

НОВА ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ НА СТЕНОПИСА „КОЛЕЛОТО НА  
ЖИВОТА“ ОТ ЦЪРКВАТА „РОЖДЕСТВО ХРИСТОВО“  
В АРБАНАСИ

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THE WHEEL OF LIFE AT THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY  
OF CHRIST IN ARBANASSI REVISITED

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**Abstract:** *The article examines the image of “Wheel of Life “ at the Church of the Nativity of Christ in Arbanassi, painted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century – the earliest known representation of the topic in Bulgaria. The theme of the Wheel of Life, which is connected with the idea of the transience of human life, is well-known in the Balkans and especially in Bulgaria and Romania in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as the famous image of the Monastery of the Transfiguration (Preobrazhenski manastir) near Veliko Turnovo, which is the work of the great Bulgarian revival artist Zachari Zograf. The question of the stages of the human life has been studied since the antiquity through citations of a series of ancient authors, and, moreover, an attention is paid to the influence of the Mount Athos over the religious and cultural life in the Balkans and more specifically over the iconography of the scene of the Wheel of Life. The image at the Church of the Nativity of Christ in Arbanassi, however, is distinguished for its originality and for that reason it is of particular interest for the researchers of the post-Byzantine period art. The human life is represented as consisting of 9 stages and it is difficult to find parallels to other similar images in the Balkans or to the philosophical conceptions, presented in the written sources.*

**Key words:** *monasteries, Wheel of Life, Byzantine art, Bulgaria, Ottoman period, Arbanassi, Nativity of Christ.*

On the east side of the gallery in the Church of the Nativity of Christ in Arbanassi, Bulgaria, there is a striking representation of the Wheel of Life (Fig.1) [Прашков, Л. 1979, обр. 123], a scene depicted in several monasteries in Bulgaria and Rumania in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, although most representations tend to be closer to the representation of the Wheel of Fortune, a slightly different topic. This representation of the Wheel of Life is particularly interesting, not only because it is the earliest known representation of the topic in Bulgaria, dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> c., but also because it is a particularly detailed and complex representation.

The Painter’s Manual of Dionysius of Fourna,<sup>1</sup> compiled most probably between 1730 and 1734, gives the instruction on “How to represent the vain life of this world:”

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<sup>1</sup> First published in the West by A. Didron on the basis of a manuscript prepared for him in 1843. The French translation, the work of Paul Durand, was published in Paris in 1845 under the title *Manuel d’iconographie chrétienne grecque et latine, avec une introduction et des notes*. It was reprinted in New York in 1963.

[**The Painter's Manual** , p. 83] *Draw a small circle, and in it draw an old man with a rounded beard, wearing a crown on his head and royal robes. He is seated on a stool with his hands outstretched to either side and holding a veil, (like the [figure of the] World beneath the Apostles in the representation of Pentecost.) Around the wheel write these words: "The vain and deceitful and fraudulent world."* We know that the Painter's manual was compiled based on the study of churches on Mount Athos and in Northern Greece, and we know that Mount Athos had an enormous cultural, religious, and artistic influence over the Christian communities of the Ottoman empire, especially in the Balkans. This is one of the reasons why the iconography of the Wheel of Life at Arbanassi, different from the Athonite iconography, is of particular interest for those interested in the sources of the post-Byzantine period painters.

In Arbanassi the representation of the Wheel of Life, which was created at least half a century before the Painter's Manual, does not follow the scheme recorded by Dionysius of Fourni. The "*old man with a rounded beard, wearing a crown on his head and royal robes*" is sitting on a large throne at the top of the representation surrounded by the inscription Ο ΠΛΟΥΤΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΔΟΞΟΙΣ [**Bakalova, E.** 2003, p. 11] = the power of riches [**Sabev, P.** 2015, p. 398; **Burrow, J. A.** 1988, p. 221–222]. There is, here, an emphasis on the Ages of Man that does not exist in most other representations of the Wheel of Life. In his book on the perception of age in medieval thought, J. A. Burrow [**Burrow, J. A.** 1988, cited in **Bogdan, C.** 2010, p. 221–222] describes three fundamental theories regarding the Ages of Man:

1. The triadic pattern of ascent-apex-decline (augmentum-status-decrementum), already mentioned by Aristotle's Rhetoric, is omnipresent in the Latin Middle Ages;
2. The seasonal division in four stages finds its origins in Pythagoras, and later in the works of Diogenes Laertius (3rd century AD). In his Life of Pythagoras he states [**Yonge, C. D.** Life of Pythagoras]:

*And he divides the life of man thus. A boy for twenty years; a young man (neaniskos) for twenty years; a middle-aged man (neanias) for twenty years; an old man for twenty years. And these different ages correspond proportionably to the seasons: boyhood answers to spring; youth to summer; middle age to autumn; and old age to winter. And he uses neaniskos here as equivalent to meirakion and neanias as equivalent to ankr.*

Ovid expands this concept in his Metamorphoses and offers four ages for humanity [**Ovid.** Metamorphoses]:

### **The Golden Age**

The golden age was first; when Man yet new,  
No rule but uncorrupted reason knew

### **The Silver Age**

But when good Saturn, banish'd from above,  
Was driv'n to Hell, the world was under Jove.  
Succeeding times a silver age behold,

## The Brazen Age

To this came next in course, the brazen age:  
A warlike offspring, prompt to bloody rage,

## The Iron Age

Hard steel succeeded then:  
And stubborn as the metal, were the men.

3. The Ptolemaic system, also known as the astrological scheme, is based on the seven planets known in Antiquity and dates back to Ptolemy (ca. 90 – ca. 168).

In his book on astrology known as Τετράβιβλος [Four Books] or ποτελεσματικά [Effects], and as *Quadripartitum* in the west, Ptolemy links the stages of life to the seven planets known at his time.

“Hence, the first age of infancy, which endures for four years, agreeing in number with the quadrennial period of the Moon, is consequently adapted to her; being in its nature moist and incompact, presenting rapidity of growth, being nourished by moist things, and possessing a highly variable habit. Its mental incompleteness is likewise in accordance with its familiar relation to the Moon, and her operative influence.

The age after this continues for ten years, and accommodates itself to the second sphere, that of Mercury. In this period, the intellectual and reasoning faculties of the mind begin to take their character, imbibing the seeds of learning, and developing, as it were, the elements and germs of the genius and abilities, and their peculiar quality. The mind is also roused to discipline and instruction, and to its first exercises.

Venus corresponds with the next and third age, which lasts throughout the following eight years, the number of her own period: from her, the movement of the seminal vessels originates, as well as an unrestrained impetuosity and precipitancy in amours. “The fourth and adult age next succeeds, and is subject to the fourth sphere, that of the Sun: it endures for nineteen years, according to the Sun’s number.

Mars, next after the Sun, claims the fifth age, that of manhood, agreeing in duration with his own period, viz. fifteen years. He induces greater austerity of life, together with vexation, care, and trouble.

Jupiter occupies the sixth sphere, and influences the maturer age, during the twelve years corresponding to his own period. He operates the relinquishment of labor, of hazardous employment and tumult, and produces greater gravity, foresight, prudence, and sagacity, favoring the claim to honor, respect, and privilege.

Saturn, moving in the last sphere, regulates the final old age, as agreeing with its chilliness. He obstructs the mental movements, the appetites and enjoyments; rendering them imbecile and dull, in conformity with the dullness of his own motion.” [Ptolemy. Tetrabiblos].

The best example of an illustration of the Ptolemaic system is in the oldest known, and best preserved, copy of Ptolemy’s so-called “Handy Tables” preserved

at the Vatican Library (Vat. Gr. 1291), dated for a long time between 813–820 (Fig. 2), but attributed more recently to the reign of Constantine V (741–775) [**Spatharakis, I.** 1978, p. 41–49; **Wright, D. H.** 1985, p. 355–362]. In the center of the illustration there is a representation of Helios in his chariot drawn by four horses. Around him, in the inner circle, there are twelve naked female figures, alternating three black, two white, one black, three white, two black and one white. They are surrounded by a thin circle with twelve numbers in Greek written in a dark brown color on a light ochre background. In the next circle there is a series of twelve clothed men in bust representing the twelve months of the year. In the band that encircles these men, the names of the twelve months with a specific date of the month in a dark brown color on a light ochre background are inscribed [**Neugebauer, O.** 1975, p. 977–978; **Spatharakis, I.** 1978; **Wright, D. H.** 1985]. In the outside band are represented the twelve signs of the Zodiac. While this is the oldest preserved representation in the Byzantine world, there are numerous older examples in Ancient Palestine synagogues, for example, not to mention similar representations in eastern civilizations. Jodi Magness has found six, perhaps seven examples of panels representing Helios, surrounded by the zodiac signs and the four seasons at Hammath Tiberias, Beth Alpha, Na’aran, Khirbet (Horvat) Susiya, Husifa, and Sepphoris. “All six compositions have a similar design with the circle of the zodiac inscribed in a square and the four seasons in the corners.” [**Magness, J.** 2005, p. 5–7].

