

## IS THERE ANY BRUTALITY IN THE BYZANTINE REPRESENTATION OF ABRAHAM'S SACRIFICE?

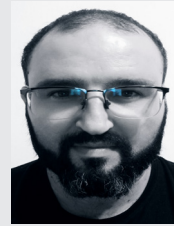
### **Abstract**

The episode of Abraham's sacrifice underscores his unwavering faith/trust in his God. The biblical patriarch had to prove to the One he served that, for Him, he could give up everything he held dearest. The sacrifice of his beloved son was obediently and promptly accepted by the patriarch. As soon as he received his commandment, he headed for Mount Moriah to offer Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord. However, the sacrifice was no longer necessary. The Lord stopped the sacrifice at the last moment and the patriarch was rewarded for his faith.

The artistic representation of Abraham's sacrifice in the Byzantine iconographic tradition provides the viewer with the possibility of fathoming the mystery of this event. The artist's/painter's interpretation of the sacrifice highlights how Eastern Orthodox tradition has related to this terrible episode. For the contemporary viewer, the image of Abraham bringing sacrifice cannot be separated from brutality. It is difficult for him/her to understand how a father is capable of mercilessly sacrificing his son to prove his faith. However, we believe that the details engraved by Byzantine artists/painters in mosaics and on frescos can change this perspective. They capture the father's care, the unwavering love between the patriarch and his son, the joint acceptance of the trial, self-control, total faith in the Father/father, and by no means brutality. Therefore, through this study, we wish to emphasise the theological message conveyed by Christian art and implicitly offer a model for the interpretation of Byzantine painting.

### **Keyword**

Abraham, Christological interpretation, iconographic pattern, sacrifice, emotions



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## Introduction

The sacrifice of the patriarch Abraham has been represented by Christian artists ever since the early Church. This scriptural episode has constantly borne witness to an essential Christian coordinate, namely, the unfailing faith in God. Therefore, the event mentioned in the Book of Genesis (chap. 22) has been painted, engraved, drawn, or depicted in mosaics on the walls of catacombs or worship buildings, on sarcophagi, and on various liturgical objects or books. Gradually, the artistic representations of sacrifice have generated certain prototypes which have come into prominence in the big centres of Christianity. A. M. Smith identified six patterns, which he grouped as follows: the type, which is characteristic to catacombs, the Hellenistic type, the Asian-Hellenistic type, the Alexandrian-Coptic type, the Palestinian-Coptic type and the Byzantine type (Smith 1922, 159-173). The last one would become general in the Christian East. The mosaic of the Basilica San Vitale of Ravenna, made in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, would become the main model, followed by the artists who would represent the patriarch's sacrifice according to the Byzantine pattern.

In international literature, the subject of the artistic representation of Abraham's sacrifice has been tackled in numerous studies. Some of them addressed the evolution of the scene in Jewish art (Gutmann 1984; Lerner, Gutmann 1987), especially in the medieval one (Gutmann 1987, 67-89), while others had in mind how the Christian art of the first millennium represented this event (Kessler 2004), while others focused on various representations from the modern and contemporary periods (Robinson 1984, 538-44; Jasper 1993, 123-9; Jaffé 1994, 193-210; Bloch 2016, 96-130). A few studies tackled the Byzantine pattern (Van Woerden 1961, 214-55; Altripp 2015, 35-48), but most of them are limited to the first Christian millennium. Nonetheless, we do have several reference points for the medieval period, which are useful to us. We are referring especially to the contributions of John Lowden (2003) and Father Eugen Pentiuc (2019).

This study aims to continue our previous research (Pașca-Tușa 2016, 123-38), in which we highlighted the prototypes and lines of interpretation developed by Jewish and Christian artists in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this case, we will have a look at the evolution and how the Byzantine prototype crystallised in the Christian East, in the two established schools of painting, namely, the Macedonian and the Cretan ones.

