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## **Saint George Slaying the Dragon on an 18<sup>th</sup> Century Icon from Slavonia - Traditional Iconography and Popular Piety**

Abstract: The paper presents an icon from Slavonia (Croatia) dating from the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and featuring the most popular miracle of Saint George – the slaying of the dragon and saving the princess.<sup>1</sup> The icon is interesting in several aspects considering its iconography, stylistic characteristics and possible origins of the painter. Starting with the latter, the analysis of the painter's style suggests that he could have been a close disciple or an associate of the famous Hristofor Žefarović who migrated to the Metropolitanate of Karlovci from Macedonia in the 1730s. His distinct figurative style belonged to the so called *zograf* painting in Serbian 18<sup>th</sup> century art, standing at the touching point of the post-Byzantine tradition and European baroque and forming a specific format of popular art. The icon in case also provides evidence for the migratory reaches of painters from the south of the Balkans in the early and mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and their influence on the creation of a specific brand of popular visual culture in the Orthodox communities in Slavonia and Croatia. The subject depicting the triumphal figure of the Saint on horseback defeating the beast was well established in Byzantine and post-Byzantine tradition, but in later centuries it was treated with increasing decorativeness and imaginative details characteristic of popular imagination. The status of Saint George as a hero, protector, miracle worker and a martyr was reinforced among the Balkan Orthodox during the Turkish reign and transferred to the Metropolitanate of Karlovci in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Key words: Saint George, *zograf* icon painting, Slavonia, 18<sup>th</sup> century

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1 The paper was written in English by the author.



Unknown zograf, *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*, around 1740, church in Gačište, Slavonia (photo: Ratko Radanović, Banja Luka)



Hristofor Žefarović, *Lamentation of Christ*, fresco in Bođani monastery church, 1737 (photo: Branislav Todić, Beograd)

The most favored miracle of Saint George, the episode with the evil dragon and the fragile princess, was a very popular subject in Serbian religious art in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the so called *zograf* painting. Among the Serbs and other Orthodox living in Habsburg Monarchy under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitanate of Karlovci, this traditional variant of visual art coexisted with mainstream and privileged baroque painting. As a form of popular art and, being closely related to the long-standing Balkan post-Byzantine painting tradition, it was nevertheless an open medium, actively communicating and interacting with the *baroque officialis* (Timotijević 1996, 131-134). The stylistic and thematic characteristics of *zograf* icons, their decorativeness, often flamboyant colors and picturesque, but simplified rendering of traditional repertoire of Christian themes and pieties, suited the needs of the unlearned majority of the Orthodox rural population through emotional, rather than intellectual connection with the believers (Timotijević 1996, 132). The icon of *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* (fig. 1) by an unknown *zograf* painter, discovered recently in the parish church in Gačićte a village in central Slavonia (Kučeković 2015, 85-88), has all of the above characteristics and presents almost an ideal case study for understanding the interesting mixture of traditional and popular in the Serbian visual culture of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

There are few reliable clues about the origins of this icon, which is housed in a modern church built after the Second World War. It seems to be the sole visual testimony of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century history of the Orthodox parish in Gačićte. As archival sources show, the Orthodox locus in the village dates from the period of Turkish conquest of Slavonia and subsequent settlement of the Orthodox population in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, later periodically repopulated by migrations from central Bosnia. The first firm record of a wooden Orthodox church in Gačićte dates from 1748 when it was dedicated to Saint George. A new masonry church was built after 1770. During much later refurbishment, begun around 1880, the parishioners decided to acquire a new painted iconostasis – on that occasion, only the “ancient” despotic icons were kept as prized testimonies of confessional continuity (Kučeković 2015, 87-88). The outlined circumstantial evidence may suggest that the icon of *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* could be the only surviving of those old despotic icons from the 18<sup>th</sup> century church. Though quite rare in reformed baroque painting in the Metropolitanate of Karlovci, the illustration of this miracle of Saint George on despotic icons on iconostases painted by *zograf* masters in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is not uncommon (Davidov 1973, 156, 159). The popularity of the subject is also testified by its frequent appearance on portable *zograf* icons and engravings (Stošić

2006, 166; Davidov 1978, 247, 337, 348) often donated to certain churches or commissioned by private individuals.

