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# THE MANUSCRIPT HERITAGE OF IOAN KRATOVSKI

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## **Abstract**

The present study is meant to express our observations on the manuscript heritage of one of the most important and interesting Balkan scribes and illuminators of the XVI century – Ioan Kratovski. His activity is connected with two Orthodox centres on the Balkans – Kratovo and Craiova. Our work is an attempt to see the decoration of the impressive number of manuscripts left by Ioan Kratovski in the light of the innovations of the ornamental language of the Post-Byzantine art that took place during the XVI century.

*Keywords:* decorative styles, Post-Byzantine art, Rūmi-Hatai motifs, Islamic ornament, Codicology

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## **1. Introduction**

In our last article [1] we discussed briefly about the decoration of the manuscript collection of the Holy Monastery of Putna and this time we suggest you an article which aims to present the manuscript heritage of Ioan Kratovski - a scribe, calligrapher and illuminator whose activity represents the new tendencies in the Balkan manuscript illuminating style in the XVI century [2-7].

We will focus our attention on two main problems which will allow us, on one hand to reveal to some extent one of the directions of the Post-Byzantine art at this stage of its development and on the other hand to put some open questions whose answers to be found in future researches.

The first problem we shall pay attention to is the appearance of the new innovated tendencies, which set their mark not only on the illuminating tradition of the Slavs on the Balkans during the XVI and XVII century, but had influenced also the decorating practices in the Romanian Principalities.

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## **2. Exposé**

Very few are known about the personality of Ioan Kratovski. In accordance with the Byzantine tradition, he has left only few remarks about himself in the colophons of his manuscripts. So, taking into consideration the colophons' information, it becomes clear that most of his life he has lived and worked in the town of Kratovo (today in the Former Republic of Macedonia), where he wrote the biggest part of his manuscripts. According to the different scholars (Bulgarian, Serbian, Romanian) the number of the manuscripts attributed to him varies from nine to eleven [8]. We accept that there are nine manuscripts that could be attributed with certainty to Ioan Kratovski, at least we are familiar with these nine manuscripts, all of them have his autograph in their colophons, but only eight are richly decorated. The Ioan Kratovski's activity lasted from 1526 to 1583. Although his first manuscript – a prayer book – has no decoration, we have eight other books that present a good possibility to study the models this illuminator has used at the beginning and to make some conclusions about the development of the motifs and compositional patterns he used in the decoration of the manuscripts during this 25-year period of activity. Therefore, the number of the manuscripts we shall scrutinize in this article is limited to eight. We will not describe in detail every single frontispiece or other decorative element, but what we are trying to do is to draw a general conclusion about the influence of the different tendencies we find in progress in the discussed manuscripts.

Obviously, Ioan from Kratovo was a calligrapher of value because he copied liturgical books for different centres on the Balkans – Mount Athos, Sofia, Serbia, Walachia, and has created a school that had a large influence over the illumination practices in these Orthodox centres. From this fact we can make two important conclusions - the first one is that he was a well-known scribe whose fame was spread over the Balkans; and the second one is that there were very strong connections between the different Orthodox centres in and outside the borders of the Ottoman Empire.

The first illuminated manuscript we shall take into consideration is a Four Gospel Book – Zograf. I.v.2 from Monastery of Zographou, Mount Athos written in 1558 in Kratovo and the last one is the Four Gospel Book, written in 1583 in Craiova, Walachia. In the Four Gospel Book from 1558, we have frontispieces with miniatures very close to the decoration of the printed book (Figure 1a). As a whole, the decoration of the first manuscript made by Ioan Kratovski has a compositional set of the ornaments that is similar to the XIII century Byzantine models (Figure 1b and 2).

Actually, our aim is to emphasize the innovative tendencies that appeared in his manuscripts. They have two main directions. The first one concerns the composition of the frontispieces – he elaborates a particular kind of composition that includes a miniature presentation of one of the four Evangelists. Therefore, there are such frontispieces in front of the text of each gospel in his manuscripts (excepting the one written in 1558).



**Figure 1.** Four Gospels Book from 1558 (Zograf, I. v.2, Monastery of Zographou, Mount Athos): (a) Frontispieces of the St. Matthew's Gospel (f. 92v, 93r); (b) Frontispieces of the St. Luke's Gospel (f. 147r).

