

Article

The Old Testament Prophecy of the Resurrection of the Dry Bones between the West and Byzantium

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Abstract: The imagery of the vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37. 1–14) still fascinates theologians and historians of religion with its exegetical and liturgical significance. Rarely represented in medieval art, the iconography of this singular topic related to the Last Judgment deserves closer attention on the part of art historians. The aim of the present contribution is to remedy this situation by offering an analysis of the main pictorial representations of Ezekiel's prophecy within the medieval East and West. This paper examines the evolution of the theme from the first pictorial evidence from Mesopotamia through the Roman late antique funerary sculpture into the Catalan and Germanic illuminated manuscript production from 11th and 12th centuries. Then, the field of the investigation broadens by taking into consideration the Byzantine artistic patterns of Ezekiel's vision of the resurrection of the dead. Finally, this paper accents the multilayered contribution of the mural paintings from the Balkan cultural field. In order to reconsider this subject through the prism of the artistic interactions between East and West, the continuity of an ancient pictorial tradition that seems to have been previously neglected is highlighted.

Keywords: Ezekiel; Old Testament prophecy; resurrection of the dead; funerary sculpture; illuminated manuscripts; objects of art; mural paintings; Balkan peninsula; monastic service; Last Judgment



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1. Introduction

The vision of the valley of dry bones appears in Ezekiel 37. 1–14. It is rightly considered to be one of the most impressive and synthetic episodes included in the Christian Old Testament. Nevertheless, until now, the meaning of this textual passage had primarily been an object of theological studies or investigations by specialists of Judaism (Greenberg 1997; Grassi 1965; Neuss 1912). The purpose of our present contribution is to offer a brief analysis of the subject from an art historian's point of view. Building upon the very important historiographical work of the German theologian and art historian, Wilhelm Neuss, we discuss the main pictorial evidence of this biblical passage in the context of its textual sources and related liturgical dimensions. This ancient theme, already attested in the Middle East during the Dura Europos period, became part of the Roman sarcophagi plastic, where it materializes faith in the Resurrection as explicated by Christian teaching. In addition to the late antique funerary sculpture, this paper treats some sparse Byzantine craftwork objects from the 6th–10th centuries, testifying to the diffusion of the doctrine of salvation and redemption in the hereafter within the early medieval period. In the 11th and 12th centuries, it seems that Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones found a fixed place in the art of illuminated manuscripts, demonstrating in this regard various mutual perceptions between both Byzantine and Occidental cultural spheres. We consider the introduction of all these rare testimonials in both the West and Byzantium as a preliminary condition to the understanding of the iconographical patterns inherent in the monumental church decoration, which occupies our focus near the end of this contribution. Concerning this matter, we underscore the appropriation formula of the theme as it appears in the middle Byzantine ossuary chapel of the Bačkovô monastery (actually in Bulgaria), which remains the most important case study for this representation, notwithstanding its unique occurrence in the medieval wall painting decoration.

2. The First Near-Eastern Pictorial Testimonies of the Iconographic Theme

The Vision of the Resurrection of the dry bones had been reported by the Prophet Ezekiel, a Prophet-priest of ancient Israel and one of three of the major Prophets of the Old Testament (Ezek 37. 1–14). This biblical passage historically refers to the exile of the Jews in Babylon at the time of the Emperor Nebuchadnezzar II, when the first Temple had been destroyed by the end of the 6th century.¹ In fact, this political item served as the basis for the wall paintings of the north wall of the assembly room of the Great Synagogue of Dura Europos, which was reconstructed around the middle of the 3th century AD (Du Mesnil du Buisson 1939, pp. 94–100, pl. 39–43; Kraeling 1956, pp. 178–94, pl. LXIX–LXXI; Weitzmann and Kessler 1990, pp. 132–39, 177–79, pl. 7; Bakalova 2003, pp. 60–61, notes 6, 7; Philonenko 1994, pp. 1–12). The Ezekiel Panel narratively illustrates the different episodes of the Prophecy, but refers conceptually to verses 11 to 14 of the biblical passage, connected to the idea of deliverance offered to the Jewish people:²

Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.’”

