

Zoo-Anthropomorphic Imagery in Christian Paintings

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to identify some Christian religious imagery that depicts a few characters with both animal and human features and search the potential source, either in pre-Christian imagery, religious cults and symbolism. Using the Holy Bible as a starting point, the present work will detail few of the most common such characters and seek for a parallel meaning in symbols dictionaries and studies regarding the interpretation of artworks. We will also relate to catholic imagery and seek correspondent depictions in traditional orthodox paintings, either in icons or in church murals. Our final objective is to establish a logical connection between the archetypal interpretation of common images and traditional orthodox religious images.*

Key-words: *zoomorphism; anthropomorphism; religion; myth; painting*

1. Introduction

When coming across a church painting featuring Saint Christopher as a dog-headed man, as shown in Fig. 1, different from all other saints we normally see in Romanian churches, a question arose: is it a figuratively distorted image or a symbolic depiction? It is well known that orthodox religious painting is very strictly regulated and it rarely appeals to liberal visual metaphors, especially regarding the human form.

The church referred to here is the wooden religious edifice in Techirghiol Monastery; built in the XVIIIth century in Mureș county, moved to Pelișor Castle in Sinaia in the first half of the XXth century and then brought to Techirghiol by Iustinian, in his successful attempt of saving the clergyman sanatorium (previously established by Miron Costin) from the communists' attempt to confiscate the valuable buildings belonging to the Church.

This soon became the starting point of many other attempts in identifying possible connections between biblical texts, symbols dictionaries and religious-themed works of art.

2. The Cynocephalic Martyr

As a patron saint of the travellers, preventing the threat of sudden, accidental death, Christopher is depicted on the northern wall of the church, so that it is very visible once one has stepped in², just as Butler notes; on the opposite side, facing him, an image of death as a full human skeleton catches the eye, strongly contrasting the dominant zoo-anthropomorphic appearance of the saint. Upon further reading, it turned out that, such representation, although frequent in orthodox painting, might be owed to a linguistic “confusion of *cananeus* (Latin for ‘Canaanite’) with *canineus* (Latin for ‘canine’ or dog-like)”³. Christian regional folklore attributes his unusual appearance as the answer to his prayers to God; as a handsome young man, he asked the Lord to change his face so that he would stop involuntarily tempting young women. Clearly, from a more logical perspective, this seems a more unlikely explanation for

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² A. Butler. 1995. *Butler's Lives of the Saints*. Vol. 7. Burns & Oates. pp. 198-199

³ L. Ross. 1996. *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary*. Westport. p. 50

the saint's religious portrait, since in western Christian paintings, and even some eastern ones, he is still depicted as a man with a normal figure, carrying the child Christ on his shoulders.



Fig. 1. *Mural painting of St. Christopher in Saint Mary Monastery, Techirghiol, Romania, photo: Maria Teodorescu*

A possible alternative theory to have generated this type of depiction would be the origins of Saint Christopher in the cynocephalic giants' tribes who supposedly ate human flesh and barked. The dog-headed men appear in the life of Saint Mercurio who could control these barbaric humans in the fight against military threats to the Roman Empire⁴.

Although the image of the dog is present all through the ancient major cults and cultures, Cynocephalics are extremely common in the Egyptian iconography, as the gatekeepers of sacred edifices, with Anubis, of course, as the most common entity to feature a human body and the head of a dog. Dog symbolism antagonises from one culture to another and is often strongly contextualized, therefore we cannot consider it being a clear representative of good nor evil.⁵

Once more potential logical explanations have been provided for this religious depiction, a question still remained, regarding other biblical characters which have mixed morphology – Are they the result of misinterpretation or exaggeration of the holy writings or is there a strong case of symbolic zoomorphism in religious paintings?

3. The Snake of Genesis

According to the biblical chronology, one of the first characters to appear as possibly having both human and animal morphology is the snake. At the very beginning of the episode of the fall from heaven, he appears as the most cunning of all creatures that God created⁶ and the suggestion of its human attributes lies in the very fact that he speaks to Eve and, by this means, convinces her to disobey God's interdiction. Some religious exegetes consider that it is self-understood, that since Eden was the perfect spiritual environment, there would be a harmonic relationship between all its inhabitants, including that of Adam and Eve with all the other creatures, but we still have no reference of such high level of communication with other animals except for the snake.

