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## **Some iconographic features of the mural paintings in the churches of Vithkuq**

**Abstract.** This study examined the iconographic features of the wall paintings in the churches of Vithkuq in Albania with the aim to explore the origins, evolution, and significance of the iconographic features of the murals. The study focused on revealing the hybrid style of these frescoes, which combine Byzantine, post-Byzantine and local traditions, and also analysed specific iconographic themes such as the “Trinity of Christ” and the “Communion of the Apostles”. The study also revealed how local traditions and external influences are woven into the visual language of these religious artworks. The analysis showed that these frescoes were not simply reproductions of established iconographic types, but rather adaptations that reflected the local theological and cultural context. The study also highlighted the high artistic sensitivity of the frescoes, particularly in terms of their use of colour, composition and symbolism. This study identified the influence of itinerant artists who brought new stylistic elements to the region, contributing to a dynamic exchange of artistic traditions in the Balkans. The results highlighted the challenges of preserving these frescoes due to environmental factors and insufficient restoration efforts. The study offered valuable insights into how local and external artistic traditions intersected in the creation of these paintings, and contributes to a deeper understanding of the social, religious, and artistic dynamics of the post-Byzantine period in the Balkans. It was concluded that the frescoes in the Vithkuq churches are not only important religious works of art, but also key cultural artifacts that reflect the complexity of the region’s historical and theological developments in the post-Byzantine era

**Keywords:** frescoes; Byzantine influence; Balkan religious art; artistic evolution; cultural heritage

### **INTRODUCTION**

The wall paintings of the churches of Vithkuq, created in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, are a vivid testimony to the artistic, spiritual, and cultural interaction that took place in the territory of modern Southern Albania. Located in the historical region of Korçë, Vithkuq served as a significant centre of Orthodox culture, preserving and transforming the Byzantine artistic tradition under Ottoman rule. Churches of this region, such as St. Nicholas and other local temples, were decorated with frescoes that amaze with the richness of iconographic subjects and the skill of execution, combining Byzantine stylistics with local cultural motifs.

Despite their importance, these post-Byzantine masterpieces have been overshadowed in broader studies of Balkan and European religious art.

The artistic tradition in Vithkuq developed during a complex historical period marked by Ottoman rule, which significantly influenced the social, political, and cultural aspects of the region’s life. F. Zeneli (2023) provides a comprehensive study on how local artisans in Vithkuq navigated the complexities of preserving and reinterpreting Byzantine artistic traditions under Ottoman rule. Their research emphasises that, despite the sociopolitical

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pressures of the period, these artisans managed to uphold the core principles of Byzantine iconography while simultaneously adapting them to the evolving cultural and religious landscape. One of the key challenges they faced was the need to balance adherence to established Orthodox artistic conventions with the incorporation of regional stylistic influences. Author highlights that this adaptation was not merely a passive continuation of earlier artistic norms but rather an active process of transformation, in which canonical subjects and stylistic elements were recontextualised to resonate with local cultural sensibilities.

T. Shkira (2022a; 2022b) conducts an in-depth examination of the artistic evolution in Vithkuq, focusing on the region's distinctive fresco tradition. The researches highlight how local artisans managed to maintain the fundamental principles of Byzantine painting while simultaneously incorporating regional folk motifs, symbols, and ornaments. This process was not merely an act of preservation but rather a dynamic reinterpretation that allowed Vithkuq's frescoes to develop a distinctive character. The author argues that the integration of vernacular elements, such as stylised floral patterns, geometric designs, and locally significant iconographic details, reflects the socio-cultural context of the period. The studies also underscore how these adaptations reinforced communal identity by visually linking sacred spaces with the artistic expressions of everyday life.

