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## **OLD TESTAMENT ABRAHAM AND HIS JOURNEY THROUGH ICONOGRAPHY OF MEDIEVAL MACEDONIA**

*Abstract:* The paper refers to the iconography of Abraham's sacrifice, both in fresco painting and archaeological artifacts from the territory of present-day Republic of Macedonia. In that regard, the cycle dedicated to this subject illustrated on the altar wall of the cathedral church of Saint Sophia in Ohrid, as well as the scene executed on a bronze ring found in situ at the necropolis of "Zadna Reka – Grmajte", have been selected as the most representative. Authors of the paper explicate the iconographic and symbolic significance of the depicted motif and elaborate its visual constellation, as well as its socio-cultural articulation.

*Key words:* Abraham's sacrifice, the church of Saint Sophia in Ohrid, Zadna Reka - Grmajte necropolis, medieval jewelry.

As first of the two main divisions of the Bible, the Old Testament comprises the law, the prophecies, the messianic announcements and the hagiographic legends of the Jewish mid-land from the first millennium BC echoing with the stark reality of the depicted stories. In that sense, the Old Testament is not a collection of sanctified mythology that glosses over the faults of its heroes. Instead, the personal narratives, the historic battles, the breath-taking tragedies, the passionate poetry, the lyrical verses and the predictive prophecies combine to weave the colossal tapestry of the Old Testament. Hence, the men and women of the Old Testament are portrayed as they really were, as they have really suffered, mourned, bled, cried and endured<sup>1</sup>. As Phillip Yancey says, "on the pages of this great Saga one will find passionate stories of love and hate, blood-chilling tales of rape and dismemberment, matter-of-fact accounts of trafficking slaves, honest tales of high honour and treachery of war"<sup>2</sup>. On the pages of this historically profound testimony of ancient times, one encounters a plethora of

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<sup>1</sup> L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: an Introduction*, New York 1984, 15-25; B. L. Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament; an introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Wandsworth 2004, 34-183; M. D. Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible and Its Context*, Oxford 2008, 63-71.

<sup>2</sup> Ph. Yancey, *Old Testament Foundations*, Grand Rapids, 2010.

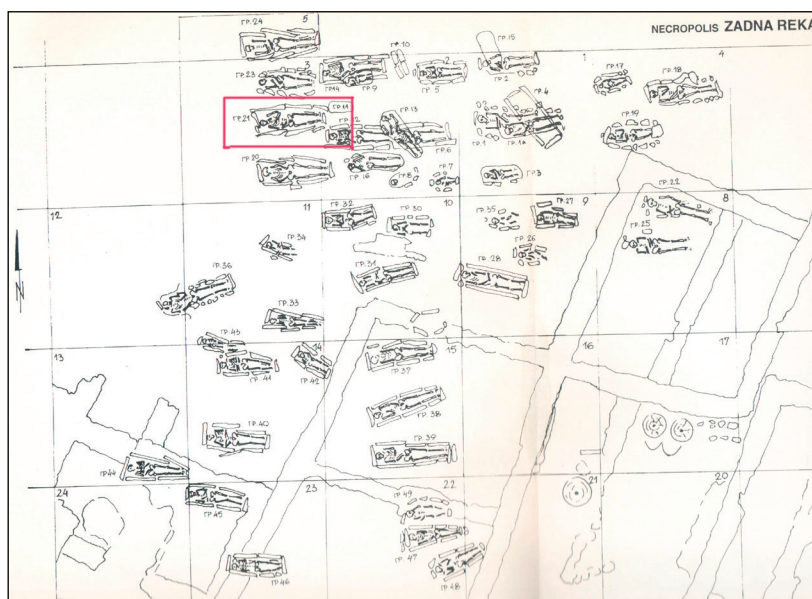


Fig. 1 Plan of the necropolis at the site “Zadna reka – Grmajte”, detail of Grave 21  
 Сл. 1 План гробља на локалитету “Задна река – Грмајте”, детаљ гроба бр. 21

humanity: patriarchs, kings, queens, priests, warriors, saints and sinners<sup>3</sup>. They are all there, each playing a significant role in the centuries-long vibrant account of victories and tragedies, of heroes and traitors, of victims and commandments. They are larger than life and yet intensely human, belonging to the distant past and yet portrayed with such vividness and relevance, that their stories come alive just like the seemingly inescapable destinies of people today.

In that regard, one of the most striking characters of Old Testament history in terms of his contribution to the expressive notion of sacrifice and devotion is the righteous Abraham – a key figure in the Book of Genesis, an individual ennobled with the virtues of loyalty and confidence, commitment and liability, perseverance and resolution. In that sense, Abraham is the common patriarch of the so called Abrahamic religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam<sup>4</sup>. In Judaism, he is the founding father of the Covenant – the special relationship between Hebrews and God; in Christianity, he is the prototype of all believers

<sup>3</sup> On the narratives of the Old Testament see: E. Hindson, G. Yates (Ed.), *The Essence of the Old Testament. A Survey*, Nashville 2012.

