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ICONOGRAPHY OF THE PARAPET SLAB FROM THE CHURCH OF ST. THOMAS IN KUTI: NEW REFLECTIONS AND POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS**

ABSTRACT: In the ruins of the church of St. Thomas in Kuti, in Boka Kotorska, Montenegro, the remains of a stone altar screen were discovered, dated to the last third of the 11th century. The preserved rectangular parapet slab, decorated with the scene of the Adoration of the Cross, belongs to the so-called pre-Romanesque sculptural decoration and represents an exceptional and to this day rare example of a preserved part of the altar partition with the aforementioned theme. In previous research, no great attention has been paid to the iconographic peculiarities of the scene, the origin and development of which researchers have linked to the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527–565) in the 6th century. This paper aims to present new reflections on the iconographic development of the Adoration of the Cross scene in the period of Late Antiquity, while opening the possibility of its earlier origin, most likely at the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century, and provides new interpretations of the meaning of the scene within the sacred space of the pre-Romanesque church of St. Thomas.

KEYWORDS: parapet slab, church of St. Thomas in Kuti, iconography, Late Antiquity.

The church of St. Thomas is located in the village of Kuti, on a hill above the Bay of Kotor. Most extensive research so far was carried out by Ilija Pušić in the period from 1959 to 1962 and resulted in the conclusions published with Jovan Kovačević, based first of all on historical circumstances, and further on architectural, sculptural, and artistic solutions. It was concluded that the church was built in the second half of the 11th century and most likely decorated shortly after its construction, in the last third of the same century

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Fig. 1. Parapet slab with a scene of Adoration of the Cross, church of St. Thomas in Kuti, third quarter of the 11th century (photo: Miodrag Marković)

(Kovačević, Pušić 1959: 156–159; Pušić 1986: 74).[1] It is a one-nave building divided by pilasters and arches into three bays, with an east apse, which is four-sided on the outside and semi-circular on the inside. There is a possibility, based on the found remains of trapezoidal stone, that the building was vaulted and had a dome because there were vaulted niches on the north and south sides, two in each aisle (Пушић 1986: 74). According to its characteristics and since this type of building was largely used in the construction of other monuments, such as the church of St. Michael in Ston, St. Peter in Omiš, and others (Marasović 1960: 36; 1994: 211, 219; Марковић 2016: 155, with literature), it can be concluded that it belongs the so-called pre-Romanesque style, which was fully developed in the mentioned region until the 11th century, whose roots can be found primarily within the Byzantine cultural circle (Пушић 1986: 74; Pušić 2006: 32–34, 108–113; Живковић 2016: 357).

Further archaeological research within the building revealed remains of stone sculpture, among which the parapet slab, part of the altar partition, stands out due to its preservation and iconographic features. Today, it is kept in the Mirko Komnenović City Museum in Herceg Novi (Fig. 1). It is a rectangular plate divided into two parts, once situated on the south side of the altar screen. The upper, proportionally smaller and narrower part, which is in the form of an architrave beam, contains a decoration executed in high relief in the form of floral interlacing (vines) into which representations of two lions and two

[1] At the end of the 19th century, the church caught the attention of researchers and was mentioned for the first time in the descriptions of Đorđe Stratimirović (Стратимировић 1895: 28). After that, the interest in the church increased, so the works of Sava Nakićenović (Накићеновић 1913: 469), Miloje Vasić (Васић 1922: 33), Djurdje Bošković (Бошковић 1957: 181) and finally Jovan Kovačević and Ilija Pušić (Ковачевић, Пушић 1959: 156–159; Пушић 1986: 73–77), as well as Vojislav Korać (Корać 1976: 155–172), Igor Fisković (Fisković 2001: 415), Tomislav Marasović (Marasović 1960: 36; 1984: 153; 1994: 83–88; 2013: 339–342), Miodrag Marković (Марковић 2016: 155, 159–162), and others, should be highlighted. After the archaeological excavations and the analysis of the remains of the building and the church furnishings, a more detailed investigation of the well-preserved parapet slab began, which previously has been mostly studied by Jovanka Maksimović (Максимовић 1971: 27).