First, we will focus on the mural representation of the church belonging to the Medieval Serbian Gračanica Monastery and then on the paintings of the Stavronikita and Saint Dionysius Monasteries of Mount Athos, executed according to the rigours of the Cretan school. In addition to the artistic analysis of these paintings, we will also use the instruments which are specific to the Eastern scriptural exegesis to identify the painters' interpretation, particularly when reproducing the climax of the sacrifice, namely the *Aqedah* (the binding of Isaac), and, implicitly, to offer a relevant answer to the question in the title.

However, before presenting the peculiarity of the two Byzantine schools of painting, besides the famous mosaic of the Basilica San Vitale, we will also describe two more 12<sup>th</sup>-century representations, which have marked the evolution of the Byzantine pattern of Abraham's sacrifice.

### **Abraham's Sacrifice in the Byzantine Mosaics of the 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

The mosaic of the Basilica San Vitale (Ravenna) is one of the models which mark the stage of crystallisation of early Byzantine art (6<sup>th</sup> c.). The scene of the sacrifice, which is thematically linked to the theophany of Mamre, was thoroughly elaborated (Smith 1922, 168). The patriarch is represented at the climax of the sacrifice when he is preparing to offer his only son as a sacrifice. Isaac is wearing golden clothing and is standing on the stone altar. His head is slightly leaning towards his father, who is holding his left hand on the top of the child's head. His hands are tied to his back, and he is wearing his footwear. His face does not express fear. He is looking at those who contemplate the scene as if to convey the faith he has in his father, who is waiting for divine approval for the sacrifice. Patriarch Abraham is looking at the sky, holding a sword in his right hand. God's intervention is marked by the presence of a hand that blesses, or which suggests the idea of dialogue. A white ram is placed at the patriarch's feet, staring at him. Even if the author did not fully abide by the details mentioned in the scriptural text (see Gn 22:9-13), he chose a literal interpretation of the event by representing the moment of sacrifice (Pașca-Tușa 2016, 134).

For quite a long period (approx. six centuries), the patriarch's sacrifice was quite seldom painted in worship buildings. Up to the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, we did not have significant representations (Smith 1922, 169). The situation would change only during the following century, with the mosaics made in the Palatine Chapel (Palermo) and the Cathedral of Monreale (Sicily). These two artistic representations of the sacrifice

confirm the fact that, within the Byzantine prototype, there were tendencies to dynamise and crystallise the model fostered by the mosaic of Ravenna.

The mosaic of the Palatine Chapel of Palermo is one of the most successful representations of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The scene, which was represented sometime between 1130 and 1143, consists of two moments: God's commandment and the actual sacrifice. This complex representation of the event can also be encountered in the mosaic of the Basilica San Vitale, only that, in the latter, the sacrifice is associated with the episode of Abraham's philoxenia when he regaled God at Mamre (Gn. 18). As such, in the left register, God is commanding Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. It is important to mention that the artist pictures Jesus Christ when he wishes to represent God. Our Saviour is wearing His blue and purple clothes, He is holding a closed scroll in His left hand, which is close to His chest, and He is addressing the patriarch, whilst blessing with his right hand stretched out. Above, the following Latin words are written: "Tolle filium tuum quem diligis Isaac et offer eum in holocaustum" (Gn 22:2), that is "take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering". Abraham is standing before the Lord, stretching out both his hands, which suggests obedience and acceptance.