Thus, in the first centuries of our era, this episode allegorically translates the hope for deliverance of the Jewish people, the supreme reestablishment of the Temple of Jerusalem, and the unification and restoration of the state of Israel (Kraeling 1956, p. 179, note 689; Cutler 1992, note 9, pp. 193–94, 351; Wischnitzer-Bernstein 1941, pp. 43–55; Greenberg 1997, pp. 741–51; Block 1992, pp. 113–41). This message probably remained unchanged within the decoration of other sanctuaries of north Mesopotamia, even during the late antique period. Thus, a relief from a sepulchral stele, which served as decoration to one of the tombs of the Necropolis of Dara displayed as mortuary rock-cut chambers, symbolically rehearses the meaning of the Dura-Europos imagery despite its fragmentary conservation state (Mundell 1975, pp. 209–27; Bakalova 2003, p. 169; Cutler 1992, p. 51, note 24, pl. 7; Keser-Kayaalp 2010, pp. 325–48).

3. Ezekiel’s Prophecy of the Dry Bones within Roman Sepulchral Plastic

The salvation symbolism of Ezekiel’s prophecy of the dry bones was the reason for the success of this iconography during late antiquity. Nevertheless, not a single occurrence has been discovered in the mural paintings of the Roman catacombs. Wilhelm Neuss explains this lack by the will to emphasize the spiritual dimension of the former Christian dogma of the resurrection in conformity with the doctrine of the Church fathers. Without amplifying that suggestion, the author defends the hypothesis of the appropriation of other Old Testament biblical themes of an eschatological character—such as Daniel in the lions’ den, Jonah being swallowed by the fish, the three young men in the fiery furnace, etc.—as being more convenient to the idea of salvation rather than the synthetic dimension of Ezekiel’s passage (Ezek 37. 1–14) (Neuss 1912, pp. 153–54). In fact, the miracle of the resurrection of the dry bones appears often in the Roman funerary art. Generally speaking, the late antique sepulchral plastic abundantly falls back on iconographical themes bearing upon the idea of redemption and the belief in immortality of the soul after physical death.

Indeed, a great number of Roman sarcophagi provide us an important material evidence as to the expansion of the Resurrection dogma during the early centuries of

¹ For a brief historical overview of this matter, see: (Kittel 1999, chp. 8 “Hesekiels Vision von der Auferweckung der Totengebeine”, pp. 69–72).

² The Biblical citations in this paper come from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (NRSV), available online at: <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.

Christianity. The first examples probably date from the middle of the 4th century. Almost all of them have been discovered in the Italian capital, where they were part of the Pontifical museum of Christian Antiquities, formerly housed in the Lateran palace and today included among the collections of the Vatican Museums.³ We observe that these examples are richly covered by Old Testament reminiscences, echoed typologically in the New Testament miracle stories. While this fact seems to be almost certain, it should be noted that there is still a controversy as to the interpretation of the figure of the executor of the miracle of Resurrection: Christ or the Prophet Ezekiel. We can suggest also another common feature: the iconography of the scene deals with the suddenness of the fulfillment of the miraculous act: the already revived bodies (except some rare figuration of individual bones, but no trace of skulls or corpse, as described in the biblical passage) appear as nude male silhouettes, for whom resurrection was possible due to the *virga thaumaturga* of the Prophet.⁴ However, we could not determine if Ezekiel or Christ is intended: both are ostensibly similar in their beardless visage; they are also characterized by tunic-pallium clothing (Sörries 1991, p. 39; Cutler 1992, p. 53). Furthermore, the controversy of this identification of the main author of the miraculous act was rendered more complex by another aspect: the resurrection prophecy reminds us of the scene of the Creation of Adam, which seems to be common in Roman funerary sculpture imagery. Thus, the question still needs to be resolved.

4. Late Antique Occurrences of the Scene on Objects of Art

It seems that the reference of Ezekiel's prophecy to the New Testament scenes has been reproduced on objects of art during the late antique period. The Old Testament episode was for instance integrated into the iconographical repertoire of a glass goblet dating from the first half of the 4th or even from the end of the 3rd century.⁵ This object was discovered in the late 19th century in an urn near the Ursulagartenstrasse, Cologne (Germany). Only a few fragments from the central part of the plate now remain (Kraeling 1956, p. 179; Neuss 1912, pp. 141–43, with further literature (note 3), fig. 1; Neuss 1915, pp. 107–8, especially pp. 116–20, pl. IX; Brenk 1966, p. 152, pl. 52). The Prophet Ezekiel is wearing a tunic covered by a *pallium*, carrying a wand in his right. He is represented as moving to the waste plain covered by scattered human remains. The border of the composition completes the Old Testament prophecy with other episodes from the Old and the New Testaments, all loaded with eschatological meaning, such as Daniel in the lions' den, the three young men in the fiery furnace, the miracle of the healing of the man born blind, the healing the paralytic at Capernaum, and finally Jonah being swallowed by the fish.