Fig. 2. Detail of the parapet slab (south side), church of St. Thomas in Kuti
(photo: Miodrag Marković)

birds, arranged alternately, are inserted (entwined) (Pušić 1969; Пушић 1986).[2] The lower, larger, rectangular part of the slab contains, in the centre of the composition, a cross with slightly extended arms, which is decorated with two braids made of a three-part strip, which form a knot at the intersection. On the left and right sides of the cross, there are representations of birds (eagles) and angels (maybe archangels) in a prayer position. The scene is defined as the Adoration of the Cross (*Adoratio crucis*), the origin of which is recognized in the art of the 6th century (Максимовић 1971: 27; Пушић 1986: 75).

The upper part of the parapet slab can be viewed artistically as a separate unit (Fig. 2). A floral interlacing, made of a three-parted stem with leaves, stretches along the entire length, horizontally. It spirally twists and turns, forming circles, or medallions, of which there are four in total. Tripartite and spiral leaves develop from them, inside which there are alternating representations of a lion, with curled tail, and a bird. At this point, the existence of another part of the parapet slab (which used to be on the northern side of the altar screen) must be mentioned, of which only the upper part has been preserved (Fig. 3). It is also in the form of an architrave beam on which, in high relief, a vine is represented, i.e. a floral motif that twists spirally, forming circles (three in total), from which leaves grow. Inside the circles or medallions, unlike the previous example, three birds are represented, of which the central one has spread wings.

[2] Some researchers recognized the images of dragons (Ђурић 1994: 244), while Jovanka Maksimović did not define which animals are in question but states that "a tripartite vine, with entwined animals and birds, twists along the upper edge" (Максимовић 1971: 27).



Fig. 3. Detail of the parapet slab (north side), church of St. Thomas in Kuti (photo: Miodrag Marković)

It is a motif that has been found in Christian art since the period of Late Antiquity. It appeared in the ancient Graeco-Roman tradition and was very common in the art of the Middle Ages. From the 4th century, in the art throughout the Roman Empire, numerous examples of floral motifs have been preserved, which spirally twist to form a circle or medallion with leaves, inside which various motifs such as birds, lions, antelopes, dogs, fruits, flowers, amphorae, various geometric motifs, and others, are placed. Such examples can be found in funerary art like on the mosaics located in the ambulatory of the Mausoleum of Santa Costanza in Rome from the mid-4th century. They are used in the decoration of palaces such as the floor mosaic with birds in Caesarea from the 6th century, as well as in the decoration of sacred buildings, like the examples of the floor mosaic of the basilica in Aquileia from the 4th century and the mosaic of the Archbishop's Chapel in Ravenna from the 6th century. Occasionally, figural motifs or entire scenes can be found within the floral wreath, such as on the example of a tapestry from Egypt depicting Alexander the Great hunting dated around 7–8th century or a chalice from Antioch from the 6th century with a representation of Christ in a wreath of acanthus (Fig. 4) (Weitzmann 1978: 91, no. 81, 606–608, no. 542). Therefore, the aforementioned motifs of floral interlacing with birds and other animals, interweaving, geometric motifs, and others, have found their place in various forms of art and on numerous subjects.

In the art of the 5th and early 6th centuries, floral motifs were often used to frame scenes, which created the impression of infinity, constant flow, or continuity, which can also be achieved by using geometric motifs of braids, interweaving, or zigzag lines (Kitzinger 1951: 81, 98, fig. 18–20; Maguire 2012: 11–12; Grabar 1995: 202–203; Вранешевић 2014). This is exactly the case with the parapet slab from the church of St. Thomas. The wreath with floral and animal motifs can be seen as a frame of the scene located below, and considering its original position, representing at the same time a liminal space that separates part of

the nave of the church from the altar, as will be discussed further in the text.[3]