In the other register, which presents Isaac's sacrifice, we have several frames which we will stress. The first of them, which marks the transition between the two parts of the event, portrays the two servants of Abraham. Their left hand are pointing to Abraham, who is preparing to sacrifice his son. Their gestures and mimicry suggest that they are talking about what is happening on Mount Moriah. One of them is holding a staff pointing to their ass, which is grazing. On the right, Abraham is holding his son's hair with one hand, while preparing to stab him with his other hand. As for Isaac, we would like to mention that he is lying on a few crosswise pieces of wood. We believe this detail can be an allusion to the Christological dimension of the event. This is also confirmed to a large extent by our Saviour's presence in this scene (Smith 1922, 159). Isaac is lying on the altar, with his hands tied to his back and with a scarf over his eyes. This detail appears for the first time in a representation of the sacrifice and suggests the father's care for his son. Abraham is looking towards an angel who is stretching out his hand towards the patriarch, blessing just like our Saviour. The words uttered by this messenger, who represents God's hand, are written at the top: "Abraham Abraham ne extendas manum tuam super puerum ABRAHAM ABRAHAM NE EXTENDAS MANUM TUAM SUPER PUERUM" (Gn 22:11-12), meaning "Abraham, Abraham!

Do not lay your hand on the boy.” On the right-hand side of the register, somewhere at the top, there is also the ram, whose horns are caught in a thicket. We would also like to point here to the fact that the patriarch's look is almost identical to that of the first register. The differences are minimal. His face does not express tension, but a clear composure. This indicates that the patriarch was serenely fulfilling God's commandment (Lowden 2003, 185).

The mosaic of the Cathedral of Monreale (Sicily), which originates in the same period (1180-1194), follows the same pattern to a great extent. From an iconographic point of view, these mosaics owe their structure to those executed in the Palatine Chapel (Munteanu 2011, 139). The two episodes (God's commandment and the sacrifice of Mount Moriah) are presented in two adjoining frames. In the first scene, Jesus Christ is commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son. The second register represents the sacrifice, with all its elements (servants, ass, ram, etc.), just as they appear in the model of the Palatine Chapel. The patriarch is holding Isaac's hair and is preparing to stab him. Isaac is lying on the altar, with his hands tied to his back. The wood is not arranged crosswise. Instead of God's hand, an angel is represented, communicating to Abraham the following message: “Abraham Abraham ne extendas manum tuam super puerum ABRAHAM ABRAHAM NE EXTENDAS MANUM TUAM SUPER PUERUM” (Gn 22:11 – The patriarch's look is almost identical to that of Palermo. We notice, however, a slight difference: Isaac's eyes are not covered with a scarf (Lowden 2003, 200).

Even if the two mosaics were executed in Italy, the Byzantine influence originating in Constantinople is evident. In those times, when artistic tendencies were being generated in the capital of the Byzantine Empire, many mosaicists of Constantinople were brought to Italy to promote the Byzantine models and patterns in the Christian West (Delvoye 1976, 91-2; Munteanu 2011, 138). The Sicilian school proved to be a good keeper of Byzantine traditions.

### **Representation of the Sacrifice in the Byzantine School of Painting**

In the Christian East, Byzantine art was conserved and implicitly developed by the school of Constantinople (Trifa 2008, 346), which had a strong influence in the Greek area and the Balkans (Macedonia and Serbia). In these territories, the Byzantine style would reach its climax through two schools: the Macedonian one, influenced by Manuel Panselinos' paintings, and the Cretan one, which is based on

Hesychastic theology, a perspective which was adopted in a painting by Theophanes the Cretan (Hristou 2008, 63).

### *The Macedonian School*

This school of painting had an impressive influence on religious art so the value of the frescoes made by the representatives of this new direction achieved pan-orthodox recognition. The realism of the figures (focusing on inner qualities instead of bodily qualities), volumetry, the replacement of pictoriality with linearity, the ascetism of shapes, transcendental accents of images, compact chromatics, without any impressionist touch, the indissoluble balance between shape and architecture and, last but not least, the dissolution of the contradiction between shape and content conferred this style the necessary qualities to gain prominence in the Christian East (Trif 2007, 82), ever since the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Chatzifóti 1995; Trifa 2009). Even if the most representative frescoes which belong to the Macedonian style are located on Mount Athos (where Manuel Panselinos worked), the centre where this direction, which is specific to Byzantine art, was promoted and where it spread was Thessaloniki. Besides these two important centres, the Macedonian style was also used in Veria, Ohrid and Central Serbia.

