



The Death of the Virgin Mary (1295) in the Macedonian church of the Panagia Peribleptos in Ohrid. Iconographic interpretation from the perspective of three apocryphal writings
La muerte de la Virgen María (1295) en la iglesia macedonia de la Panagia Peribleptos de Ohrid. Interpretación iconográfica a la luz de tres escritos apócrifos

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Recibido no día 27-04-2011

Abstract: Painted in 1295 by the Greek painters Michael Astrapas and Eutybios, the fresco of the Virgin's Death (*Koimesis*) in the church of Panagia Peribleptos in Ohrid, Macedonia, highlights the main events described by the apocryphal stories on the death, the burial, the resurrection and the assumption of Mary, reinterpreted by the theologians and the hymns' writers. This mural painting integrates in a diachronic development the scenes of the Virgin's farewell to her friends, the coming of the apostles on clouds, the death, the funeral and the burial of Mary, including the episode on the attempt of desecration, the punishment and the conversion of a Jew named Jephonias, as well as the Virgin's assumption, a subject performed for the first time in art. This article tries to explain and to illustrate the iconographic elements contained in this mural painting, analyzing them from the perspective of three apocryphal texts on the Mary's death and assumption. Through such analysis we would highlight the direct and essential influence of certain Literature (apocryphal) in the creation of certain History, understood at the same time as History of Art (iconography) and History of Religions (dogmatic).

Resumen: Plasmado en 1295 por los pintores griegos Miguel Astrapas y Eutybios, el fresco de *La Dormición de la Virgen* en la iglesia de la Panagia Peribleptos en Ohrid, Macedonia, ilustra los principales sucesos incluidos en los relatos apócrifos sobre la muerte, sepelio, resurrección y asunción de María, reinterpretados por los teólogos y los escritores de himnos. Dicho mural

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integra en desarrollo diacrónico las escenas de la despedida de la Virgen de sus amigas, la venida de los apóstoles sobre nubes, la dormición, los funerales y el entierro de María, incluyendo el episodio del intento de profanación, castigo y conversión del judío Jefonías, sin olvidar la ascensión de la Virgen, tema éste último que se plasma por primera vez en el arte. El presente artículo trata de explicar e ilustrar los elementos iconográficos contenidos en ese mural, analizándolos desde la perspectiva de tres textos apócrifos sobre la muerte y ascensión de María. Mediante tal análisis pondríamos en luz la directa y esencial influencia de cierta Literatura (apócrifa) en la creación de cierta Historia, entendida al mismo tiempo como Historia del Arte (iconografía) e Historia de las Religiones (dogmática).

Keywords: Medieval art – Byzantine painting – Iconography – Apocryphal literature – *Koimesis*.

Palabras clave: Arte medieval – Pintura bizantina – Iconografía – Literatura apócrifa – *Koimesis*.

The Greek-Eastern Church held the Dormition (*Koimesis*) of the Virgin Mary as one of the twelve Great Feasts of the liturgical year.² It became, eventually, a widespread issue throughout the Eastern and Western Christendom,³ even though it always kept the distinctive features of its Byzantine origin. The earliest known examples of the iconography of the *Koimesis* or Dormition – some ivory icons⁴ and some frescoes in the rock churches of Göreme, Cappadocia,⁵ including the famous Tokale kilise⁶ – are documented in the mid

² According to Louis Bréhier, “L’Église grecque distingue douze grandes fêtes du Christ (Annonciation, Nativité, Épiphanie, Présentation, Baptême, Transfiguration, Resurrection de Lazare, Rameaux, Crucifiement, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecôte), et un cycle de fêtes de la Vierge.” (*L’art chrétien. Son développement iconographique des origines à nos jours*, Paris, Librairie Renouard-H. Laurens éditeur, 1928, p. 140). In another section, recording the twelve great Greek-Byzantine liturgical feasts, Bréhier repeats almost all of the above, except two of them, which he replaces with Anastasis and Dormition of the Virgin. For an overview of these Byzantine celebrations, cf. Gaetano PASSARELLI, *Iconos. Festividades bizantinas*. Madrid: Libsa, 1999, 272 p.

³ BRÉHIER 1928: 268.

⁴ See, for example, the three Byzantine ivory icons with *Koimesis*, all dated on the tenth century (in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), illustrated in Helen C. EVANS and William D. WIXOM (eds.), *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture in the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843-1261*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1997, p. 149, 155 and 156, respectively.

⁵ Four essential monographic books on the Byzantine rock churches of Cappadocia and the iconographic programs of its wall decorations are: Nicole and Michel THIERRY, *Nouvelles églises rupestres de Cappadoce, Région du Hasan Dagi* (Avant-propos par André Grabar), Paris:

or late tenth century. It spread rapidly in the eleventh century, and became a repetitive motif in subsequent centuries.⁷

The liturgical feast of Mary's Dormition and its derived iconography are based on an heterogeneous group of oral legends and apocryphal writings,⁸ that are documented since at least the fourth century,⁹ and in numerous homilies, hymns, exegesis, commentaries and glosses made by some Church Fathers and Doctors, theologians, philosophers, preachers, hymnographers, liturgists and other thinkers of the Eastern Church, such as St. Modest of Jerusalem (†634),¹⁰ St. Andrew of Crete († 720),¹¹ St. German of Constantinople († 733),¹² Archbishop John of Thessaloniki (seventh century),¹³ St. John of Damascus (c. 675-c. 749)¹⁴ and St. Theodore Studites (759-826).¹⁵

Klincksieck, 1963, 248 p. + il., s.p. ; Spiro KOSTOF, *Caves of God. The Monastic Environment of Byzantine Cappadocia*, Cambridge, Mass / London: The MIT Press, 1972, 296 p.; Nicole THIERRY, *Haut Moyen-Âge en Cappadoce, Les églises de la région de Çavusin*, Tome I, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1983, 197 p. + il., s.p.; and Catherine JOLIVET-LEVY, *Les églises byzantines de Cappadoce. Le programme iconographique de l'abside et de ses abords*, Paris, Editions du CNRS, 1991, 392 p.+185 pl.

⁶ Catherine JOLIVET-LEVY (1991: 85-87) and Charles DELVOYE (*L'art byzantin*, Paris: Arthaud, 1967, p. 236) date these frescoes of the Tokale kilise, in Göreme, as coming from the beginning or mid tenth century.

⁷ Marie-Louise THEREL, *Le triomphe de la Vierge-Église. Sources historiques, littéraires et iconographiques*, Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1984, p. 46.

⁸ For an overview of these apocryphal sources on the Assumption, within the context of the Spanish literature, cf. Aurelio de SANTOS OTERO, *Los evangelios apócrifos*, Salamanca: La Editorial Católica, Col. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 148, 2006, 705 p. For some editions of other apocryphal texts on the Assumption from Arabic or Coptic tradition, cf. Gonzalo ARANDA PÉREZ, *Dormición de la Virgen. Relatos de la tradición copta*, Madrid: Editorial Ciudad Nueva/Fundación San Justino, Col. Apócrifos Cristianos, 2, 1995, 324 p.; and Pilar GONZÁLEZ CASADO, *La dormición de la Virgen. Cinco relatos árabes*, Madrid: Trotta, 2002, 218 p.

⁹ Most experts date the first apocryphal writings on the Assumption in the fourth century, although some of them would roll back the first signs to the second century, a period in which the story of the alleged heretic Leucius, and even the text of Pseudo John the Theologian, appeared.

¹⁰ ST. MODEST OF JERUSALEM, *Encomium in dormitionem Deiparae*, PG, 86, 3288 ss.

¹¹ ST. ANDREW OF CRETE, *In dormitionem Deiparae*, PG, 97, 1053 ss; y 1081 ss.

¹² ST. GERMAN OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *In sanctam Dei Genitricis dormitionem*, PG, 98, 345 ss.

¹³ See the apocryphal book of this author, mentioned below, many of whose details will be provided in the iconographic analysis we will propose in this essay.

¹⁴ See the bilingual edition (Greek/French) SAINT JEAN DAMASCENE, *Homélies sur la Nativité et la Dormition* (Texte grec, introduction, traduction et notes par Pierre VOULET), Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, Coll. Sources Chrétiennes, 1961, 211 p.

¹⁵ ST. THEODORE STUDITES, *Laudes in dormitionem Deiparae*, PG, 99, 719 ss.