The story about Saint George's miraculous victory over the demonic beast on the icon from Gačićte is depicted as a combination of episodes from his vita and accounts of his miracles (Popović 1973, 351-352, 371-374). The mounted warrior saint tramples the dragon beneath his horse's stomping hooves, thrusting his lance through the throat of the beast, while in the back, the awestruck princess witnesses the event with hands crossed on her chest. Her father, the tsar, and mother the tsarina are also depicted, alongside a group of astonished inhabitants of the city, on top of a high defensive tower. This part of the composition follows the accounts of the miracle, but with emphasis shifted from the original story in which Saint George kills the dragon only after the princess leads it, already defeated, inside the city (Popović 1973, 373), to the depiction of the saint's heroic act in front of the spectators. This iconographic scheme, as elaborated further in the text, was already a long-standing and well-established model in post-Byzantine tradition. In the upper section of the icon the hand of God appears from the clouds blessing the saint and an angel, also carried by a group of clouds, places the heavenly crown on the saint's head. This part of the story can be found in Saint George's vita accounts of his martyrdom on a wheel ordered by Diocletian, when an angel of God appears saving the saint and the voice thunders from the heavens – *Do not fear George, I am with you ...* (Popović 1973, 352). This text is written in Cyrilic on the ray of light descending from the hand of God and continued with the angel's healing and blessing words – *Rejoiceth..!* also appearing in some versions of Saint George vita texts (Života 1911, 9). An interesting and quite unique feature for contemporary zograf painting is the text of the kondakion dedicated to Saint George, sung in the morning service on his feast day (Nikolajević 1984, 142; Mirković 1961, 239-240), written in Cyrilic in the upper right corner of the Gačićte icon.<sup>2</sup> The addition of this liturgical hymn contributes to the icon's festive aura and may represent another indicator of its former status as a despotic icon.

The visual iconography of Saint George, one of the most popular from the first echelon (Walter 2003, 41-44) of warrior saints, developed gradually in the Eastern Christian sphere. Modern scholarly approach to his cult assessed the ma-

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2 *God raised you as his own gardener, O George/ for you have gathered for yourself the sheaves of virtue./ Having sown in tears, you now reap with joy;/ You shed your blood in combat and won Christ as your crown./ Through your intercessions, forgiveness of sins is granted to all* (Orthodoxwiki 2015). The original text on the icon is written in Church Slavonic. Judging by the orthography and graphic character of the kondakion text, alongside the decorative outlining of the cartouche, it can be assumed that the icon and the text are contemporaneous.

major characteristics of this development.<sup>3</sup> Although extremely popular and widely celebrated, the historical George from Cappadocia is still a very illusive character (Walter 1995, 269; Walter 2003, 109). The latter might have opened the path for early and prolific incorporation of distinct features of other warrior saints into the cult of Saint George, but also the assimilation of characteristics of pre-existing cultic practices and folklore of the regions where the strong devotion to Saint George took root (Novaković 1880, 133-143; Atanasov 2001, 226-228), initiating the production of various apocryphal text that might have influenced the rich and varied visual iconography of the saint's life and posthumous miracles (Stevanović 2012, 393-404; Stevanović 2015, 31-47). His primary devotional characteristic as a Christian martyr was celebrated in many painted cycles during the medieval and post-Byzantine periods (Atanasov 2001, 274-313; Popović 2003, 95-110; Walter 2003, 134-138). The warrior image, though, was fortified when Saint George's military, rather than martyr status was acknowledged in Byzantine imperial iconography, later adopted by analogue ideologies in the sphere of Byzantine influence (Walter 2003, 131-132; Katsaros 2013, 505-515). Serbian medieval ruling elites appropriated this facet of the saint's cult, as witnessed by important royal and noble monastic endowments from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Walter 1989a, 347-358; Marković 1995b, 600-607; Popović 1995, 451-470). The sense of impending doom among the Balkan Orthodox provoked by Ottoman threat after the battle of Chernomen (1371), reinforced the trust in the help of holy warriors (Marković 1995a, 192-197). The situation and accents of the cult of Saint George changed to a certain extent in the following period of Turkish rule in the Balkans, especially in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, when devotion to him was strengthened even more (Popović 2003, 97). For Serbian Orthodox population under the Ottomans, Saint George becomes one of the most invoked among the so-called fast-helping saints (Ševo 1999, 119), those who respond to the prayers of the needy (Novaković 1880, 134).<sup>4</sup> Although almost never portrayed as a martyr in Serbian Orthodox churches of the period, but exclusively as a standing warrior in full military attire (Petković 1965, 67-68), his martyrdom was never far out of sight, as witnessed by the nearly standard epithet "The Great Martyr" found on many of the preserved icons and wall-painting portraits, as is also the case on the Gačište icon.