A broader understanding of Vithkuq's artistic development necessitates engagement with research on post-Byzantine art, particularly regarding the influence of the Archbishopric of Ohrid and the Gramos School of Art. As noted by I. Vitaliotis & A. Palushi (2022), these artistic institutions were instrumental in shaping sacred art in Albania and neighboring regions. Their study explores how the Archbishopric of Ohrid functioned as a major ecclesiastical and cultural hub, facilitating the transmission of artistic techniques and theological themes across different Orthodox communities. The authors emphasise that the Ohrid school was particularly influential in preserving Byzantine artistic traditions while also fostering localised stylistic variations. A significant contribution to the study of Albanian painting is made by R. Rousseva (2011), who examines the works of renowned artists such as Onufri, Constantin Shpataraku, and David Selenikasi. In her view, their works are not only artistic masterpieces but also serve as valuable sources for understanding the spiritual life, values, and ideology of the time. Analysing their artistic legacy, she underscores the high level of artistic skill and aesthetic culture in Albania from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Previous studies of the artistic heritage of the Balkans have mostly been limited to general stylistic analyses or thematic classifications of religious art. M.A. Rossi & A.I. Sullivan (2023) focused on the persistence of Byzantine motifs, such as depictions of the life of Christ, saints, and liturgical scenes, and on the adaptation of these subjects to the specific needs of local communities. At the same time, these analyses have often lacked a deeper dive into the

unique features of individual regions, particularly Vithkuq. Its artistic heritage is distinguished by a specific iconography that reflects the complex interaction between traditional aesthetics and local artistic practices, which gives its study a special relevance. The Vithkuq frescoes represent not only artistic, but also cultural, social and spiritual value. They testify to an attempt to preserve Orthodox identity in difficult historical conditions and at the same time develop art that met the needs of the local population. However, the lack of attention to this aspect in modern research highlights the need for a more focused analysis that would not only document this heritage, but also expand understanding of the dynamics of post-Byzantine art in the Balkans.

The iconography of the frescoes reflects a complex interplay of cultural and socio-political factors (Nesterenko, 2024). Scenes such as the Passion Cycle and depictions of local saints illustrate how the artisans of Vithkuq negotiated between canonical Byzantine themes and local narrative traditions. Scholars such as I. Vitaliotis (2021) have pointed to similar processes in the artistic traditions of neighbouring regions, suggesting a broader network of influences that extended to Vithkuq. However, questions remain about how this dynamic is uniquely manifested in the Vithkuq frescoes. Another pressing issue is the physical preservation of these works of art. Environmental and anthropogenic factors, including neglect and inadequate conservation practices, threaten their longevity (Zhangabay *et al.*, 2023). Research into the mechanisms of decay in post-Byzantine churches highlights the urgency of developing sustainable conservation strategies. The Vithkuq frescoes, which are often housed in remote and poorly maintained buildings, are an example of these challenges. Addressing these challenges requires interdisciplinary approaches that combine art historical analysis with conservation science.

In summary, the research aimed to answer key questions about the origins, development, and meaning of the iconographic features of the Vithkuq murals. The research objectives were to: examine how these works of art reflect the intersection of Byzantine heritage and local traditions; uncover the sociocultural identity of the Vithkuq community through the murals; developing strategies that can be applied to ensure the preservation of wall paintings for future generations.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the aim of this study, a systematic approach was applied to the analysis of existing scientific literature, visual documentation and conceptual frameworks related to post-Byzantine wall paintings and their socio-cultural significance. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how the wall paintings in the churches of Vithkuq reflect the intersection of Byzantine artistic heritage and local traditions, and helped to reveal their socio-cultural role and develop conservation strategies. The study was carried out in 2024 and focused on the analysis



of the iconographic features of these works, their thematic aspects, stylistic elements and symbolic content, as well as the challenges associated with their conservation.

The theoretical framework of the study integrated concepts from art history, cultural heritage studies and conservation methodology. The basis was established theories of iconography and post-Byzantine art, especially those concerning the interaction between ecclesiastical traditions and local artistic influences. This foundation was enriched by contemporary research on the sociocultural function of religious art, which allowed for a deeper interpretation of the role of frescoes in the formation of the community identity of Vithkuq. The criteria for selecting sources gave preference to materials that highlight post-Byzantine art in the Balkans, with a focus on the analysis of iconographic themes and the influence of regional factors on artistic creativity.