5. The Old Testament Prophecy in Illuminated Manuscripts between East and West

The first known depictions in illuminated manuscript production come from the Near-Eastern region, as it was with the wall paintings of Dura Europos. The French national library houses one of the rare illuminated bibles of the late antique period, the precious Ms syr. 341.⁶ This codex of Mesopotamian origin (whose provenance probably lies in the Monastery of Baquqa in Iraq) was written mainly on parchment and dates probably

³ We forward here to some digitalized material: Garrucci (1879), pl. 312, 1: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/garrucci1879bd5/0185>; 313, 4: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/garrucci1879bd5/0186>; 318, 1: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/garrucci1879bd5/0191>; 361, 1: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/garrucci1879bd5/0234>; 372, 2: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/garrucci1879bd5/0245>; 376, 4: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/garrucci1879bd5/0249>; 398, 3: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/garrucci1879bd5/0271>.

For other pertinent examples, see the doctoral thesis of Adele Reuter which is the first attempt to establish a "death iconography" with respect to early Christian art: (Reuter 1913, pp. 45–48, with earlier bibliography on the topic). For the abundant bibliography on Roman funerary plastic, see particularly: (Caillet and Loose 1990, p. 58, note 55, fig. 47; Neuss 1912, pp. 142–52, pl. 1–8; Brenk 1966, pp. 152–54, pl. 2, 53–55; Wilpert 1932, pp. 269–70, pl. CXII/2, CXXIII/3, CLVI, CLXXXIV/1, CCVI/7, CCXV/7, CCXIX/1; Nauwerth 1980, pp. 82–89 (Totenerweckungen mit der Bildformel "nackter Leichnam" und einzelner toten Kopf; Totenerweckungen mit "Gebein"; Totenerweckungen "en masse"), figs. 60–70).

⁴ For certain authors, like De Waal, the old Christian funerary art has conserved not a single Old Testament representation: (De Waal 1906, pp. 27–48 (most particularly pp. 28–31)).

⁵ For complete bibliographic references and digital reproduction of this object, see: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_S-317.

⁶ For the digitalized copy of this manuscript, see: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10527102b>.

from around 600 CE (Neuss 1912, p. 153; Omont 1909, pp. 85–98, pl. VII, fig. 10; Leroy 1964, pp. 208–19; Weitzmann 1977, pp. 16, 109–10; Sörries 1991, especially pp. 38–39, 75, 85, fig. 11). It contains the Old Testament in the Syriac Peshitta version and portions of the New Testament. The miniature representing the vision of the resurrection of the dry bones is referenced on the fol. 162^r, preceding the corresponding book, as with the other miniatures (Figure 1). Ezekiel is classically represented as an old man dressed in white tunic and pallium, using his magic wand to revivify two skulls at his feet in reply to the Eternal’s request symbolized by God’s hand in the sky segment.



Figure 1. Syriac Bible, Ms Syriacque 341, 6th–7th century, fol. 162^r. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (Source gallica.bnf.fr/BnF).

As a matter of fact, no pictorial attestations of Ezekiel’s vision seem to appear before the High Middle Ages. The Latin book illumination provides us an excellent account of development of its pictorial tradition. Two monumental Spanish bibles, which were originally illuminated in the monastery of Santa Maria de Ripoll (Girona), allow us to demonstrate this iconographical evolution and its variations (Castiñeiras 2020). The first, the so-called Bible of Roda or otherwise *Biblia Sancti Petri Rodensis*, located in the manuscript collection of the National Library of France (BnF, Latin 6), dates from the first half of the 11th century but its illumination was carried out in various stages in this same century. This came from the Catalan Benedictine monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes located in the Province of Girona (North East Spain), where it was attested by the beginning of the 12th century. However, it owes its origin to the scriptorium of the neighboring Ripoll monastery, where it was produced under the patronage of the abbot Oliba (1008–1046).⁷ Later the Bible of Roda joined the library of a French nobleman, the Marshal Adrien-Maurice de Noailles, from