This type of floral motif, which follows the form of a stylized acanthus wreath and leaves or vines, has a rich, multi-layered, and ambiguous symbolism. It has its roots in ancient Greek art, carrying primarily funerary characteristics since, as Vitruvius testifies, it was growing around the grave of a deceased girl. Later, it acquired the connotation of rebirth or the Resurrection, and with the spread of Christianity, it continued to carry a similar meaning (Vitruvius 1914: 104; Savo, Kumbaric 2014: 109–115). Therefore, floral motifs and birds, which often appear as symbols of peace on Early Christian monuments, in this context can refer to the Resurrection, as well as the Garden of Eden, i.e. the *locus amoenus* (Вранешевић 2014). For the sake of a clearer understanding of the symbolic meaning of the relief, it is important to look at the second part of the parapet slab with the theme of the Adoration of the Cross.



Fig. 4. Chalice from Antioch, the 6th century (photo taken from https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/468346)

The lower part of the parapet slab represents a rare iconographic example preserved to this day in the Medieval Art of the 11th and 12th centuries. In the center of the composition, as already emphasized, is a cross with interlaced braids on its crossing. On both sides are eagles with spread wings, facing the cross. Next to them, on the left and right, are standing figures of angels or archangels, also facing the cross, with their hands in a prayer position.[4] They have halos, large eyes, and wings (Fig. 5). The figure on the left has

[3] This is not a lone example in art. It can be seen in numerous examples of church furnishings, the sculptural decoration of building facades, ciboriums such as in the church of St. Tryphon in Kotor, parapet slabs like the one in the church of St. Michael in Kotor, in Zavala, and others (Никодим Богосављевић 2010). Similar examples can be found in Western European art and the art of the East, such as the one preserved in the Walter Art Museum, inv. no. 27.535, see. https://art.thewalters.org/detail/23314/section-of-a-chancel-barrier-/. Numerous literature sources deal with art history objects and monuments in the period from Late Antiquity to the late Middle Ages and just a few examples are cited here (Drandaki et al: 2013; Toman 1997).

[4] If we compare this scene with a similar example of a spolia in relief found on the western facade of the outer narthex of the church of Đurđevi Stupovi in Budimlja, dated to the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century, where there are representations of archangels between the double cross, as evidenced by the



Fig. 5. Detail of the parapet slab, representation of an angel/archangel (photo: Miodrag Marković)

a noticeably more stooped posture, while the right one is upright. As already emphasized, it is a scene that is defined in scholarly literature as the theme of the Adoration of the Cross (*Adoratio crucis*) and, judging by previous research "known from large mosaics and objects of applied art of the Justinian era" (Максимовић 1971: 27)[5], i.e. the 6th century.

remains of the inscriptions (Јовановић, Томовић 2011: 505), it is very possible that here we are also talking about the archangels Michael and Gabriel. Similar iconography is to be seen in the example of a paten from the 6th century from Constantinople (Weitzmann 1978: 537–538, no. 482). The author here expresses her gratitude to Academician Prof. Miodrag Marković for pointing out the spolia in the church of Đurđevi Stupovi in Budimlja and for the useful comments and advice related to the scene of the Adoration of the Cross in the art of the Middle Ages.

[5] The same is stated by I. Pušić in his work on the church of St. Thomas in Kuti (Пушић 1986: 75).



Fig. 6. Codex Glazier (MS G. 67), fols. 214v–215r (photo taken from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Glazier)

The scene certainly points to Late Antique art whose individual iconographic characteristics indicate a connection with the Coptic and Insular traditions of the mentioned period. Thus, interlaced bands, such as those that decorate the surface of the cross, appear frequently in Coptic art, like in the Codex Glazier (MS G. 67), dated around 400 AD, which is also the only known example of such a cross in the art of manuscript decoration (Plummer 1968; Weitzmann 1978: 494; Schenke 2012: 846–853; Atiya 1991: 162–164) (Fig. 6).[6] They were firstly connected to the later Irish art because they are common in manuscripts of the Insular tradition, although the influence certainly came from Christian Egypt.[7] It is a representation of the Egyptian cross (*crux ansata*) on fol. 215r, which is woven in red, yellow, and brown, with floral motifs in the form of spirals emerging from the left and right arms of the cross. At the base, on the sides of the cross, are peacocks facing each other with twigs in their beaks, two smaller birds on the arms of the cross, and one in the loop of the *crux ansata*. This is also the only "decoration" of the manuscript which, as one of the characteristics of the Late Antique art, places an ornamental cross at the end of the codex (Weitzmann 1978: 494).