A systematic literature review was conducted to identify the main trends and gaps in the research on the Vithkuq murals and similar examples in the Balkans. The review included international and regional perspectives, ensuring a holistic understanding of the context. The search was conducted in databases such as JSTOR, Scopus and Google Scholar, using the keywords: “post-Byzantine wall paintings”, “iconography in Vithkuq”, “religious art of the Balkans”. Priority was given to publications from the 2019–2024 period, taking into account fundamental research in the field of post-Byzantine art and iconography. The materials used in the study covered a wide range of academic sources, historical records, and visual documentation. Archival materials provided detailed information about the iconographic programs of the frescoes, while visual records, such as photographs and sketches, allowed for a deeper study of their stylistic and compositional features. To uncover the sociocultural identity of the Vithkuq community, themes such as the depiction of local saints, the integration of folk elements, and the adaptation of canonical Byzantine subjects to local religious and cultural needs were explored. The analysis showed how the frescoes functioned not only as religious artifacts, but also as expressions of community values and identity.

Conservation strategies were examined through the lens of modern methodologies in the field of art conservation. State-of-the-art conservation researches were analysed and conservation methods described to identify effective approaches to ensuring the longevity of the Vithkuq paintings. Particular attention was paid to minimising environmental impact and applying the latest technologies for monitoring and restoration.

## RESULTS

In the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the growth of large-scale church buildings in Vithkuq and their rich decoration were the result of a multifaceted interaction of social, political, religious and artistic factors typical of the wider Balkan region or South-Eastern Europe during the period of Ottoman rule (Tzedopoulos, 2023). This period was defined by complex political realities, when Orthodox communities under

Muslim domination sought ways not only to preserve their identity, but also to emphasise their own spiritual autonomy. It is in this context that the churches of Vithkuq became the embodiment of the resilience of the Orthodox tradition and its ability to adapt to new conditions.

Among the numerous churches built during this period in Vithkuq, only a few have preserved sufficiently clear fresco paintings and iconographic programs that allow for a full-fledged analysis. These frescoes, although developed within the framework of the post-Byzantine artistic canon, demonstrate unique local features that testify to the creative approach of the artists to solving artistic problems. In this region, elements appear that harmoniously combine traditional Byzantine subjects with local details, which makes Vithkuq a special example of the synthesis of sacred art and socio-cultural environment.

The frescoes of Vithkuq churches created during the Ottoman period served a dual function. On the one hand, they were an integral part of the religious life of the community, contributing to spiritual upliftment and support of faith. On the other hand, they served as an important means of preserving an original culture and historical memory, allowing the local population to identify themselves as a community with a unique heritage in conditions of foreign pressure. These images reflected not only religious themes, but also local traditions, everyday life and even political realities.

One of the most impressive compositions is the fresco of the altar area of the Church of St. Michael in Vithkuq, depicting the Annunciation of St. Anne. Located high on either side of the scene of the Holy Liturgy, it was created in 1728 and is distinguished by a clear structure that gives the plot a monumentality. Unlike similar images in the churches of Ohrid or the monastery of Osios Loukas in Greece, where symmetrical composition dominates, the Vithkuq fresco demonstrates the dynamics of movement and an emphasis on the emotional component. Local artists apparently sought to make sacred plots closer to the community, adding details that resonated with the everyday life of parishioners (Mihaljević, 2021).

An equally important example is the composition “The Communion of the Apostles”, which contains a unique iconographic detail – Judas, depicted on the left with the devil on his shoulders, moving in the opposite direction from the other apostles (Fig. 1). Such a motif, although rare for post-Byzantine art, is extremely eloquent. It focuses attention on moral weakness and betrayal, while emphasising the idea of responsibility before God and society. The Vithkuq artists sought to achieve not only aesthetic expressiveness, but also symbolic depth that was understandable to parishioners.

The image of Judas with the devil on his shoulder in Vithkuq is distinguished by its expressiveness and versatility, significantly surpassing the similar scene in the church of St. Sophia in Ohrid both in colour variety and compositional complexity (Fig. 2). The Ohrid composition, despite its mastery, remains within the framework of



static symmetry and canonical rigor, which are characteristic of traditional icon painting of that period. In contrast, the Vithkuq scene impresses with its dynamics, which gives the image a special drama. The saturation of colours, smooth transitions and contrasting accents create the effect of depth, and the asymmetrical arrangement of ele-

ments adds energy and movement. In this composition, the artist clearly sought to convey not only the plot basis, but also the psychological tension of the moment, which enhances the emotional impact on the viewer. This makes the Vithkuq scene a unique example of an innovative approach to the visual language of medieval art.