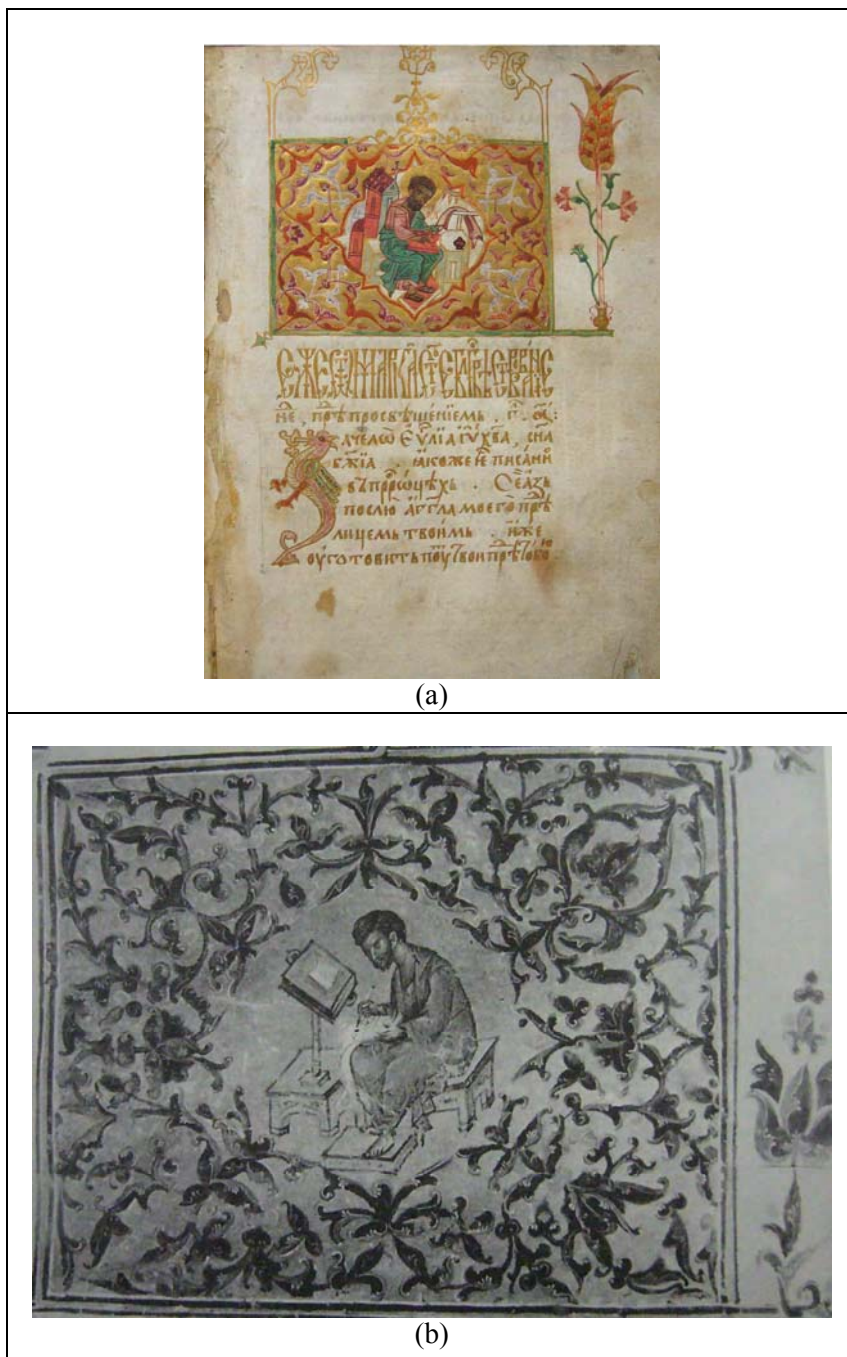
Nevertheless, the frontispieces with miniature are not something new to the Byzantine tradition, they have appeared even since the IX-X century, but in Slav manuscripts, except for the Psalters where King David is depicted in such kind of frontispieces, this type appears as late as XV century [3, 9-13]. Ioan Kratovski's frontispieces have one more specific feature and this is the positioning of the Evangelist into a round, four-leaved or almond-shaped medallion surrounded by a floral composition.