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned example, as well as the parapet slab in Kuti, it can be noticed that these are iconographically similar solutions – crosses "decorated" with braids and birds, placed on the left and right sides of the cross (peacocks or perhaps eagles). It is interesting to note another similarity between the interlacings of the Codex Glazier and our example reflected in the fact that in both cases the interlacings and the knots they form are longer by one node on the left side of the arm of the cross than on the right side. In other words, the knots (entanglements) go in a row, without interruption, but the right arm of the cross is by one node shorter (smaller) than the left arm. At the same time, these are the only, to our knowledge, known examples of crosses decorated with interlacing that are of unequal shape, size, and number of knots between the two arms.

[6] Dating of the manuscript is still debatable in scholarly literature, so we can hypothesize the time of its creation which ranges from the beginning of the 5th to the end of the 6th century. In 1994, a radiocarbon examination of part of the binding of the manuscript was carried out, which on that occasion was roughly dated between 420 and 598 AD (Sharpe 1996: 381–400). Also, based on palaeographical analyses, researchers dated the manuscript between 400 and 500 AD (Alexander 1978; Buzi 2018: 15–67, esp. 28).

[7] One such example is seen in the Book of Durrow (Robinson 1908). For this reason, researchers believe that the Insular manuscripts, both of Ireland and England, were created under Coptic influences (Bober 1967: 30–49; Weitzmann 1978: 494 (444a); Werner 1990, 174–223).



Fig. 7. Spolia of the western facade of the outer narthex, church of Đurđevi Stupovi in Budimlja, end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century (photo: Бошковић 1975: 417, fig. 2)

Images of birds, or in this case eagles, are very frequent in the art of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. They are here placed at the sides of the cross, joined by angels/archangels in a posture of prayer. There is a similar iconography on the parapet slab with the scene of the Adoration of the Cross in Dabravina (Максимовић 1971: 46; Никодим Богосављевић 2010: 38, T. X, 1) and on the relief on the western facade of the outer narthex of the church of Đurđevi Stupovi in Budimlja but without the images of birds (Fig. 7) (Бошковић 1975: 409–415; Чанак-Медић 1989: 103–104; Јовановић, Томовић 2011: 499, 505–509)[8]. Iconographic representations of the cross with images of birds, as already mentioned, have been found earlier in art, as seen in the example of the Samager casket from the 5th century (today kept in the Archaeological Museum in Venice). On its upper part (lid), in the form of an architrave beam, there is a one-armed cross decorated with precious stones, *crux gemmata*, with two birds on both sides. The representations of doves in floral wreath allude to Elysian fields and places of eternal bliss, which is directly taken from the ancient heritage on one hand, and textual sources on the other (Вранешевић 2014 with literature). Dating from the same century is the mosaic floor of the baptistery from Skhira, in southern Tunisia, on which there is a series of jeweled crosses placed within the colonnade. Birds with flowers and twigs are represented in the arches of the colonnade (Jensen 2017: 120–122, fig. 5. 8). Our example, however, has representations of eagles, the most majestic of all birds, which emphasize the heavenly, solar symbolism that often signified the ruler's power and authority and was also the main instrument of God's will (Никодим Богосављевић 2010:

[8] The above-mentioned relief was placed on the western facade of the outer narthex of the church as a spolia and was once probably part of the parapet slab (Јовановић, Томовић 2011: 505). Researchers proposed other possibilities – that the relief was placed "at the top of the triangular pediment of the altar screen", and that it stood "in the tympanum of the portal of the church" (Чанак-Медић 1989: 104) or that it was "frontal part of a sarcophagus" (Бошковић 1975: 411). Jovanović and Tomović pointed out that in question is the panel which, when it lost its original function, became a tombstone (as evidenced by the inscription) and was finally used as a spolia on the facade of the building (Јовановић, Томовић 2011: 506).

