

“Visual Paraphrase” in the Paintings of Palaiologan Renaissance: Literary Influences on the Iconography of the Ascent to the Cross, and Michael Astrapas and Eutychios as “Devotees” of *Christos Paschon**

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Introduction

The Virgin’s lament over the death of Christ is universally recognized. Few, however, are aware that this depiction is absent from the canonical gospels. Additionally, It is also less widely known that the Pietà originated in Byzantine art, predating its development during the Italian Renaissance. Byzantine artists, with their rich imaginations, created the Pietà during the middle Byzantine period (the 9th to 12th centuries). They also developed icons of the tender Virgin, foreshadowing the coming tragedy. Byzantine painters played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of subsequent Christian art.

Paintings of the late Byzantine period (13th to 15th century) demonstrate a heightened intensity of emotional expression in art. Innovative painters such as Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, hailing from Thessaloniki, exemplified this trend in their work at the Church of Bogorodica Periblepta in Ohrid (1294/95) with their depiction of the Virgin’s profound grief. While the influence of literature on art during the middle Byzantine period has been well-demonstrated, less attention has been given to the literary sources that inspired late-Byzantine painters in their creations.

In recent years, I have been working to prove the hypothesis that the theatrical play *Christos Paschon* served as the literary source for later Passion iconography. *Christos Paschon* is a drama comprising 2,630 lines, remarkably composed of quotations from Greek tragedies, primarily seven plays of Euripides. Traditionally, this work has been attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the three Cappadocian Fathers active in the 4th century. However, it is now considered a scholarly exercise circulated among enthusiasts in the 11th and 12th centuries. I argue that Macedonian painters, such as Michael and Eutychios, were indeed familiar with *Christos Paschon*. The depiction of the *Ascent to the Cross* offers compelling evidence to support this hypothesis.

Having outlined the premises of my research, I now turn to the main topic: the Ascent to the Cross. The four Gospels do not specify how Christ was crucified; they simply state He was crucified. Crucifixion is not an act that can be carried out by a single individual it requires the cooperation of multiple people. It also involves various preparations and tools. Naturally, this raises the question how exactly the crucifixion of Christ was carried out. The Byzantine response, intriguingly echoed in contemporary Italy, was that a ladder had been used [Fig.1].

The Ascent to the Cross is a somewhat neglected episode in Passion narratives, and as a result, there is limited research specifically addressing this subject. Previous studies have centered on whether the Ascent to the Cross originated in the East or the West. This question is closely tied to the origin of the ladder, a crucial element in the depiction of the scene. Since the work of G. Millet, it has been widely believed that the earliest literary and artistic references to the ladder date to 13th-to-14th-century Italy. Nevertheless, some Byzantine scholars continue to support

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Fig. 1: the Ascent to the Cross, 1294/95, Bogorodica Periblepta, Ohrid, N. Macedonia

the Italian-origin theory.

T. F. Mathews and A. K. Sanjian identified the oldest representation of the Ascent to the Cross in an 11th-century Armenian manuscript and argued that the ladder originated from the Armenian tradition of equating the cross with Jacob's ladder. Building on their findings, A. Derbes classified the Ascent to the Cross into two types based on whether or not Christ's ascent was voluntary: the heroic type and the human type. She examined literary sources dating back to the Church Fathers, but ultimately found no definitive source. Consequently, she interpreted the ladder as a symbol of Christ's voluntary sacrifice for the salvation of humanity. E. Ota broadly supports Derbes's interpretation and the theory of an Eastern origin.

On the other hand, V. Cottas was among the first to recognize the influence of *Christos Paschon* on art. However, both the play and her research have been largely overlooked by art historians, who regarded them as mere curiosities. This is partly due to Cottas's attribution of *Christos Paschon* to Gregory of Nazianzus, a view now considered anachronistic from prosodic, thematic, and theological perspectives. Nevertheless, her meticulous and insightful analysis remains a valuable resource.