**Figure 2.** Four Gospels Book (Christ Church gr.25, Oxford), f.140r.  
Frontispieces of the St. Luke's Gospel.

On the other hand, we can find a similarity in the compositional organization of the frontispieces in a group of Byzantine manuscripts (XIV century) made in the Byzantine provincial centres - for example the frontispieces of Four Gospel Book in Pistoia, Bibl. Fabroniana, Cod. gr. 307, Paris. gr. 550 [14]. First Buchtal pays attention to the influence of the arabesque on the composition of these frontispieces [15] (Figure 3). What is important to keep in mind here is that the first wave of Islamic influences on decoration of the Byzantine manuscripts was in XIII-XIV century whereas among the Slavs this kind of infiltration appears later by the intercession of the Ottoman Art.

The second tendency concerns the set of ornamental motifs. We can divide them according to their origin into two main groups: 1) modified Byzantine motifs, 2) new Ottoman motifs.



**Figure 3.** Four Gospels Book from: (a) 1566 (HACI №250, Sofia), f.90r - Frontispieces of the St. Mark's Gospel; (b) 1330 (Pistoia, Bibl. Fabroniana, Cod. 307), f.157r - Frontispieces of the St. Luke's Gospel.

In this paper, we shall pay attention to the second group, which is represented by two main stylistic trends of Ottoman Court Style from XVI century. The first one, called Rūmi-Hatai is a combination of Seljuk arabesque (Rūmi motifs) with lotus and peony flowers (Hatai motifs) (Figure 4a). The second one is composed of some semi-stylized flowers (tulips, roses, carnations, hyacinths) [16-19] (Figure 4b).

The decoration of the Four Gospel Book from 1558 consists of big rectangular frontispiece in the beginning of every Gospel. They are filled with knitting-floral motifs coloured in gold, blue, red and green. The stylization of the motifs on the f.147a shows an influence by the Rūmi-Hatai Style. This ornament is built by twisted vine tendril turning into a leaf Rumi motif and small lotus palmetto Hatai motif. Here, we have to mention that only the compositional organization of the motifs is familiar to the Byzantine decorating tradition. In the decoration of the manuscript Christ Church gr.25, f. 87, 140, 226 [20] we can see parallels in the movement and positioning of the ornament but the distinction comes from the different type of floral motifs that are used here. We find similarity in the frontispiece on the f. 93a as well, where stylized tendril turning into leaf Rumi motif and two Hatai palmettos added to them form four spiral modules and finish with a modified lily-palmetto. The white colour around the palmetto is similar to the so-called 'metallic palmetto' typical for the Early Palaiologan Art [21] and also demonstrates that this Byzantine model was quite familiar to Ioan Kratovski. On the other hand, the type of the motifs is different. We can point out a motif similar to those represented in the frontispiece on the f. 147a in the composition of the book binding decoration of the early Ottoman manuscript [22].

The big frontispieces in the beginning of the Gospels in the next three Four Gospels Books – HACI №34, HACI № 250 and Zograf.I.v.2 and those of the Lectionary RMNR 1/23 all of them written and illuminated by Ioan Kratovski show close stylistic features. The compositional organization of the inner space, the weaving of the miniature into the ornamental elements is something familiar to the Byzantine Art during the XIII and XIV century. But, what we see here is a new stylization of the motifs influenced by the Rūmi-Hatai Style.

Ioan Kratovski has also used as a marginal decorative element representing the idea of the 'arbor mundi', a peculiar sheaf of semi-stylized floral motifs, coming out of a branch linked to the bottom band of the frontispieces or the same sheaf of semi-stylized floral motifs coming out of a vase which is put on the page without links to the compositional elements. The flowers Ioan Kratovski has depicted are tulip, rose, carnation and hyacinth. All of them are known as motifs from semi-stylized trend, developed by Kara Memi during the XVI century [23]. Our opinion is that the motifs used by Kratovski and the type of their stylization are similar to those of the contemporary Ottoman Art.