84–86; Поповић 2021: 348–354). In patristic exegesis, eagles denote supernatural beings, angels, or even Christ (Kazhdan 1991: 669).

However, the main motif that occupies the entire space of the lower part of the parapet slab is a cross decorated with interlaces and knots. Although the scene as a whole belongs iconographically to the 6th century, its appearance in art can be found somewhat earlier.

In the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians he indicates "For the preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who perish; but unto us who are saved, it is the power of God", which inevitably initiated the reflections of the patristic fathers about the symbolic value and significance of the cross, especially in the second half of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd century. Justin Martyr and Tertullian imagined the cross as a *crux commissa* reminiscent of the cross on which Christ was crusified (Dölger 1962: 5–10; Armstrong 1979: 34–38; Longenecker 2015: 149–161; Jensen 2017; Garipzanov 2018: 81). From that moment on, we can talk about the spread of this Christian sign among the faithful, which first served as an apotropaic sign of blessing and salvation[9], and from the 4th century began to appear in the art of catacombs, churches, and mausoleums independently, flanked by birds and floral motifs, or framed by a triumphal wreath, etc. (Spier 2007: 75, 89, 515; Maraković, Kos 2020: 23–46). The overall development of the image of the cross occurred during the Theodosian dynasty in the 5th and early 6th centuries, as can be seen on the mosaic in the apse of the church of Santa Pudenciana in Rome (402–417) created during the pontificate of Innocent I (401–417) or in the mosaic decoration of the triumphal arch of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (432) created during the time of Pope Sixtus III (432–440), where the cross is flanked by the apostles Peter and Paul, while in the background there are four symbols of the evangelists. These images appeared simultaneously with the spread and distribution of particles of the Holy Cross – *Lignum crucis*, especially in the territory of today's Italy, when they became an integral part of altar spaces, book covers, reliquaries, etc. (Baert 2004). So, in the 5th century, apostles but also birds, peacocks, or the symbols of the evangelists began to appear around the representation of the cross.

It should be emphasized that during the reign of Emperor Theodosius II (402–450), the place of Christ's crucifixion and suffering, the cross from Calvary (Theophanes 1883–1886: 86), was highlighted as the central focus of Jerusalem, but also of the entire Christian community. From the second half of the 4th century, the place of Christ's burial, or more precisely the Anastasis rotunda, has become the central point of pilgrimage, the *omphalos,* the *locus sanctus* of collective memory, which reflected in the inner space of the church in a symbolic sense and determined the place as the image of Christ's triumph over death, the place of eternal bliss in the Garden of Eden (Weitzmann 1974: 31–35; Bacci 2016: 206–225; 2021: 265–282; Jensen 2017: 100–101; Laato 2021: 175–184).[10] Therefore, as expected,

[9] About the act of engraving the sign of the cross on the forehead of Christians, see. Garipzanov 2018: 82. About the apotropaic meaning of the cross, see. Mango 1986: 83; Garipzanov 2018: 99–105; Filipova, Types of crosses present in artworks found in Macedonia, https://www.academia.edu/9606803/Types_of_crosses_present_in_artworks_found_in_Macedonia_Systasis_24

[10] It is interesting to emphasize that, based on the reconstructions of researchers, primarily Krista Im, in the Chapel of Adam within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, an apse was decorated with mosaics with

the cross is emphasized in art with the aim to visually encourage the mental image of believers who (co)participate and bear witness to the truth of the Crucifixion and Christ's triumph during the liturgy in the sacred space of the church (as evidenced, apart from images, by written sources such as the Syrian hymn from the 6th century created on the occasion of the consecration of the cathedral of St. Sophia in Edessa) (Baldwin Smith 1950: 74, 89–91; Mcvey 1983: 91–121, esp. 95; Jensen 2017: 122). It is a complex and multi-layered idea that continuously emphasizes the importance of the altar and pre-altar space and arouses emotions in the faithful during the Eucharist.