Based on the aforementioned research, this paper addresses four main points: (1) A re-evaluation of Derbes's classification. The focus is on the depictions of the Ascent to the Cross that include the ladder—primarily limited to wall paintings. Wall paintings have been selected due to their public nature, which exposes them to a wider audience, thereby illustrates how an image is disseminated over time and space. The classification criteria remain focused on Christ's posture while ascending the cross. Derbes' classification implicitly favors patristic texts, potentially introducing bias. To minimize subjectivity and align Christ's posture with linguistic verb constructions, the classifications "active" and "passive" will be employed. (2) The origins of the ladder. The earliest instances of the Ascent to the Cross are introduced, and the sources of the image clarified. (3) It will be demonstrated that motifs, inscriptions, and stage settings depicted in the scenes of the Ascent to the Cross as well as subsequent episodes are derived from *Christos Paschon*. Evidence will be presented to demonstrate, this explanation will establish that Macedonian painters, including Michael and Eutychios, were well-acquainted with *Christos Paschon*. (4) The presentation will provide current answers to some of the enduring questions associated with the creation of the imagery of the Ascent to the Cross.

1. Re-classification and the Literary Sources of the Ascent to the Cross

1-1. Active-1 Type

I consider the "active-1 type" to be the archetype of the Byzantine Ascent to the Cross. As observed in the Church of Bogorodica Periblepta in Ohrid (1294/95) by Michael and Eutychios, Christ is depicted as resolutely



Fig. 2: the Ascent to the Cross, 11 C or 13 C, Vehap'ar Gospels, MS. 10780, fol. 125v, Erevan, Matenadaran, Armenia

advancing toward His death, unforced by anyone, and driven solely by His own strong will. The Virgin is not yet present at Calvary; she is portrayed as a small figure in the background vale. Readers are encouraged to take note of this near-absence of the Virgin.

As Derbes argues, the heroic Christ, who willingly ascends the cross for the salvation of humanity based on patristic tradition, appears to have been a popular depiction. Three years after Bogorodica Periblepta, anonymous painters portrayed a similar scene in the Church of Sveti Nikola in Varoš (1298). George Kallierges, celebrated as “Thessaly’s foremost painter,” also adopted this motif in the Church of Anastasis tou Sotiros in Verroia. Michael and Eutykhios revisited the theme in the Church of Sveti Ġorġi in Staro Nagoričane, where the Virgin is again shown observing Christ’s resolve from beyond the mountain.

Mathews, Sanjian, and Derbes identify the Vehap’ar Gospel to be the archetype of the “heroic” type [Fig.2]. However Christ appears to be hesitant, being both pushed from behind and pulled by the hand. On this point, I concur with Ota’s interpretation. While Mathews and others date it to the 11th century based on the manuscript’s colophon, Evans, through stylistic analysis, argues for a 13th-century date.

What, then, is the source of the image of Christ resolutely ascending the ladder? It is found in the eighth homily of George, metropolitan of Nicomedia, which is considered a literary source for the Descent from the Cross and the Lamentation of the Virgin in middle Byzantine art. The scene of the Ascent to the Cross appears in the middle of his lengthy homily, which spans the episodes from the Last Supper to the Lamentation of the Virgin. George adopts the setting in which Roman soldiers lead Christ.

Arriving at the place of the Skull and being zealous to execute the life-creating death, the blood-thirsty [Roman soldiers] have firmly fixed the cross and stripped Him of the garments He clothed; sharpening the frenzy of the nails, they laid down a stepladder for their ascent toward the cross with murderous intent (τῆς δὲ πρὸς τὸν σταυρὸν ἀνόδου βάσιν ἑαυτοὺς τῇ φονικῇ προαιρέσει καθυποτιθέντων), then a more violent sword has stuck into her [the Mother of God]; then the arrows of grief have penetrated straight through her. But how did the soul not depart from the body? How was the bond of her body not torn apart? How could her eyes bear it, though seeing her own light ascending to the cross (τὸ ἴδιον ἐπὶ σταυρὸν ἀνιὸν βλέποντες φῶς)?