We picture the biblical snake to be just as the animal we all know, but the curse of God following the initial sin tells us otherwise. God first curses the snake to crawl on its belly from

⁴ D. G. White. 1991. *Myths of the Dog-Man*. The University of Chicago Press. pp.37-38

⁵ J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant (coord). 2009. *Dicționar de simboluri: mituri, vise, obiceiuri, gesturi, forme, figuri, culori, numere*. Polirom, Iași. pp. 247-252

⁶ *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*. 1982. Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București. Facerea, 3.1, p. 13

that point onward⁷, which raises another question: didn't the snake already crawl on its belly? It may be a mistake to disconsider evolutionary changes that would have taken place in general in the animal reign over millions of years, but the Old Testament is supposed to have been written no earlier than 1200 BC. Even if the Genesis is indeed inspired by the Sumerian Gilgamesh myth and therefore older than that, there still is little chance of the snake having looked or moved significantly different from today.

The human ability of speech, along with the post-curse image of the snake we could mentally build, combined with no detailed biblical description of its body before, could allow us to consider this creature as having had a sum of animal and human features. In religious western European painting, one of the most common depictions of the snake as a zoo-anthropomorphic being was created by Michelangelo, in one of the scenes in the Sistine Chapel.



Fig. 2. *Adam and Eve* by Michelangelo Buonarotti, Sistine Chapel, Rome, Italy
(source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Adam_and_Eve,_Sistine_Chapel.jpg, autor: Sebastian Bergmann, Siegburg, Germany)

This depiction of the snake, as a zoo-anthropomorphic beast, mostly with human features, occupies more or less the same space in the surface of the mural as the other two characters, suggesting its high importance in the narrative. What we actually focus on is the anatomical structure dominated by human features and, furthermore, the striking resemblance between the snake's upper anatomy and that of Eve. Considering the fact that the snake spoke only to Eve, according to the Genesis, and that women have always been considered prone to sin or mistakes, it seems somehow more natural, from the folkloric perspective, that the snake would correspond to the female side. In this context, the depiction becomes a metaphorically and symbolic means of visual representation and interpretation of the biblical dogma.

It is believed that Michelangelo worked on the plan of the entire fresco in close collaboration with intellectual clergy commanded by the Pope Julius the 2nd⁸ himself, and since we know that some changes to a few of the other sections of the fresco were made, it is safe to assume that the representation of the snake as half female did not arouse opposition from the Pope or his team of advisers. In fact, clergy seems to have generally agreed over such representations, with Raphael Sanzio being another artist to paint such a scene in the Vatican Palace. However, it's no wonder, since the same patron as Michelangelo's commissioned this work as well.

⁷ *Idem*. *Facerea*, 3.14, p. 13

⁸ E. Crispino. 2009. trad Cameleon. *Viața și opera lui Michelangelo*, Adevărul Holding, p. 94



Fig. 3. *Adam and Eve* by Raphael Sanzio, Vatican Palace, Rome, Italy

(source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0_Adam_et_Eve_-_Fresque_de_Rapha%C3%ABl_-_Stanza_della_Signatura_\(2\).JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0_Adam_et_Eve_-_Fresque_de_Rapha%C3%ABl_-_Stanza_della_Signatura_(2).JPG), author: Jean-Pol Grandmont)

An older depiction and probably even more relevant than the two above is from a manuscript that depicts two relevant scenes from the life of the first people in Eden, dated from the XIIIth century (see Blanche de Castille's psalter, National Library, Paris, France). The central figure of the lower tondo is the snake, about which, in this case, we cannot tell if it features the head of a male or female (since both Adam and Eve have long hair), but one thing is for sure, it faces Eve, therefore we can speculate it depicts precisely the scene of the motivational dialogue in Genesis 3.1-4.

