

REVIEW

On the dissertation

THE ROMAN POPES IN THE MURAL PAINTINGS PROGRAM OF THE CHURCHES IN THE BULGARIAN LANDS (15TH-18TH CENTURIES)

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Tereza Bacheva has graduated Bulgarian philology from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. For many years she has been working at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, where she has participated in several collective projects. During the period 2020-2022 she was a full-time PhD student at the Institute, having completed her dissertation on time.

The **topic** of the dissertation is original, and as the text shows, very promising. Depictions of Roman popes in Bulgarian mural paintings of the post-Byzantine period have never been the subject of a special and complex study in Bulgarian science, and there is a lack of such works in Balkan historiography. Roman high priests, proclaimed saints, are part of the Christian calendar, but after the division of the churches their images in the Orthodox temples acquired a certain ideological and political significance. This makes the study of these images in an Orthodox setting very interesting, and this is especially true for the first centuries when our lands were under Ottoman rule.

The text is structured as follows: an Introduction, which sets out the aims and objectives of the dissertation, the chronological and territorial scope of the material studied, makes some terminological clarifications, and reviews previous research on the topic; a main chapter which examines the personalities of the Roman popes, their pictorial tradition, and the possible reasons for including their images in the programs of the Orthodox churches; three further chapters dealing with the personalities, cults and images of Popes Clement, Sylvester and Leo; one final chapter on some episodically appearing personalities of Roman popes; a conclusion; a bibliography; a catalogue of 42 objects; illustrations and appendices. The total length is 285 pp. text, 63 illustrations to the catalogue and 41 to the text. The proposed layout is fully adequate for the task of the work.

In the introduction, very ambitious objectives are defined: “... to study their fresco images (of the Roman popes - I. G.) from churches on the territory of Bulgaria in the period of the 15-18 centuries, to trace the relationships of these images to the Byzantine and post-Byzantine theological-visual conception of temple space” (p. 8).

The representations of Roman popes from Bulgarian fresco ensembles have been conscientiously collected and hardly any of them are missing. Each is carefully described in the catalogue, with the relevant publications correctly cited. The illustrations are in most cases of very good quality, and quite a few were photographed by Tereza Bacheva herself, suggesting her fieldwork in each monument.

Following the initial collection and documentation part of the thesis work, Teresa Bacheva has done something very important and contributory: clarifying the identity of the person depicted in cases where there is no annotation to the signature, and there are multiple saints of the same name in the calendar, which is what most of the persons and images studied are. This attribution work is very complex, and it is not in vain that different opinions can be found in the literature about the personality represented by the same image. Here the instructions in the hermeneias (regularly consulted by the dissertator), which are too laconic, in individual cases give different marks for the same saint, and sometimes simply have not been followed, do not usually help. The successful ending of some dilemmas is often helped by an examination of the context of the image. Teresa Bacheva organized her study by following the various liturgical spaces of the temple, which have their own specifics and traditions for drawing up an iconographic program and choosing images. Here she demonstrates an excellent knowledge of Byzantine and post-Byzantine art, its mechanisms, traditions, and monuments, which ensures the productivity of her work. But before she gets to the analysis of specific images from post-Byzantine churches in Bulgarian lands, her dissertation has laid a very solid foundation by clarifying the life path of each Roman high priest she deals with, the emergence and fate of his cult, the hagiographic works that are dedicated to him, and the older tradition of his depiction, both in the West and in the East. This complex and interdisciplinary approach shows both good preparation and maturity and is one of the many contributions of the work.

Along with specifying the personalities of the Roman popes represented in the monuments under consideration, it is extremely important to place them in the context of the program of each fresco ensemble, their function in that program, and their possible meanings in relation to the tradition of the Orthodox temple, worship, and historical circumstances. Important conclusions are reached about the relative frequency of the depiction of individual Roman high priests, or the absence of their images, which also provides a guide for future researchers of the mural heritage. Particularly intriguing is the analysis of a unique monument that combines the images of several Roman bishops - the church of Dolnobeshovishki Monastery. Several hypotheses are put forward as to the possible meaning and source, although the author does not press any of them because of the lack of firm grounds. I will note here that Tereza Bacheva's approach is the same all over - she is extremely cautious about the possible interpretations of the studied images, or the reasons for their inclusion, and about their meaning in each monument, avoiding unnecessary categoricity true to scientific correctness.

Teresa Bacheva is looking for possible reasons for the presence of Roman bishops in the agenda of Orthodox churches. She examines the possibility that one of the reasons was the presence of Catholic communities in our lands in the period under study, but in my view quite rightly concludes that this situation is not determinative. One can support her conclusion that these images were inherited from the Byzantine tradition, though details such as the mitre and the triregna which were borrowed from the Western tradition. Also important is the observation that some iconographic studios maintained their own stable decisions in the choice and placement of Roman popes.

Linguistically, the text is flawless, the meaning is clear, and special terms are used appropriately.

The bibliography comprises 576 titles in Slavonic, Greek and Western languages, covering a variety of fields - art history, history, philology, medieval culture, etc. This is a vast amount of information, assimilated, made sense of, and skillfully used.

Tereza Bacheva has five publications related to her dissertation, one of which is in print, which exceeds the requirements of the Law and the Regulations of the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

The abstract corresponds to the content of the dissertation. The contributions mentioned by the author are accurate.

In conclusion, I will summarize the contributions of the dissertation.

One of them is the very successful choice of the topic, which not only in dissertations ensures the success of the research.

The second is the exhaustive collection of images and their careful study, in which a resultant attribution work has been done.

The third is methodological - for monuments of Orthodox monumental painting, the functional approach has proven to be effective. It is important to emphasize here that the monuments from Bulgarian lands are placed in a very broad chronological and territorial context.

The fourth is the drawing out of principles for the construction of the iconographic program for the considered period, which is valid not only for the images of the popes but has a much wider significance.

I accept Tereza Bacheva's dissertation THE ROMAN POPES IN THE MURAL PAINTINGS PROGRAM OF THE CHURCHES IN THE BULGARIAN LANDS (15TH-18TH CENTURIES) as a mature, complete, and excellently executed scientific work, and I will vote for awarding the educational and scientific degree Doctor to the dissertator.

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