It is primarily within hermitages, where ascetic monks dwelled, that there was a demand for this particular kind of image. During the Middle Byzantine period, Christological narratives became the standard for mural decoration, since the images could stand for the theology and history of the church. Two scenes of the Crucifixion, one at the hermitage of Niketas the Stylite and the other at the New Church of Tokalı Kilise, give special emphasis to the dual nature of Christ while providing evidence of the historical event as told by the Scriptures. The Crucifixion scenes found at the chapel of Niketas and the New Church at Tokalı Kilise correspond to the function of the church primarily as a space to perform the liturgy in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice. Situated near the altar, the paintings convey a central theme of transformation as witnessed by the monks performing the Eucharistic liturgy. Expressing the divine through the human experience—that is, through the senses—is a vital part of the spiritual encounter and, as such, requires a particular kind of imagery that promises salvation and eternal life.

The spread of Christianity had a tremendous effect on the culture and life of Cappadocia. Christianity was prevalent throughout the region as early as the second century C.E.¹ During the eighth and ninth centuries, Arab invasions began to deplete the population and threatened to overcome the Byzantine Empire. Miraculously, the eastern provinces were regained, and the prominence that

¹ Lyn Rodley and Nicole Thierry. "Cappadocia," in Grove Art Online, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T013854>, from Oxford Art Online, accessed October 10, 2010, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/>.

Christianity once had was restored. The period marks the gradual uprising of monasticism, particularly in the Tufa valleys of Kizil Irmak.² The area proved to be a desirable location for monks seeking a landscape that resembled those described in the narratives of the prophets in the Old and New Testaments. As a result, many hermits assumed an ascetic life in the desert, where pilgrims would travel to visit them. These same pilgrims doubled as donors who funded the decoration of numerous rock churches throughout Cappadocia.

Inscriptions such as the one found at the hermitage of Niketas the Stylite were included as a way of celebrating the pious acts of wealthy donors. The patron associated with the decoration of the chapel of Niketas is commonly known as Eustratios the *Kleisourarch*, commander of a military division. There has been some speculation about Eustratios's reasons for commissioning the chapel, the general belief being that he wanted to commemorate a military victory that had been supplied to him by the prayers of a monk.³ A second inscription was also found in the chapel and reveals the identity of the monk as being Niketas, who followed St. Simeon the Elder, likely the first hermit to establish himself on the top of a column. It has been speculated that directly below Niketas's column was a chapel decorated with a program and style of painting that is more or less dated to the early eighth century.⁴ It has been assigned an early date on the basis of composition, which emphasizes a narrative cycle recounting the lives of Christ and the saints. On the nave of the chapel is a Crucifixion scene that is flanked by representations of St. Simeon and the Apostles. The inscriptions were placed alongside each figure to identify them but also to call attention to the sanctity of both human and divine forms. For instance, an inscription found inside of Niketas's chapel reads, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins

² Ann Wharton Epstein. "The Problem of Provincialism: Byzantine Monasteries in Cappadocia and Monks in South Italy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. (1979): 29.

³ Ahmet Ertuğ and Catherine Jolivet-Lévy. *Sacred Art of Cappadocia: Byzantine Murals from the 6th to 13th Centuries* (Istanbul: Ertuğ & Kocabıyık, 2006).

⁴ Lyn Rodley. *Cave Monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 189.

of the world.”⁵ The meaning behind the passage gains more strength when paired with the actual image. In order to fully describe the imperceptible details of Christian theology, artists and patrons in Cappadocia turned to art to express their beliefs and ideas.

Representing these complexities in visual form became problematic and resulted in the institutionalization of a standardized code for image production. The Quinisext Council of 692 enforced a litany of canons that affected art directly. The eighty-second canon, for example, declared that the representation of Christ should be shown in human form instead of symbolically as a lamb.⁶ There were numerous changes made to the pictorial schemes of churches throughout the region.