Therefore, the author believes that there is a symbolic meaning of the visual narrative of the parapet slab of the church of St. Thomas in Kuti with the aim to symbolically highlight the place of Christ's crucifixion in the pre-altar space, but also announce the place of his future triumph that will ensure the salvation of the entire human race. Floral motifs with entwined birds, lions, crosses, eagles, and angels/archangels awaken hope for eternal life in the eyes, thoughts, and hearts of believers. The parapet slab becomes a material, visual, and above all visible and suggestive focus, a place that marks the liminal space within the sacred space of the church that is filled with symbolic multi-layered meaning. Also, the prominent interwoven cross flanked by eagles and angels/archangels at the same time becomes an integral part of the liturgical act, imbued with a fragrant cloud of incense that evokes its spiritual, triumphal, and eternal nature. Finally, iconographic variations of the cross, as well as the place where it appears, including different techniques on different materials, flourished in the 6th century throughout Mediterranean Christendom, on public monuments, mass-produced objects made of metal, precious and semi-precious stones, and on various luxury items such as silverware or jewelry, but also coinage (especially on the gold coins of Emperor Tiberius II Constantine in the second half of the 6th century and intensively during the time of Emperor Heraclius at the beginning of the 7th century) (Baert 2004; Morrison 2013: 71–73). Then, the iconographic type of the cross flanked by the apostles was established, especially in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. It largely resembles representations from the 4th and 5th centuries from Rome, Ravenna, and other larger centers of the western part of the Roman Empire.

The extraordinary importance of the sign of the cross in the visual culture of the 6th century is also shown by special iconographic modifications – the scene of St. Peter and St. Paul bowing to the Latin cross, which refers to the Cross of Calvary, also appears on objects of Palestinian art in the 6th and 7th centuries. This scene is similar to the iconographic composition popular in Rome in the second half of the 4th century. However, on the earlier prototype, Sts. Peter and Paul were not surrounding the cross, but the *Chi Rho*. Some researchers believe that the model for the development of this scene was the representation of the Adoration of the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*), which developed in the 5th century and can be seen in the example of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls (*San*

images of *crux gemmata* flanked by angels. This cross can be related to the one that Emperor Theodosius II gave to the Great Church as a replacement for the previous one. This is supported by the appearance of the cross on the emperor's coinage (Ihm 1960: 90–91, 194, fig. 24; Bacci 2021: 275).

Paolo fuori le Mura) (Thunø 2015: 16; Leclaire 2005–2008: 63–78). An iconographically similar decoration can be seen in the catacombs of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus in which Christ is surrounded by Sts. Peter and Paul, while in the same axis below Christ, there is an image of the *Agnus Dei* surrounded by martyrs (Thunø 2015: 189).

When it comes to the parapet slab in Kuti, perhaps the closest iconographic example was found on the already mentioned relief from the western facade of the church of Đurđevi Stupovi in Budimlja and parts of partition slabs in Dabravina (Бошковић 1975: 411; Чанак-Медић 1989: 104; Јовановић, Томовић 2011: 505; Никодим Богосављевић 2010: 38, T.X, 1). However, when it comes to iconographic models in Late Antique art, the paten from the Constantinople workshop of the 6th century should be pointed out as containing the representation of a cross (*crux gemmata*) surrounded by the archangels Michael and Gabriel with nimbus, swirling clothes, with hands raised in prayer or glory, that is, in worship, and four rivers of Paradise flowing under their feet. In his reflections on the ampoules from Monza, Andre Grabar found similar iconographic elements with the paten, and he saw examples in monumental painting but left the question of dating open (Grabar 1958: XXXII–XXXIII; Ihm 1960: 91–92, 194–195). A silver book cover from the 6th century with a picture of a cross flanked by martyrs has been found in the territory of today's Syria (Weitzmann 1979: 619). The scene is framed by intertwining vines that emerge from amphorae placed in the corners of the codex cover, and which spirally twist to form medallions within which leaves, bunches, baskets, and birds are placed. In the center of the composition is a cross with extended arms supported by the figures of two young saints with halos, which were once gilded[11]. From the same period, a glass chalice from today's Syria, has been preserved, and although quite damaged, decorated on both sides. On one side, around the *crux gemmata*, angels and orantes (apostles?) are represented with the letters Alpha and Omega (Rev. 21: 6, 22: 13), while on the other side, a smaller cross is represented under a canopy, flanked by angels with wings and codices in hands (Fig. 8). The scene of the Adoration of the Cross decorates the liturgical