One of the most representative paintings of Abraham's sacrifice made in the Macedonian style can be found in the Gračanica Monastery in Serbia (nowadays Kosovo). The frescoes of this church, which were executed starting with the years 1321-1322, mark the sumptuousness of the Byzantine style of the Palaeologus period. Likewise, the style of this worship building represents the peak of Serbian Byzantine medieval architecture. According to Father Eugen Pentiu, who dedicates a subchapter of his work to the analysis of this fresco, the painting of the monastery combines Jewish and Christian interpretations. In this *interesting marriage*, the painter merged several time sequences into a single artistic representation, thus achieving a simultaneous reading of the scriptural episode (Pentiu 2019, 345). The painting is divided into two sections: the bottom one can be named *Abraham's obedience* and the other on *the binding of Isaac* (Pentiu 2019, 347).

In the lower part of the scene, the focus is on Abraham, who stands out through his height. The other persons, Isaac and two servants, are like children. Even if Isaac were a child (Wells 1939, 579-582), the servants Abraham took with him on the journey could not have been children. As such, the painters' intention was that of emphasising

the patriarch. This is also confirmed by the size of the ass, which is like that of the three. Thus, Abraham, whose stature is impressive, is placed behind the three, holding a knife in his right hand. The other hand is held on his chest and indicates the inner tension he undergoes between unconditional obedience and fatherly love for his son, that is (St. John Chrysostom 1989, 149). His worried gaze is directed ahead. His servants and Isaac are looking intently at him. The energetic movement of the patriarch's right leg suggests his hurriedness in fulfilling the mission with which God had entrusted him. Abraham was waiting to see the denouement of the sacrifice and how exactly would God fulfil His promise through which He assured him that his many offspring (St. Cyril of Alexandria 1992, 74) would be from the bloodline of Isaac, whom he would offer as a burnt offering: "Paradoxically, by obeying, Abraham connects himself to God's sovereign will, so that, in the end, the physically bound Isaac is not offered to the fire on the altar, but rather to the God of life" (Pentiuc 2019, 347).

Contradictorily, the offering of Isaac as a sacrifice is the means through which God fulfils His promise. Without accepting the divine commandment and, implicitly, without fulfilling it, Abraham could not partake of the promise. By relating to this episode from the perspective, Abraham's attitude during the sacrifice can be understood much more easily. The patriarch offers his son to the God Who had given him life, Who, eventually grants Isaac a privileged role in the divine plan. No one can question the patriarch's love for his son, whom he had long waited for. And we believe that the promise of a descendant made Abraham more determined to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house (Gn 12:1-3) (Wenham 2002, 334). Thus, even on Mount Moriah, the patriarch showed his infinite love for his son. His death cannot be an end, but the beginning of a supernatural mystery, that no one else could have understood. Abraham learns to love like God, which is why he mysteriously sees how the Father sends His Son to be sacrificed (Basarab 1997, 46). The Christological dimension of this event of the Old Testament is underscored in many representations of the sacrifice, but not in the fresco of the church of Gračanica. The act of Isaac carrying the wood is considered the main image referring to Jesus Christ's sacrifice (Van Woerden 1961, 230). In the Serbian fresco, the wood is barely visible under the burning altar. Moreover, Isaac is not painted carrying the wood, but he is carrying the fire vessel. Therefore, the intention of the author of the fresco of Gračanica was not that of underlining the typological character of the sacrifice, but that of emphasising Abraham's obedience and faith, which guaranteed the fulfilment of divine promises.

