

Lutheran Apocalyptic Imagery in the Orthodox Context

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Abstract: Dürer's Apocalypse was undoubtedly the prototype for the many apocalyptic representations that suddenly appeared in Central Europe by the end of the sixteenth century: the influence of Dürer's Apocalypse extended far beyond the German borders, towards Western, Southern and Eastern countries. The Apocalypse text is extremely rich in symbols so that it could easily be enriched with additional meanings: Cranach's reworking of Dürer's iconographic model in the 1520s, under Luther's personal guidance, became a key instrument of transmission of the Lutheran doctrine and anti-papal criticism. The reception of these prototypes in the Orthodox world followed different routes, as two different works of art can prove, namely, a cycle of frescoes on Mount Athos and a series of Gospel book covers made at the end of the seventeenth century by an unidentified Transylvanian Saxon Lutheran goldsmith. In the latter, the Cranach prototype, which was originally made with the purpose of transmitting the Lutheran doctrine, was brilliantly adapted by the goldsmith to a different context. The comparative analysis of the same scene by Dürer, Cranach and the Transylvanian goldsmith can be useful to show how art could be employed to transmit a religious and political message while adapting it to the specific needs and characteristics of a culturally and religiously different context.

Keywords: post-Byzantine; Wallachia; Transylvania; Mount Athos; Venice; engravings; frescoes; goldsmithing; visual culture

1. Introduction

The Book of Revelation, also called *The Revelation of Saint John*, or the *Apocalypse*, is the last book of the New Testament. The book describes the vision received by the saint while exiled to Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea (Boxall 2013). The text is dated to the end of the first century, and the author, who names himself John, has been sometimes identified with John the Apostle and Evangelist. Saint John's visions described terrifying events predicted to occur at the end of time and challenged the imagination of theologians and scholars, who wrote a great number of commentaries that sought to decipher the meaning of those symbols and events. The text, indeed, really complex and full of symbols, has been interpreted in several ways: some prefer the view that sees the prophecies as events that had already happened in the first century BC, while others believe that the Book of Revelations describes future events; still others believe that Revelation must be read as an allegory of the ongoing struggle between good and evil (Christ and the Antichrist). Artists also tried to give visual form to this text, especially in ages when social instability or natural catastrophes compelled people to seek indications of Saint John's prophecies around them: apocalyptic imagery became more frequent in times of eschatological hopes or fears.

As pointed out by Cynthia A. Hall (1996, p. 9) and Denise Alexandra Hartmann (2010, p. 1), Apocalypse imagery became quite popular in Germany during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, due to the millennial belief that the world would come to an end in the year 1500. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, Germany experienced a period of social instability: peasant revolts, famine and criticism of the Church were interpreted as signs that the Apocalypse was imminent and, consequently, apocalyptic imagery anticipated the end of the world.



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In 1498, Albrecht Dürer created a series of fifteen large woodcuts to accompany a German and Latin translation of the Book of Revelation, the *Apocalipsis cu[m] figuris*¹. By the end of the fifteenth century, illustrations of the Apocalypse had become widespread in Central Europe, and especially in Germany: his *Apocalypse* was a huge success and had a great direct and indirect influence on many artists.

The connection between Dürer's *Apocalypse* series of 1498 and the Lutheran stand for church reform following it about 20 years later (1517) cannot be ruled out on the ground of the time gap, as calls for reform were unquestionably quite frequent even before the turn of the century, so that—as David Price stated—the assumption that Dürer was familiar with that movement already in the closing years of the fifteenth century can be justified (Price 1994: 688). Although several scholars read Dürer's iconographical choices as evidence of his anti-papalism, it would be probably more appropriate to interpret Dürer's Apocalyptic scenes as expressions of discontent rather than a categorical rejection of church hierarchy or dogma (Price 1994: 691).

A point of interest lies in the references Dürer made to the critical state of his age: already in the first scene of the apocalyptic series, we can read an allusion to contemporary history and the fears that upset it, such as the feeling of discomfort due to the Ottoman presence in the Balkans and, consequently, the fear for the fall of Christendom. While Dürer's iconographic predecessors (the *Apocalypse* series printed in the workshops of Hans Grüninger and Anton Koberger) began with the depiction of the Roman emperor Domitian enthroned while persecuting Saint John in the scene of his martyrdom, Dürer substituted a more frightening character to the pagan emperor: a Sultan is sitting on the throne, as a would-be persecutor of Saint John and all the Christians (Price 1994). This replacement of Domitian by the Sultan is entirely justified as, at the end of the century, the Turks' hegemony in Rome came to symbolise the fear of the fall of Christendom and the Holy Roman Empire to the Ottomans, who were trying to penetrate Europe through the Balkans (Figure 1).

