

MARIA ALESSIA ROSSI, *Visualizing Christ's Miracles in Late Byzantium: Art, Theology, and Court Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2024. xxvii+337 pp., with illustrations. – ISBN 978-1-009-38762-0

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MARIA ALESSIA ROSSI has provided the first book-length treatment of early Palaiologan images of Jesus Christ's miracles. Previously thought of as secondary additions intended to enrich monumental iconographic programs, the late Byzantine miracle cycles are given rightful and thoughtful consideration through a composite methodology rooted in art history, theology, and history. The book consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. There are also five tables with useful information about the ministry of Christ in Serbian and early Palaiologan churches, in monuments before the thirteenth century and in the *Painter's Manual* by Dionysios of Fourni, together with extensive bibliography and a subject index.

ROSSI notes at the beginning the proliferation of miracle accounts in the literary and visual production of the Constantinopolitan court and the milieu of the emperor Andronikos II. For her, Gospel miracles were a tool to highlight the importance of Byzantine Orthodoxy and reflect new procedures for the promotion of saints. She observes that the painted cycles vary widely, which indicates that the miracles of Christ never achieved a canonical status.

At the core of the book are eight early Palaiologan monuments in Constantinople, Thessaloniki, Mystra, Ohrid, and Omorphokklesia. ROSSI ties the extensive miracle cycles in these buildings to the recovery of Constantinople by the Byzantines in 1261 and the failed unification with the Western church attempted by Emperor Michael VIII.

Chapter 1 outlines the historical events of Michael VIII's and Andronikos II's reigns in order to explain the socio-cultural context for the proliferation of miracle cycles in Byzantine churches. At the center are the two emperors' church politics, which involved the Union of Lyon (1274) and its reversal (1282).

Chapter 2 discusses miracle stories which proliferated in the literature of the period. Those are considered in relation to the retaking of Constantinople from the Latins (1261) and the reclaiming of various Orthodox shrines.

Miracles were thought of as proof of sainthood and an indication that God is on the sides of the Orthodox.

Chapter 3 is concerned with two main issues – the iconography and reasons for the selection of individual scenes. ROSSI's overall conclusion is that there is no overarching governing principle for the placement and number of scenes, and even for their grouping.

Several episodes are given special consideration. The Samaritan woman is the first one to be examined closely. The author offers a survey of the episode's iconography while looking in more detail at Palaiologan examples. She highlights the woman's clothing and especially the way in which her cloak is depicted. A fruitful avenue of investigation that can relate important messages about the two protagonists is the landscape, which is particularly noteworthy in the Thessalonikan church of St Catherine.

The narrative of the Marriage at Cana is usually disrupted with the banquet and the miracle represented as two distinct episodes. The author brings in comparisons with Serbian churches, and more specifically Gračanica and St Nikita, where a special emphasis was placed on the feast, which ROSSI sees as a meaningful reference to the marriage of King Milutin, sponsor of the two cycles, and Simonis, daughter of the Byzantine emperor Andronikos II.

The Healing of the Man Born Blind is the next scene treated more closely. The book emphasizes the presence or lack of the pool as well as the duplication and even the triplication of the man, as seen in the church of St Catherine in Thessaloniki.

ROSSI offers also an iconographic analysis of the Healing of the Paralytic at the pool at Bethesda, singling out the protagonists and the staging of the episode with or without a portico. She pays close attention to the image in the Hodegetria Church at Mystra, which displays a visual solution, unique for Byzantine art, with a large angel sitting in the well and stirring the waters while a paralytic is being lowered into the pool. ROSSI interprets the latter as referring to contemporary miraculous occurrences at the site of Zoodochos Pege (Life-Giving Source) in Constantinople, recorded in a well-known collection compiled by the fourteenth-century ecclesiastical historian Nikephoros Kallistos Xantopoulos. Just as in his text, where the well at the site was compared to the one in Bethesda, the painted biblical event, according to ROSSI, erupts into the present.