<sup>4</sup> On the role of Abraham in the Old Testament, see: Th. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: the Quest for the Historical Abraham*, San Antonio 2002; On the deeds and religious function of Abraham, see: R. Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory and History in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford 2005; On the religious impact of the personality of Abraham, see: F. E. Peters, *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, Princeton 2010; On the religious and cultural heritage of Abraham, see: J. D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: the Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Princeton 2012.

and followers of Christ, in Islamic religion, Abraham is seen as the crucial link in the chain of prophets which begins with Adam, the Forefather and culminates in Muhammad. Although the narrative related to Abraham is one of the most significant on the pages of the Old Testament, the chronological reference to the time of his existence is far from being specified. However, scholars tend to date the story of Abraham within the patriarchal age, along with the Exodus and the period of the Judges. Some researchers suggest that the saga related to Old Testament Abraham was composed in the course of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC as a literary consequence of the tensions between Jewish landowners in Judea during Babylonian reign who claimed their rights to the properties through the legacy of their common father Abraham<sup>5</sup>. Regardless of the pending issues linked to the chronology, as well as ideological functionality of the righteous Abraham, his highly significant impact over Biblical posterity cannot be overlooked. As such, Old Testament Abraham has gained his rightfully deserved place on the pages of Christian patristic, as well as in the sphere of Christian iconography, both as a suggestively depicted portrait and as an actor in history determining events. An archaeological finding which has inspired this paper will be presented and explicated in the most illustrative and detectable manner.

The vivid stratigraphy of *Macedonia Byzantina*, the “Christian” material culture of which flourished in all its variants and components offering unique artistic examples of both sacral and secular symbolically significant objects invested with the notion of belief, however offers very limited incorporations of the image of Old Testament Abraham. Namely, his role i.e. his representation has primarily been delegated with the didactics and hierarchy of the ecclesiastical forms of expression i.e. the fresco decoration and lacked the archaeological context. Thus, one can anticipate the astonishment and thrill when the representation of Abraham was detected i.e. identified on an object belonging to the sphere of personal, in a way intimate, everyday manifestation of faith, such as a “cheap” bronze ring.

The opus of medieval rings used by the ordinary people is vast and almost impossible for thematic categorisation since the cheap imitations made of bronze were usually artistically elaborated in a poor manner, thus only allowing

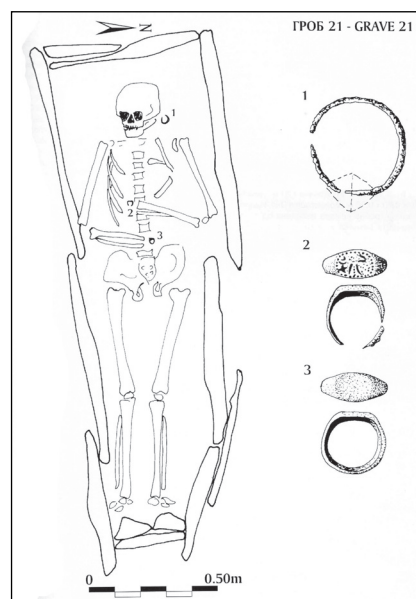


Fig. 2 Grave 21, drawing

Сл. 2 Гроб бр. 21, цртеж

<sup>5</sup> P. M. McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel*, Louisville 1999, 41-42; J. L. Ska, *Introduction to Reading of the Pentateuch*, University Park 2006, 227-228, 260.



Fig. 3 Ring depicting the Sacrifice of Isaac

Сл. 3 Прстен који приказује Аврамову жртву

a glance into the hidden meaning of these both religious and superstition media. However, there are occasions when the researcher is “gifted” with a glance inside the hidden symbolic of the object and to reveal, at least the most perceptible and logical interpretations behind the bunch of lines and dots used as a decoration on the ring’s head. One such example is the bronze ring discovered at the medieval necropolis of “Zadna Reka – Grmajte” (Fig. 1), an *in situ* grave find from the necropolis

formed and utilized by a small settlement chronologically simultaneous to the beginning and zenith of Samuel’s State<sup>6</sup>. It is a small necropolis, the burial rite and grave inventory of which show Christian provenance, thus allowing the presumption that the population of this funerary grounds was sufficiently middle class in following the latest trends of the Christian devotional jewellery.