The iconographical theme of *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* is very old (Walter 1989b, 664-665), but the combination of this principal scheme with

3 Comprehensive bibliographies on the subject have been put together by several authors; we refer to the ones we found most useful in our research (Marković 1995b, 568-599; Walter 2003, 109-144).

4 The popular belief in Saint George as the patron of farmers and cattle owners was widespread among the Balkan Orthodox during the period of Turkish rule and was especially important in a rural society (Petković 1965, 68)

the saving of the princess became widespread, as it appears, from the eleventh century onwards (Atanasov 2001, 225- 242; Walter 2003, 128-129, 140-142). In post-Byzantine period, its standard rendering stemmed from the solutions achieved in Cretan icon painting from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. From the prototype model created by painter Angelos Akotantos in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Vassilaki 2009, 137-152), Saint George emerges on the forefronts of icons as a muscular action hero on an equally muscular and forceful steed, with the fluttering scarlet cloak, signifying both his martyrdom and victory over evil (Alpatov 1956, 306). The famous Cretan master reached an omnipotent idealized synthesis of older hieratic Byzantine representations of Saint George on horseback with more naturalistic variations of early Renaissance painters, such as Paolo Veneziano (Vassilaki 2009, 141-142). Retaining consistently this successful visual formula, Cretan painting of the period also produced icons of *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* combined with the princess episode in the background, reaching especially flamboyant, profuse with Western influences and thematically rich variants in the work, as maybe the most striking, of painter Georgios Klontzas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Barboudakis 1993, 399, 413-414). It seems that Cretan models for iconography of *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* became almost universal in the Balkan post-Byzantine world, adopted by regional “schools” of painting which, in turn, enriched it with many specific details (Rakić 2012, 68-69; Matić 2017, 136). The multilayered narration of visual iconography was paralleled by various interpolations in manuscripts of the time describing the miracle of Saint George and the dragon, with notable folkloric influences, especially in the South Slavic domain (Stojkova 2000, 112-124).

The zograf painters of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Metropolitanate of Karlovci inherited the plethora of iconographic variants of their post-Byzantine background; many of them migrated to the area from the south of Balkans in the first half of the century, thus carrying a direct connection to visual models of their native regions (Davidov 1978, 106). The icon from Gačište, partly because of the reasons described at the beginning of this text, but mostly because of its particular stylistic features, may seem like an artifact completely strange in the surrounding that was increasingly trying to accept the baroque visual culture (Kučeković 2014, 9, 43-67). The oddness becomes less when some suppositions about the authorship of the icon are cross-referenced with known social and confessional circumstances of the period in Slavonia. To an experienced eye, the characteristic of the figure of Saint George on the Gačište icon, especially quite striking facial features, is immediately associated with the recognizable style of the famous “Illyrian Rascian common zograf” Hristofor Žefarović (Davidov 1978, 105-125;