During the early 1520s, when the Reformation became widespread, Dürer's *Apocalypse* was reworked by Lucas Cranach the Elder, whose workshop was in charge of illustrating the 1534 first complete version of Luther's Bible (*Biblia, das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift Deutsch*), printed in Wittenberg by Hans Lufft (Figure 2). Luther's translation of the Bible into German allowed a wider audience to engage directly with the religious text, while the printing press made it more affordable, facilitating the diffusion of the Lutheran message. It seems that Luther himself got involved in the illustration and required the artists to avoid any additional, superfluous detail that would not serve the text (Noble 2009, p. 34); once again, the representation of Apocalypse scenes offers the chance to transmit a political and religious message.



Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer, "Saint John's Martyrdom", woodcut, 1498, from *Apocalipsis cu[m] figuris*.



Figure 2. Hand-coloured woodcut from Cranach's illustration for the German translation of Luther's Bible (*Biblia, das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift Deutsch*, Wittenberg: Lufft.) [Source: Klassik Stiftung Weimar–Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek/CI I: 58 (c)].

2. The Athonite Frescoes

In the Byzantine world, conversely, one observes what could prudently be described as an almost total absence of depictions or reworkings of apocalyptic themes at least until the second half of the sixteenth century, when such depictions started to become popular both as printed images and as frescoes (Rigo 1996, pp. 78–79)².

The first known extensive depiction of the Apocalypse in the Orthodox world is to be found at Mount Athos, in the Dionysiou Monastery, where a large fresco cycle consisting of twenty-four scenes, each depicting a passage from the Apocalyptic text, was created probably between 1552 and 1568 (Huber 1989). The structure of the cycle was soon imitated in other Athonite monasteries, e.g., at the Monastery of Xenophon (Renaud 1943, pp. 2–3; Tsimpoukis 2013).

The many similarities of the fresco cycle with the woodcuts by Dürer and Lucas Cranach were first pointed out by Juliette Renaud in a 1943 study. In this work, she stressed, along with the undoubted similarities, also the obvious stylistic differences between the German sources and the reworking of a distinctly Byzantine taste, and therefore she put forward the hypothesis of a lost series of drawings that might have acted as an intermediary between the German and Athonite areas, perhaps through Venice (Renaud 1943, pp. 2–3). Sergio Bettini, in the introduction to the Italian edition of *The Painter's Manual* by Dionysius of Fourni (a Byzantine forgery, dateable in reality to the mid-eighteenth century³), briefly

discusses this point and adopts the thesis proposed by Renaud, stating that the Greek author of the Dionysiou Monastery frescoes was more likely to have been familiar with Venetian prints than with the originals (Bettini 1971, pp. xxvi–xxvii).

This thesis is in fact entirely plausible for two reasons: firstly, Venetian printers in the sixteenth century were very active in the re-adaptation and printing—not always authorised—of works by German artists, and Dürer in particular; secondly, the text of the Lutheran Bible was reprinted in Venice and disseminated from there with locally produced illustrations inspired by the models of Cranach and Dürer.

Based on these premises, however, my opinion is that the model (either directly or indirectly transmitted) for the Mount Athos frescoes is represented by Cranach's engravings, rather than Dürer's. The first clue in this direction is the fact that the frescoes depict certain apocalyptic episodes that cannot be found in Dürer's engravings but that are present in Cranach's work: the fourteen Dürer engravings are in fact numerically insufficient to act as a model for the twenty-four frescoes, while Cranach's engravings number around thirty episodes, providing a wide set of models.

From the comparison of the frescoes and the engravings by Cranach, one can clearly see how the Athonite painters copied the German prototype, adapting it to the different artistic medium and their own stylistic standards, without really understanding its cultural provenance and attempting to formulate an equivalent, which would be more suitable within the local context.