⁷ For a complete bibliography, as for the Catalan Bibles with a schematic of the questions of iconography and attribution, see: (Contessa 2008, pp. 329–42).

which it entered the collection of the French national library.⁸ This parchment manuscript is covered by red velvet and has a back made with Moroccan leather. Originally designed as a pandect, which signifies that it was produced in a single volume, it was divided in four volumes after joining the former Royal library of France. It contains a wide range of Old Testament pictorial cycles, particularly deriving from the prophetic books. The book of Ezekiel is part of the third volume of the ensemble, which was probably illuminated in the third quarter of the 11th century (Latin 6 (3)).⁹ Their miniatures belong to a complex narrative prophetic cycle: we have on fol. 45^r the representation of Kebar river (Ezek 1. 1), the siege of Jerusalem (Ezek 4. 1–3), and the sword against Jerusalem (Ezek 5. 1–2).¹⁰ The illustration of the passage dedicated to the resurrection of the dry bones (Ezek 37. 1–10) belongs to fol. 45^v (Figure 2). Folio 45^v contains the prophecy against the mountains of Jerusalem (Ezek 6), the profanation of the Temple (Ezek 8), the vision of the dry bones (Ezek 37. 1–10), the union of the sticks (Ezek 37. 16–17), and the apocryphal martyrdom of the prophet himself (Contessa 2009, p. 166).



Figure 2. Biblia Sancti Petri Rodensis, Ms Latin 6 (3), third quarter of the 11th century, fol. 45^v. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (Source gallica.bnf.fr/BnF).

Ezekiel's vision covers here the second register seen from below. On the left part of the composition we see the seated prophet, his head turned to God's blessing right hand, which appears characteristically in a celestial segment. Ezekiel is preaching to the dry bones, carrying out the will of the Eternal. They inhabit the central part of the register, which depicts the deserted valley full of skeletons as described in Ezek 37. 1–2:

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.

⁸ For a complete bibliographic list, see the BnF data: <https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc620519>.

⁹ For the digitalized copy of the volume, see: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b85388130>.

¹⁰ See also: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b85388130/f93.image>.

In the Bible of Roda, God's hand appears a second time on the right part of the composition engaged in the act of revivifying the remains. Here, the resurrected dry bones are represented as naked, straightened bodies getting ready to come out of their coffins after having received the breath from the four winds which are depicted as wing-covered angel faces. Thus, the artist anticipates Ezek 37. 5–6:

This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

The illuminator literally translated the textual passage of Ezek 37. 9–10:

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

By representing the resurrected flesh standing up straight in unclosed sarcophagi, the illuminator refers to the open graves evoked in Ezek 37. 12, preluding the return to "the land of Israel", as already mentioned in relationship of the first Near-Eastern occurrences of the theme. Nevertheless, here the Ezekiel prophecy deals more with the fulfillment of the miraculous act as a reference to the general Resurrection of mankind and the Last Judgement, after the manner of the Church fathers.¹¹

The Bible of Roda has frequently been associated with another splendidly illuminated bible, also imposing in size, probably owing to their common cultural origin and to their similar iconographical tradition. The Bible of Ripoll—sometimes erroneously referred to as the Bible of Farfa—is a medieval manuscript which seems to have been illuminated in the first third of the 11th century. That happened in the scriptorium of the Catalan monastery of Santa Maria de Ripoll by the efforts of the monk Guifré de Ripoll (Mundó 2002). We know it today as Cod. Vat. Lat. 5729, named after its location at the collection of the Vatican Apostolic Library. The fol. 209^r consists of two registers corresponding to the prophecy of the Resurrection of the dry bones (above), which has been associated with Ezekiel's vision of the temple (Ezek 40. 1–49) in the spirit of the Roda Bible.¹² These representations are preceded on fol. 208^v by the siege of Jerusalem (Ezek 4. 1–3), the vision of the Kebar river (Ezek 1. 1), and the first theophany (Ezek 1. 4–28) (Contessa 2009, p. 165).