The text states that the Roman soldiers set up a βάσιν to crucify Christ, and shortly thereafter, it describes the Virgin watching the light ascend to the cross. The word βάσιν, the accusative singular of βάσις, means “footstool” and can



Fig. 3: the Ascent to the Cross, 1271, Sveti Nikola, Manastir, N. Macedonia

collectively refer to a ladder or stepladder. If this interpretation is correct, the source of the ladder can be traced back to 9th-century Byzantium. Unless an earlier source is discovered, the question of its origin is thus resolved.

1-2. Active-2 Type

The depiction of the Ascent to the Cross at the Church of Sveti Nikola in Manastir village (1271) is the earliest example of its kind in wall paintings **[Fig.3]**. As in *Periblepta*, Christ is not being forced by anyone, but He appears to be climbing the ladder hesitantly, with His head bowed. While His lonely and hesitant ascent to the cross may, in a sense, be considered passive, He is not as yielding as if being dragged up by a mob. Focusing solely on Christ's demeanor, it resembles the depiction in the *Vehap'ar* Gospel.

Derbes does not mention this work, and Ota categorizes this example simply as the "human type". However, it fundamentally differs from the human type in that Christ ascends the cross without anyone's assistance. I propose referring to this type of Ascent to the Cross as the "active-2" type.

The frescoes of Sveti Nikola were created by the workshop of Jovan Zograph, a generation before Michael and Eutychios. Why did Jovan not adopt the active-1 type or the "passive type," which I will discuss in the next section? I believe that, unlike the following generation of painters, Jovan was either unaware of *Christos Paschon* or for that reason, did not deliberately adopt the passive type.

So, what source did the painter rely on? I propose that he drew from the Byzantine version of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which was developed in the 10th century and was widely known by Jovan's time.

They [Jews] came to the place called the Skull, which is the stone pavement, and there the Jews set up the cross ... It was the sixth hour of the day of Friday when they [Roman soldiers] made Him go up onto the cross and they nailed him (ὅτε ἀνεβίβασαν αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ σταυρῷ καὶ ἐκάρφωσαν), stretching out His very pure hands as far as they could and pulling His feet down.

The M group in the manuscript of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, from the concise M-1 to the complete M-3, uses the compound verb "make (s.b.) go up", but there is no mention of anyone actively pulling Christ up or intervening in any other way. I interpret active-2 type as Jovan's pride in not blindly following the emerging active-1 type of his time. However, the fact that later patrons did not prefer this type clearly indicates that such artistic innovations do not always succeed.



Fig. 4: the Ascent to the Cross, 1314, Sveti Nikita, Banjani, N. Macedonia

1-3. Passive Type

The third type of the Ascent to the Cross, referred to in this paper as “passive,” is exemplified by the depiction in the Church of Sveti Nikita in Banjani, initiated by King Milutin in 1303 [Fig.4]. The depiction is the earliest example of the passive type, and also bears the signatures of Michael and Eutychios. Unlike their work in Ohrid, however, this depiction shifts to a more shadowed and melancholic Palaiologan style.

The painting depicts Christ on a footstool rather than a ladder, facing the viewer with the cross behind Him. A Jew on the left, standing on a stepladder, holds nails and a hammer in his right hand while grasping Christ's right arm with his left hand. On the right, another Jew, leaning over the crossbar, attempts to pull Christ's left wrist upward.

The passive type quickly spread throughout Macedonia after this example appeared. Some depictions show Christ standing on a footstool, while others feature a ladder. The use of the singular form *βάσις* by George of Nicomedia may have contributed to this variation. However, the new iconography did not completely replace the old. Both types coexisted within the Macedonian repertoire, with the choice largely depending on the patron's preference.