Interested in finding out whether the images representing this iconographic theme are essentially related to the texts which inspire them, we will discuss in this paper –as a paradigmatic example– the monumental fresco of the *Dormition of the Virgin* in the monastic temple of the Panagia Peribleptos (now called St. Clement) in Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia.¹⁶ Our goal here is to highlight how and to what extent this iconographic details of Ohrid's *Koimesis*¹⁷ –bypassing now *ex professo* other undoubted patristic, theological and liturgical sources– are directly derived from three apocryphal writings of the Virgin's death: first of all, the *Treaty of St. John the Theologian on the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God* (called the *Book of St. John the Evangelist or Pseudo John the Theologian*,¹⁸ a document datable to the fourth century or even earlier);¹⁹ the second apocryphal is the *Dormition of Our Lady, Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary, written by John, Archbishop of Thessaloniki* (called the *Book of John of Thessaloniki*,²⁰ dated to early seventh century);²¹ and third one, but no less interesting, *De transitu Beatae Mariae Virginis (auctore Pseudo Josepho ab Arimathea)*,²² an eclectic narrative, derived from the two previous, written by Pseudo Joseph of Arimathea.

In this brief essay, we propose to inquire whether and to what extent these three legendary texts contributed to the building and consolidating of a “real” *history*, in the sense of forging an iconographic theme “officially” supported by the ecclesiastical authorities. This theme which –shown to all the Christians all along the centuries through many images in paintings, sculptures, mosaics and ivorian carvings– would contribute to spread everywhere and definitely set, as an official dogma, the belief in Virgin Mary's almost immediate resurrection

¹⁶ The basic content of this paper was read as a Communication in the *Congreso Internacional “Imagen y Apariencia”*, University of Murcia, november 19-21, 2008. A short version of it was published with the title “*La Dormición de la Virgen en la iglesia de la Panagia Peribleptos de Ohrid (Macedonia): Análisis iconográfico a partir de las fuentes apócrifas*”, in: Concepción de la PEÑA, Manuel PÉREZ SÁNCHEZ, María del Mar ALBERO, María Teresa MARÍN TORRES and Juan Miguel GONZÁLEZ MARTÍNEZ (eds.), *Imagen y Apariencia*, Murcia: Editum, Servicio de Publicaciones, Universidad de Murcia, 2009, p. 1-14.

¹⁷ Illustrated in colour in Christa SCHUG-WILLE, *Art of the Byzantine world*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969, p. 217; and in black and white (two details), in VELMANS 1999: 196, figs. 178 and 179.

¹⁸ We adopted the bilingual text (Greek / Spanish) of this apocryphal writing from the SANTOS OTERO (2006: 576-600) edition.

¹⁹ Cf. SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 574.

²⁰ We adopted the bilingual text (Greek / Spanish) of this apocryphal text from the SANTOS OTERO (2006: 605-639) edition.

²¹ Cf. *Ibid.*: 646.

²² We adopte the bilingual text (Latin / Spanish) of this apocryphal from the SANTOS OTERO (2006: 640-653) edition.

and, chiefly, in her assumption to heaven in body and soul. It would render evident an antonomastic case in which the *Literature* (apocryphal writings) would influence directly the course of *History*, taken here in two related senses, such as *History of Religion (Dogmatic)* and as *History of Art (Iconography)*.

The restricted limits of this inquiry far exceeds any attempt to provide a comprehensive statement –much less, an exhaustive one– about the links between the apocryphal literature (whose texts related to them are very copious) and the generic iconography of the death of the Virgin Mary, whose artistic representations increased with unusual profusion all over the centuries and through the Eastern and Western Christian world. Therefore we will consider only a mere case study, although fully representative and conclusive, depending of the proposed objective: the influence which the three apocryphal writings mentioned above have exerted on the intellectual authors (who designed the iconographic program) and/or the material authors (the painters) of this *Koimesis* of Panagia Peribleptos in Ohrid. For this purpose, our iconographic analysis will be centered on the close relationship between each main detail of this fresco and the corresponding statements extracted from one or other of these three apocryphal sources, chosen *ex professo* as the most explicit and relevant for our purposes.

The *Dormición* of the monastic church of the Panagia Peribleptos in Ohrid – commissioned by the great Byzantine heteriarc Arbanas Progon Sguros, a relative of the imperial family²³– was performed in 1295²⁴ by Eutybios and Michael Astrapas, two Greek painters, probably of Thessaloniki origin.²⁵ Despite the numerous signatures which they inserted in some frescoes of their authorship, the individuality of these artists is so confusing that some historians have considered them to be three different people: Michael, Astrapas and Eutybios.²⁶ However, almost all the other experts consider

²³ VELMANS 1999: 194.

²⁴ The date of execution of this mural appears as an inscription in it.

²⁵ VELMANS 1999: 194.

²⁶ David TALBOT RICE (*Art of the Byzantine era*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1966, p. 205-206) says that they were three masters –which he calls Astrapas, Michael and Eutybios–, who worked for Milutin between 1295 and 1301 in a whole series of churches. According to this historian, Astrapas was the oldest and most conservative of the three, while Eutybios was the most innovative and typical of this school. Talbot Rice also points out the known fact that Eutybios and Michael, who worked together in Ohrid Peribleptos, were the first to sign these paintings of Ohrid. Tania Velmans also shows a strange ambiguity, when, after stating that “an artists’ workshop, with Michel Astrapas as the protomaster, was linked to his court” [that of the King Milutin], she continues: “The three painters of the Peribleptos in Ohrid –Astrapas, Michael and Eutybios–, jointly or separately signed the

them to be two individual artists with close professional links (probably, also of parentage)²⁷, who worked often together as a team, as witnessed by their

frescoes of the church of Our Lady of Ljeviska (1306-1307) in Prizren, St. Nikita in Čučer (1319-1320) and St. George in Staro Nagoričino (1317-1318).” (VELMANS 1999: 251).

²⁷ In the Summary of the Poster presented in the *21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (London, 2006), under the title “The painter Eutybios - father of Michael Astrapas and protomaster of the frescoes in the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid?”, the researcher Miodrag Marković, from the University of Belgrade, proves that Eutybios was not only the teacher, but also the biological father of Michael Astrapas. Astrapas was not a surname but a nickname, which in Greek means “enlightened”. These are the eloquent conclusions of Miodrag Marković: “It is commonly believed that Michael Astrapas played a more significant role than Eutybios in painting of the church of Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid. This opinion is supported by the fact that Michael's name is always written first in the two painters' joint signatures and by the fact that there are seven signatures where Michael's name appears alone. On the other hand, only one signature is preserved where Eutybios's name appears by itself (KA(M)OY EYTYX[IO]Y). However, this signature demands that the issue of the protomaster of the frescoes of the Ohrid church be discussed once more. The reason for this is the appearance of the word “καμου” (crasis for και εμου). This word bore a very specific meaning in the signatures of medieval Greek painters. The persons who wrote signatures employing this word used it to emphasize their role in the work. As these persons were always the protomasters it seems that the assumption that Eutybios was the main fresco painter in the Virgin Peribleptos is reasonably founded, even if we keep in mind that the Eutybios's aforementioned signature formed a part of specific joint signature of the two painters: XEIP MIXAHA TOY ACTPAHA / KA(M)OY EYTYX[IO]Y. As far as the question of protomaster of the workshop of Michael and Eutybios is concerned, it is important to take into consideration their “joint” signatures at Staro Nagoričino and St. Nikita. Michael is also the first one mentioned in those two signatures (Staro Nagoričino: <XEIP> MIXAHA EYTYXIOY; St. Nikita: XEIP MIXAHA EYTYXIOY). However, both signatures lack the conjunction “και” between the names of the two painters. This would suggest that the word EYTYXIOY should be interpreted as Michael's patronym and not the name of Michel's collaborator. Actually, Petar Miljković-Pepok considered the possibility of the asyndeton, but it is unlikely that this poetic figure of speech would be used in a painter's signature, especially if the omission of the conjunction would cause a change in the meaning of the signature (“the hand of Michael, Eutybios's son” instead of “the hand of Michael and Eutybios”). Besides, it is the fact that Greek painters' signatures which are preserved in churches painted by two cooperating painters regularly contain a conjunction (“και” or, less frequently, “μετά”) between names of the protomaster and his collaborator. It is also important to keep in mind that until the end of the 18th century some Greek artists did sign their works with a name and a patronym. They did this out of respect for their fathers and teachers. Michael Astrapa might have used his patronym instead of a family name for the same reason. In addition, the influence of the milieu where Michael lived and worked in at the time must not be excluded. A name and a patronym were dominant anthroponymic categories in Serbia by the 15th century, and family names were formed much later.” (Miodrag Marković, “The painter Eutybios – father of Michael Astrapas and protomaster of the frescoes in the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid?”).

joint signatures on many murals, commissioned by the Serbian king Milutin (1282-1321), which they painted in several churches of Macedonia, in Prizren, Čučer and Staro Nagoričino.²⁸

The impressive *Koimesis* of Peribleptos in Ohrid has a dense and complex composition, which, located at the end of the central nave of the temple, fills the entire main wall without any gap and it goes from the left to the right side walls. The whole narrative of that triple wall layout presents the main events and details described in the Apocrypha of the death, funeral, burial, resurrection and assumption of the Virgin: on the left wall, the death's announcement to Mary by the Angel, as well as her farewell from her friends; on the bottom of the central wall, her dormition; on the right wall, her funeral and burial; finally, on the top of the central wall, her assumption into heaven.