Todić 2013, 2, 221-232). Although known in Serbian art of the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century mostly as a talented engraver who, employed by the highest ranks in Serbian Orthodox church, had an important role in contemporary reformatory processes of the Serbian cultural and religious habitus in the Habsburg Monarchy (Davidov 1978, 127-157), his painted legacy reveals best his unique figural style. Žefarović migrated to the Habsburg Monarchy from his native Dojran in Macedonia some time before 1740 (Todić 2013, 2, 221-222), coming out as a fully trained artist and painting his largest preserved fresco corpus in the church of Bođani monastery in Bačka (Todić 2013, 2, 222, 227-228).<sup>5</sup> The facial features of the rich scope of characters Žefarović created in Bođani (fig. 2) provide vivid analogies with Saint George on the Gačište icon. Even closer similarities can be observed with the despotic icons on the iconostasis in the church in Branjina village in Baranja region, attributed to Žefarović and/or his workshop (fig. 3) (Vasić 1971, 145-147; Šelmić 2003, 326-327). However, direct authorship of the Gačište icon to Žefarović can not be claimed and there is no evidence that he ever travelled that far westwards in Slavonia and Croatia. In the absence of any other solid ground, apart from quite striking stylistic resemblances, only speculations about the possible presence of one or more of his apprentices or associates in Slavonia in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century can be proposed (Kučeković 2015, 88).

Many features of the Gačište icon show how its unknown painter adapted to the specific preferences of the Orthodox community he created it for. As predominantly rural in nature and surrounded by the Catholic world, the Orthodox society and its Church in Slavonia and Northern Croatia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century harbored locally many prolonged traditional cultural inclinations (Kučeković 2014, 241-247, 274-284). The significant social influence of wealthy Orthodox merchants from the south of Balkans, many of them ethnic Aromanians and Greeks, who travelled or permanently settled and did business in trading towns of the region, also brought about transposition of their religious customs and cultural preferences (Davidov 1990, 165-176). The icon from Gačište could be considered as one example of such transpositions, as all of its characteristics, both iconographical and stylistic, could be found in the visual tradition of the Ohrid archbishopric of the previous period - the artistic sphere that produced Žefarović and painters with similar styles.<sup>6</sup> The ethnic origins of zograf painters migrating from afore-

5 Speculations about places of his artistic training still vary considerably, ranging from regional centers as Thessaloniki, Ohrid, Moschopolis, Mount Athos or Ionian islands of Zakyntos or Corfu, with presumed apprenticeships with prominent masters such as David of Selenica or Panayotis Doxaras (Moutafov 2001, 154-155; Todić 2013, 2, 221).

6 The area of this flourishing variant of post-Byzantine painting in the south of Balkans in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries is differently named by scholars as, for example, the Ohrid-Moschopolis cultural circle (Grozdanov 2016, 229-230) or area of Epirus and Western Macedonia (Moutafov 2001, 93-101). Ethnic

mentioned regions, or ones trained by them in the Habsburg lands, played no significant role in their engagements – their Orthodoxy was their primary identification code; they worked for Serbian, Greek and/or Greek speaking Aromanian commissioners alike, and used the corresponding languages and orthographies, or sometimes even both at the same time (Davidov 1990, 165; Šelmić 2003, 327-328; Grozdanov 2016, 229). The painter of the Gačićte icon might have been of non-Slavic ethnicity but nevertheless skilfully using the Church Slavonic language and the Cyrillic script.



*Hristofor Žefarović (attributed), Christ on the Throne, around 1740,  
despotic icon in church in Branjina, Baranja  
(photo: Dragan Damjanović, Zagreb)*

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origins of Žefarović himself are still the subject of discussion among scholars (Todić 2013, 2, 221).



