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Tirana, Albania

UNPUBLISHED SCENE OF ST JOHN VLADIMIR FROM THE CHURCH  
OF THE ENTRANCE OF THE VIRGIN TO THE TEMPLE AT KOLKONDAS,  
MYZEQE, CENTRAL ALBANIA

**Abstract:** The paper presents a hitherto unpublished scene of saint John Vladimir from the church of the Entrance of the Mother of God to the Temple from the village of Myzeqe, central Albania. The dating of the frescoes in the last two decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century provides an additional example of the saint's regional veneration. The paper starts with a brief presentation of the monastery and the church in question, describes the scene of St. John Vladimir and classifies it in its iconographic classification type.

**Keywords:** saint John Vladimir, the Church of the Entrance of the Virgin to the Temple at Kolkondas, Central Albania.

**Information about the author:** Konstantinos Giakoumis — European University of Tirana, Bulevardi “Gjergj Fishta”, Nd. 70, H. 1, Borough No. 7, 1023 Tirana, Albania. E-mail: konstantinos.giakoumis@uet.edu.al, kgiakoumis2@gmail.com

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НЕ ОПУБЛИКОВАННОЕ РАНЕЕ ИЗОБРАЖЕНИЕ СВЯТОГО ИОАННА  
ВЛАДИМИРА ИЗ ЦЕРКВИ ВВЕДЕНИЯ ВО ХРАМ ПРЕСВЯТОЙ  
БОГОРОДИЦЫ В КОЛКОНДАСЕ, МЫЗЕКЕ, ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЛБАНИЯ

**Аннотация:** В статье представлен ранее не публиковавшийся материал о сцене из жития св. Иоанна Владимира из церкви Введения во храм Пресвятой Богородицы, в деревне Мызеке, Центральная Албания. Фрески, датирующиеся последними двумя десятилетиями XVIII столетия, предоставляют новый пример традиции регионального почитания святого. Работа, открывающаяся кратким вве-

дением в историю монастыря и вышеупомянутой церкви, исследует изображение св. Иоанна Владимира, помещая его в контекст иконографической типологии.

**Ключевые слова:** святой Иоанн Владимир, церковь Входа Богородицы в храм в Колкондах, Центральная Албания.

**Информация об авторе:** Константинос Гиакумис — Тиранский Европейский университет, бульвар Г. Фишта, Nd. 70, Н. 1, Borough No. 7, 1023 Тирана, Албания. E-mail: konstantinos.giakoumis@uet.edu.al, kgiakoumis2@gmail.com

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The monastery of Saint Kosmas the Aetolian and the Entrance of the Virgin to the Temple at Kolkondas, Fier [Figure 1] lies on a site associated with the miraculous discovery of the saint's body after his martyrdom. Visiting it in October 18, 1848 on his way to the nearby deserted ancient city of Apollonia, Edward Lear described it as “a little wood of plain trees”, situated among a group of low hills, with the monastery “shaded by ... high trees” [6]. Up until 1900s the territory surrounding the monastery must have resembled an island on Seman River, however, successive floods at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought alluvial deposits that raised ground level by 2–3 meters thereby covering the buildings of the monastery, the ruined old church and the lower parts of the newer taller catholicon until they were recently excavated and reconstructed.

An 18<sup>th</sup> century saint much revered in Greece, Albania and their diaspora, Saint Kosmas, in whose name the monastery is mostly known, was born at the village of Megalo Dendro in Aetolia in 1714. He attended school in neighbouring villages, where he also taught, and in 1750s he studied in the Athonias School, Mount Athos, where he was also ordained as monk at Philotheou Monastery. In 1760 he visited Patriarch Sophronios II and got permission to travel widely and preach striving to defend Greek civilization and Orthodoxy in an age of aggravated Islamization. A few years before his martyrdom, he returned to Epiros and also travelled and preached throughout Albania, from Shkodra and Kruja to Gjirokastra and Saranda, and from Vlora and Himarra to Pogradec, Ohrid and Voskopoja. His activity was perceived as suspicious and, allegedly upon the instigation of Berat's Jews, Kurt Pasha of Berat ordered his arrest, which, without trial, led to his martyrdom by way of strangling in August 24, 1779. According to his *vita*, his body was thrown into Seman River (Gk. Genousos), from which Christian inhabitants of Myzeqe, led by a priest, retrieved and buried it in the monastery of the Entrance of the Virgin to the Temple at Kolkondas [5; 3] [Figure 2].