In the passive type of the Ascent to the Cross, the focus is not solely on Christ. The Jewish figures clinging to the crossbar also contribute significantly to the scene. What could they be doing in such strained postures? The answer to this question becomes clear upon reading *Christos Paschon*. In *Christos Paschon*, the third Messenger who witnessed Christ ascending the cross reports the event to the Virgin, who is at a distance, thus providing a detailed depiction of the ascending process far beyond the narratives of the two sources quoted above:

After they [Jews] left the city of this land of Salmon, they arrived at Stone Pavement. The vengeful throng, dragging my Lord straightway to the wood soaring skyward, they led him up, they led him to the hilltop; the pillar has stood firmly straight up into the sky. They pulled back the oblique crossbar straight to the pillar, secured it forcefully, seized His hands, and nailed His feet into the fixed wood (Ἐς κλῶνα δ' ἐγκάρσιαν ἄλλον εὐθέως ἔτεινον, ἐξέτεινον, ἤλωσαν χέρας, πόδας δὲ καθήλωσαν ἐν πηκτῷ ξύλῳ).

Upon reviewing the above-mentioned example, Sveti Nikita, it becomes evident that the painters are visually paraphrasing *Christos Paschon*, indicating their intimate familiarity with its content. The depiction of Jewish figures manipulating the crossbar aligns closely with specific descriptions from the text. For instance, the Jewish on the left, holding a hammer and nails, pulls back the slanted crossbar (ἔτεινον), while the one on the right thrusts it into the



Fig. 5: the Arrival at Calvary, 1312, Vatopedi Monastery, Mt. Athos, Greece

upright pillar (ἐξέτεινον).

2. Michael and Eutychios as “Devotees” of *Christos Paschon*

There is further evidence that painters of the Macedonian School active in the 14th century were familiar with *Christos Paschon*. For instance, let us examine the scene of Christ’s arrival at Calvary in the Vatopedi Monastery (1312), attributed to the legendary painter Panselinos [Fig.5]. Here, Christ, led by Roman soldiers, is depicted as having just arrived under the cross. A well-dressed Jew stands on the *suppedaneum* to secure the crossbar. The inscriptions flanking the titulus (the inscription board) foretell the fate awaiting Christ, referring to “the Nailing into the Cross (ἡ εἰς τὸν σταυρὸν καθήλωσις),” which echoes the term used in *Christos Paschon*. Returning to the earlier quotation from the play, it becomes evident that the same word (καθήλωσαν) is used in this inscription.

What about the case of Michael and Eutychios, who revolutionized the Passion cycle during the Palaiologan period? In the Arrival at Calvary in Ohrid [Fig.6], additional details not depicted in Vatopedi are included. A young Jew leans against the cross, and the inscription above the crucifixion reads “the Fixing of the Cross (ἡ πηξείς τοῦ σταυροῦ),” citing the expression from *Christos Paschon* (ἐν πηκτῷ ξύλῳ), as Panselinos does.

Evidence that Michael and Eutychios were well acquainted with the contents of *Christos Paschon* extends beyond the mere appropriation of phrases in inscriptions. They also adopted the narrative framework of the play when depicting the Arrival at Calvary in Ohrid. As previously noted, the Virgin was not present at Calvary when Christ ascended the cross. It was only the duo of the gifted painters (and possibly Panselinos) who included a small figure of the Virgin. The setting of the Virgin’s distant is a narrative derived from *Christos Paschon* itself.

In the opening of his *Kontakion* with the famous phrase “A sheep contemplating her own lamb dragged to the slaughter,” Romanos Melodos adapts the description from Luke (23:27-32), singing of the Virgin following Christ from the moment of his procession to Calvary. George of Nicomedia, drawing inspiration from John (19:25) alongside the Synoptic Gospels, explains that the Virgin, not only present at the Last Supper but also enduring the Judgement of the High Priests, remained by Christ’s side throughout His Passion. According to the *Gospel of Nico-*



Fig. 6: the Arrival at Calvary, 1294/95, Bogorodica Periblepta, Ohrid, N. Macedonia

demus, upon hearing from John the Evangelist that her Son was being led to Calvary, the Virgin, accompanied by John and other holy women, hastens after Christ. Along the way, amidst a throng of people, the Virgin spots her Son and, disregarding the danger, urges the crowd to make way, though whether she reaches Christ's side remains ambiguous.