The bronze ring depicting the unique representation of *Abraham’s Sacrificial Offer* was discovered in Grave 21 (Fig. 2), dated in the 10<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, along with yet another bronze ring the decoration of which is devastated and, quite intriguingly with a biconical earring, not a pair but a piece. The *in situ* length of the skeleton was 1.70 meters, which points to a male, though there are no anthropological data regarding the gender of the deceased<sup>7</sup>. The *Abraham ring* was discovered on the left palm, no phalanxes noted in the documentation’s inventory, while its inner diameter is 2.5 cm, once again pointing to a male carrier. The details of the iconography of this miniature *mise-en-scène* are placed on the oval head of the bronze ring, in a field accentuated by punctuated dots, thus creating the atmosphere denotative of Mount Moriah, the site where Abraham was instructed to sacrifice his one son to God, by God’s will (Fig. 3). At the centre of the scene there is a stylized male figure, whose arms are wide - orant open, holding a knife/sword in the left hand. In the left part there is a stylized representation of a table/altar, while on the right side is a depiction of an obscure phyto or zoomorphic figure, or an attempt for visualising both. Thus, this scene could not be anything else, but one stylized representation of the verses in Genesis 22:1-12 i.e. the *Sacrifice of Abraham* or the *Sacrifice of Isaac* as a more common reference.

The central figure, Abraham is presented in a garment which is artistically similar and stylistically analogous to the ring depictions pulling their in-

<sup>6</sup> Л. Кепеска, *Задна Река – Грмајте, средновековна некропола*, Прилеп, 1995, 14.

<sup>7</sup> The anthropological examinations identified only 3 skeletons due to the poor preservation of the osteological material, two of which were male, whose *in situ* length is 1.62 i.e. 1.65 meters. Thus, it seems logical to assume that the skeleton in Grave 21 also belonged to a male individual.



spirations from the numismatic series of the time, but in this case, we believe that the dotted vertical raw on the garment is denotative of an *epitracheion* vestment, liturgical symbol of priesthood and pastoral role<sup>8</sup>. Thus, he is 'iconographically' invested with the patriarchal role given to him by the Old Testament verses. His hand is raised in divine determination and is denotative of his obedience in the moment when Abraham, ready to slaughter his son, was stopped by God who said: "Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." (Genesis 22:1-12)<sup>9</sup>. Whether the phyto/zoomorphic lines on the right of Abraham are an attempt to sketch the thicket and the sacrificial ram is difficult to say, since the media carrying this scene is far too small for detailed iconographical elaboration. Thus, we can only assume that the artist's intention was to indicate the obligatory elements of this Old Testament scene in an artism of his extent, at which point we are faced with the crucial and far more important question regarding the ontology of this scene! Namely, the most essential part of this archaeological item is the scene selection, a representation previously unseen on a media such as ring dated in the time-frame of *Macedonia Byzantina*, the 'iconographical' selection of which and furthermore its symbolic meaning raise intrigue and fascination.

Allow us to broaden the context of this depiction chrono-topically i.e. both chronologically and territorially, in order to point to what we believe are the closest analogies of the ring's iconography, in terms of artistic, format and symbolical similarities. Following a chronological order, we present few examples of various provenances, the decorative matrixes of which are similar to the Grave 21's ring. The first analogy is a gem-ring dated in 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, of unknown, probably Asia Minor origin, on which the garnet stone inset in gold is decorated with the representation of Abraham offering the bind Isaac, his son to God. The luxurious gem ring has far more elaborated and un-



Fig. 4 Seal from the Dumbarton Oaks Collection; 5a (obverse): Bust of Sarah; 5b (reverse): Sacrifice of Isaac

Сл. 4 Печат из колекције Дамбартон Оукса; 5a (аверс): Сарино торзо; 5b (реверс): Жртва Аврамова

<sup>8</sup> For the numismatic inspirations on jewelry see: P. Špehar, O. Zorova, *Grave Finds as Testimony of Christianity in Central Balkans from 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century*, in Rome, Constantinople and Newly-Converted Europe, Vol. 1, Krakow-Leipzig-Rzeszow-Warszawa, 2012, 429-446.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+22%3A1-13&version=NIV> New International Version.



Fig. 5 Judeo –  
Christian pendant,  
unknown origin

Сл. 5 Јудео-  
хришћански  
привезак, порекло  
непознато

ambiguous representation of the Old Testament verse, but the schematic resemblance of the depicted scene is clearly visible. The second example comes from the collection of Dumbarton Oaks, a seal (Fig. 4, a and b), dated in the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the obverse of which depicts the sacrificial offer of Abraham, supplemented with the depiction of the Manus Dei as an indication of God's presence and intercedence.

Next in line is a Judeo-Christian pendant depicting a menorah and the Sacrifice of Isaac, of unknown origin, broadly determined as 8<sup>th</sup> century *terminus ante quem* (Fig. 5). We find this pendant's iconography impressively similar to the Grave 21's ring, especially in the arrangement of the details important for the scenery. The representation of the righteous Abraham's obedience as an iconographical inspiration is also found onto other media<sup>10</sup>, such as the 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries bronze/lead Byzantine relief (Fig. 6), as well as the 6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries Byzantine terracotta tile, thus broadening the media forms of this Old Testament episode and undoubtedly testifying to the profound symbolic that this scene had for the common people, since these objects are more or less point-breaks between the canonical and the individual manifestations of religious belief during the Byzantine era.