Despite some obvious differences related to the schematic organization of the iconographic formula of both Catalan Bibles, we notice that these are sober compositions organized in separated compartments and distinguished by the lack of any coloring. In fact, there is also a third bible of the same group, the Bible de Fluvia, which only survives in dispersed fragments. We could speculate about whether this third and last manuscript of the so-called Ripoll group contained an illuminated copy of our iconographic subject.

We complete our remarks on the Old Testament prophecy with the Catalan miniature of the 11th century by its single occurrence from the Germanic cultural area. We discovered it in the Latin Gumbertus Bible, a large pandect on parchment, oeuvre of the Salzburg school, and is indeed one of the most significant of the Romanesque Era. Probably dating from the last quarter of the 12th century, this richly illuminated codex was executed in the scriptorium of the Benedictine Monastery of Saint Gumbertus in Ansbach (Bavaria, Germany). It is now conserved in the Erlangen University library under the shelf-mark H62/MS 1.¹³ Ezekiel's vision was integrated into the upper part of fol. 210^v.¹⁴ The

¹¹ For a brief résumé of the exegetical dimension of the Old Testament prophecy, with special emphasis on Cyril of Alexandria, Theodoret of Cyrus, Ambrose and Tertullian, see: (Planchette 2020, pp. 239–42).

¹² See the link to the digitized version of the manuscript: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.lat.5729/0420.

¹³ For a complete bibliography on this Latin bible: <http://gateway-bayern.de/BV040355440> and particularly the description of the Latin manuscripts in the Erlangen University Library by Hans Fischer (Ms. 1): <http://www.manuscripta-mediaevalia.de/dokumente/html/hsk0601a> A link to the digital copy of the Erlangen manuscript: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:29-bv040355440-2>.

composition is characterized by the double presence of the figure of Ezekiel. A decorative column divides the surface into two equal sections. These illustrate both phases of the miraculous act: on the left, the thaumaturge is shown receiving the order of the Eternal, surrounded by the mortal remains in a barren valley; on the right, we see the old prophet in a crowd of naked bodies revived after receiving spirit from the blowing winds represented in the four corners. We observe that this miniature in the Gumbertus Bible, together with the first one, marks the beginning of Ezekiel's book. Nevertheless, it appears without any direct connection to the biblical text dedicated to the theophanic vision of the glory of the Lord on the Kebar river (Ezek 1. 4–28).¹⁵

As a matter of fact, we find a similar disjunction between text and image in one of best preserved Byzantine illuminated manuscripts from the end of the 9th century, the Homilies of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus. Commissioned in Constantinople circa 880 AD in commemoration of the Emperor Basil I, the founder of the Macedonian dynasty, this Greek codex is today part of the collection of the French national library (Grec 510).¹⁶ Among the sumptuously illuminated miniatures of the Old Testament, executed on a full page, we encounter the representation of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (fol. 438^v) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The Homilies of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Grec 510, circa 880, fol. 438^v. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (Source gallica.bnf.fr/BnF).

¹⁴ See: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:29-bv040355440-2#0428>.

¹⁵ For more on the vision of the Glory of the Lord on the Kebar River, see: (Planchette 2019, pp. 324–32, 441–71; 2020, pp. 188–97, (with a complete bibliography on this topic)).

¹⁶ For the digitalized copy, see: <https://archivesetmanuscripts.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc23564t> and <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84522082>.

It served as an introduction to the first of the last three texts included in the Homilies, the *Significatio in Ezecheliem*, sometimes called *Declaratio in Ezecheliem*. The scene is encircled in a decorative framework of golden architecture and an embroidery of precious stones. As in the Gumbertus Bible, this composition is split in two, each part integrating the vertical figure of the prophet Ezekiel. On the one hand, he appears in the posture of prayer, blessed by God's right, encircled by a rocky landscape spread with bones and skulls. We read following inscription in reference to Ezek 37. 3:

Κ[ΥΡΙ]Ε Κ[ΥΡΙ]Ε ΗΖΗCΕΤΑΙ ΤΑ ΟCΤΑ ΤΑΥΤΑ.

On the other hand, Ezekiel comes along with the Archangel Michael (identified in the inscription) at the head of a group of badly preserved human silhouettes, which recalls Ezek 37. 8–9 (Planchette 2020, pp. 254–55).