On the other hand, what about the setting of *Christos Paschon*? When the first Messenger reports that Judas betrayed Christ and only John followed Him, the Virgin and the Myrrhophores are positioned outside Jerusalem. Later, upon receiving news from a second Messenger that the Jewish crowd demanded Christ's execution before Pilate, the Virgin and her companions resolve to approach the mob to ascertain Christ's condition, as follows:

Myrrhophore: I do not know, dearest sister. For I fear, and a hot tear ignites beneath my eyes. Let us retreat and tread quietly. Let us approach those terrors with caution. Now is the time to summon our courage; we have been worn out by sorrowful steps. A raging throng surrounds Him, and we must not draw too near to their fury. Their minds are grave; the hateful mobs, hostile and murderous, will not bear to look upon us, driven by the impulse of such loathed thoughts; savage character, barbarous mind, it's their nature. I fear lest they scheme a new and fiercer misfortune against you; and truly, seeing this, I dread lest they thrust a sharpened sword through His side. Then, you would endure a new and greater misfortune if the street were to seize the entrails of your Child. But let us approach those avengers; let us observe the actions of the murderous. So, let us go, let us go somewhere into that shrubby vale (Ἰωμεν οὖν, ἰωμεν ἥχι που νάπος).

Theotokos: You win, since this pleases everyone; and let us go elsewhere, wherever it seems good to you.

Myrrhophore: From there, as it's necessary to observe as if from afar.

After this, upon hearing from a third Messenger about Christ's crucifixion, the Virgin, determined to witness her beloved Son's final moments, gathers her strength and reaches His feet. Thus, upon examining works with the same theme, it is intriguing to observe how discrepancies in the canonical texts are filled in by the imagination of the authors over time.

Michael and Eutychios were aware of the setting described in *Christos Paschon*, where the Virgin and her retinue gradually approach Calvary from a distance. With meticulous attention to detail, while the Virgin is depicted small beyond the mountain ridge in the Arrival at Calvary, she is shown approaching a nearby shrubby vale (νάπος), where even the vegetation is carefully rendered, in the Ascent to the Cross [Figs.1, 6]. Michael and



Fig. 7: the Arrival at Calvary, ca. 1300, Koimesis tes Theotokou, Thronos, Greece

Eutychios employed perspective to visually evoke the dramatic effect of the play.

Th. Gouma-Peterson suggests that renowned Macedonian painters such as Michael and Eutychios, Kallierges, and the legendary Panselinos, trained in the same workshop, in either Constantinople or Thessaloniki. It would not be surprising if they became familiar with *Christos Paschon* during their apprenticeships in these major cities.

When comparing the remaining examples of the Ascent to the Cross, it appears *Christos Paschon* had spread beyond Macedonia by the mid-14th century. However, due to time constraints, this paper will not address that aspect.

As a conclusion to this chapter, let us present a modest example from Crete, illustrating that *Christos Paschon* might have attracted a new “devotee.” The painter of the Church of Koimesis tes Theotokou in Thronos village (ca. 1300) vividly portrayed the intricate details of the Arrival at Calvary as described in the play, infusing vibrancy into his work [Fig.7]. The inscription “The Ascent on the Cross (ή ἀνάβασεις ἐπὶ τοῦ σταυροῦ)” to the upper right of the cross and its imagery anticipating Christ’s fate evoke similarities with those in Vatopedi. Here, the painter depicts the crossbar diagonally (ἐγκάρσιαν ἄλλον), recreating Calvary immediately after Christ’s arrival, as recounted by the third Messenger in *Christos Paschon*. It is also noteworthy that this work was commissioned by the Kallierges family, the same lineage that produced George, acclaimed as “the foremost painter of Thessaly” in Verroia.

Conclusions

Let us summarize the classification and development of the iconography of the Ascent to the Cross based on our discussion thus far. It is reasonable to classify Byzantine depictions of this scene into three types, all of which share the use of a ladder or footstool as described in the homily by George of Nicomedia in the 9th century.