Objects of personal devotion, a plethora encompassing a wide range of media referred to as phylacterium and used as statements of faith and protection against the *'unbearable lightness of being'* is our preferred proposed typology for this particular ring, the depiction of which echoes back to the *'prehistory'* of Christianity in what we anticipate is a laconic didactic *'treatise'* on the subject of faith as an ultimate apotropaic instrument. Alluding to such function, the ultimate meaning of which remains veiled, the Grave 21 ring opens some new scholarly meditations in the sphere of jewellery's decorative iconography, and hopefully some new ideas and insights inside this *'fountain'* of motifs. This specific "iconographic" representation could also have been invested with hierar-

<sup>10</sup> For example the wooden relief from Bargala, see S. Filipova, *The sacrifice of Abraham from Bargala's Wooden relief*, Patrimonium 13, 2015, 107-120.

chal, social and even religious denotation signaled by its carrier. However, having in mind the difficulty in interpretation of motifs and meanings of the medieval rings we could only hope that further finds and research could shed light on the *conscious* need for use of these depictions on objects so tightly and intimately related to their carrier. At this stage we could only point that so far the Macedonian archaeology has not yet revealed any analogy to Grave 21's ring, nor a similar representation on "everyday" material culture, thus making it an exclusive example in the opus of medieval bronze rings.

If we turn our attention to the horizon of art history, particularly the one encompassing medieval fresco ensembles, we will certainly find that the scene of Abraham's sacrifice is a rare iconographic phenomenon in that domain, as well. Speaking of the Byzantine monuments in the Balkan Region, the most impressive composition depicting this Biblical event is, by all means, executed in the monastery of Gračanica<sup>11</sup>, where the fearful gaze of the old Abraham, the distorted figure of his terrified son and the proportional silhouette of the landscape backdrop associative of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem create an expressive spectacle of a tragic, yet festive ceremony of beneficial offering. However, the fresco painting from Medieval Macedonia can also offer some visually interesting examples, among which the painted cycle illustrated in the altar space of the Saint Sophia cathedral in Ohrid (ca. 1040-1045) is the most significant<sup>12</sup>. (Fig. 7) Belonging to the decorative



Fig. 6 Bronze relief, 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century

Сл. 6 Бронзани рељеф, V или VI век

<sup>11</sup> Б. Тодић, *Грачаница. Сликаство*, Београд – Приштина 1998, 141; Idem, *Serbian Medieval Painting. The Age of King Milutin*, Belgrade 1991, T. XXX.

<sup>12</sup> П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Материјали за македонската средновековна уметност I. Фреските во светилиштето на црквата св. Софија во Охрид*, Зборник на Археолошкиот музеј I (1955-1956), 37-67; Р. Љубинковиќ, М. Коровиќ-Љубинковиќ, *Средновековното сликарство во Охрид*, Зборник на трудови, Охрид 1961, 101-106; В. Н. Лазарев, *Живопис XI-XII веков во Македониј*, Actes du XII<sup>e</sup> Congrès international d'études byzantines I, Beograd 1961, 114-121; С. Радојчиќ, *Прилози за историју најстаријег охридског сликарства*, Зборник радова Византолошког института VIII/2 (1964), 355-381; П. Миљковиќ-Пепек П., *Материјали за историјата на средновековното сликарство во Македонија III Фреските во наосот и нартексот на црквата Св. Софија во Охрид*, Културно наследство III (1967), 1-25; Р. Hamann-Mac Lean R., *Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien*, Giessen 1976, 224-248; A. Wharton-Epstein, *The Political Content of the Painting of Saint Sophia at Ohrid*,





Fig. 7 St. Sophia, Ohrid, Programme of the altar

Сл. 7 Св. Софија у Охриду, Програм олтарског простора

program of the bema spectacularly permeated with ideologically nuanced visual methodology related to the rightful maintenance of the Eucharist<sup>13</sup>, Abraham's cycle in the Ohrid's Archbishopric is given a special visual functionality within the religious dimension of the depicted ensemble. Sharing its spatial denomination with innovative visual explication of the Doctrine formulated as liturgical pictures with didactical roles<sup>14</sup>, Abraham's cycle in the Ohrid cathedral church is much more than a Biblical illustration of a dramatic and impressively thrilling Old Testament event.

Although the cycle starts at the southern border of the altar and continues towards its centre counter clock wise, the compositions depicting the Biblical

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Jarbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik 29 (1980), 315-329; B. Schellewald B., *Die Architektur de Sophienkirche in Ohrid*, Bonn 1986; A. M. Лидов, *Образ Христа – архиепеей в иконографической программе Софий охридской*, Зограф 17 (1986), 5-21; A. Wharton *Art of Empire. Painting and Architecture of the Byzantine Periphery*, University Park and London 1988, 105-106; Б. Чипан, *Св. Софија: катедрален храм на Охридската архиепископија*, Скопје 1995; Ц. Грозданов, *Фреските на Св. Софија Охридска*, Скопје 1998, 3-16; S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, Milano 2006, 27-34, 52-56; E. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, Македонија. Милениумски културно-историски факти, Скопје 2013, 1565-1568, 1578-1583; E. Dimitrova E., *V. I. Personalities in Medieval Macedonia. Five Paradigms of Supreme Commissionership (11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> Century)*, Folia Archeologica Balkanica III, Скопје 2015, 609-613.