The upper part of the scene depicts the preparation for the sacrifice. Isaac's hands are tied to his back, and he is lying before the altar. Abraham is leaning while holding his left knee on the back of his son. In his right hand, he is holding the knife and is prepared to perform the stabbing. On the other hand, he is pressing Isaac's chin and, implicitly, his head backwards to stab him. Even if the patriarch's look would also urge us to look towards the sky, where God's intervening hand is represented, our focus is on how he is holding his son. In this case, the painter's interpretation is literal. He does nothing else but creates the actual tension which would have existed during such a sacrifice. In Jewish literature, this scene is called *Aqedah*. Father E. Pentiuc mentions that this term originates in a verbal root whose meaning is: "to tie together the legs of an animal for sacrifice". Moreover, he underlines the fact that the term *Aqedah* is used in this form only once in the Holy Scripture, namely, in Gn. 22:9, where Isaac's sacrifice is described. On the other hand, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, this term indicates in the Mishnah the tying of the lamb for the morning and evening offerings presented in the Temple (Ex 29:38-42; Nm 28:1-8; 2 Kgs 16:15; Ez 46: 13-15; Neh 10:34; 2 Chr 13:11). According to the Mishnah, the lamb had to be tied just like Isaac had been tied by the patriarch (*Tamid* 3: 2-3; 3: 7; 4: 1) (Pentiuc 2019, 345).

### *The Cretan School*

This school of painting emerged and developed against the backdrop of a strong Hesychastic influence generated by the monks of the Holy Mountain. In a full dispute with the West, they started to be reluctant to the Renaissance influences in the paintings executed in the Macedonian style. In this context, a need was felt to imprint the mystical experience of those who were partaking of divine light onto art. Therefore, the tendency of this new style of painting, which spread towards Russia through Theophanes the Greek, towards Mystras (see the frescoes of the Peribleptos and Pantanassa churches) and towards Crete (the place which also gives the name of the school), was that of maintaining the accurate Byzantine ideal in art. This style of painting grants special attention to the morphological outline, contained movements, and simplicity, to the inner peace of the saints represented by shadowy colours and bright lines in prominent areas. The Hesychastic tendencies of this painting method are influenced by the art of mobile icons, which focuses on the face (Hristou 2008, 63). Due to this association, the scenes are separated by red bands, thus giving the viewer



the impression that, in front of him, there is a wall made up of several icons (Trif 2007, 83). To highlight the characteristics and nuances that this pictorial style (developed up to its apogee by Theophanes the Cretan) imprints upon the representation of Abraham's sacrifice, we have chosen two frescoes of Mount Athos (Stavronikita and Saint Dionysius) dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The mural paintings of Stavronikita (dating from 1546) represent the apogee of Theophanes the Cretan's artistic style, for it reaches the climax of his ascetic thinking. As such, the fresco of Abraham's sacrifice, being part of this exceptional pictorial ensemble, is referential to the Cretan School (Hristou 2008, 65-66). Given the limited space allotted to this event, Theophanes chooses a representation that is focused on its main moment, namely Isaac's sacrifice. Thus, at the centre of the fresco, there are two protagonists of the sacrifice. Isaac is lying on the ground, with his hands tied to his back. His body is arching. The patriarch is keeping his knees on his son's stretched legs. With his left hand, he is holding Isaac by the hair, so that his head is leaning backwards. With his other hand, Abraham is pointing the knife at the bare neck of Isaac, who is also looking towards the altar on which the wood is already burning or towards the angel who is fast descending from the sky, with his hand stretching out towards the patriarch. Abraham's look is directed towards the sky, as can be noticed in all representations. In this case, instead of God's hand, the angel's presence is used. Theophanes chooses this option for two reasons: to accurately render the scriptural text and to underscore God's immediate intervention. This detail would not have been captured had he chosen to paint the divine hand. Opposite the angel on a rock, we can notice the presence of a ram tied to a thicket. In this representation, Theophanes the Cretan suggests focusing our attention on the main character of the events of Mount Moriah, namely, patriarch Abraham. He is placed at the centre of the scene. The space between the two peaks, the dark blue sky and the halo focus our attention on the patriarch's face, which expresses solemnity, obedience, composure, courage, hope, trust in God, faith, and infinite love (Chirilă 2014). This is the message that the fresco of the Stavronikita Monastery wishes to convey.