His model for the variant of the theme of *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* painted on the Gačište icon is derived from aforementioned Cretan classics, strongly influential in the Ohrid archbishopric, but also in the region of Greek Ionian islands that might have been the place of Žefarović's artistic training (Moutafov 2001, 153-155). The proof of the presence of this template in Žefarović's circle, although no icons or engravings signed by him featuring this particular subject are preserved, can be found on the engraving *Saint George Slaying the Dragon with Vita Scenes* made in Vienna around 1748 (fig. 4), attributed to his namesake and probably a relative and associate Georgije Žefarović (Davidov 1978, 222-223, 348; Todić 2013, 1, 130-131). In the cartouche below the central panel of this engraved vita icon, with the figure of Saint George on horseback and the princess episode in the background, the troparion to Saint George is engraved, as yet another connecting feature with the Gačište icon which bears the text of the kondakion – the other hymn from the same liturgical set for the Feast of Saint George. However, the difference between artistic renderings of the two works is quite significant, although they are almost contemporaneous, or the Gačište icon being made slightly earlier than the engraving attributed to Georgije Žefarović. Alongside disparate iconographical features, mainly the pose of the saint's head, clothing and the princess fleeing, which suggest different, but still very much related paragons, the engraver's approach is much more naturalistic and conceptually closer to Western art, in accordance with his presumed short Viennese career (Davidov 1978, 223) and probably urban identity of his unknown commissioner/s. On the other hand, the comparable figural *naïveté*, strong colors and decorative details of the Gačište icon could be explained by the general trend of zograf painters adapting to more traditional and popular tastes of their rural provincial clientele.

The exact model, engraved or other, for the Gačište icon in all its features could not be precisely identified; the fact which might point to its uniqueness, but surely yet another indicator of richness and variety of details, and indeed their imaginative selection and free combination, that could be incorporated by zograf painters into the subject of *Saint George Slaying the dragon*. The icon from Gačište is comprised as an apotheosis of the victorious saint (Alpatov 1956, 307), receiving the grace of God in the decisive moment of his battle. The earlier variants rooted in Byzantine tradition tended to show the saint already victorious over the conquered beast, with the princess leading it pacified on the string (Todić 1993, 113-115). Increased influences exerted upon the Eastern Orthodox world by Western baroque religious practices that promoted concepts of active piety and saints as examples of everlasting heroic deeds of faith, resulted in the

shifting of old iconographical accents of warrior saints towards more pronounced action-hero schemes (Timotijević 1996, 361, 367-368). Saint George slaying the dragon becomes almost universally depicted in the middle of the battle with the beast, with the princess as an active and often rhetorically gesticulating participant. Such concepts went hand in hand with the popular imagination associated with Saint George, reflected also in folk literature (Novaković 150-163). The special place in the front plane of icons was always left for the monster itself as an epitome of evil, acquiring ever more ominous characteristics derived from variable zoomorphological roots (Bejenaru and Bacumenco 2004, 361-373). The painter of the Gačište icon shows it as a true winged dragon, paying much attention to details of its twisted body in the death rattle, with flows of blood gushing from its serrated jaws. The traditional wreath of God's glory bestowed upon the saint by an angel is replaced by a crown in Western fashion, richly decorated with pearls, as well as the saint's halo. The influence of the baroque ornamental repertoire can be seen in the saint's black and lavishly gilded attire and saddle cloth. The gestures of the princess, the figures on the city walls and those of God and His angel on the top constitute the rich rhetorical fabric of the image, emphasize its allegorical potential and strongly engage the spectator.

Returning shortly to the question of the iconographical model for the Gačište icon, we incline towards looking for its source in the rich corpus of engravings created by the artistic sphere from which Hristofor Žefarović originated. The role of engravings of both Eastern and Western provenance as iconographical templates in his artistic formation and later career is quite well studied (Timotijević 1996, 72-77; Moutafov 2001, 76-77). Engravings with *Saint George Slaying the Dragon and Saving the Princess* from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, mainly from Mount Athos, feature many details present on the Gačište icon (Papastratos 1990, 203-206). Some interesting observations can be made by studying engravings from this circle with representations of yet another variant of *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* – the one that, alongside the princess episode in the background, includes the figure of a youth carried by the saint on the horse behind him (Papastratos 1990, 207-213, 478-479). This iconographical scheme, with still varied interpretations concerning the identity of the young boy (Grotowski 2003, 27-77), achieved great popularity in Bulgarian icon painting of the period, where it was infused with many folkloric elements (Božkov 1984, 243-247; Paskaleva 1987, 99, 163, 183). Although mainly appearing in the south of Balkans, this variant is also recorded in zograf painting in the Metropolitanate of Karlovci (Stošić 2006, 163; Todić 2013, 2, 56-57). Because of the richness of decorative and narrative details appearing on icons and engravings depicting

this iconographical variant, we propose its inclusion into the imagined scope of visual paragons that might have been at the disposal of the Gačićste icon painter.