<sup>13</sup> A. Wharton-Epstein, *The Political Content of the Painting of Saint Sophia at Ohrid*, 315-317; E. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1580.

<sup>14</sup> E. Dimitrova E., *V. I. Personalities in Medieval Macedonia. Five Paradigms of Supreme Commissionership (11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> Century)*, 611.

Fig. 8 St. Sophia, Ohrid, cycle of Old Testament Abraham, Hospitality of Abraham  
Сл. 8 Св. Софија у Охриду, циклус Старозаветног Аврама, Аврамово гостољубље



Fig. 9 St. Sophia, Ohrid, cycle of Old Testament Abraham, Hospitality of Abraham, detail

Сл. 9 Св. Софија у Охриду, циклус Старозаветног Аврама, Аврамово гостољубље, детаљ



story are iconographically well structured<sup>15</sup>. In that sense, the Hospitality of Abraham is illustrated in two episodes: the first one depicting the Arrival of the Angels in the plains of Mamre (*Genesis: 18, 2*) and the second one - visualizing the Annunciation of the birth of Isaac by the Angel (*Genesis: 18, 8-10*). In the iconographic concept of the first composition, kneeling Abraham is welcoming the three angelic figures in front of scarce landscape scenery constructed of a steep rocky mountain; with a manifest gesture of humble obedience, the old man is stretching his arms towards the seemingly unexpected guests; the three angels, one of which is giving a sign of recognition, are approaching their host with dignified motion of ceremonial heralds.

The second composition (**Fig. 8**) shares the festal atmosphere of depicted Arrival, yet, adds some energetic vividness to the illustration of the wishful “entertaining”: while the old Sarah is peeking through the gate of her household, Abraham brings the plate with the food “offering” to the heavenly visitors (**Fig. 9**); his corporal posture is not very different from

<sup>15</sup> R. Hamman-Mac Lean und H. Hallensleben, *Die Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien von 11. bis zum frühen 14. Jahrhundert*, Giessen 1963, 19; С. Радојчић, *Прилози за историју најстаријех охридског сликарства*, Зборник радова Византолошког института VIII/2, Београд 1964, 361-362.



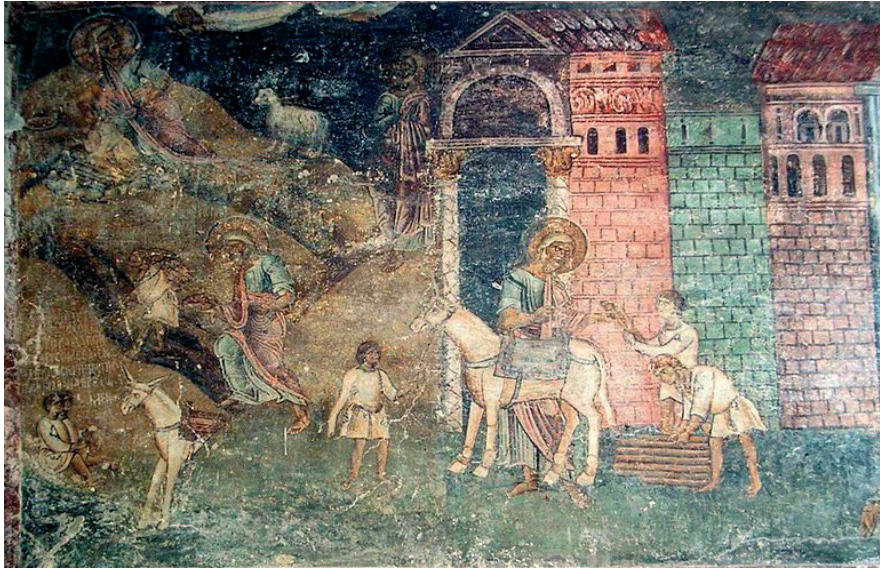


Fig. 10 St. Sophia, Ohrid, cycle of Old Testament Abraham, Abraham's sacrifice  
 Сл. 10 Св. Софија у Охриду, циклус Старозаветног Аврама, Аврамова жртва

the humble pose he strikes in the previous episode; yet, the atmosphere is much more domesticated since the spectacle is depicted in front of an urbanized setting with precisely formulated architectural scenery.