(a)

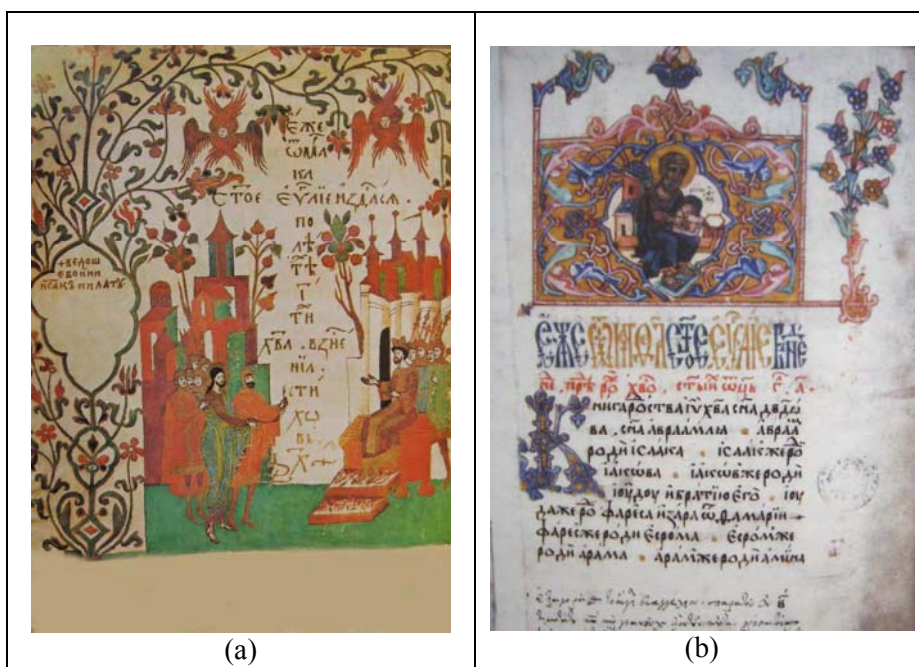


(b)

**Figure 4.** (a) Jug, early XVI century, Turkey or Balkans, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 158-1894; (b) Ceramic tiles from Harem in Harem Dairesi in Topkapi Sarayi, XVI century.

In the both artistic traditions (Slav and Ottoman), the representation of the flowers symbolizes the Paradise [23, p. 210; 24; 25]. In Byzantine manuscripts the motif of the tree of life is also well present. So, the influence of Ottoman Art on the ‘mise en page’ of Slav manuscripts is formal and affects only the neutral area and namely that of the ornament. There is no change neither in the meaning, nor in the iconography, only the type of motifs is replaced by others coming from the contemporary Ottoman decorative Arts.

In general, we can explain this second innovative tendency in the manuscripts of Ioan Kratovski with the wide penetrating of this kind motifs into the other genres of the Christian Art [26-28]. Also, the Rūmi-Hatai Style and Semi-stylized flowers trend have had a large spread and have been penetrated into the decoration of the Serbian manuscripts and printed books and what is more interesting here is the fact that these artistic currents coming from the East has been adopted in the Art of Venice [29, 30]. From Venice it has had its long way back to the East influencing both the Western Art and the Art of the Balkan countries.



**Figure 5.** Four Gospels Book: (a) Ms. 1/1934 Museum of the Monastery of Dragomirna, Romania, f. 139v, Jesus Christ in front of Pilate; (b) from 1583 (MNAR Ms. 11, f. 6r), Frontispieces of the St. Matthew’s Gospel.



One of the open questions we said we would like to put in this article is connected with marginal ornament that Ansatsie Crimca (1560-1629) has used in the decoration of his manuscripts [31-34] (Figure 5). They also represent a sheaf of semi-stylized floral motifs coming out of a vase linked to the bottom band of the composition or put without links to the other elements that claimed to be an Oriental influence. They have different dimensions in comparison to those met in the manuscripts of Ioan Kratovski but as an idea have not they the same suggestion? We can talk about an independently found decorative decision in the both cases but it is also possible to seek and some kind of influence between the works of these two illuminators.