I propose that the active-1 type is the archetype of the Ascent to the Cross, as George’s homily predates the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and is rooted in the patristic tradition. George’s homily was referenced by John Geometres in his late-10th-century *Life of the Virgin*. By the end of the 10th century, Euthymios the Athonite had translated



Fig. 8: Guido da Siena, *The Ascent of the Cross*, ca. 1265-1274. Tempera on wood, 34.5 × 46 cm, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, Netherlands

Geometres' work for his Georgian brethren. Furthermore, in the 11th century, the *typikon* of the Theotokos Euergetis Monastery stipulated the reading of George's homily during the orthros on Good Friday. Thus, by the 11th century, George's homily was well known to the inhabitants of Constantinople.

Guido da Siena and subsequent Italian painters followed the Byzantine active type [Fig.8]. Interestingly, in these depictions, Christ is grasped by Jews, and the Virgin is present at the scene. Notably, the Virgin attempts to stop the mob and restrain her son, who is rushing towards His death. H. Belting notes that icons in *Maniera Greca*, akin to relics, were highly prized in Italy and were imitated by Duecento artists. These modifications may be attributed to the painters' imagination as Derbes assumes or to the literary works overlooked by researchers, as it is demonstrated above.

Regarding the active-2 type, I will omit further discussion here since it has already been covered. As for the passive type, however, it is highly likely that Michael and Eutychios conceived this type in the early 14th century, specifically between 1303 and 1307, before they were commissioned to work on the Church of Bogorodica Ljeviška in Prizren. This hypothesis is based on the dating of the codices containing *Christos Paschon* and the personal relationships surrounding these artists.

Firstly, concerning the codices, the earliest codex containing *Christos Paschon*, Paris gr. 2875, dates to around 1260. The second earliest, Paris gr. 2707, includes a colophon indicating that a scribe named Michael Synadinos completed his work in 1301. This timeframe coincides with the careers of Michael and Eutychios, suggesting that they were likely familiar with *Christos Paschon* and could have drawn from its texts and settings in their works.

Christos Paschon inherently combines two elements that were highly favored by the intellectuals of the time: Euripides and Gregory of Nazianzus. Michael Psellos, a towering figure in 11th-century scholarship known for his historical writing and studies on Aristotle, praised both in his literary critiques. Psellos's aesthetic sensibilities were passed down to influential figures such as Theodore Metochites, the premier of Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos, and Thomas Magistros, the Thessalonian philologist who annotated tragedies by Euripides. Additionally, the *Souda*, a lexicon compiled in the 10th century and essential to philologists since the 12th century, references a work resembling *Christos Paschon* in its entry on Gregory of Nazianzus. This suggests that *Christos Paschon* might have been known among Byzantine scholars by the 12th century, at latest.

The second point, concerning interpersonal relationships, is based on circumstantial evidence. Who connects King Milutin, the two painters, and the passive type? I propose it is Empress Irene, wife of Emperor Andronikos II.

In 1299, Andronikos II arranged a political marriage between King Milutin and his five-year-old daughter Simonis. Harboring resentment towards the emperor over the treatment of her son, in addition to the ignominious marriage, Irene had a falling out with him and literally “ran away from home” to Thessaloniki in 1303. Seeking political support, she approached her ambitious son-in-law, King Milutin, which led to scandals, as she not only exchanged letters and gifts but also hosted him in her residence.

Regardless of the actual facts about their relationship, it is plausible that Empress Irene hosted scholars and engaged in literary discussions popular at the time, possibly involving Milutin as well. Thus, it would not be far-fetched to consider that Irene played a role in facilitating these interactions and introducing contemporary literary trends, such as *Christos Paschon*, to Milutin and the painters.

1303 falls two years after the second codex of *Christos Paschon*, Paris gr. 2707. For contemporary bibliophiles with Psellos’ aesthetic sensibilities, this might have appeared as a “long-awaited reprint.” Additionally, 1303 marks the year when King Milutin began to earnestly promote the arts. In a letter to Andronikos II, King Milutin mentions that he initiated the construction of Sveti Nikita, where the passive type made its debut. Such instances seem too perfect to be mere chance.