Fig. 8. Glass chalice, from today's Syria, the 6th or 7th century (photo taken from https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/479057)

[11] It cannot be determined with certainty whether they are apostles, saints, martyrs, or evangelists, given that all figures can be found on the covers of books from the Late Antique period (Grabar 1954: 9–14; Ihm 1960: 88–89; Ostoia 1969: No. 9).

cup that served as a vessel for wine during the Eucharist, emphasizing the cross of Golgotha, whose importance, as already stated, has been distinguished since the 5th century, and especially after Heraclius' conquest of Persia and the Heavenly Jerusalem in the 7th century (Elbern 1962: 17–41; Weitzmann 1978: 609–610; Vikan 1995: 82–86; Jensen 2017: 98; Bacci 2021: 273–274, fig. 3).

If we take specific consideration to the iconographic solution of the parapet slab of the church of St. Thomas in Kuti, dated to the second third of the 11th century, as well as the place of its location in the pre-altar area of the temple, the one that separates the space of the nave from the altar, we must consider the possibility of a symbolic meaning of a cross decorated with interlacing and flanked by eagles and angels/archangels, encrusted with floral heavenly motifs with birds and lions. They together point to the Holy Cross and its role as the *omphalos*, the center of Christendom, which at the same time points to the future eternal life we await and is physically present in the space of the church to evoke the future role of eternal and continuous triumph. Devotees, therefore, did not observe the actual materiality of the object, but experienced it symbolically, during prayer or liturgy, as the most eloquent sign of Christ's victory over death and eternal life in the Garden of Eden. Theodore of Mopsuestia at the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century identified the Divine Liturgy with Christ's suffering, and saw the deacons who participated in it as angels (Lupi 1977: 29–42), while the Tree of Life was seen as "the axial determinant of Paradise, Garden of Eden, or the Third Heaven" (Врањешевић 2014: 112), *axis mundi*, which connects Heaven and Earth. Therefore, the parapet slab of the church of St. Thomas in Kuti, being in a place that physically and symbolically separates the space of the nave from the altar area, indicates the iconographic type of Adoration, i.e. Adoration of the Cross, the Calvary Cross, the umbilical place of Passion and Triumph over death, while at the same time referring to Jerusalem as a prominent place of celebration of the cross, which, as already seen, pervades and develops in Christian iconography from the discovery of this most significant Christian relic until today.

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ИКОНОГРАФИЈА ПАРАПЕТНЕ ПЛОЧЕ ЦРКВЕ СВ. ТОМЕ У КУТИМА: НОВА РАЗМИШЉАЊА И МОГУЋА ТУМАЧЕЊА

Резиме

У рушевинама Цркве Св. Томе у насељу Кути, у Боки которској, откривени су, између осталог, остаци камене олтарске преграде, која је датована у последњу трећину XI века. Сачувана правоугаона парапетна плоча, украшена сценом Обожавања крста, припада тзв. прероманичкој скулпторалној декорацији и изузетан је и до данас редак пример очуваног дела олтарске преграде са наведеном темом. У досадашњим истраживањима није посвећена већа пажња иконографским особеностима сцене чији су настанак и развој истраживачи везали за период владавине цара Јустинијана I (527–565), односно VI век. Овај рад има за циљ да предочи нова промишљања о иконографском развоју сцене Обожавања крста у периоду касне антике, уз отварање могућности њеног ранијег настанка, највероватније у крај IV и почетак V века, те пружа нова тумачења значења сцене у оквиру сакралног простора прероманичке цркве у којој се налазила.

Кључне речи: парапетна плоча, црква Св. Томе у Кутима, иконографија, касна антика.