4. Angels and Demons

Angels are most commonly perceived as divine creatures, highly spiritual, present in most cults as intermediaries between people and gods. In Christian iconography, angels are most commonly represented with human-like bodies, in accordance with various biblical descriptions: superior to man⁹, created by God, along with sky, water, sun and moon, stars and light¹⁰, categorized¹¹. They are (with very little exceptions) depicted as ideal human figures, with no visible sexual dimorphism, bathed in light or with an aura around their head and, most importantly for the present article, with wings. It's reasonable to assume that the presence of bird-like wings of angels in paintings (both canonical or lay religious-themed) is a symbolic attribute of their celestial, spiritual nature, also a clear visual distinction from saints and ordinary humans.

These bird-like wings, either white or brightly coloured, are the visual key-element of angel paintings and the Byzantine painting code establishes how each category of angelic spirits should be depicted, either on wood or on church murals. What is even more interesting is that Dionysus of Fournas (XVIIIth century), provides a detailed description of how the scene of the fall of Lucifer and his followers should be depicted. The icon painter is supposed to paint the faithful angels on clouds, therefore in Heaven and to place an abyss in the centre of the image, with more angels falling towards Tartar. The lower the angels are placed in this composition, the darker they should be rendered and the more obvious their demonic features should be, as if the fall implies an instant metamorphosis of these once-heavenly creatures. As

⁹ *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*. 1982. Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București. Psalmi 8,5, p. 567

¹⁰ *idem*. Psalmi 148.1-5, p. 636

¹¹ *idem*, Epistola către Coloseni a Sfântului Apostol Pavel. 1.16, p. 1337

for Lucifer himself, the first to fall from God's realm, he is supposed to be the darkest, most terrifying of them all, laying on the bottom of hell, looking upwards¹², as in remorse for the betrayal. However, we should acknowledge Dionysus as a collector and coordinator of previous texts establishing painting methods and rules for the canonical works¹³.



Fig. 4. *Detail of The Last Judgement, fresco, Voroneț Monastery, Gura Humorului, Romania (source: <https://doxologia.ro/iconografie/judecata-de-apoi-surprinsa-detaliu-la-manastirea-voronet>, foto: Ștefan Cojocariu)*

Although the fall of the unfaithful angels is almost absent in the orthodox religious art, in the lay art, as well as in the western religious or religious-inspired painting, the subject is fairly common. On the other hand, The Last Judgement as shown in Fig. 5, seems to be one of the favourite Romanian themes for large scale murals, especially in the Moldavian territory. What interests us here is the characteristics of angels, who appear with regular long cloaks (on the right) or roman military uniform (on the left) and large wings, in opposition to the devils that are claiming the souls of sinners, whose appearance is closer to the one of beasts – they seem to have either dark skin or lizard-like scales all over their bodies, prominent tails, horns and claws. Even if in other painting devils also have wings, theirs are still dark and bat-like.

As an overall rule for angels and devils' imagery, their wings solely are relevant enough; while angels have bird-like feathered wings, demons have dark, bat wings. This relevant connection of wings' resemblance to that of day or nocturnal flying creatures is a visual symbol of their very nature.

In the end, as a relevant exception to the rule of angelic representation of wings, the canonical byzantine religious painting also provides Saint John the Baptist with a set of wings, which most probably is a symbol of the prophetic role-transfer from angels to John. The holy texts support this attribute of the saint by emphasising the purity and dedication of Saint John and making him an example of a holy life, clean as an angel's.

5. Conclusions

During this research, we acknowledge that although zoo-anthropomorphic depictions in religious art in general and in Christian art in particular might have a common background, these are not a result of dramatic fantasizing or exaggeration, but the proof of a sum of theological, illustrative, representative, profoundly symbolic and spiritual messages.

Each has its own origins and evolution, therefore there seems to be no universal formula of discovering a common underlying trigger, consequently an in-depth analysis is

¹² Dionisie din Furna. 2000. *Erminia Picturii Bizantine*, Sophia, București, p. 67

¹³ A. Stoleriu. 2013. *Reprezentarea vizuală a sacralului*, Institutul European, p. 114

needed for each of these examples and the many more than await in religious texts, relics, artefacts and standing churches.

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