Figure 1



EUTYCHIOS and MICHAEL ASTRAPAS, *The Dormition of the Virgin*. Fresco, 1295.
The Panagia Peribleptos church (now called St. Clement), Ohrid, Republic of
Macedonia

www.wraith.plus.com/byzcong/poster/Markovic.pdf. Consulted on May 14, 2011).

²⁸ VELMANS 1999: 193-199 and 251-255.

The cycle of this *Dormition* of Ohrid starts on the left wall with the scene of an Angel announcing to Mary her forthcoming death and giving her a paradise palm, while she sits at home in Bethlehem. This narrative detail, according to which the angelic message and the heavenly gift staged at Mary's home, responds to Pseudo Joseph of Arimathea's very late story. This author describes the announcement to the Virgin of her impending transit in the following way:

Secundo igitur anno post ascensionem domini nostri Ihesu Christi beatissima virgo Maria diebus ac noctibus semper in oratione assistebat. Tertia vero die antequam obiret, venit ad eam angelus Domini salutavitque eam dicens: «Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum». Illa autem respondit dicens: «Deo gratias».²⁹

The same apocryphal expresses with similar precision the dialogue with which the Angel deliver to the Virgin the heavenly palm promised by the Lord:

Iterum dixit ei: «Accipe hanc palmam quam tibi promisit Dominus». Illa vero cum magno gaudio gratias Deo referens accepit palmam sibi missam de manu angeli. Dixit ei angelus Domini: «Post triduum erit assumptio tua». Illa autem: «Deo gratias », respondit.”³⁰

This version of Pseudo Joseph of Arimathea contrasts, however, with the version of the oldest of the three apocryphal, Pseudo John the Theologian (fourth century), who places the announcement of the death by the ArchAngel Gabriel next to the tomb of Jesus, on the Olive Mountain of Gethsemane. According to Ps. John the Theologian's story:

One day –it was Friday– the holy (Virgin) Mary went, as usual, to the grave [of Christ]. And, while in prayer, it happened that the heaven opened and the Archangel Gabriel descended, saying: “Hail, o mother of Christ our God!, your prayer, after passing through heaven, has come into the presence of your Son and has been heard. Therefore you will leave this world very soon and you will

²⁹ “During the second year after the our Lord Jesus Christ's ascension, the Blessed Virgin Mary used to deliver constantly to prayer day and night. But two days before her death she was visited by an Angel of the Lord, who greeted her by saying: « Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee ». She, herself, answered: « God be thanked ».” (PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, IV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 643).

³⁰ “He spoke again and said: « Receive this palm which the Lord promised you ». She then, full of joy and gratitude to God, took the Angel's palm sent to her. And the Lord's Angel told: « In three days your assumption will happen. » To which she replied: « God be thanked ».” (*Ibid.*).

depart, according to your request, to the heavenly mansion, besides your Son,
to live the authentic and perennial life.”³¹

On the other hand, Archbishop John of Thessaloniki (seventh century) takes an intermediate position between the other two apocryphals, placing also the Angels’s announcement at Mary’s home, even though just before she left to pray in the Olive Mountain.³² As one can see, the authors of the iconographic program of Ohrid’s fresco, discarded the Ps. John the Theologian’s initial version and preferred the later versions of John of Thessaloniki and Ps. Joseph of Arimathea.

The scene of the death’s announcement to Mary by the Angel continues on the same left wall with the episode of the Virgin praying on the Olive Mountain of Gethsemane,³³ where the trees bow in front of her, as noted by John of Thessaloniki: “And when [Mary] came to the [Olive] mountain, it was happy together with all the plants on it, so that they bowed their heads and worshipped (her).”³⁴

The iconographic cycle of Ohrid *Koimesis* continues with the moment when Mary, sitting inside her home in Bethlehem, notifies her friends and relatives (reduced to six women in this Macedonian fresco) of the imminence of her death. In fact, as shown here by Eutybios and Michael Astrapas, the compact dialogue between the Virgin and her relatives, with their sober attitudes and

³¹ PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, III. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 577.

³² “When Mary, the holy mother of God, was about to detach herself from her body, the great Angel came to her and said: « Mary, get up and take this palm which was given to me by the one who planted the paradise; give it to the apostles so than they can carry it with hymns before you, for within three days you will leave the body. Know that I will send all the apostles by your side; they will care about your funeral and contemplate your glory until they (finally) take you to the place reserved for you ». And Mary answered to the Angel, saying, « Why have you brought only this palm and not one for each, lest, giving it to one, the others may mutter? And what do you want me to do or what is your name for me to tell them, if they ask me? » The Angel replied: « Why are you concerned about my name?, for (only) hearing it causes admiration. Do not hesitate with respect to the palm for many will be cured through it and it will provide proof for all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Therefore, it will be apparent to those who believe; and it will be hidden from those who do not believe. So go to the mountain ».” (JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, III. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 609-610).

³³ “Then Mary started walkin and climbed the Olive Mountain, while the Angel’s light was shining before her and she was holding the palm.” (JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, III. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 610-611).

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 611. These two scenes, the announcement of Mary’s death and the prayer in Gethsemane, cannot be seen in the photographic image which we have reproduced here.

silent expressions, barely allows the viewer to look at all the richness of the narrative details designed by John of Tesseloniki, when he states:

And, after saying that, [Mary] came out and told to her maiden: “Hey, go call my relatives and all those who know me, telling them: Mary calls you”. The maid went and informed all in accordance with what she has been told.³⁵

Figure 2



According to the Archbishop of Tesseloniki’s testimony, Mary’s dialogue with her relatives and friends continues in the following manner:

And, after those had entered, Mary said: “My fathers and brothers, come to my aid, because I am going to leave the body for my eternal rest. Get up, therefore, and do me a big favor. I ask not for gold nor for silver, as all these things are vain and corruptible. I only ask as charity that you remain with me these two nights and that each one of you take a lamp, without allowing it to extinguish for three consecutive days. In my turn, I will bless you before I die.” And they did as they were told.³⁶

An epigraphic inscription inserted in the mural about the same scene of the Mary’s announcement to her friends mention the incident in which Mary asks to John the Apostle to enforce, after her death, her desire to donate two

³⁵ *Ibid.*, V: 613.

³⁶ *Ibid.* According to John of Thessaloniki, in the moment of announcing her imminent death, Mary invites relatives and friends to pray and sing psalms of praise in her honor, rather than lament and mourn her inevitable demise. (*Ibid.*: 615).

tunics of her own to a couple of poor widows,³⁷ as John of Tesseloniki mentions with great detail. After pointing out that the Mother of God asked the disciples –especially, St. John– to cease mourning the imminence of her announced death,³⁸ the prelate of Thessaloniki continues saying:

Afterwards Mary told [John]: “Come out with me and ask the people to sing hymns while I am talking to you.” And, while they chanted, she took John to her own room and showed him her shroud and all the dresses of her (future) corpse, saying: “John, my son, you see that I have nothing on earth, except my shroud and two tunics. You know that there are two widows here; when I die, then give each of them one of these.”³⁹

The sequence of the most important events of the Mary’s death and assumption is distributed in the vast central wall of the temple of Ohrid’s Peribleptos in a complex narrative interweaving that summarizes in brief brushstrokes many of the scattered –often contradictory– details described by the three apocryphal.

Figure 3 and 4



³⁷ VELMANS (1999: 194) states that the inscription expresses Mary’s wish of giving her tunics to the two widows, according to John of Thessaloniki’s story.