Counter clockwise, north of the depiction of the Hospitality, the Biblical tale of the Sacrifice of Abraham is illustrated in five episodes (**Fig. 10**): 1. Abraham and his servants saddling the ass with the wood for the burnt offering (*Genesis: 22, 3*) occupies the largest portion of the entire spectacle of the Sacrifice, showing Isaac holding the leash of the donkey, as if he is carrying the sacrificial "lading" by himself; in the second plan of the scene, the architectural scenery associates this composition with the previous one alluding to the home of Abraham as a starting point of his paternal agony. 2. Abraham is leaving the servants to wait for him (*Genesis: 22, 5*) in the rocky landscape of the land of Moriah where they take their rest seating on a grassy hillside. 3. Abraham and Isaac are heading to the designated spot for the offering (*Genesis: 22, 6*), whereat Isaac is leading the way while Abraham is following his son on the path of a steeply passage through the rocky landscape of Moriah. 4. Abraham is stretching his hand to kill his son with a knife (*Genesis: 22, 10*), simultaneously turning his hand to the left, in direction to a segment of the sky where the voice of God directs him otherwise. 5. Abraham sees the ram as a replacement offering (*Genesis: 22, 12-13*) and starts to walk downhill towards the foot of the mountainous landscape. Although according to the visual structure of the composition, it seems that there are two main constituents of the spectacle: the preparation of the sacrifice depicted in an architectural frame of Abraham's habitat (in the south part of the scene) and the process of the sacrificial offering



Fig. 11 St. Sophia, Ohrid, Blessing of the Eucharistic bread

Сл. 11 Св. Софија у Охриду, Христ благосиља причесни хлеб

iconographically articulated in the natural setting of the land of Moriah (in the north portion of the view), all five episodes of the Biblical story are elaborated in their exact narrative succession.

Following the Biblical tale in a consistent manner and uniting the two crucial chapters that refer to the designated role of Old Testament Abraham as a devoted follower, as well as God's favourite, the cycle in Saint Sophia cathedral's altar space emanates accentuated Eucharistic significance. The astonishing appearance of the angels in Abraham's habitat at Mamre as a symbolic hypostasis of the Holy Trinity and the prediction of Isaac's birth as an Old Testament prefiguration of Christ's incarnation (*Genesis, chapter 18*) are complemented with the elaborated depiction of Abraham taking his son to be sacrificed in the land of Moriah (*Genesis, chapter 22*) as an Old Testament prototype of Christ's sacrificial offering on the cross of Golgotha. Hence, if we have in mind that Moriah in Hebrew means the mount of God, a place which in the Book of Chronicles, as well as in Isaiah's and Zechariah's prophecies refers to the site of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem (*II Chronicles: 3, 1; Isaiah: 2, 3; Zechariah: 8, 3*), than Saint Sophia's cycle sublimes two ideological coordinates of the Biblical story: the sophisticated notion of Incarnation as an essential prerequisite of the Messianic role of the Saviour and the designated location of the sanctified temple where the sacrificial offerings were placed as the Eucharistic bread was laid on the altar table in the Ohrid cathedral. In that regard, the Old Testament evidence of one righteous man's destiny heralds the elaborated synoptic substance of the predicted redemption of the entire mankind. On the account of that, the cycle depicting the Story of Abraham was painterly executed in the second register of





Fig. 12 St. Sophia, Ohrid, Three Hebrews in the fiery furnace, Jacob's ladder

Сл. 12 Св. Софија у Охриду, Три Јевреја у пећи, Јаковљева лествица

the fresco ensemble of Saint Sophia's bema, corresponding to the composition in which Christ blesses the Eucharistic bread, placed in the center of the altar (**Fig. 11**)<sup>16</sup>.

Moreover, if one takes a look at the visual constellation of the fresco programme in the altar of Saint Sophia's cathedral church, one will notice that, in terms of its spatial location, the Old Testament Abraham's cycle is in firm visual correlation with the four compositions depicted in the same register on the north wall of the bema: the Three Hebrews in the fiery furnace, Jacob's ladder (**Fig. 12**), The Vision of Saint John Chrysostom (**Fig. 13**) and Saint Basil Officiating (**Fig. 14**)<sup>17</sup>. In regard to their ideological function within the program concept of the painted decoration of the sanctuary, two of them refer to the prefigurative role of Old Testament events: the scene with the three young Hebrews thrown in the fiery furnace (Book of the Prophet Daniel: 3, 12-30)<sup>18</sup> reflects the notion of devotion and obedience to God, while the Dream of Jacob with the vision of the heavenly leader (Book of Genesis: 28, 10-19) alludes to the obligations and inheritance of the people chosen by God<sup>19</sup>. Both Biblical phenomena are founded upon the notion of Abraham being the forefather of the righteous men dedicated

<sup>16</sup> S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, T. 31.