*Georgije Žefarović (attributed), Saint George with Vita Scenes, colored engraving, around 1748 (photo: Galerija Matice srpske, Novi Sad)*

The overall concept and specific details of the Gačićste icon represent an expression of a particular pictorial poetics striving to span the gap between post-Byzantine and mid-European visual traditions. It was created for the community that lived quite estranged by its confessional distinction and found solace in traditional visual expressions of the Orthodox faith. Nevertheless, it displays obvious influences of Western pictorial concepts which were exerted upon religious art of the entire Balkan region of the period (Moutafov 2001, 5-12, 65-87). It was painted by a skilled and talented master and might be considered among zograf icons of higher quality. Lack of data prevents its precise dating, but the 1740s could be proposed as probable time of its creation. Unfortunately, its almost total stylistic uniqueness and isolation among preserved zograf icons from Slavonia hinders any further non-speculative conclusions and makes it almost an exotic testimony to once flourishing cross-cultural connections.

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Života, stradanijata i čudeasata na svetago velikomučenika, pobedonosca i čudotvorca Georgija. 1911. Sveta Gora: Man. Sv. Georgi Zograf.

### **Photo captions:**

Fig. 1. Unknown zograf, *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*, around 1740, church in Gačište, Slavonia (photo: Ratko Radanović, Banja Luka)

Fig. 2. Hristofor Žefarović, *Lamentation of Christ*, fresco in Bođani monastery church, 1737 (photo: Branislav Todić, Beograd)

Fig. 3. Hristofor Žefarović (attributed), *Christ on the Throne*, around 1740, despotic icon in church in Branjina, Baranja (photo: Dragan Damjanović, Zagreb)

Fig. 4. Georgije Žefarović (attributed), *Saint George with Vita Scenes*, colored engraving, around 1748 (photo: Galerija Matice srpske, Novi Sad)

*Александра Кучековић*

## **Свети Георгије убија аждају на икони из Славоније из 18. века – традиционална иконографија и популарна побожност**

У раду је представљена икона из Славоније, датована у прву половину 18. столећа, са представом најпопуларнијег чуда Светог Георгија – убијања змаја и спасавања принцезе. Икона представља занимљиву целину како с аспекта иконографије и стилских карактеристика сликарства, тако и могућег порекла сликара. Анализа стила анонимног мајстора указује на могућност да се радило о блиском ученику и/или сараднику чувеног Христофора Жефаровића, који је у Карловачку митрополију мигрирао из Македоније 30-их година 18. века. Његов специфичан сликарски стил припадао је такозваном зографском сликарству у српској уметности 18. столећа, које се формирало на додиру поствизантијске традиције и европског барока и формирало дистинктиван формат популарне уметности. Икона о којој је реч указује на миграцијске досеге сликара са југа Балкана у раном 18. столећу и њихово учешће у стварању специфичних облика популарне визуелне културе у славонским заједницама Славоније и Хрватске. Представа на којој тријумфујући светитељ на пропетом коњу савладава звер била је етаблирана у византијској и пост-византијској традицији, али се у каснијим вековима третирао са све наглашенијом декоративношћу и уз додавање маштовитих илустративних детаља карактеристичних за популарну имагинацију. Статус Светог Георгија као хероја, заштитника и мученика оснажен је међу православнима на Балкану у периоду турске владавине и као такав пренет је у религиозну и визуелну културу Карловачке митрополије 18. века.

Кључне речи: Свети Георгије, иконопис 18. века, зографско сликарство 18. века, популарна побожност, Славонија