For example, in the fresco dedicated to the episode of the *Fifth Trumpet: The Locusts from the Bottomless Pit*, from the ninth chapter of the Apocalypse (9: 1–11) the Athonite painters replicated all the structural elements of the narrative (i.e., the star fallen to Earth after the fifth angel sounded his trumpet, the key he was given to open the bottomless pit, the sun covered by the dense smoke arising from the pit, the locusts with crowns on their heads and human faces, with feminine hair, lion teeth and scorpion tails). Nevertheless, the figures are stiff and the elements seem simply juxtaposed, lacking, on the whole, the overall coherence that characterizes the prototype, making the scene harder to read and understand (Figures 3 and 4).

The reason why the Athonite painters had to look from Mount Athos to the West to find an iconographic model is that, basically, in the Byzantine world, unlike in the rest of Europe, the Apocalypse had been ignored by exegetes for centuries. This was because it had been looked upon with suspicion by the Church due to its dubious origin, and consequently, it had not enjoyed any attention as an iconographic subject⁴.



Figure 3. *Fifth Trumpet: The Locusts from the Bottomless Pit*, fresco from the Dionysiou Monastery (Mount Athos), 17th century. [Chris Hellier/Alamy Stock Photo].



Figure 4. Hand-coloured woodcut from Cranach's illustration for Luther's Bible (*Biblia, das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift Deutsch*, Wittenberg: Lufft). [Source: Klassik Stiftung Weimar–Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek/CI I: 58 (c)].

3. The Gospel Book Bindings

Apart from the Mount Athos frescoes, the oldest known series of episodes from the *Apocalypse* in the Balkan Orthodox lands are to be found in a series of almost identical Gospel book covers made in the eighth decade of the seventeenth century by an unidentified Saxon goldsmith from Braşov (conventionally called Master EV after his seal), working for the Wallachian court⁵. One of the book covers is still in Romania, as it was gifted to the Cotroceni Monastery by the *voievod* Şerban Cantacuzino Basarab, and now belongs to the Muzeul Naţional de Artă al României (Nicolescu 1968, cat. 346, Figure 5), two are on Mount Athos (Ikonomaki-Papadopulos 1997, p. 370) and a fourth is at the Orthodox patriarchate in Jerusalem. At that time, and in the following centuries, these are to my knowledge the only Orthodox liturgical objects with an extensive representation of Apocalyptic episodes⁶.

Both plates of the bindings are decorated with episodes of the *Apocalypse*. Other than the two central scenes (the *Crucifixion* and the *Adoration of the Magi* on the front cover and the *Descent into Limbo* on the back), the four corner medallions on each side (the Evangelists on the front cover, and the apocalyptic prophets Isaiah, Zechariah, Jeremiah, Daniel on the back cover) and the two medallions occupied by the donor inscription, thirteen out of eighteen medallions on each side are decorated with episodes from the *Apocalypse*. It must be pointed out that the iconographic prototype is not Dürer, but rather Cranach. The comparative analysis of many of the scenes strongly supports this hypothesis: on the

whole, twenty-one out of the twenty-six scenes on the book cover are conceived as “copies” of the Cranach woodcuts for the *Apocalypse* of the Luther Bible (from folio 184 on). This is perfectly evident, although the different artistic *medium* inevitably forced the goldsmith to operate some simplification of the arrangement of the figures and, above all, to reduce the number of elements of the composition, either human figures or scenic details.



Figure 5. Master EV, Embossment for a Gospel with scenes of the Apocalypse, end of the seventeenth century, gilded silver, Romanian National Museum of Art. [© Muzeul Național de Artă al României].

The political instability of the Romanian Principalities, Wallachia in particular, during the seventeenth century, can probably account for the introduction of such apocalyptic

imagery at that time, which is significantly later than in other Byzantine areas: the Turks had been occupying the Balkans for centuries and were now approaching the Wallachian southern borders, while Catholic Habsburgs were trying to spread reformed Catholicism, threatening both Transylvanian protestants and Wallachian orthodoxies. The Wallachian rulers were well aware of these multiple threats. Still, they preferred siding with the other Christian countries and sought the development of a diplomatic network, considering the making of alliances the only possible solution against the common Muslim enemy. Those plans were not successful and in 1714, Constantin Brâncoveanu, Șerban Cantacuzino's nephew, was sentenced to death once his secret plans of alliance with the Catholic Habsburgs were discovered by the Ottomans.