The only partly preserved church of the Entrance of the Virgin to the Temple at Kolkondas [Figure 3] was a wooden-roofed basilica with three aisles. This architectural type was quite widespread in the region and the entire 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, as one can conclude by comparison to a series of monuments, like the catholicon of the Nativity of the Virgin “Ardenica” at Kolonja, Fier, central Albania [Figure 4]. The masonry is made of uneven stones and spolia most probably from the nearby site of Apollonia placed tied together with lime mortar. The most visible eastern side of the church was particularly decorated [Figure 5]. The church's floor was once more elevated than what it currently is ... A majuscule inscription [9, p. 109] placed at the northern wall, adjacent to the apse provides ample information about the reconstruction of the church, as well as a safe date thereof [Figure 6]:

TRANSCRIPTION	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
+ ANEKAINISΘHΘEIOΣO <sup>7</sup> YTOΣNAOΣΔI   <sup>2</sup> ΑΣ YNAPOMHCTOYΠANIEPΩTATOYMITPO   <sup>3</sup> ΠOΛ ITOYBELLAPADONIQASAFEXOΔONTEKAI   4 KOΠONΠANTONTONXPICTIANONNIEPEONTE   5KAIΛAIKONAPHIB'IouλίφA'	+ This holy church was renovated by contribution of the most holy Metropolitan Joasaph of Belagrada [Berat], with expenses and toils of all Christians, both clergymen and laymen. 1 July 1782.

The church's iconographic programme of frescoes currently appears to be largely destroyed and exposed to the erosive weather conditions which will most certainly destroy the few remaining frescoes in spite of the protective roof within the next few years, if the frescoes are not insulated. The sole parts preserved to date are the fresco decorations of the northern wall's first zone, as well as few remaining frescoes at the eastern part of the church, up to the higher levels of the apse. The stylistic analysis of the few remaining frescoes points to an atelier of or very close to the family of George and John Tzetiri from Grabova. In spite of the size of the church and the space available, the unfamiliarity of the painters in utilizing it with an air of monumentality points to artists mostly accustomed to small-scale artworks.

The ninth (from East to West) full-body saint depicted on the northern wall of the church can be safely identified with St John Vladimir [Figures 7–8]. The saint at the right can be identified as St Nestor; I am further suggesting that the saint at his left can be identified as St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite. In a blue background the full-body figure of St John Vladimir is frontally represented. The saint is shown wearing a royal red divitision hemmed with pearls at its lower edges and a dark blue dalmatica (currently looks greenish because of the erosive effect of calcium and minerals) outlined with gold tresses with ornaments of pearls and precious gems [for the Byzantine imperial dress look for 1, 10]. The saint seems to be holding a cross with his right hand laying it onto his right shoulder. The position of his left hand I believe points to *cephalophoria*, although no clear signs of it are nowadays visible, on account of the advanced erosion of the fresco. His face is executed with dark brown preparation of the flesh and rapid bright brushstrokes with limited transitions from the darker to the more lit surfaces. His oblong, bearded face, giving the saint a Christ-like look, is characterized by soft modelling with refine, thin contour lines. The saint's eyes are turned slightly to the right. The saint bears a golden crown on his head; it is ornate and quite detailed; its creases are decorated with pearls at their ends. The saint also bears a golden halo [Figure 9].

The description above, with slight variants, has been the standard iconography of the saint for a considerable period of time. The scene's *cephalophoria* (i.e. the bearing of his head, as is rather usual in his iconography) rather distances our scene from the earliest known representation of St John Vladimir, the 1625 fresco of St. John Vladimir from the second pictorial phase of the church of St. Nicholas at Shelcan, Shpat, Elbasan and the formerly stolen icon of St John Vladimir currently kept at the National Historical Museum in Tirana [Figure 10]. This iconography becomes the standard for a great number of artworks portraying the saint bearing his head (*cephalophoros*), apparently influenced by the 1690 engraving of the saint by Isabella Piccini, which was included in the 1690 *akolouthia* [2, p. 182; 11].

In view of the absence of a date in our scene, its dating can only be made by attribution, using the inscription's 1782 date as a *terminus post quem*. The mastery of rendering of volume in the latter example of 1810 points to a less experienced phase of a painter. The painter seems to be well versed with the trends of the Epirotan school of painting in the rendering of the flesh. The scene can be classified to the iconographic variant B.1.1.1. [4], which is manifested in monumental paintings since 1728, in the west wall of the porch, Church of the Archangels

Michael and Gabriel, wall painting, fresco, Vithkuq, Korçë [7, p. 188; 9, p. 161;10], painted by Kyrkos and Panagiotis. In my view, the two termina which can be used to date our scene are [Figure 11, 12]:

1 George & John Tsetiri, *St. John Vladimir*, 1795, Church of St. Nicholas, wall painting, fresco, Vanaj, Lushnjë [9, p. 112, 10].

2 Terpo, son of painter Constantine from Korça, *St. John Vladimir*, 1810, Catholicon of the Monastery of St. Naoum, wall painting, fresco, Ohrid [7, p. 183].

In view of the structure, composition and elaboration of our scene, I believe it antedates both of these examples. I am therefore inclined to suggest a date between 1782 and 1795 and point to a new generation of painters from Grabova, less acquainted with monumental painting. Although the scene described herein does not bring anything new to the iconography of St John Vladimir as we now know it, the case is certainly an additional example of the widespread veneration of the saint in the region of Myzeqe.

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