It is plausible that King Milutin, influenced by the latest trends in Thessaloniki, commissioned an unprecedented depiction of the Ascent to the Cross. Alternatively, if Michael was Eutychios’ son, he might have been driven by both artistic pride and ambition to surpass the active-1 type inherited from his father. In either case, the acceptance of the passive type—emphasizing Christ’s human frailty and the reality of the history of salvation—by patrons inheriting Psellos’ aesthetic, where Euripidean pathos is paramount, is evident. This is further supported by the fact that later Macedonian painters incorporated Michael and Eutychios’ innovative work into their repertoire.

These are the conclusions regarding the Ascent to the Cross, but a few questions remain unresolved. Firstly, when did the interest in depicting this scene specifically emerge? In the 12th century, artists were indifferent to how Christ was crucified. For instance, in the Church of Sveti Górgi in Kurbinovo (1191) and the Church of Panagia tou Araka in Lagoudera (1192), there are no subsidiary images like the Ascent to the Cross. Although Nikolaos Mesarites, who described in his *ekphrasis* the mosaics of the Church of Agioi Apostoloi in Constantinople between 1198 and 1203, dedicates much attention to minor subjects, such as Christ walking on water or the priest bribing the soldiers guarding the Holy Sepulcher, he mentions only the Crucifixion in the Passion cycle.

Consequently, one may argue that the Western tradition was the precursor, as Guido’s work suggests. Both the *Monte Cassino Passion Play* in the mid-12th century, the earliest surviving example in the West, and the *Cyprus Passion Play*, written in vernacular Greek around 1260, only include stage directions for the Crucifixion as “they put Christ on the Cross,” without mentioning a ladder or even the Virgin. Therefore, the emergence of interest in depicting the Ascent to the Cross can be dated to around 1260, coinciding with the *Cyprus Passion Play* and Paris gr. 2875, the “first edition” of *Christos Paschon*.

The creation of the Ascent to the Cross raises several derivative questions regarding the characteristics of late Byzantine art. Why did dramatic subsidiary images like this scene emerge during this period? Why did iconographic programs become more complex by incorporating subsidiary images at this time? H. Maguire’s model, which suggests that emotionally heightened literary expressions are mirrored in art, is well applied in the case of the Ascent to the Cross. However, while his model shows us the “how” efficiently, it leaves the “why” unanswered.

Some may see the influence of Psellos, and ultimately of Aristotle, in the background. Both Aristotle and Psellos considered Euripidean pathos the pinnacle of tragedy, and this aesthetic was inherited by the intellectuals of the Palaiologan era, as previously noted. Educated patrons who shared Psellos’s aesthetic likely instructed painters to depict Christ’s actions and emotions, and the grand tragedy woven by them, in dramatically detailed manners. In other words, the educated patrons of the Palaiologan era expected painters to align textual and pictorial imagery.

The aesthetic, handed down from Aristotle to Psellos, manifested in the Palaiologan Renaissance as *mimesis*, faithfully imitating characters’ actions and emotions in narrative scenes, and as *diegesis*, exhaustively narrating Christ’s tragedy through iconographic programs. Such an excessive narrative quality characterizes the paintings of the Palaiologan Renaissance.

Another perplexing question remains: Is the Ascent to the Cross in the Vehap’ar Gospels truly an isolated