Saint Dionysius Monastery provides us with a more complex representation of the sacrifice, which includes the main stages of the sacrifice found in Byzantine mural mosaics/paintings. The fresco of this worship building was executed by Zorzis, one of Theophanes' apprentices. This can be easily inferred, as Zorzis generally uses his mentor's technique and models. Nonetheless, he differs from Theophanes as he uses

some elements of Italian technique, his clothes are painted in a sketchier manner and are better outlined, and his faces are more luminous and are presented in a clear dynamic (Hristou 2008, 66). The scene of Abraham's sacrifice is executed over a line of arcades, in several frames. The first frame portrays Abraham as he receives the divine commandment. The next one presents Abraham's two servants and the ass. The third frame depicts Abraham and his son moving away from the servants. Then, we see Isaac carrying the wood on his back and the fire in his left hand, whilst the patriarch is walking in front of him, heading towards the mountain. The climax is represented in the last frame, using his mentor's pattern.

The first frame captures the moment when the divine commandment is received. The attention is focused on the patriarch, who is looking towards the sky. The blue semicircle on the three rays towards which Abraham is looking symbolically signals God's presence. The communication between God and the patriarch is suggested by the latter's stretched hand and by the inscription which renders the content of the text in Gn 22:2. The composure and the unconditional obedience he showed and would show God are etched on Abraham's face. The following scene captures one of the events which occurred at the base of Mount Moriah. The servants who have accompanied the two protagonists of the sacrifice to the place indicated by God, remain next to the ass, waiting. Two servants are sitting on a rock, talking. The position of their bodies and the direction to which the hand of one of the servants is pointing suggests the fact that the two are talking about the sacrifice that the patriarch is about to bring on the mountain. We notice the fact that the ass is still saddled; this detail is meant to indicate that they will not linger much in that place.

The third frame captures the moment of separation from the servants and the beginning of the mountain climbing. The scene highlights both the patriarch's care for his son and the strong connection between the two. Abraham is holding Isaac's hand and is looking at him, while the position of his body indicates the dynamism of climbing. Here, we have in mind the hand stretched out towards the mountain and his left leg slightly lifted, in a natural walking position. Isaac's face denotes composure and faith in his father, who is, however, consumed by an extremely heavy tension. We see that Isaac is wearing red clothes, which suggests the sacrifice he is about to endure. In the following frame, the same persons are represented, but in different hypostases. Isaac is carrying the fire in one hand and, on his back, he is carrying the wood for the sacrifice. The Christological connotation of this gesture is straightforward. To support

his intention of underscoring the typological character of the sacrifice, the painter used a thin rope to tie the wood crosswise. The outstretched hand and the words written on the wall refer to the dialogue between Isaac and his father concerning the lamb for the burnt offering (Gn 22:7-8). Abraham is holding the knife in one hand and, in the other, he is pointing towards the place where the sacrifice will occur. Their gestures suggest a common acceptance of the sacrifice. Isaac understands from the patriarch's answer that he will constitute the sacrifice and they move on (Gn 22:9). For Zorzis, the patriarch pointing towards the mountain was essential. Therefore, he does not fully abide by the scriptural details of the episode and places the fire in Isaac's hand, while, in reality, it was carried by Abraham.

The last frame illustrates the apogee of the sacrifice. Isaac's hands are tied to his back and he is lying on the wood. Abraham is keeping his knees on his son's body and, with one hand, he is grasping his hair and pulling his head backwards to make the sacrifice. Saint John mentions the fact that, at this moment, when the patriarch grabbed the knife to slay his son, the latter "did not struggle or fight back, but he obeyed and accepted what his father was doing, he was lying still like a lamb on the altar and was waiting for his father's right hand". (St. John Chrysostom 1989, 150). It is worth mentioning that, in this fresco, the altar is not painted. The lack of this element, which is indispensable to any act of sacrifice, suggests to a certain extent that the sacrifice was not finalised. This plausible explanation has a complementary role. The inscription which partially renders the content of verses 11 and 12, the semicircle with three rays, which suggests God's intervention, and the presence of the ram tied to the thicket fully confirm that Isaac's sacrifice was stopped.