An 11th Italian manuscript (Fig. 3), today at the BNF (lat 7028, fol. 154), follows the same basic scheme, but offers a “Christianized” version of the god Helios [**Avril, F., Zaluska, Y.** 1980, p. 41, Pl. XV; **Boudet, J.-P.** 2016, p. 40–41]. In the center, represented with a twelve spike nimbus, Christ is dressed in a *chlamys-costume*. The mantle, adorned by a *tablion*, is attached by a fibula on his right shoulder. Two stars – symbols of the earth and the moon? – are above his shoulders. His right hand, symbol of power, is raised and points straight up with the palm opened. He is surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac, and in each corner men in bust represent the four seasons. They wear a *chlamys-costume* similar to the one worn by Jesus.

While the representation of the zodiac is frequent in Romanesque [**Ferrand, A.** Le zodiaque...] and gothic art –the narthex of St. Marie-Madeleine at Vézelay and the pillar of St. Pierre of Souvigny, or thenorth portal of the cathedral of Amiens, and in a stained glass window, and on the west and north portals at Chartres, among many examples [**Mâle, E.** 1925, p. 297] –, “it remains an exceptional example in the painted décor of a Byzantine church.” [**Jevtić, I.** 2007, p. 129–130]. Since it is listed in several painters’ manuals (Hermeneia) that originated on Mount Athos, one can speculate that it was introduced in Post-Byzantine art via Mount Athos [**Gravgaard, A.-M.** 1987, pp. 73–82]. It is worth noting, once again, that while the influence of Mount Athos on artistic creation in Bulgaria during the Ottoman period is considerable and well documented [**Pavlikianov, K.** 2011, pp. 45–78], the representation of the wheel of life at the Nativity of Christ church in Arbanassi follows a different tradition.

The seven stages of life are recorded in Dionysius de Fourma manual. It is this Ptolemaic system that is represented, for example, at the church of Rășinari (1761), even if the painter, Grigore Ranite, added a Christian element by adding Jesus Christ on a cloud, holding a cross in his right hand [Bogdan, C. 2010, p. 223]. But the painter of the Wheel of Life at Arbanassi chose neither the Ptolemaic version, nor the abbreviated three stages variation that are commonly used in Rumania and Bulgaria. Instead he represented nine stages of life, and there are no inscriptions indicating what these various stages refer to. At the very bottom of the representation an inscription reads: “The insatiable Hades.”.

The representation of nine stages in life is rare, and does not correspond to any major philosophical approach to stages in life. It can be found in Bulgaria, however, in a 1873 painting at the house of rich Bulgarian merchants, the Lekovs, in Panagjurishte (Fig. 4) [Bakalova, E. 2003, p. 19].<sup>2</sup> There are, however, nine stages in the life of man in an Italian engraving from the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century representing a lightly different theme known in French as “le degré des âges.” (Fig. 5)<sup>3</sup>.

By comparison Dionysius’ Manual says: *Outside the third and larger circle put the seven ages of man thus: below in the right hand part of it draw an infant climbing upwards and write in front of it above the circle Child seven years old); further up draw another larger child and write Boy (fourteen years old); higher up draw another youth with moustaches and write Youth (21 years old) above the apex of the circle draw another with an incipient beard seated on a throne with his feet on a cushion, and his hands outstretched to either side; he holds a scepter in his right hand and a money bag in his left hand; he wears a crown and royal robes. Below him, above the circle, write Young Man (28 years old). Below him in the left half draw another man lying on his face, with grey hair, and write Older man (56 years old). Below him draw another man with a white beard, bald and lying on his face with his hands hanging down, and write Old Man (75 years old) [The Painter’s Manual of Dionysius of Fourna., p. 83].*

In the Paris gr. 36, folio 163v (end of the 14<sup>th</sup> c.), there is an interesting representation where the cosmos is inscribed within the wheel of life (Fig. 6) [Spatharakis, I. 1976, p. 77, Fig. 44].<sup>4</sup> In the center stands an elder in a long robe representing the world (κόσμος), two young men standing to his right and to his left are pulling his long hair and long beard. An inscription reads: *Οσοζμεάγαπήται μαδυσέταιμέ.*<sup>5</sup> Around the central representation of the cosmos there is a circle

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<sup>2</sup> The number of stages in life is not mentioned.