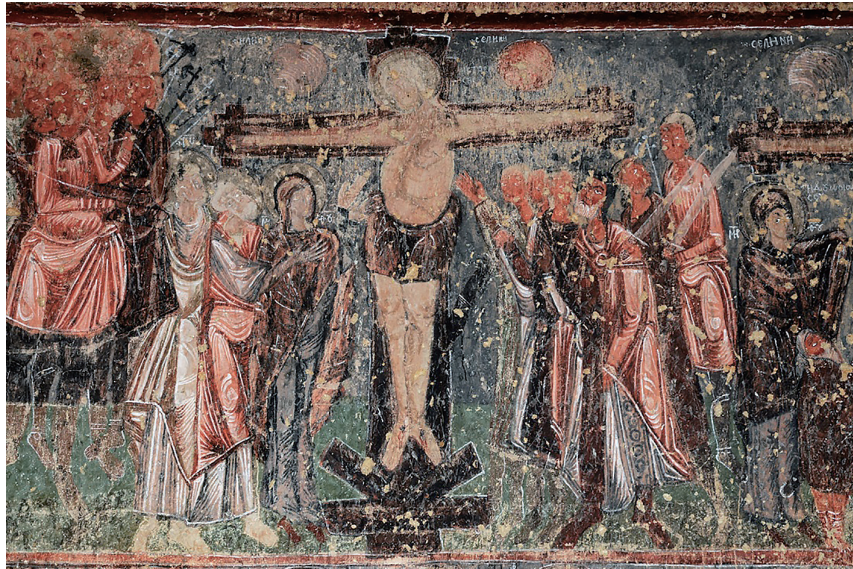


Fig. 9: the Crucifixion, 964/65, The Pigeon House Church, Çavuşin, Turkey

hapax? This is intricately linked not only to the dating of *Christos Paschon* but also to the relevant entry in the *Souda*. I am skeptical that *Christos Paschon* originated in the 4th century; in fact, I remain doubtful about its widely accepted dating to the 11th to 12th centuries.

The key to unraveling this enigma lies in Cappadocia, the homeland of Gregory of Nazianzus. The Pigeon House Church at Çavuşin portrays a distinctive Crucifixion [Fig.9]. To the left of the cross, the Virgin and the Evangelist stand alongside an elderly man with white hair and a beard, who seems to address Christ. The inscription above this man's head reads Πέτ(ρ)ος. C. Jolivet-Lévy correlates the literary source of this Crucifixion with the following passage from *Christos Paschon*:

Theotokos: And, here comes the illustrious Peter, somber, pitiful, and sorely pricked. He calls upon God like one who has committed a grave wrong. Why, Peter, do you weep? You have indeed committed a dreadful act, yet there remains a chance for you to seek forgiveness. Oh Child, oh dearest, oh Word of God, grant him pardon; for it is the common lot of humans to err, my Child, and Peter erred, trembling before the crowds.

Christ: Depart now, Virgin Mother, stay strong. I absolve Peter of his error; I no longer need you, for I have always obeyed your words because of your pious and noble spirit. And what you said to me is beyond argument; your tears have drawn all grace from me and loosened all bonds of transgressions. And I plead with you: hate no one of mortals, no one that unjustly hung me up to this wood.

Melias Magistros, an Armenian military officer, has been conventionally regarded as the patron of the Pigeon House Church, and the sizable cave church, dated to 964/65, was commissioned presumably to celebrate the triumph of Emperor Nikephoros Phokas (913-69, r.963-69), whose portrait is preserved in the wall paintings. The physical evidence is unequivocal. This unique depiction of the Crucifixion subtly suggests that *Christos Paschon*, or at least the prototype of its imagery, can be traced back to the mid-10th century. The first devotees of *Christos Paschon* might have been Armenians, or the eastern residents of the empire, contrary to our expectations: there might have been more avid readers of the theatrical work before the time of Michael and Eutychios than we would assume.

Art historians have long underestimated the historical value of *Christos Paschon* as a literary source for Byzantine imagery. *Christos Paschon* reminds us of the need to consider how a historical source could be perceived not only from modern eyes but also through medieval ones.

Sources of Illustrations

Fig.2: The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Universitat Hamburg (https://mycms-vs04.rrz.uni-hamburg.de/sfb950/receive/iaa_art_00002946)
 Fig.5: [pemptousia.gr](https://www.pemptousia.gr/2020/04/megali-deftera-sinaxari-batopaidiou-agiografies-5/) (<https://www.pemptousia.gr/2020/04/megali-deftera-sinaxari-batopaidiou-agiografies-5/>), 19, April, 2024.
 Fig.8: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meester_%20van_de_Madonna_del_Voto_-_Guido_da_Siena_-_Kruisbestijging,_1265_-_1274,_ABM_%20s5.tif?uselang=ja) Other photos were taken by the author.

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