³⁸ “When Mary heard John crying and saying these things [when she announced to him her death], she asked those who were there to be quiet (because they too were crying), and she seized John, and said, “My son, be magnanimous with me, stop mourning”. Then John got up and wiped his tears.” (JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, VI. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 618).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

The middle sector of the composition is framed by two heavy, looking “clasic”, buildings. The one on the left would be, in our view, the Mary’s home in Betlehem, where, after receiving the Archangel’s announcement of her death, she takes refuge with three virgin friends⁴⁰ (which are named by the third apocryphal),⁴¹ and where, as mentioned previously, she notifies her relatives of her upcoming transit.⁴²

Two details seem endorse the conjecture that this building would be the Virgin’s Bethlehemite home: her presence inside it (visible through the upper window), crowned with her halo of sanctity; in addition, the red curtain swept by the wind in the column-jamb of the “door” of the first floor, just to the left of the window where Mary is. This undulating curtain, in effect, could refer to both the great thunder⁴³ as well as the voice saying *Amen*,⁴⁴ both of them being signs through which, according to the various apocrypha, God announces the upcoming death of the *Theotócos* and the imminent arrival of the apostles and Angels to assist her in her last moment. By the way, Ps. John the Theologian expresses it in the following way:

⁴⁰ “And, hearing it from the mouth of the holy Archangel, she [Mary] came back to the holy city of Bethlehem, taking with her the three maidens that looked after her.” (PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, IV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 577-578).

⁴¹ Pseudo Joseph of Arimathea points out the names of these three virgins: “She had beside her three virgins: Sephora, Abigea and Zael.” (PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, V. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 644).

⁴² “And in saying this, she went and told the maid of her house: « Look, go call my relatives and those who know me, telling (them): Mary calls you ». The maid went and informed everyone in line with what they had been told. And, after those had entered, she told them: « Fathers and brothers, come to my aid; I am going to leave the body for my eternal rest. Therefore, stand up and do me a big favor. I do not ask for gold nor for silver, as all these things are vain and corruptible; I only ask you as sign of charity that you remain with me two nights and that each one of you take a lamp, without letting it extinguish during three consecutive days. For my part, I will bless you before I die ». And they did as she had indicated. And the news was transmitted to all her acquaintances and Mary’s relatives, so that all gathered at her side.” (JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, V. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 613).

⁴³ “And at the very moment that they [the Mary’s relatives and friends who were with her when she announced her death] came out of the chamber, there was a great thunder, so that all those present were prey of confusion.” (JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, VII: 618). According to Ps. Joseph of Arimathea, “At that time (it was the tierce hour), while the queen [holy] Mary was in her chamber, there were strong peals of thunder, rain, lightning, tribulation and earthquakes.” (PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, VI. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 644).

⁴⁴ “She [Mary] then said [John]: « Go, take the censer, put incense and stay in prayer ». And there came a voice from heaven saying the *Amen*.” (PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, X. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 580).

For my part, I [John] heard that voice [the *Amen* coming from heaven, after John's prayer], and the Holy Ghost told me: "John, did you hear that voice that came from the heaven after you finished your prayer?" I replied to him: "Indeed; yes, I heard it." Then the Holy Ghost said: "This voice you have heard is a sign of the imminent arrival of your brethren the apostles and the holy hierarchy, because today they are going to gather here."⁴⁵

On the contrary, the building on the right side of the Ohrid *Koimesis*, through whose windows one can see two women –elliptical synonymous of crowd– is most likely the Mary's residence in Jerusalem, in which she took refuge with her relatives, friends and apostles, fleeing the persecution of the Jews, and where Mary would finally die. This conjecture seems confirmed by the Ps. John the Theologian's observations:

But the Holy Ghost told the apostles and the mother of the Lord: "Behold, the governor has sent a chiliarch against you because of the Jews' mutiny. Leave, then, Bethlehem, and do not fear, for I am going to take you to Jerusalem on a cloud, and the strength of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost is with you."⁴⁶

The issue of Mary's final resting place in Jerusalem at the time of her death is supplemented and corroborated by the same author, when he says in another place:

Five days later the governor, the priests and the whole city knew that the Lord's mother, accompanied by the apostles, was in her home in Jerusalem, because of the miracles and wonder that were happening there. And a crowd of men, women and virgins gathered shouting: "Holy Virgin, Mother of Christ our God, do not forget the human race."⁴⁷

Thirteen balloons or alveoli are flying, surrounding the upper periphery of the central compositional parallelogram of the Ohrid *Dormition*, each of which (except the third one on the right) is inhabited by a person with a halo of sanctity, and pointed, for expressing direction and speed. Such balloons represent the bright clouds on which, according to the promise which Christ

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XXXI. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 590. The aforementioned author continues his story: "Then, the apostles stood up and left the house [of Mary in Bethlehem] carrying the litter of [their] Lady, the Mother of God, and started walking towards Jerusalem. But, in accordance with what the Holy Ghost had said, they were taken immediately away by a cloud and found themselves in Jerusalem in the Lady's home. Once we were there, we got up and we started singing hymns continuously during five days." (*Ibid.*).

⁴⁷ PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XXXIV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 591.

made to his Mother,⁴⁸ the apostles –the living and the dead⁴⁹– were carried by the Holy Ghost from even the most remote places of the planet to Bethlehem to look after the Mother of God in her death, funeral and burial. The first of the three apocryphal says:

And the Holy Ghost told the apostles: “Come ye all on the wings of the clouds from all the places of the earth and gather in the holy city of Bethlehem to attend to the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is disturbed: Peter from Rome, Paul from Tiberias, Thomas from the center of the Indies, James from Jerusalem”.⁵⁰

Figure 5



⁴⁸ “Afterwards [Mary] prayed thus: « My Lord Jesus Christ, given that by your extreme kindness you accepted to be born from me, hear my voice and send me your John Apostle so that seeing him gives me the first fruits of happiness. Send me also your other apostles, those who have already flown towards you and those who are still alive, wherever they are, so that, seeing them again, I may bless your name, something always praiseworthy. I am livened up because you paid attention to your servant in everything ».” (PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, V. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 578). Cf. *asimismo* PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, X. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 646.

⁴⁹ “Andrew, Peter’s brother, and Philip, Luke and Simon the Canaanite, together with Thaddeus, who had passed away, were awakened from their graves by the Holy Ghost. It addressed them and said: « Do not think that the resurrection time has come. The reason why you emerge from your graves at this point is that you must go to pay homage to the mother of your Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, paying her a wonderful tribute, because now the time has come for her exit [from this world] and for her departure towards heaven ».” (PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XIII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 581).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

According to Ps. John the Theologian, the individual transfer of the apostles to Bethlehem on a luminous cloud, directed by the Holy Ghost's power is witnessed by each of them,⁵¹ beginning with Peter himself:

Peter replied: "I myself, when I was in Rome, I heard a voice coming from the Holy Ghost, which told me: The time of thy Lord's mother has already arrived, she is ready to leave; start [therefore] on your way to Bethlehem to say to her good-bye. And behold, a luminous cloud snatched me, and I also saw the other apostles who came towards me upon the clouds and I felt a voice saying: Go all to Bethlehem".⁵²

Figure 6



A certain amount of mystery surrounds the third and the fourth balloon-cloud in the upper right side of Ohrid's fresco: the key to such an enigma is provided, once again, by the Apocrypha. From the Ps. Joseph of Arimathea's text, we recognize that the third balloon is occupied by Mary –with her halo of sanctity and dressed in black, exactly as she appears on her deathbed–, and by the Archangel Michael, who leads the newly resurrected body of the Virgin to heaven. Also according to Ps. Joseph of Arimathea's tale, the fourth balloon-cloud is occupied by the doubting Apostle Thomas receiving Mary's girdle. According to this apocryphal story, Thomas –absent from the Mary's death and burial,⁵³ because he was late from India, and having seen, while in flight, the *Theotócos* as she was raised into heaven– asked for a gesture of kindness, a gesture that she performed throwing to him the girdle with which the apostles had tied the shroud. Ps. Joseph of Arimathea reports this fabulous episode in these terms:

⁵¹ Ps. John the Theologian (XIX-XXV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 584-587) records with plenty of details the verbal "testimony" of each apostle narrating the circumstances of place and action in which everyone was conducted on a bright cloud to Bethlehem to attend the dying Mother of God.

⁵² *Ibid.*: XVIII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 584.