The miniatures in the manuscripts written and illuminated by Ioan Kratovski also have some peculiar features. The Evangelists are depicted with shortened statures, grossly shaped extremities, which gives them an Eastern air. It is difficult to see the Ottoman influence here also in the manner he depicted Evangelists' figures, because they still have their individual features. We are more inclined to seek the explanation of this in the archaistic style characteristic for the frescoes during the XV and XVI centuries and the mixing of two representational positions in the depiction of the Evangelists' heads.

Disproportions of the Evangelist representations in his last two manuscripts can be explained also with the fact that Ioan Kratovski is advanced in years and, as he pointed out in a note on the f. 281v of MNAR 11, he was writing this manuscript wearing glasses [8, p 181] (Figure 5b).

His last two manuscripts were written and illuminated in Craiova unlike the first seven, which were written in Kratovo. Both of them are Four Gospels Books and are made without being commissioned. Iconographical, these two manuscripts are very close to his earlier works. Of course, there are some variations in the decorative ornaments as we mentioned before. As it is for example the lack of the carnation in his last manuscript and the presence of this flower in the Four Gospels Book from 1580. Nevertheless, Ioan Kratovski spent only few years in Walachia, his stay there has left traces in the illuminative practices of this principality. He became a mediator who brought in the manuscript decoration in Walachia the new oriental motifs that have already flown into the different genres of the Balkan art. In the XVII century, his decorative practice found followers in the lands of Walachia as well. The most important among them is Radu the Grammarian whose works, as Ms. Slav.651 in Academic Library of Romania and MNAR № 22, show the same decorative taste [35]. The fact that we have two known disciples of Ioan Kratovski (Lazar and Petar) who gladly mentioned in the colophons of the manuscripts that they were his disciples and the traces of his illuminating language we find during the XVII century in the Romanian Principalities stimulates us to pose a problem of a possible school that he created. And if such a school had existed, it had not been limited only to his activity in Kratovo which was a flourishing craft centre on the Balkans in the XVI century. It has extended the influence of his activity in the lands of Bulgaria and Romania. Usage of the term 'school' here has the condition that we can talk about an illuminating school of a full value during the

discussed period. But what we are trying to illustrate with this term is the idea that in the works of Ioan Kratovski we can see the formation and development of one creative conception which has its models from where it has drawn and became itself a model for another generation of illuminators.

### **3. Conclusion**

Studying this group of manuscripts that belong to the second half of the XVI century we can see that they demonstrate an interesting ‘co-existing’ of the predominating Byzantine ornament and some Islamic motifs. Every manuscript shows a different compositional set of the ornament and reflects this tendency in its way. But we can make a conclusion that in the first manuscripts made by Ioan Kratovski we have an intensification of the decorative features and closeness to the contemporary Ottoman style. Whereas in his late works we find a returning to the more plastic ornamental language of the Byzantine style which main characteristic is the usage of the palmetto and the rinceaux.

The manuscript heritage of Ioan Kratovski is a good starting point of a more detailed study of the different processes that influenced the Balkan illuminating practices in the Orthodox lands in and outside the border of the Ottoman Empire. On one hand because it shows a specific inner movement, as we mentioned above, from closeness to the Byzantine models in the beginning passes through a phase of intensification of the Islamic ornament and as we can see in the last two examples the illumination returns to the known models. On the other hand, it points out another tendency and namely the transformation of the Romanian principality to the most preferable place for the scribes and the illuminators at the end of the XVI and the whole XVII century.

The XVII century presents very interesting and different directions in the field of manuscript illumination in Walachia, especially during the reign of Matthew Basarab when we have three different models of decoration. The first one is that brought by Ioan Kratovski, which co-existed with the old tradition whose main ornamental motif remains the knitting geometrical figures and, as it concerns the miniature, it stays connected with the Late Palaiologan tradition [31] like the decoration of Ms. №13 in the Romanian academic library. The third direction, brought in the lands over the Danube by Lukas from Buzău and Matthew from Mira and developed by their disciples, shows a totally different models and stylization of the manuscript decoration which is influenced at the same time by the Byzantine tradition, the baroque decoration of the printed books and the new adopted Islamic ornaments.

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