6. The Old Testament Prophecy in the Byzantine Monumental Monastic Decoration

Ezekiel's vision continued to inspire Byzantine masters under the Komnenos dynasty. The funerary chapel of the Bačkovó monastery, situated in the Rhodope mountain in south Bulgaria, was established by the end of the 11th or the beginning of the 12th century by Gregory Pakourianos, a military commander in the court of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos (Planchette 2020, p. 49sq.). This cemetery chapel, conceived in the lower level as a monastic ossuary as it still preserves the bones of deceased members of the monastic community, distinguishes itself from other Byzantine sanctuaries especially by the specific symbolic meaning of its singular iconographical program. This program, probably dating from the middle of the 12th century, was conceived in accordance with the functional and liturgical use of the building: its frescoes served as visual support to the celebration of commemorative and funerary services which took place on the same level. The depiction of Ezekiel's prophecy on the west wall of the ossuary's *naos* should be analyzed in the same sepulchral context, since it symbolizes hope for the future redemption of the mankind. It also evokes the salvific meaning of the *Deesis*¹⁷ (in the ossuary *apsis*), accentuated by the idea of resurrection conveyed by the depiction of a funerary or commemorative office for a monk (on the north and south walls of the ossuary *naos*) (Figure 4), strengthened by the illustration of one of the first representations of the Last Judgement (in the ossuary *narthex*).



Figure 4. The *Deesis* and a funerary or commemorative office for a monk. Mural paintings, 12th century, *apsis* and *naos* of the lower level (ossuary) of the Bačkovó cemetery chapel, Bulgaria. Created by author.

¹⁷ *Deesis*: the supplication of the Virgin and Saint John the Baptist before the Christ for the salvation of the mankind.

In what follows, I would like to allude to the iconographical particularities of the Bačkovó representation of Ezekiel's prophecy facing the *Deesis* (Figure 5).¹⁸



Figure 5. Ezekiel's vision of the resurrection of the dead. Fresco, 12th century, west wall of the ossuary's naos, Bačkovó cemetery chapel, Bulgaria. Created by author.

The composition is distinguished by the contrast of complementary, bright colors that visually split the composition into two parts, increasing the dramatic act of resurrection. The imposing figure of the prophet, dressed in a long white tunic covered by a green pallium, advances in a dynamic posture, holding with both hands a scroll on which we can read the following verses:

Τάδε λέγει κύριος κύριος τοῖς ὀστέοις τούτ[οις ἰδ]ού,] ἐγὼ φ[έρω
εἰς
ὅ]μᾶς πν(εῦμ)α πν(εῦμ)α [ζ]ωῆς

It literally evokes Ezek 37. 5:

This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.

In consequence, the right side of the composition is dedicated to the actual fulfillment of the messianic revelation observed as a miraculous act: the bones and skulls are represented as a vast army of already resuscitated orant silhouettes, having received the breath of life from the four winds, following Ezek 37. 8–10.

The fresco in the Bačkovó ossuary chapel also proves to be important from another point of view. It visually reproduces a crucial episode of the funerary liturgy service of the Eastern churches. We know this thanks to a few Greek and Russian manuscripts of the *Euchologion* or *Trebnik*,¹⁹ themselves known only from later translations made in the 16th century, yet certainly indicative of an older tradition (Goar 1647, pp. 539–61, especially p. 544sq.; Babić 1969, p. 168; Dmitrievskij 1965, pp. 728–35). These texts report the performance of burial rites for monks and laity. Among them we find the stanza of eight tones composed by Saint John of Damascus. The 5th idiomela sounds:

I remember the prophet who said: I am earth and ashes and again I looked in the tombs, I saw the emaciated bones and I said: who is the king, or the soldier, who is the rich or poor, who is the righteous or the sinner? But rest with the righteous, Lord, Your servant!²⁰

¹⁸ For an in-depth review of the Ezekiel's vision of the resurrection of the bones in the Bačkovó cemetery chapel, from iconographical and liturgical point of view, with a comparison to its visual environment, see: (Planchette 2020, pp. 227–31, 237–47, 257–59, 277–81 and especially pp. 387–90).

¹⁹ Missals containing the whole ceremonies celebrated at different occasions of the liturgical year.

²⁰ Translation after: (Nelidow and Nivière 1979, p. 131; Guillaume 1992, p. 274 ("funérailles d'un moine ou d'une moniale"); Matzerath 1939, p. 88 ("Totenfeier für Mönche"); Maltzew 1898, pp. 176–77 ("Ordnung des Begräbnisses der Mönche")).