⁵³ "And, when [Mary] was going to ask [John the Evangelist] where he came from or why he was present in Jerusalem, behold, (suddenly) all the disciples of the Lord, except Thomas called Didymus, were taken on a cloud to the chamber's door where the blessed [Virgin] Mary was." (PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, VII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 645).

Tunc beatissimus Thomas subito ductus est ad montem Oliveti et vidit beatissimum corpus petere caelum, coepitque clamare et dicere: «O mater sancta, mater benedicta, mater immaculata; si inveni gratiam modo, quia video te, laetifica servum tuum per tuam misericordiam, quia ad caelum pergis». Tunc zona qua apostoli corpus sanctissimum praecinxerant, beato Thomae de caelo iactata est. Quam accipiens et osculans eam ac Deo gratias referens venit iterum in valle Iosaphat.⁵⁴

According to this same writer, the doubting Thomas, after denying that the Virgin's body was still in her tomb in the Valley of Jehoshaphat,⁵⁵ exhibited her girdle as a material evidence to prove to the other apostles the almost immediate resurrection and the assumption into heaven of the *Panagia* in body and soul. In the words of Ps. Joseph of Arimathea:

Deinde beatus Thomas referebat eis quomodo missam cantabat in India: indutus adhuc erat vestimenta sacerdotalia. Verbum Dei ille nesciens in monte Oliveti ductus erat et vidit sanctissimum corpus beatae Mariae in caelum ascendere, et oravit eam ut benedictionem ei daret. Exaudivit deprecationem illius et iactavit illi zonam suam, qua praecineta erat. Et ostendit illam zonam cunctis.⁵⁶

At least, these thirteen cloud-balloons⁵⁷ synthesize synoptically and synchronically three different moments of the assumption history: the first

⁵⁴ “Then the blissful Thomas was suddenly transported to the Olive Mountain, and, seeing how the blessed body was heading toward heaven, he began to cry saying: « Oh holy mother, blessed mother, immaculate mother! If I find any favor in your eyes, be kind and enliven your servant, as I can contemplate you, because you are on your way to heaven ». And at this exact moment to the blessed Thomas received from the up high the belt with which the apostles had tied the holy body [of Mary]. Upon receiving it in his hand, he kissed it, and thanking God, he returned to the Valley of Jehoshaphat.” (*Ibid.*: XV: 649-650).

⁵⁵ “Then the blessed Thomas said: « Where did you put her body? » They pointed at the grave with fingers. But he replied: « No, this very holy body is not there. » Whereupon the blessed Peter said: « Once you refused to give you credit about the resurrection of our Master and Lord, unless you could see it and feel it with your fingers. How can you believe now that the holy body was there? » He, for his part, insisted saying: « It is not here. » Then, as they got angry, they approached the tomb, which had been excavated recently in the rock, and removed away the stone, but they did not find the body. So they did not know what to say having been defeated by Thomas' words.” (*Ibid.*: XIX: 651).

⁵⁶ “Then the blessed Thomas began to tell how he was celebrating mass in India. He was still clothed in priestly vestments, [when], ignoring the word of God, he was transported to the Olive Mountain and was able to see the body of the blessed holy [Virgin] Mary ascending to heaven, and prayed to her that he be blessed by her. She heard his prayer and threw him the belt with which she was tied. Then he showed everyone her belt.” (*Ibid.*, XX: 651).

⁵⁷ We can not agree with the Tania Velmans' inaccurate interpretation, when she says that the “clouds only carried eleven apostles, because John was close to Mary at the time of her

one is the initial arrival of the apostles to Bethlehem to attend the Dormition of Mary;⁵⁸ the second is the transfer of the apostles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem fleeing from the Jews;⁵⁹ and, third, the final moment of the departure of the apostles, because the same luminous clouds in which they came to Bethlehem served them as a miraculous vehicle to return to their respective destinations, after completing all the process of Mary's death, burial and assumption. In the words of Ps. Joseph of Arimathea, in effect, "nube qua ibi advecti sunt revexit unumquemque in locum suum (...). Et ita et apostoli cito reversi sunt ubi erant prius ad populum Dei predicandum."⁶⁰

The bottom of Ohrid's mural represents the Dormition scene itself inside the Virgin's home in Jerusalem, amid the group of people gathered around her. Dressed in black, Mary lies on a sumptuous funeral bed, of magnificent red and white cloth, embroidered in gold. Clearly, the painters of this Macedonian fresco had the clothing's exquisiteness of the dying *Theotócos* in mind, just as the apocryphal text points out:

death, if we refer to the Dormition's homily by John of Thessaloniki." (VELMANS, 1999: 194). There are two reasons for our disagreement with the prestigious Belgian historian: in the first place, there are thirteen balloons-cloud in this fresco (the twelve for the apostles, and the thirteenth for Mary and the Archangel Michael); in the second place it seems reasonable to assume that the apostle John is the beardless person that appears on the higher balloon-cloud on the left side of the mural, and who points with his index to the open gates of heaven, through which the raised *Theotócos* will enter.

⁵⁸ "And when the thunder ceased, the apostles landed at the Mary's door on the wings of clouds. They were eleven of them, each flying on a cloud, Peter the first and Paul the second; this one also was traveling on a cloud and was added to the number of the apostles, because he owed Christ the principle of his faith. After these two, the other apostles also gathered at the Mary's door riding on clouds." (PS JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, VII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 618-619)

⁵⁹ "XXXI. But the Holy Ghost told the apostles and the mother of the Lord: « Behold, the governor has sent a chiliarch against you because of the Jews who have mutinied. Therefore leave Bethlehem, and do not fear, for I am going to move you on a cloud to Jerusalem, and the strength of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost is with you ». XXXII. Then the apostles stood and left the house carrying the litter of [their] Lady, the Mother of God, and directed themselves towards Jerusalem. But at that moment, in accordance with what the Holy Ghost had told them, they were taken away on a cloud and they found themselves in the Lady's home in Jerusalem." (PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XXXI-XXXII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 590.

⁶⁰ "the same cloud that had brought them led each to his respective place (...). The same way the apostles were also quickly returned to the place where before they were to evangelize the people of God." (PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, XXII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 652).

Tunc vocavit Ioseph de Arimathia civitate et alios discipulos Domini, quibus congregatis et propinquis et notis, nuntiavit transitum suum omnibus illic adstantibus. Tunc beata Maria lavit se et induit se sicut regina et exspectabat adventum filii sui, sicut promiserat ei. Et rogavit omnes propinquos ut eam custodirent et solatium ei facerent. Habebat autem secum tres virgines: Sepphoram, Abigeam et Zael. Discipuli vero domini nostri Ihesu Christi iam dispersi erant per universum mundum ad populum Dei praedicandum.⁶¹

Figure 7



The presence of the enormous censer or incense burner placed on a pedestal in the foreground of the composition, at Mary's deathbed, is also significant. Such an incense burner could be interpreted as having two synoptic reflexion of textual references of our apocryphal writings: in the first instance, it would probably allude to the incense the Mother of God asked the apostles and friends to burn, in addition to the prayers she asked for her soul. For instance, Ps. John the Theologian says: "Thus, when she had rested a little, she [Mary] stood up and told them [the three virgins that looked after her]: « Bring me a censer, I will put myself in prayer. » And they brought it to her, as she asked them."⁶² And in another place, this author corroborates: "When she had finished her prayer, [Mary] told the apostles: « Cast incense and pray »."⁶³

⁶¹ "Entonces [María] llamó a José el de Arimatea y a otros discípulos del Señor. Y cuando éstos se hubieron reunido, así como sus propios conocidos y allegados, anunció a todos los presentes su tránsito inminente. Luego la bienaventurada (virgen) María se aseó y engalanó como una reina y quedó en espera de la llegada de su Hijo, en conformidad con la promesa de éste. Y rogó a todos sus parientes que la guardaran y le proporcionaran (algún) solaz." (Ps. JOSÉ DE ARIMATEA, V. En: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 643-644).

⁶² Ps. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, IV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 577-578.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, XXVI: 587.

In the second instance –totally complementary and with no inconsistency with respect to our first interpretation–, that huge incense burner could also refer to the delicate perfume, which, according to some apocryphals, flowed from the Virgin’s body at the time of her death. For instance, Ps. John the Theologian states that “when her immaculate soul left, the place was flooded with perfume and ineffable light.”⁶⁴ On the other hand, John of Tessoniki says:

And about the tierce hour we heard a loud thunder from heaven and a perfumed fragrance flowed (so softly), that all present were overpowered by the sensation of sleep, except the apostles and three virgins, whom the Lord made keep watch so that they could give testimony about the Mary’s funeral and her glory.⁶⁵

Figures 8 and 9



The twelve apostles and the three holy bishops, Dionysius, Hierotheus and Timothy, who, according to Byzantine tradition, attended the Mary’s death, surround the Virgin’s deathbed, bowed reverently and mournful.⁶⁶ Peter is at

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, XLV: 597.