In the Göreme Valley in particular, where the New Church of Tokalı Kilise is located, there was a gradual shift towards depicting Christ in human form. Tokalı Kilise underwent several stages of construction, the first being as a functional hermitage. A vast amount of wealth went into the decoration of the interior, which incorporated the use of costly materials such as lapis lazuli. Once again, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the narrative cycle, which features scenes from the lives of Christ and his disciples. The Crucifixion scene at the chapel of Niketas is one example of a composition that uses saintly figures such as John the Baptist to underscore Christ’s human nature. At Tokalı Kilise, the figure of Jeremy points to the Crucifixion as if to reinforce the sacrifice of the lamb.⁷ To commemorate their pious act, the patrons, Constantine and Leon, instructed the workshop of Nikephoros to include the inscription, “[y]our (most holy church) was completely decorated by Constantine out of love for the monastery (of the heavenly angels). He adorns his new work with twenty venerable images....”⁸ As the inscription implies, the church contains a number of Christological scenes as well as hagiographic depictions, but it is the image of the Crucifixion in the main apse of the church

⁵ Rodley, 186.

⁶ Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82.

⁷ Ertuğ and Jolivet-Lévy, 50.

⁸ Rodley, 218.

that bears mentioning. The Crucifixion, in addition to showing Christ in human form, seems to be referencing liturgical events such as the transubstantiation of the Eucharist.

Illustrating the conversion of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ proved to be just as difficult as explaining verbally, in theological terms, his dual nature. The problem of representing Christ's two natures was fiercely debated throughout the eighth and ninth centuries, the period commonly known as the Byzantine Iconoclasm. Consequently, leaders of the church began to deeply criticize all acts of worship incorporating religious iconography. Any material aid that might assist in pagan rituals, such as sacrificial victims, shrines, and images, were immediately renounced.⁹ Spiritual aids were prohibited for contradicting the Second Commandment, which forbids graven images. If, however, the decoration was in any way symbolic or narrative, it was deemed acceptable.

In response to these changes, images of the Crucifixion along with non-figural images such as the crucifix became the standard motifs for church decoration of the period.¹⁰ The chapel of Niketas exemplifies the artistic style of the eighth century, since a prevalence of crosses dominates much of the scheme. There has been some debate about the influence of imagery of the Crucifixion on religious groups such as the Cult of the Cross.¹¹ The cult encouraged the production of images that might help heretics "understand...the depths of the humiliation of the Word of God...that we may recall to our memory his conversation in the flesh, his passion and salutary death, and his redemption which was wrought in the whole world."¹² As the passage implies, Christological scenes became a popular theme among the interiors of churches, since it was the historical events of Christ's life that provided the model for monks like Niketas.

⁹ von Grunebaum, G. E. "Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Influence of the Islamic Environment." *History of Religions*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Summer, 1962), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062034>, (accessed November, 17 2010), 5.

¹⁰ Rodley and Thierry, "Cappadocia."

¹¹ Rodley, *Cave Monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia*, 189.

¹² von Grunebaum, "Byzantine Iconoclasm," 4.

The development of Christological narrative in church programming may have begun with single isolated figures and evolved into complex narrative cycles by the Middle Byzantine period.¹³ In general, the predisposition towards narrative was common both before and after the Byzantine Iconoclasm. Historical narratives were appropriate subjects for church decoration, since the themes were derived from Christian traditions and could not be traced back to paganism. In addition, the architectural space of the church could allow continuous narratives to be extended throughout the interior without disruption. This appreciation for narrative seems to be the case with the New Church of Tokalı Kilise, where the space from the eastern side of the barrel vault to the entrance of the apse is covered with registers of Christological scenes. The conch of the central apse features the image of the Crucifixion, which is unusual for a Byzantine church. The novelty of the image also comes from the fact that because the artist painted the scene on a curved surface, he had to add a slight modification to the arms of the cross so that it could be read horizontally.¹⁴ To ensure legibility, the scenes are presented in sequential order with organizational divisions that are provided by the architecture. Not all of the figures are neatly arranged, since there are saints who clearly stand isolated from the larger scheme. The combination of narrative with single figures was not introduced until later on and can only be explained in terms of the specific liturgical needs of the particular region. In all probability, the purpose of the narrative was to represent a liturgical calendar of the Christian feast cycle.¹⁵