In the service for monks, this idiomela was sung at the end of the ceremony as the coffin was being carried to the cemetery.

The continuity of this tradition could be proved by the permanent presence of this textual passage from approximately the 11th century onward, as attested by the liturgical manuscript of Grottaferrata Γ.β.XLIII., of Constantinopolitan origin (Galadza 2004, p. 232sq.). There, the Ezekiel verse was chanted at the graveside, before the actual burial. This fact is confirmed too by other liturgical manuscripts such as the *Euchologia* of the Mont Athos monasteries of Vatopedi (Ms n° 133 (744)), from the 14th century, and Dionysiou (Ms n° 450), from the beginning of the 15th century (Galadza 2004, pp. 243–44; Dmitrievskij 1965, pp. 282–85, 389–90). Thus, the examples from medieval written sources help us comprehend the interaction between performed rituals and painted iconography, as attested at the Bačkovovo cemetery chapel.

The excellently preserved state of the Ezekiel fresco in this monument is exceptional, as we see it in the following comparative analysis. As a matter of fact, we know only one other example of the vision of the Resurrection of the dry bones in Byzantine mural painting. It too is found in a sepulchral monument, contemporary with the Bačkovovo chapel, the Saint Trinity Chapel of the *katholikon* of the Koutsoventis Monastery in North Cyprus. It was also established by the end of the 11th century, as a final resting place of a high military dignitary under Alexios I Komnenos²¹ and decorated around 1100 ((Kotoula 2006, pp. 27–41 (especially pp. 28–33), pp. 235–49, figs. 1–23); Papageorgiou 2010, pp. 169–85; Papacostas et al. 2007, pp. 25–156; Parani 2018, p. 43, fig. 16, note 159sq.). The iconographical program of the Koutsoventis chapel remained covered by white plaster since the time of the Turkish occupation of the island (1974). Thus, its content is known only from photographic archives of the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies in Washington.²² This iconographical program is charged with deep soteriological meaning, and this indicates the sepulchral function of the building. The representation of the prophet Ezekiel is located on the upper part of the south-west column of the *naos*.²³ Ezekiel is holding a scroll on which we read the passage from Ezek 37. 12–13. He is facing another prophet, Isaiah, who appears on the opposite pillar holding a scroll with the text from Isa 26. 19. Furthermore, the Ezekiel panel refers to the representation of an *Anastasis* on the south wall and its visual counterpart on the north wall, the Crucifixion, which forms part of a concise Passion cycle. Thus, the artist of the Koutsoventis frescos accentuated the Old Testament prophecy, as did the Bačkovovo master, by integrating the prophet's portrait into an iconographical environment of a monastic sepulchral monument inspired by the idea of salvation and resurrection.

7. Conclusions

We notice first of all that the visual representations of Ezekiel's prophecy of the dry bones offer only a first attempt to discern the mutual perceptions and interactions between the West and Byzantium within an original iconographic formulation, rather than an exhaustive survey of its material artistic evidence. Nevertheless, our study brought to light the most significant emergences of this singular biblical theme both in the Medieval Occidental and Eastern cultural spheres. We saw its presence within Latin Medieval and Byzantine manuscript production. Chronologically, we proceeded by mentioning the origin of an ancient pictorial tradition based upon Jewish sources, which the late antique funerary sculpture commonly adapted following the new Christian doctrine. A subsequent restatement of the hope of an eternal afterlife describes the fresco program of the ossuary of the Bačkovovo monastery in Bulgaria, which is of particular significance insofar as it provides the best preserved example of the Old Testament prophecy in Medieval church decoration.

²¹ Eumathios Philokales, governor of Cyprus.

²² See the rapport, which includes the photos taken during the restoration efforts carried out in the 60s: (Mango et al. 1990, pp. 63–94).

²³ Reproduced by (Mango et al. 1990, figs. 113–14, pl. 3; Papageorgiou 2010, p. 177, fig. 2). See also: https://web.archive.org/web/20110608064949/http://www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/doaks_eid_2413.html.

There this scene became a unique testimony of an ancient commemorative practice which seems to vanish during the Middle ages, but which still remains an important source for understanding monastic liturgical traditions.

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