<sup>3</sup> The theme will be very popular in Western Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in particular in France where Epinal prints popularized the topic.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Bakalova 2003, p. 16, note 24.

<sup>5</sup> *He who loves me bold restores me.* [Bordier, H. 1885, p. 264]. He identifies the characters standing around the personification of the World as a man and a woman, but these are rather one, young, beardless man, and one older man with a short beard and a

containing inscriptions, and an outer circle with eight people lying flat on their stomachs. At the top of the circle sits a king, identifiable thanks to his royal garb, his crown, and a royal scepter that he holds in his left hand. Above him is the inscription *ὁ βασιλεὺς*.

The eight characters represent the seven stages of life forming a wheel, and the monk Nicodemus, the miniaturist, represented himself as an eighth person at the very bottom of the wheel. He is identified by an inscription. The seven stages of life are often depicted as men of different ages, from a young boy to an old man. Here they are all of the same age and wear very similar clothing, with some difference in their hair – two appear to be wearing a cap. Nicodemus wears monastic robes, mantle, and hat.<sup>6</sup>

Under the wheel among foliage there is a large lion and another unidentified animal,<sup>7</sup> but no open tomb and no dragon. On folio 203v of the same manuscript, however, there is a representation of the Tree of Life with a dragon at the very bottom from which the main root of the tree originates. Four griffins are standing on the other roots of the tree in which an upright man is eating fruit. St. Bonaventure taught that the medicinal fruit of the *Lignum vitae* is Christ himself [Simpson, L. Allegorical Exegesis in...]. The tree is flanked by a lion, a unicorn, two weasels, two ostriches, and two birds of paradise [Ameisenowa, Z., Mainland, W. F. 1939, p. 326–349].

The Wheel of Life is often referred to as the Wheel of Fortune, although the two subjects are different and therefore have a different iconography. The Wheel of Fortune is an allegory of luck in the shape of a wheel that pushes some up, and others down. The wheel is operated by a female allegory blindfolded that represents hazard (luck). This iconography most probably originated in the manuscripts illustrating Boethius' *De Consolatione philosophiae*, a text written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, that was rediscovered and became popular among a certain elite at the end of the Middle-Ages [Bakalova, E. 2003, p. 14; Bogdan, C. 2010, p. 92]. A good example of this iconography can be found in the 15<sup>th</sup> c. French manuscript (Fr. 809) at the BNF (Fig. 7). On folio 40r a miniature illustrates the dialogue between Boethius and the personification of Philosophy. “The woman who turns the wheel is portrayed two-faced, as a *Janus bifrons*, to suggest the ambivalence of luck: *Bona* and *Mala* Fortuna.” [Bogdan, C. 2010, p. 92]<sup>8</sup>

The Wheel of Life representation will become popular in church paintings in Bulgaria and Rumania in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the immediate vicinity of Arbanassi, at the monastery of the Transfiguration near Veliko Turnovo, on the south side of the outside wall of the church, there is a representation of the Wheel of Life,

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moustache; Byzance et la France médiévale [Byzance et la France médiéval] describes “le Monde dont deux personnages tirent les cheveux et la barbe, à l’intérieur d’une sphère allégorique de la vie humaine.”

<sup>6</sup> H. Bordier interprets the eight who are lying down as women [Bordier, H. 1885, p. 264].

<sup>7</sup> H. Bordier interprets it as a lion eating a dog [Bordier, H. 1885, p. 264].

<sup>8</sup> My translation.

dated around 1850 (Fig. 8). It is the work of the renowned Bulgarian revival artist Zacharij Zograf [**Тчавраков, Г.** 1978, p. 142–149, 168 photo; **Прашков, Л., Бакалова, Е., Бояджиев, С.** 1992, с. 51–58].<sup>9</sup> The representation is significantly different from the one in Arbanassi. In the center there is neither the sun, nor an old man, as prescribed in the Painter’s Manual, but a representation of Fortuna, or, according to Cristina Bogdan, an allegory of the World [**Bogdan, C.** 2010, p. 96]. In the next circle he represents the four seasons. On the outside circle is a representation of the seven ages of life as prescribed in the painter’s manual: three ascending, three descending, and the seventh in the mouth of a dragon “near to him is Death, and he is in the middle of the tomb holding a large sickle which he puts to the neck of [the last descending] old man and drags him down.” [**The Painter’s Manual of Dionysius of Furna.**, p. 83]. And Zacharij Zograf follows the advice of the Painter’s Manual by putting “two angels to the right and to the left outside the circle with half-haloes on their heads, and turning the wheel with cords.” [**The Painter’s Manual of Dionysius of Furna.**, p. 83].