Therefore, Zorzis' painting of St. Dionysius Church represents one of the most important Byzantine representations of Abraham's sacrifice (Ștefănescu 73, 78). The five frames, the complexity of the composition, and the highly refined pictorial details illustrate the depth of interpretation the apprentice of Theophanes the Cretan gives to the events of Mount Moriah. The model promoted by his master would gradually become general in the Christian East, especially in the worship buildings where the scene of the sacrifice is painted in the apse of the altar. Given the limited space of the altar, most painters chose to render the climax of the sacrifice. Their choice was directly influenced by Dionysius of Fournà, according to whom Abraham's sacrifice is painted on the walls of the Proskomide (Dionysius of Fournà 2000, 234; Cristea 1905, 152-3), together with other sacrifices which prefigure our Saviour's sacrifice: Abel's sacrifice,

Melchizedek's sacrifice, Manoa's sacrifice and the three youths in the fiery furnace (Braniște 2017, 7-8).

### Conclusions

The literal interpretation of Abraham's sacrifice has been prominent in Byzantine artistic representations ever since the 6<sup>th</sup> century (the mosaic of the Basilica San Vitale – Ravenna). In the Middle Ages, the accurate painting of the historical details included in the text on which it is based, namely, Genesis 22, tends to become common practice (the Palatine Chapel – Palermo and the Cathedral of Monreale – Sicily). The Byzantine schools of painting (the Macedonian and the Cretan one) adhered to this direction and, where the space allowed for it, there were several registers which represented the main moments of the patriarch's trial: the moment when he received the divine commandment, the journey to Mount Moriah together with his servants, the rest at the base of the mountain, the climbing to the place of sacrifice and the actual sacrifice (the Great Lavra, the Koutloumousiou Monastery, St. Dionysius Monastery). When the space allotted to the sacrifice was limited, the representation of the climax of the sacrifice (Stavronikita) or several elements of the sacrifice in a single frame (the Gračanica Monastery) was chosen.

The position of Isaac's body during the sacrifice, as it is represented in the frescoes of the Gračanica Monastery, Stavronikita and St. Dionysius Monastery, is identical to that of the animal to be presented as an offering before being stabbed. Thus, this image does not suggest in any way the patriarch's violence or the unacceptance of the sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham does nothing else but presents an offering according to the rules such a ritual entails. Understanding these artistic details, which originate in a careful exegesis of the text, but also in a mindful perception of the mysterious dimension of the event, offers us the possibility to look at the climax of the sacrifice from a new perspective, which does not impact the viewer emotionally. In no circumstance does the patriarch's supposed brutality find a place in Eastern tradition, even if some painters wanted to impress at times through emotional details.

Considered as a whole, the representation of Abraham's sacrifice, as it is promoted and perpetuated in Byzantine tradition, re-establishes the natural order of things. The patriarch loved his son very much and this was seized through various details: Isaac's trustful eyes about his father (Basilica San Vitale), the covering of Isaac's eyes with a scarf (the Palatine Chapel), composure, and serenity in the

patriarch's eyes (the Cathedral of Monreale), the inner tension caused by the love for the son (Gračanica Monastery), the patriarch's hopeful eyes looking at the sky (Stavronikita), the holding of his son's hand while climbing up the mountain (Saint Dionysius) and, last but not least, the repeated allusions to our Saviour's sacrifice (the Father's beloved Son).

It would be desirable that the artistic details which fall within the area of typology be included in a future study. The Christological perspectives of the event, which are captured in the Byzantine representations of Abraham's sacrifice, could emphasise even more love between the Father (father) and Son (son).

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