ROSSI then considers under the heading 'additional healing miracles' the iconography of the Healing of the Man with Dropsy, the Healing of the

Lepers, and the Healings of Demoniacs. The chapter also includes discussions of further Gospel scenes such as the Expulsion of the Merchants from the Temple, The Twelve-Year-Old Christ in the Temple, and Christ Reading in the Synagogue. This last section is a bit more schematic but can still be mined for ideas about iconographic developments, illustrations, and bibliography.

Chapter 4 is similarly dedicated to Christ's miracles, but here ROSSI considers their settings and groupings. Discussed are perennial questions about tradition and innovation behind the specific clusters of miracles and the demonstrable flexibility of the cycles. Thus, the miracle episodes could be grouped according to chronology as seen in the Metropolis in Mystra, or according to gendered needs as revealed in the same church and in the south bay of Chora's esonarthex. Sabbath miracles, such as the Healing of the Man Born Blind, the Healing of Peter's Mother-in-Law, and the Healing of the Paralytic, form a separate cluster and are intended to help reconfigure the idea of 'work'. Especially interesting is the discussion of the liturgical groups, in which certain images are brought together to follow the Gospel lectionary and in the case of the Healing of the Paralytic, the Samaritan woman, and the Healing of the Man Born Blind – the *Pentekostarion*. The author deservedly gives this liturgical triad greater attention and considers its spiritual meaning in homilies and catechetical instructions, as well as its relationship to the rite of baptism. It is possible also, as ROSSI contends, that the miracles are meant to parallel the vitae of the saints to whom a space is dedicated, as is the case with St Euthymios in Thessaloniki.

The last few pages of the fourth chapter are concerned with the location of miracle cycles within Byzantine churches. ROSSI does not think that there was a rule for placing them in one or another part of the church but rightly points out that certain developments in late Byzantine church architecture, e.g. the proliferation of auxiliary spaces, allowed for a greater flexibility and use of images. In order to elucidate the placement and meaning of certain episodes, she emphasizes the importance of two rites – baptism and blessing of waters.

The penultimate chapter 5 is about the ways in which Christ's miracles form clusters and function within the programs of the eight early Palaiologan churches identified at the beginning of the book. A noteworthy feature of this section is the presence of drawings of the programs, which gives readers the opportunity to understand better the placement and relationships among individual scenes. Furthermore, we find here the first detailed

scholarly discussion of the miracle cycle in the nave of the Church of St Catherine in Thessaloniki. ROSSI identifies the various principles which underlie the grouping of the ministry episodes in this church, such as liturgical considerations and having been performed on the Sabbath, while noting that certain miracles have no parallels in other contemporary churches and do not follow any of the established organizing principles discussed in the book. She intuits that this might have something to do with a distinct feature of the church and the site on which it was built – perhaps a miraculous spring or even the tomb of a holy person.

Another important element of the fifth chapter is ROSSI's discussion of the miracle cycle in the Hodegetria at Mystra in relation to the Constantinopolitan shrine of Zoodochos Pege and the homonymous icon of the Virgin painted in the narthex of the church. The subsection on the images in St George at Omorphokklesia is similarly noteworthy, as it thoughtfully introduces into the academic mainstream this monument and its decoration.

It is in this penultimate chapter that we see the first significant discussion in English of the miracle cycle in the Peribleptos church in Ohrid. For ROSSI, it was the desire to elucidate the connection between the Old and New Testaments that was of primary concern in the cycle. An important feature of the Peribleptos program is that the scenes of teaching (south) and healing (north) are separated, signaling to the viewer different messages related to the active and contemplative aspects of Christ's life.

In the book's conclusion ROSSI summarizes her argument that the cycles with the miracles of Christ should be thought of in relation to the literary production of the time which displays similar interest in the miraculous. She considers the iconography of the miracles as relatively generic and even schematic, and yet, she identifies the introduction of diseases different from those mentioned in the biblical texts and likely inspired by real afflictions. This would have allowed the audiences to relate to the images in a more immediate way, recognizing references to their current circumstances.

ROSSI's book offers holistic treatment of Christ's miracles in Byzantine churches by bringing out the important relationship between history, theology, and iconography. It focuses on these images in order to elucidates the complex socio-cultural context of revival and hope in the early Palaiologan period.

Keywords

late Byzantine religious iconography