The same artist worked at the monastery of Trojan, where he represented the Wheel of Life on the outer western wall shortly after 1847 [**Гергова, И.** 1988, с. 11–12, Fig. 40; **Прашков, Л., Бакалова, Е., Бояджиев, С.** 1992, с. 98–107].

There are representations of the Wheel of Life in many churches from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> c., for example, at the Ilientsi Monastery (1832), at St. John the Forerunner in Bistrica (1882) [**Bakalova, E.** 2003, note 31, photo 23–24], at the monastery of Batoshevo, near Turnovo, at the Monastery of Sokolski near Gabrovo [**Bakalova, E.** 2003, note 31; **Bogdan, C.** 2010, p. 96],<sup>10</sup> and other.<sup>11</sup> The theme seems to be “popular” and goes beyond<sup>12</sup> the representation in churches.

The theme of the Wheel of Life is well established in the Balkans from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on. It is found in many monasteries in Bulgaria and Rumania in particular. It was even adopted by rich Bulgarians to decorate their house, and it was used on Bulgarian 100 leva banknotes in the 1990s to illustrate the work of Zahari Zograf. But all of these representations follow a scheme different from that of Arbanassi. So while the Wheel of Life in Arbanassi is the oldest representation of the theme in Bulgaria, it was not used as a model by the painters of the Bulgarian revival and later. The village of Arbanassi, mostly inhabited by rich Greek, Albanian, and Bulgarian merchants at the time, had solid trade relationships, in particular with Dubrovnik,

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<sup>9</sup> There is no picture of the Wheel of Life in the book of L. Prashkov et alii [**Прашков, Л., Бакалова, Е., Бояджиев, С.** 1992].

<sup>10</sup> Cr. Bogdan provides a list of 12 churches in Rumania, from the 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> c. with a representation of the Wheel of Life [**Bogdan, C.** 2010, p. 100 – 102].

<sup>11</sup> E. Bakalova gives other examples in Albania and Macedonia that are beyond the scope of this article [**Bakalova, E.** 2003, note 31. One can add to this list a 1727 fresco at the Church of St. John the Forerunner in Apozari/Kastoria.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that there is no mention of the Wheel of Life in the Hermeneia recorded by Asen Vasilev [**Василев, А.** 1976].

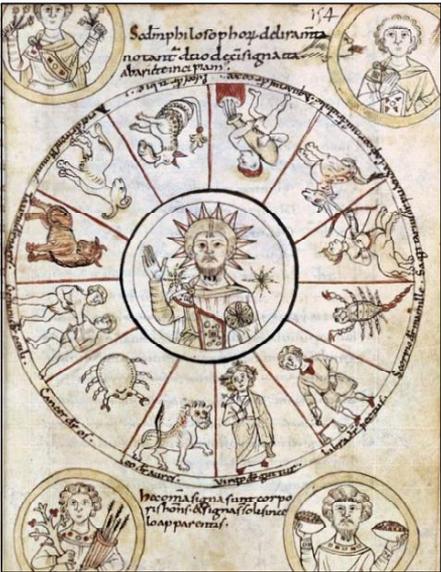
Italy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and, of course, Istanbul. Therefore, it is not surprising that western influence could be found in the decoration of the numerous churches in the small town. As the result of this influence, the Wheel of Life at the church of the Nativity of Christ in Arbanassi remains a unique example of the iconography of this theme.



Фигура 1



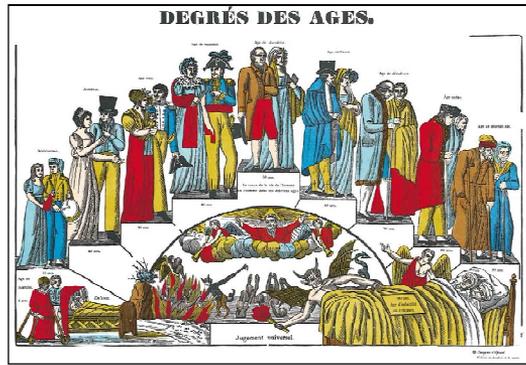
Фигура 2



Фигура 3



Фигура 4



Фигура 5



Фигура 6



Фигура 7



Фигура 8

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