⁶⁵ JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, XII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 630.

⁶⁶ According to an ancient apocryphal tradition, referred by Archbishop Juvenal and adopted by St. John of Damascus, it was held to be true that the prelates St. Timothy, the first bishop of Ephesus, St. Hierotheus and St. Dionysius, all beloved disciples of St. Paul, also attended the Virgin’s death together with the apostles. St. John of Damascus, in effect, states: “Being present then the Apostles, the Holy Apostle Timothy, first bishop of Ephesus, and Dionysius the Areopagite, as evidenced by himself, the great Dionysius, in his addresses to the Apostle Timothy, over the blessed Hierotheus, who was also present...” (SAINT JEAN DAMASCENE, *Homélie sur la Nativité et la Dormition* (Texte grec, Introduction, Traduction et Notes par Pierre VOULET), Paris : Les Éditions du Cerf, Coll. Sources Chrétiennes, 1961, II, 18, p. 173).

the top of the bed, while John⁶⁷ (with white hair and beard, to signify his old age in Patmos), the probably James and Paul⁶⁸ (bald and with his dark beard) are bent over at its bottom. As well as all the Angels, who came at the Virgin's request, all humans attended there praying and singing psalms and hymns at the imminent passage of the *Theotócos*, according to Ps. Joseph of Arimathea:

Dixit eis beata Maria: «Ego filium meum rogavi, antequam sustineret passionem, ut ipse et vos essetis ad obitum meum; et annuit mihi hoc donum. Unde sciatis quod die crastina erit transitus meus. Vigilate et orate mecum, ut, quando venerit Dominus ad animam meam suscipiendam. vigilantes vos inveniatis». Tunc omnes promiserunt se vigilare. Et vigilaverunt et adoraverunt per totam noctem cum psalmodiis et canticis cum magnis luminariis.⁶⁹

The central sector of the Ohrid fresco is filled by Jesus, who appears surrounded by countless reverent angels, and who fulfills the promise he made to his Mother.⁷⁰ He then approaches her funereal bed, in the midst of thunder, flashes and voices, escorted by an army of celestial hierarchies.⁷¹ Ps. John the Theologian has a similar feeling, when he expresses:

On the same Sunday the Lord's mother told the apostles: "Cast incense, because Christ is now coming with an army of Angels." And at the same time

⁶⁷ "Mary then got up, went outside, raised her hands and prayed to the Lord. Once she had completed it, she came back and layed down on her bed. Peter sat down at the headboard and John next to her feet, while the other apostles arounded her bed." (JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, XII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 630).

⁶⁸ "And when her immaculate soul left (...) then Peter, like myself, John, and Paul and Thomas, hastily embraced her holy feet to be sanctified." (PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XLV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 597).

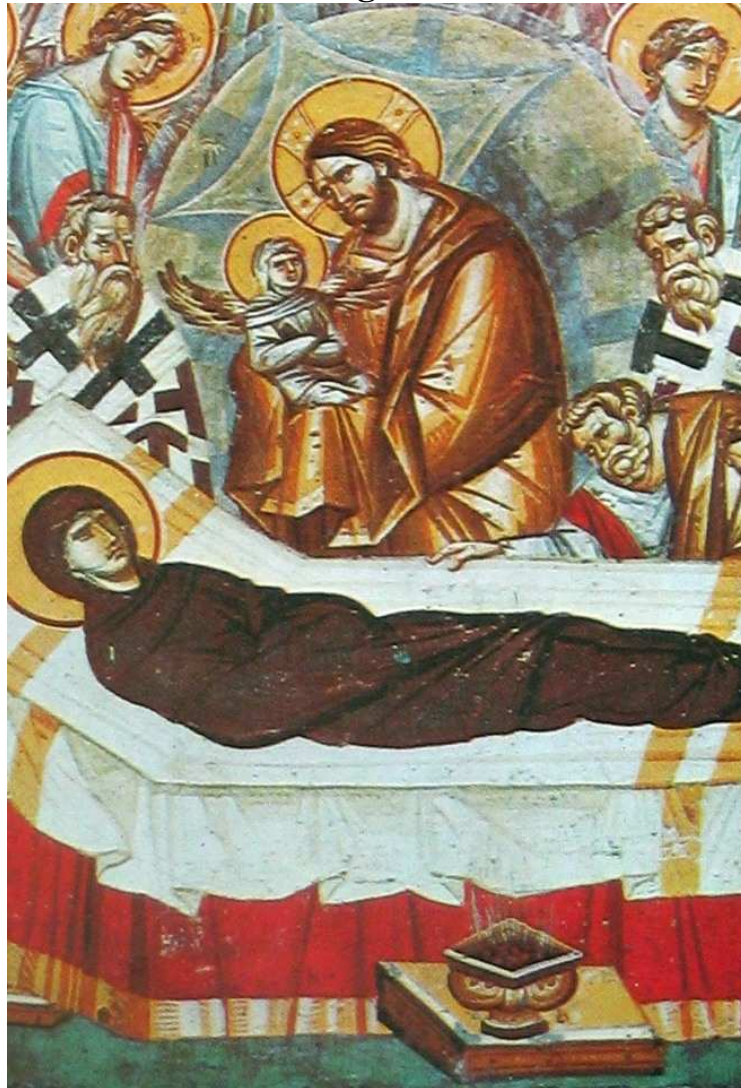
⁶⁹ "The Blessed [Virgin] Mary told them: « Before my son suffer the passion, I begged to him that he as well as you attend my death, a favor that he granted me. Therefore you must know that my death will happen tomorrow. Stay watchful and pray with me so that, when the Lord comes to take over my soul, he finds you awake ». Then all of them promised to remain vigilant. And they spent the night in vigil and adoration, singing psalms and hymns, accompanied by great illuminaries" (PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, X. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 646).

⁷⁰ "After I had finished my prayer, the holy [Virgin] Mary told me: « Bring me the censer ». And taking it, she exclaimed: « Glory to you, my God and my Lord, for everything you promised has been fulfilled in me all that you promised to me before ascending to heaven, that is to say, that, whenever I were to leave this world, you would come to meet me total glory and surrounded by many Angels ».» (PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, IX. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 579-580).

⁷¹ "And, while they [the apostles] prayed, there was a thunder in the sky and a terrible voice was heard, like [the noise of] carriages. And then a huge army of Angels and Powers [appeared] and a voice was heard like [that of] the Son of man. At the same time, the Seraphs circled around the house where layed the holy and immaculate Virgin Mother of God." (*Ibid.*: XXVI: 587).

Jesus Christ came in seated on a throne of Cherubim. And while all of us were praying, countless multitudes of Angels appeared, and the Lord [was] full of majesty above the Cherubim. And behold, a glowing aura irradiated on the holy Virgin by virtue of the presence of her only-begotten Son, and all the powers of heaven fell to the ground and worshiped Him.⁷²

Figure 10



The intellectual and material authors of the Ohrid's *Koimesis* transcribe those apocryphal fantasies *verbatim*. Therefore, Jesus appears resplendent in his mandorla with a double nimbus (a small one, circular and golden; a second, larger, starry and transparent), and wearing a golden robe. He appears here bowing slightly towards Mary to receive in his hands (covered with his own

⁷² *Ibid.*, XXXVIII: 593.

robe, as a sign of respect for the sacred) his Mother's soul,⁷³ hypostatized under the guise of a baby covered with white veils, of indescribable radiance.⁷⁴ The Messiah lifts the soul-infant of his mother to give it to St. Michael, who, under escort of other Archangels (five of them lined up after the apostles) and the massive host of bystanding Angels, will lead Mary to heaven.⁷⁵

Even ignoring the episode of the Virgin's blessing of each apostle,⁷⁶ just moments before her death, the authors of the Ohrid mural assume unequivocally the unavoidable act of Jesus welcoming in his arms the his Mother's soul when she exhaled her last breath, the same instant in which she is taken to heaven in celestial songs. For instance, Ps. Joseph of Arimathea sums up this event in these words:

Sed recedente lumine simulque cum ipso lumine assumpta est in caelum
anima beatae Mariae virginis cum psalmodiis, hymnis et canticis canticorum.
Et ascendente nube omnis terra contremuit et in uno momento obitum
sanctae Mariae omnes Hierosolymitani aperte viderunt.⁷⁷

Heaven is symbolized in this Ohrid's fresco by joining the two earthly buildings (the Mary's houses in Bethlehem and Jerusalem) in a wide arch, a transparent bluish "dome", through whose widely open gates, under the real mullioned window of the Peribleptos' temple, still leave some members of the

⁷³ "And the Lord, after extending his pure hands, received her holy and immaculate soul." (*Ibid.*: XLIV: 596).