<sup>17</sup> С. Радојчић, *Прилози за историју најстаријех охридског сликарства*, 362-363; A. Grabar, *Les peintures murales dans le choeur de Sainte Sophie d' Ohrid*, Cahiers Archéologiques XV, Paris 1965, 257-265; Ц. Грозданов, *Јавување на премудроста на свети Јован Златоуст во Света Софија охридска*, Студии за охридскиот живопис, Скопје 1990, 35-41; A. J. Wharton, *Art of Empire. Painting and Architecture of the Byzantine Periphery*, 106.

<sup>18</sup> citation according to the *Holy Bible. Old and New Testament in the King James Version*, Nashville 1972.

<sup>19</sup> A. J. Levine, Daniel, in: *The new Oxford annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical books : New Revised Standard Version*, Oxford 2010, 1239-1241; J. L. Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob: Ancient Interpretations of the Biblical Story of Jacob and His Children*, Princeton 2006, 24.

Fig. 13 St. Sophia,  
Ohrid, Vision of St. John  
Chrysostom  
Сл. 13 Св. Софија у  
Охриду, Визија св. Јована  
Златоустог



to religious fervour. In that sense, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego consider themselves successors of Abraham and Isaac's faith (Book of the Prophet Daniel: 3, 35), while Jacob, being an immediate descendent of Abraham and Isaac, inherits God's protection and His unquestionable care (Book of Genesis: 28, 13). Moreover, the place where Jacob stopped for the night has been identified as Mount Moriah<sup>20</sup>, the location of designated Abraham's sacrifice, as well as the position of the future Temple in Jerusalem. Hence, the two Old Testament compositions are ideologically linked to the notion of Abraham as God's favourite, as well as his "obligatory" role for posterity and, accordingly, to the narrative cycle of his devotion and sacrifice.

The other two scenes that spatially correlate with the cycle dedicated to Old Testament Abraham represent program novelties in Saint Sophia altar decoration with a long, as well as significant impact on the later Byzantine monumental painting: united with a "cooperative" ideological indication of the subsequent composition of Officiating church fathers, they show the fundamentals of the compulsory liturgical decor in all Byzantine sanctuaries from 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In that sense, one has to notice that in the spatial disposition of program components in Saint Sophia altar, the Old Testament scenes – the Three Hebrews in the fiery furnace, as well as Jacob's ladder are counterparts of the Hospitality of Abraham while the Vision of Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Basil Officiating correspond to the depiction of Abraham's sacrifice. Hence, in the conceptual matrix of program context elaborated in the bema of the Ohrid cathedral church, the Biblical tale of the righteous Abraham does not only refer to the notion of unquestionable religious devotion in the Old Testament, but to its Eucharistic reflection in correspondent liturgical ceremonies, as well. Therefore, in the centre of the apse on the subsidiary walls of which Abraham's

<sup>20</sup> H. G. Lunt, *Ladder of Jacob, a new translation and introduction*, The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha 2, New Haven 2010, 401-412.



Fig. 14 St. Sophia,  
Ohrid, St Basil  
Officiating

Сл. 14 Св. Софија  
у Охриду, Служба  
св. Василија  
Великог

sacrifice heralds the benevolent sacrificial offering of the Saviour celebrated in the festal liturgy, Blessing of the Eucharistic bread has been depicted as the ultimate denominator for the redemption of the entire humanity. With the grand assembly of church authorities, arranged in the lower zone<sup>21</sup> as a legitimate confirmation, as well as the picture of the immaculately incarnated Patriarch in the conch<sup>22</sup>, the cycle of Old Testament Abraham, with its ideological and liturgical reflections, represents a powerful visual metaphor of the Eucharistic rite, funded upon the faith and maintained through canonized ceremonies.

In the horizon of its painterly expression, the cycle of Old Testament Abraham in Saint Sophia's sanctuary is nothing but highly illustrative<sup>23</sup>. The suggestively vivid motion of the angelic figures (Fig. 15) in the first episode of the depicted story, the proportionally festal arrangement of the three celestial beings around the dining table, the humble posture of the host who brings the offering of food to his heavenly guests and the attentive, inquisitive gaze of the old Sarah who peeps from inside the household in the scene of Abraham's hospitality permeate the visualization of the Biblical verses with the expressive nuances of a tense and exciting spectacle. On the other hand, the decision of the iconographer to illustrate the process of Isaac's Sacrifice in several episodes comprised by a mutual frame, is due to the notion of the dramatic complexity of the act itself which, as passionately described in the Bible, consists of an agonized preparation and unpredictable non-execution. The firm compositional structure of the architectural scenery in the backdrop of the scene showing the preparation of the sacrifice contrary to the harsh, incoherent and dramatically ar-

<sup>21</sup> С. Радојчић, *Прилози за историју најстаријег охридског сликарства*, 355-360; R. Hamman-Mac Lean and H. Hallensleben, *Die Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien*, pl. 1

<sup>22</sup> М. Лидов, *Образ Христа – архиерей в иконографической программе Софий охридской*, 5-21.