On these grounds, it is easy to understand, for example, why characters in Turkish garments appear in the decoration of an Orthodox liturgical vessel, embodying negative characters of biblical episodes. "Turks" appear in at least five scenes on the Gospel book cover: in two scenes they are being punished, while in three scenes they are worshipping the Dragon, the Beast and Babylon the Great. Making a comparison between these scenes and the prototype (Cranach illustration for Luther's *Apocalypse*) we can easily observe how these figures replace unspecified pagan characters.

A really interesting scene on the book cover is the one depicting *Babylon the Great* (the mother of whores and the abominations of the Earth). This apocalyptic episode has been interpreted in many different ways through the centuries: in Christian thought, the ancient city of Babylon represented the antithesis of the Heavenly City. It was rather a worldly enclosure of corruption and vice.

As we have already said, the persecutor of the Christians, mentioned at the beginning of the *Book of Revelation*, was identified at first with Emperor Domitian; it is therefore not really difficult to recognise pagan Rome in the figure of Babylon the Great. Furthermore, in the *Book of Revelation*, it is said that Babylon the Great sits on "seven mountains" (17:9), that she rules over the kings of Earth (17:18), that she is the centre of the world's commerce (18:3, 11–13), the persecutor of the saints (17:6) and the corrupter of the nations (17:2; 18:3; 19:2). As a matter of fact, the Roman Empire was centred on seven hills, ruled the whole world, controlled trade, persecuted Christians, corrupting other cultures and imposing its rules and norms. The Christian philosopher Augustine in his most important work, *De civitate Dei contra Paganos*, affirmed: "[...] condita est civitas Roma velut altera Babylon et velut prioris filia Babylonis [...]" (Augustin of Hippo 1998, XVIII, 22). After the end of the thirteenth century, the Franciscans, too, employed this comparison but shifted the metaphoric image of Babylon from imperial Rome to a corrupt papacy (Tschudi 2000, p. 7).

Northern propaganda portrayed Rome as a den of vice ruled by the Antichrist, i.e., the Pope; the city was cast in the role of Babylon, often by means of widely distributed pamphlets. Luther himself wrote a treatise in 1520, with the title *Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, published both in German (*Von der babylonischen Gefangenschaft der Kirche*) and in Latin (*De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae, praeludium*), where he openly accused the Pope of being the Antichrist. Therefore, it is not surprising that in his *Apocalypse* series, Lucas Cranach represented Babylon the Great as a woman riding the beast and wearing the papal tiara (Figure 2). It must be observed that this iconographic detail was not present in Dürer's *Apocalypse*—as Denise A. Hartmann pointed out, his illustrations were not loaded with direct criticism of the Catholic Church (Hartmann 2010, p. 2).

Comparing the three representations of this episode—by the Transylvanian goldsmith, Cranach and Dürer—it is evident how Cranach used Dürer's imagery as a prototype, modifying, though, the apocalyptic iconography according to the new Lutheran context, and how the goldsmith in his turn owes a debt to Cranach. Nevertheless, the Transylvanian master also added a detail that is not present in his iconographic predecessors, consequently changing completely the interpretation of the scene: we can observe that while the characters worshipping Babylon are represented by Dürer and Cranach as unspecified noble figures, the goldsmith clearly intended them as Turks. Therefore, Babylon the Great—on the book cover—is no longer a representation of Papal Rome, but a representation of Ottoman Istanbul.

The recurrence of figures of Turks as negative characters could have been read by the Wallachian customers as a clear allusion to one of the major fears of that age, and, since they were represented as punished by God's power, this was a feature that could therefore be read as a sign of eschatological hope. Conversely, it would have been absolutely unacceptable to make any negative allusion to the Papacy, as a comprehensive Christian alliance against the Ottomans was seen by the Wallachian rulers (and maybe also by the Transylvanian master himself) as the only possible defence against the risk of the collapse of Christendom. In the same way that Cranach adapted Dürer's prototype to the new Lutheran context (stressing the Lutheran anti-papal critique), the Transylvanian master adapted Cranach's prototype to the Wallachian one, emphasising the Turk as a common enemy to all the Christians.

The Ottoman enemy was a recurrent topic already in sixteenth-century Lutheran discourse—which often combined the anxiety about Islam with his criticism against the authority of the Roman Church (Smith 2014)—, and the fear of the Turkish "invasion" was surely more pressing in Transylvania two centuries later.