⁷⁴ "And saying these words she [Mary] filled her role, while her body was smiling at the Lord. He took her soul and put it in Michael's hands, but not before having wrapped it in veils, whose light is impossible to describe" (JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, XII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 631).

⁷⁵ "Then the Angel said: « (...) I am the one who takes the souls of those who humble themselves before God and the one who transfer them to the place of the righteous the same day they leave the body. And with respect to yourself, if you leave the body, I myself will come for you »." (*Ibid.*: III: 611).

⁷⁶ "Then the Lord turned and told Peter: « It is time to start the psalmody ». And all the heavenly powers responded to the *Alleluia* after Peter's song. Then a glow stronger than the light haloed the face of the Lord's mother and she got up and blessed each of the apostles with her own hands. And all gave glory to God." (PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XLIV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 596).

⁷⁷ "But when the glow began to retreat, the soul of the Blessed Virgin Mary started the ascent to heaven between psalms, hymns and the echoes of the *Song of Songs*. And when the cloud began to rise, the total earth experienced a shudder, and in an instant all the inhabitants of Jerusalem could clearly perceive the St. Mary's death." (PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, XII: 647).

uncountable cohort of Angels,⁷⁸ who descended with Christ to the bedside of their dying Queen, to pay homage to her before driving her to Paradise.⁷⁹

Figure 11



Figure 12



⁷⁸ Perhaps Velmans has a slight slip when she states that the fact that “the Virgin is represented [in this Ohrid’s fresco] by the second time and live among the open doors of Paradise” is “a novelty”. (VELMANS 1999: 194). Indeed, many characters that are haloed in the space between the heavenly gates and Christ receiving his mother’s soul –especially those which are “between the open doors of Paradise” – are all Angels or Archangels, each uniformly represented with the same white dress, the same halo, the same wings (when visible) and the same tiara on their uncovered heads. On the contrary, when the Virgin Mary, living and mature, is represented for the second time in this fresco –in the thirteenth cloud-balloon, accompanied by the Archangel Michael–, she is drawn with the same black dress and the same veil over her head with which she appears on her deathbed.

⁷⁹ “The [great Angel] answers [to Mary]: « Know that (...) when the Lord sends searching you, I will not come alone, but with all the armies of Angels as well who will be singing in front of you ».” (JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, III. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 611).

The twelve apostles are presented for the third time, in the lunette that crowns the wall, distributed in a semicircle on both sides of the actual window. They are now in heaven (heavenly image), as suggested by the nimbus of holiness, missing in their “earthly” representation at the funereal bedside,⁸⁰ and as it also underlined by the fact that they are seated in their thrones in the highest part of the mural (“in the heights”). Solemnly enthroned in their celestial glory, the apostles wait, ceremoniously, for the imminent arrival of the *Theotócos*. Some of them point at the throne of the Queen of Heaven, still empty in the centre of the lunette, in pendant of the Christ’s throne, also empty because he is still on the earth to receive the soul of his dying mother.

Figure 13



The cycle of the Ohrid’s *Koimesis* continues on the right side wall with the scene of Mary’s funeral,⁸¹ whose coffin –represented here (for a better visibility of the Virgin’s body) as the same luxurious bed exhibited in the scene

⁸⁰ In the *Koimesis* of Ohrid, the apostles also have a halo of holiness when they are represented in the balloons-clouds, while being driven in flight to Mary.

⁸¹ This scene of the procession for Virgin’s burial is only partially visible in the photographic image which is reproduced.

of her death— is been shouldered by the apostles⁸² from Mary's house in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion, to the new tomb that Jesus indicated to them.⁸³

The Jew Jephonias (or Reuben, according to Ps. Joseph of Arimathea)⁸⁴ stands immediately after the *cortège*, wearing a short red dress. Some sources⁸⁵ define him as a priest, whose severed arms are attached to the top of the Virgin's bed-coffin as a punishment for attempting to overthrow it and desecrate her body.⁸⁶ Hovering above Jephonias,⁸⁷ stands the Archangel Michael who still brandishes his sword of fire, with which he cut off the arms of the desecrator. The painters of this Macedonian mural illustrate well the event referred to by some apocryphal, including Ps. John the Theologian:

Then, behold, while they were walking, a certain Jew named Jephonias, which a robust body, lashed out furiously against the coffin carried by the apostles. But suddenly an Angel of the Lord, with invisible force and using a sword of fire, separated both hands from their shoulders and left them hanging in the air on both sides of the coffin.⁸⁸

Summarizing the formulations of several apocryphal (whose variants and discrepancies in no way compromise the essence of the story), John of Tessaloniki sums up such a legendary episode: hearing the voices of those who sang hymns at Mary's funeral procession, the Jewish priests decided to kill the apostles and to burn the body of the Virgin.⁸⁹ When they chased them with swords and other weapons, they were blinded by some angels located on clouds, a blindness that did not affect a priest (whose name the archbishop of

⁸² “And the twelve apostles, after depositing her holy body in the coffin, carried it out.” (Ps. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XLV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 597). John of Thessaloniki states: “Peter, along with the other apostles and the three virgins, shrouded Mary's body and placed it on the coffin. (...) Then the apostles stood up, and bore the coffin of Mary. Meanwhile, Peter sang: « *Israel left in Egypt* [Ps. 113.1]. Alleluia ». The Lord and the angels, for their part, were walking on clouds and singing hymns and praises without being seen. Only the voice of angels can be perceived.” (JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, XIII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 632-633).

⁸³ “And the apostles carrying the precious body of the glorious mother of God, our Lord and ever-virgin Mary, placed it in a new tomb where the Savior had indicated to them. And unanimously they stood beside it three days to look after it.” (*Ibid.*, XIV: 637-638).

⁸⁴ Cf. PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATEA, XIV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 648.

⁸⁵ Cf. JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, XIII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 633.

⁸⁶ JUAN DE TESOLÓNICA, XIII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 633-634.

⁸⁷ In this mural in Ohrid, the head –and, therefore, the face that identifies him– of Jephonias has been destroyed, as a likely consequence of “censorship”, *vindicta* or *damnatio memoriae* of everything that –in the ordinary public's opinion– represents such a character.

⁸⁸ Ps. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XLVI. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 597.

⁸⁹ JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, XIII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 633-634.

Tessaloniki does not mention), who arrived late,⁹⁰ was not blinded, but, seeing the procession, he clutched fiercely the coffin in an attempt to throw down and destroy it.⁹¹ However, his arms remained attached to the coffin and hanging from it, after being violently detached at their elbows.⁹² His arms healed miraculously after the apostles interceded. Thereafter the Jewish priest converted to Christianity.⁹³

On the other hand, Ps. Joseph of Arimathea indicates that as punishment for his desecration, the arms of that Jew –whom he names Reuben– were only attached to the coffin, without being cut off, so that he was forced to descend, sobbing, to Mary’s grave in the Valley of Jehoshaphat.⁹⁴

Designer of the iconographic program of this monastic Macedonian church required almost certainly that the painters Michael Astrapas and Eutykhios should include in the mural the more current apocryphal version –that of the

⁹⁰ “So they stood up and went out with their swords and (other) weapons in order to kill them. But the Angels who were in the clouds blinded them immediately. Not knowing where they were going, they hit with their heads against the walls, except for one priest amongst them, who had come out to see what was happening.” (*Ibid.*).

⁹¹ “Then, as he approached the procession and saw the crowned coffin and the apostles singing hymns, he cried angrily: « Behold, the chamber of that who stripped our nation. Look at the enormous glory she is enjoying». And so saying, he hurled himself furiously at the coffin. He grabbed it where the palm was with the intention of destroying it; then dragged it and wanted to throw it onto the floor.” (*Ibid.*: 634).

⁹² “But suddenly his hands remained stuck to the coffin and hanging from it after having been violently detached from the trunk at the elbows.” (*Ibid.*).