If Middle Byzantine mural decoration was meant to represent a calendar of feasts, then perhaps the most important dates would be those that occurred during Lent. Literary evidence suggests that stylites venerated the life of St. Simeon because it was during Lent that he practiced severe mortification.¹⁶ Each year he would go without food until he became deathly ill. By celebrating the

¹³ Ann Wharton Epstein, *Tokali Kilise: Tenth-Century Metropolitan Art in Byzantine Cappadocia* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1986), 45.

¹⁴ Epstein, *Tokali Kilise*, 24.

¹⁵ Harvey, "The Stylite's Liturgy," 523.

¹⁶ Harvey, 523.

Eucharistic liturgy, Simeon broke his fast and was restored back to life. Like the bread and wine of the Eucharist, Simeon and his followers were transformed. One may postulate that placing an image of the Crucifixion over the altar, like at the New Church of Tokalı Kilise, indicates the need to express these ideas.

By observing the decoration of the church, it becomes clear that a great deal of thought was put into the arrangement of the figures. Compared to the New Church of Tokalı Kilise, the chapel of Niketas the Stylite contains a much more ambiguous program of Christological and hagiographic scenes. Niketas's chapel differs from the New Church in that it reserves the most significant space, the conch, for the Virgin and Child. In addition, the Crucifixion scene is placed on the east wall lunette and is accompanied by the solitary figures of St. Simeon and John the Baptist. Paired with each figure is an inscription that identifies the saints and a passage that reads, "[f]or the prayer and salvation and the forgiveness of sins of Niketas, stylite, by the faith of the ascetic...."¹⁷ It seems as though Niketas wanted to redeem himself and ensure his salvation through a lifetime of pious devotion and ritual worship. Redemption and salvation were thought to be attainable through enacting the Eucharistic liturgy, which would explain why so much attention was given to the space where this ceremony took place. The mural decoration of Niketas's chapel reflects the intended function of the church as a sacred space to celebrate and remember Christ's sacrifice.

A ceremonial practice such as the Eucharistic liturgy involves each and every one of the senses, which makes an encounter with the divine ever more conceivable. The incense, chants, and processions all contribute to the feeling of being a witness to the events commemorated in the liturgy. Viewing the panels of Christological narratives painted on the walls of the church, holy men like Niketas may have been inspired to devote themselves to being witnesses and practitioners of spiritual worship. After all, the body and senses are the means for bridging the gap between the human and the divine. By

¹⁷ Rodley, *Cave Monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia*, 187.

practicing asceticism, the monk's body was transformed into a vessel for containing the divine within the earthly realm. It is not surprising that themes of resurrection, victory over death, and redemption dominated the interiors of Byzantine churches.

Perhaps the reason why Christ is portrayed in such a triumphant manner in Byzantine church interiors is because he was meant to embody both the physical and spiritual hardships that monks like Niketas endured for much of their lives. The extent to which they would dedicate themselves to performing pious acts, such as praying for the forgiveness of sins for others or commissioning expensive church decorations, suggests that these holy men were on a quest for salvation. Based on the evidence that remains from texts and architectural decoration, the hermitages of Cappadocia were sacred spaces with a form and function that provide some insight into the cultural and artistic developments of the period.

The hermitages of Niketas the Stylite and the New Church at Tokalı Kilise are but two examples of the painted decorations that remain from the Byzantine Era; both depict the figural representation of Christ at the moment of the Crucifixion. Contemporary theological debates resulted in the intervention of the Catholic Church on matters concerning the representation of Christ. In response to these ongoing changes, mural decoration was modified to accommodate liturgical needs. Christological scenes became the standard for church programs because the images were didactic symbols of Christ's mission on earth. As a historical account of Christ's sacrifice and triumph over death, these murals inspired the pious acts of ascetic monks eager for forgiveness and salvation.

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