4. Conclusions

German models, through copies (of variable artistic quality) and Venetian prints, reached Mount Athos within decades of their realisation, but without any doubt, Cranach's remaking represents—primarily because of its wider extension—the prototype for the cycle of frescoes in the monastery of Dionysiou.

After one century, Cranach's model is also clearly detectable in the work of the Transylvanian master EV, active under the patronage of the Wallachian court. However, the iconographic models did not reach the Romanian lands through the well-known contacts between the Wallachian court and Mount Athos (as we could have initially speculated, on the basis of the chronological precedence of the Apocalyptic Athonite frescoes), but rather directly from Germany, thanks to the Transylvanian goldsmiths, who had strong connections with their motherland and whose visual culture was surely acquainted with the Lutheran imagery.

Therefore, Mount Athos, the main gravitational centre of Orthodoxy after the fall of Byzantium, proves to be a receptacle for exogenous models and prototypes. As shown by the examples, the Germanic apocalyptic themes reached the Athonite peninsula following two routes. The first, in the sixteenth century, is the one that links Germany to the Mediterranean via Venice, thanks to the circulation of printings, the second is the one that passes through the Balkans, by means of the donation of Gospel book covers made by Transylvanian masters.

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Notes

- ¹ The full text is available at the following webpage: <http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/general/VAB8619>, accessed on 10 March 2023. The German translation was taken from the Koberger Bible of 1483. The Latin version was also reissued by Dürer in 1511 (Price 1994).
- ² The first comprehensive study of these important frescoes, dating from the mid-sixteenth to mid-nineteenth century, is the one by Georgios Tsimpoukis: his book examines the ten iconographic cycles of the Revelation of John, as preserved in the wall paintings of nine monasteries in Mount Athos (Tsimpoukis 2013).
- ³ *The Painter's Manual (Ermeneia ton zographon)* by Dionysius of Fournas was long thought to be a Byzantine text from the eleventh century, whereas it has been proven to be a text from the first half of the eighteenth century. Consequently, it is not so much a manual of Byzantine painting practice, but rather of the late "Greek-Venetian" era. By the end of the fifteenth century, Cretan painters had, in fact, broken away from the mediaeval tradition to confidently adopt the visual language of the Venetian Renaissance, which they had become familiar with directly through stays with the Greek community in the lagoon. In other

words, Venetian influence had a preferential route of penetration into south-eastern Europe and the Mediterranean East via Crete, and from there to the Greek continent and the entire Christian East. The emergence of the Turkish presence in the Mediterranean in the seventeenth century slightly changed the scenario: the Cretan painters settled in the Ionian Islands, which was still under the protection of Venice, and from there they moved to work in the Orthodox territories in the Balkans. For the English translation of *The Painter's Manual* see (Hetherington 1974). Several scholars, among whom Michele Bacci and Maria Georgopoulou must be mentioned, dedicated extensive research to the topic of the relation of the Cretan painters with Venice and the so-called Cretan school (Bacci 2019; Vocotopoulos 2016; Georgopoulou 1995; Chatzidakis 1974).

- 4 A notable exception is the representation of the Last Judgement, which is attested as widespread in the entire Christian world already in the ninth-tenth century, possibly because it is mentioned in several books in both the Old and New Testament.
- 5 Sometimes the crown, the symbol of Braşov, stands above his hallmark. Art historians such as Corina Nicolescu advanced the hypothesis that this means that the artist in question belonged to the local goldsmiths' guild. Nevertheless, art historians such as Teodora Voinescu and Corina Nicolescu suspected that this goldsmith was more active at the Wallachian princely court of Şerban Cantacuzino than at Braşov: Voinescu, in her study published in the volume dedicated to the Romanian treasure recovered from the URSS, highlighted the absolute absence of silver objects made by Master EV in the Transylvanian art collections. Nicolescu, in the introduction to the work *Argintăria laică și religioasă*, agreed with Voinescu's observation and also hypothesised that the absence of the crown means that such artwork was realised autonomously by a goldsmith, without guild control and approval (Nicolescu 1968, p. 27; Voinescu 1958, p. 80).
- 6 I already previously published some preliminary observations contained in this paragraph (Paolicchi 2018).

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