⁹³ Cf. *Ibid.*: 636-637. Ps. John the Theologian relates thus the conversion of this desecrating Jew: “After this miracle having been accomplished [the severance of Jephonias’ hands by the Angel’s sword], the Jews, that had seen it, cried out in a loud voice: « Indeed the Son you who gave birth is God, o mother of God and ever-virgin Mary! » And Jephonias himself, required by Peter to declare the wonders of the Lord, stood behind the coffin and began to shout: « Holy Mary, you who breed Christ God, be mercy on me ». Peter then turned to him and said: « In the name of her Son, let the hands that have been detached, rejoin ». And, just after saying that, the hands that hung from the coffin where the Lady layed, did separate from the coffin and rejoined again Jephonias. And with that he believed in Christ and praised God, who was born from her.” (PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XLVII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 598).

⁹⁴ “But, on reaching the halfway point, behold, a certain Jew by name Reuben stepped forward, trying to put the coffin on the floor along with the body of the Blessed [Virgin] Mary. But suddenly his hands became dry up to his elbows, and, willingly or unwillingly, he had to go down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, weeping and sobbing when he saw that his hands had become rigid and attached to the coffin and was not able to extract them by himself.” (PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, XIV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 648).

cutting off of the arms by the sword of the Archangel Michael—, instead of the less common version of Ps. Joseph of Arimathea.

After the long interruption caused by Jephonias' episode, the apostles, chaired by Peter, deposited Mary's body in her new tomb in Gethsemane (according to some apocryphal)⁹⁵ or in the valley of Jehoshaphat (according to Ps. Joseph of Arimathea).⁹⁶

In this complex *Dormition* of the Panagia Peribleptos church in Ohrid, the narrative knot continues and concludes with the scene in which the apostles were greatly surprised to see empty the Mary's tomb.⁹⁷ This concluding scene reflects iconographically the widespread belief of the Assumption into Heaven of the resurrected body of the Virgin. In that context, Ps. Joseph of Arimathea considers that the Mary's bodily assumption was performed when she was buried, by staying bluntly:

Tunc apostoli cum magno honore posuerunt corpus in monumento, flendo et canendo prae nimio amore et dulcedine. Et subito circumfulsit eos lux de caelo et, cadentes in terram, corpus sanctum ab angelis in caelum est assumptum.⁹⁸

However, the two other apocryphal, Ps. John the Theologian and John of Tesseloniki, place Mary's bodily assumption three days after her burial. According to the first of these two writers, in fact, the events after the burial of the Virgin's body were the following:

And behold, an exquisite perfume flowed from the holy shrine of Our Lady, the Mother of God. And for three consecutive days voices of invisible Angels were heard praising her Son, Christ our God. But when the third day ended, the voices stopped, so all of them realized that her venerable and immaculate body had been moved to Paradise.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ “After this miracle was wrought [the healing of Jephonias' hands after his conversion], the apostles took the coffin and placed her holy and venerable body in Gethsemane, in an unused tomb.” (PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XLVIII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 598).

⁹⁶ “Then the apostles, shocked by such an enormous clarity, rose to the beat of the chant and began moving the body from the Holy Mount Zion to the valley of Jehoshaphat.” (PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, XIV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 648).

⁹⁷ VELMANS, 1999: 197.

⁹⁸ “Afterwards the apostles placed the corpse in the grave with all sorts of honors and began to mourn and sing, because of the excess of their love and tenderness. Suddenly they were surrounded by a heavenly light and fell prostrate onto the ground, while the holy body was taken to heaven on the hands of Angels” (PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, XVI. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 649).

⁹⁹ PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XLVIII. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 598.

For his part, John of Tessoniki describes these circumstances in the following way:

And, carrying the precious body of the glorious mother of God, our Lady and ever-virgin Mary, the apostles placed it in a new tomb [where] the Savior had told them. And they stood unanimously beside it three days to protect it. But when we opened the grave with the intention of worshipping the precious tabernacle of the woman that is worthy of all praise, we only found the linen, (because) she had been transferred to the eternal inheritance by Christ God, who took flesh from her.¹⁰⁰

Despite the slight variations in the interval between the death and the assumption of the Virgin,¹⁰¹ the three apocryphal mentioned above coincide with the respect to the fact that there were certain supernatural phenomena.¹⁰² The apostles were convinced that Mary's body, resurrected and was miraculously taken up to heaven. They also believed that when she died, her soul was taken to Paradise, welcomed by her own Son.¹⁰³

Conclusions

One can point out many results from this analysis of the *Dormition of the Virgin* in the monastic church of the Panagia Peribleptos in Ohrid. The most outstanding ones could be the following ones:

This mural literally reflects with great accuracy the essential details described by the three apocryphal we choose about the Assumption, even though it omits countless details which, by their abundance, dispersion and prolixity, would render problematic –and irrelevant– its pictorial representation.

¹⁰⁰ JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, XIV. In: SANTOS OTERO, 2006: 637-638.

¹⁰¹ As mentioned above, Ps. Joseph of Arimathea accepts the immediate resurrection and bodily assumption of Mary into heaven, while the other two apocryphal claim that such an event happened three days after her death.

¹⁰² According to the apocryphal writings which have been analyzed in this article, the three main phenomena revealing the resurrection and bodily assumption of the Virgin are the cessation of Angels singing the third day, the exquisite perfume that emerges from the grave, and the emptiness of the tomb, where the apostles found only the funeral linen and coats.

¹⁰³ PS. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN, XLIII: 596; JOHN OF THESSALONIKI, XII: 632-633; PS. JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA, XI-XII: 647.

The designer of the iconographic program of this Macedonian *Koimesis* nearly always chose the texts of Ps. John the Theologian and John of Tesseloniki (preferably the first). He nevertheless also included some details from Ps. Joseph of Arimathea, especially those relating to the fabulous episode of the Mary's girdle, which was thrown at the Apostle Thomas, as an authentic proof of her almost immediate resurrection and her assumption into heaven in body and soul.

The *Dormition* of the Panagia Peribleptos in Ohrid is undoubtedly the most comprehensive interpretation of the entire cycle of Virgin's death and Assumption of all the Byzantine works with the same subject. Not surprisingly it gathers in a perfect sequence all the main events and details of the announcement of the death, the antecedents and preparation for the death, funeral, burial, resurrection and assumption of the Mother of God across several walls of the temple's nave.

This Ohrid *Dormition* –as well as that of Sopoćani, painted about three decades before¹⁰⁴– organizes synchronously and synoptically some diachronically different instants and episodes: such a phenomenon is evidenced, for instance, by the arrival and final departure of the apostles on the same balloon-cloud, or in the simultaneous intervention of Angels and Archangels, whose presence is manifested both in the prelude (when Mary receives the news of her death), as well as in the central scene in which they escorted Jesus, pay tribute and sing hymns of praise to Mary in her last hour.

Similarly, this mural of Ohrid combines synoptically in the same scenic space several locations, including the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, or the interior and exterior of the Virgin's Bethlehemite and Jerusalemite houses.

The two protagonists, Mary and Jesus, receive a relevant role in Ohrid's fresco; so do the apostles (present three times in three different moments and situations) and the Angels (represented at two different instants).

¹⁰⁴ The *Koimesis* of Sopoćani was painted *circa* 1265. On this mural painting see the article José María SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, "El fresco de *La Dormición de María* en la iglesia de la Stma. Trinidad de Sopoćani a la luz de tres apócrifos ascensionistas", *Especulo. Revista de Estudios Literarios*, n° 47, Madrid, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, march-june 2011. URL: <http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero47/dormicion.html>

The relative visibility that this Macedonian mural gives to the maiden friends and to the relatives of Mary is interesting. This is also true even to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, even though they are not always exhibited in a friendly attitude, as, for example, in the episode of Jephonias desecration.

Finally, this wall painting in Ohrid has a triple statement, which is of particular theological pregnancy, concerning the belief of Mary's almost immediate resurrection and heavenly body and soul assumption. The doctrine about the assumption is suggested in this fresco by means of three complementary metaphors: the open doors of heaven, through which the dying Mother of God would enter; the delivery of the Virgin's girdle which she hands over Thomas, while her body (in the guise of an adult female) is transported to heaven on a cloud; third, and above all, the assembly of the twelve apostles, which are seated on their thrones in the heavenly glory, while pointing at the still empty throne of the Queen of Heaven, whose imminent arrival is announced together with her Son.

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