<sup>23</sup> В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, Београд 1974, 9.



ticulated landscape depicted in the rest of the episodes picturing Abraham's sacrifice is another component of the specifically configured ambience of the visual story. In that regard, the column supporting the porch of the supposed Abraham's habitat, represented as a tall and well fortified edifice, is the visual "divider" of the two main portions of the composition - the one depicting the preparation and the other picturing the consecutive process of the sacrifice.

Yet, the episode in which Abraham raises his hand in order to sacrifice his son Isaac, although positioned in the high left angle of the composition, reveals the overwhelming tragedy of the moment in the fearful, frightened and helpless glance of the old man determined to kill his only child. The calm composure of the two servants, unaware of the forthcoming

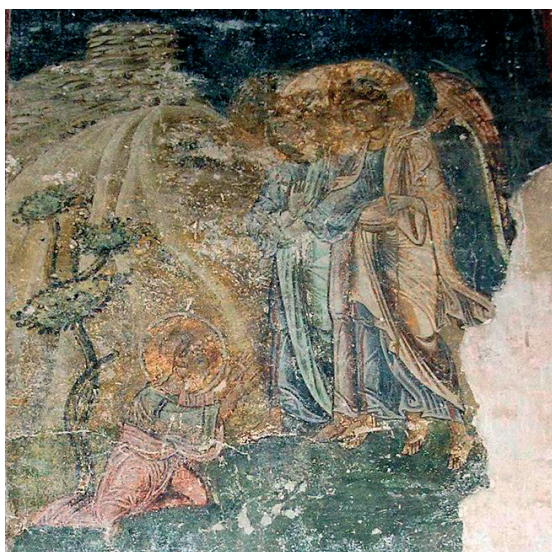


Fig. 15 St. Sophia, Ohrid, cycle of Old Testament Abraham, Arrival of the Three Angels

Сл. 15 Св. Софија у Охриду, циклус старозаветног Аврама, Долазак трију анђела

event, contrary to the suggestively agitated facial expression of the suffering father, the wide prospect of the first episode located in front of the architectural backdrops, contrary to the dense configuration of the hilly landscape of the subsequent sights, as well as the colourful resonance of hues of the right portion of the picture contrary to the dark gamut of the palette in the left part of the vista where the drama takes place - are the aesthetic components of painterly execution of the emotional Old Testament narrative<sup>24</sup>. Graphically sublimed when represented as symbolic ornament on archeological artifacts and/or elaborately illustrated within painterly ensembles, the Sacrifice of Abraham, with all its visual coordinates, stands for one of the most compassioned iconographic spectacles in the creative language of medieval aesthetics.

<sup>24</sup> Е. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1581-1583.

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ПУТОВАЊЕ СТАРОЗАВЕТНОГ АВРАМА КРОЗ ИКОНОГРАФИЈУ  
СРЕДЊОВЕКОВНЕ МАКЕДОНИЈЕ

Старозаветни Аврам, један од најживописнијих ликова библиских времена, нашао је своје заслужено место међу светитељским представама на зидовима византијских цркава, али и на предметима средњовековне материјалне културе. Инспириран археолошким налазом са некрополе *Задна река – Грмајте* код Прилепа (X – XI век), овај чланак описује најупечатљивије иконографске представе Аврамове жртве настале на македонској територији у средњовизантиском периоду. Мушки прстен са стилизованом представом библиског “чедоморства”, откривен у гробу број 21 поменуте некрополе, једини је примерак ове специфичне иконографије на подручју византијске Македоније, али се његове аналогије могу наћи у неколико примера материјалне културе Средоземља из ширег периода средњовековне епохе који припадају различитим типолошким категоријама (накит, рељефи, декоративне теракоте). Мада се улога и функција прстена са овом карактеристичном иконографијом не може тачно утврдити, његов фунерарни карактер упућује на прифилактичку/апотропејску димензију налаза, као и на хијерахијско-социјални и религијски статус власника.

У домену историје уметности, најрепрезентативнији примерак је илустровани циклус Аврамове жртве у светилишту Охридске катедрале Св. Софије (1040-1045), где је библиска прича артикулисана у седам живописних епизода. Притом, Долазак анђела и Аврамове гостољубље су приказане као засебне композиције, док су епизоде Аврамове жртве смештене у заједнички оквир брдовитог пејсажа који обухвата пет драматичних старозаветних призора. Како су насупротив овом циклусу илустроване две библијске композиције са еухаристичним садржајем, док је у центру Св. Софијског олтара приказана сцена Христа који благосиља причесни хлеб, постаје јасно да је циклус Аврамове жртве приказан као део ширег еухаристичног контекста катедралног храма са веома наглашеним идеолошким и литургијским значајем. У сублимираном графичком облику на археолошким налазима или у илустративно развијеној варијанти у уметничким споменицима, Аврамова жртва, са својим специфичним структуралним елементима, један је од најзанимљивијих иконографских призора у визуелној култури средњовековне Македоније.