Figure 1. "Communion of the Apostles" Church of Saint Michael, Vithkuq

Source: photo by the author

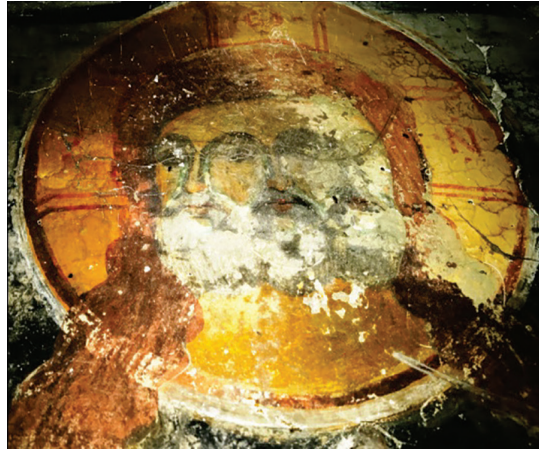


Figure 2. "Communion of the Apostles" Church of Saint Sophia, Ohrid

Source: photo by the author

Another unique motif is the image of the Three-Faced Christ in the apsidal zone of the Church of Saints Cosmas and Damian, built in 1736 and painted between 1746 and 1750 (Fig. 3). This choice of image differs from the traditional practice, according to which in single-nave Byzantine churches of this period the image of the Holy Mandylion was usually placed in the apse – a symbol of the divine incarnation, which emphasised the immutability of Christian dogma (Studer-Karlen, 2023). In contrast, the Three-Faced Trinity, borrowed from Western European iconography of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, testifies to the evolution of theological ideas and the readiness of local artists to

integrate new ideas. This composition represents the unity and equality of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, while leaving room for symbolism and abstract interpretation, which was atypical for the Eastern Christian tradition. This choice of image emphasises not only theological flexibility, but also artistic innovation, demonstrating a synthesis of Western and Eastern traditions. It could also have been an attempt to strengthen interfaith dialogue, given the historical context of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the interaction between the Orthodox and Catholic traditions became increasingly active (Gagu, 2023). Thus, this motif is not only an artistic, but also a theological testimony of the era.



**Figure 3.** The Three-Faced Christ, Church of Saints Cosmas and Damian, Vithkuq

**Source:** photo by the author

The domes of the side aisles of the Church of St. Michael are decorated not only with images of heavenly figures, such as the Archangels, St. Mary and St. John the Baptist, but also with martyrs, in particular St. Paraskeva and St. Catherine. The inclusion of these saints in Vithkuq's iconographic programs reflects their widespread veneration in the Orthodox centres of the Ohrid diocese, which indicates a close connection between the local artistic tradition and the general religious trends of the region (Kirchhainer, 2007). The images of these saints not only strengthened the cult identity of the community, but also performed a didactic function, introducing the faithful to examples of holiness and martyrdom. Among the traditional images of standing saints in the full-length frieze of the

Church of St. Michael, the composition *Deisis*, located on the south wall near the iconostasis, attracts special attention (Fig. 4). In the centre of the composition is Christ, surrounded by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, who pray for the salvation of humanity. This image, deeply symbolic in nature, resembles a prayer triptych and emphasises the role of the Virgin Mary and John as intercessors standing between humanity and God. The image is characterised by a refined harmony of colours and attention to detail, which give the scene not only spiritual grandeur, but also artistic beauty. The style of the *Deisis* in the Church of St. Michael demonstrates the skill of local artists in combining the traditions of Byzantine iconography with the influences of the post-Byzantine period.



**Figure 4.** *Deisis*, Saint Michael, Vithkuq

**Source:** Kristaq Balli: *The symbolic universe of the icon* (2024)

A similar arrangement of the *Deisis* scene is found in the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, where the mosaic composition represents Christ Pantocrator with the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, creating a solemn mood and emphasising the importance of intercessory prayer (Fig. 5). However, in the context of the Church of St. Michael, this

composition takes on somewhat different characteristics: it is more localised in its iconography, enriched with details that reflect the specifics of the local artistic tradition. For example, the image uses characteristic colour palettes typical of post-Byzantine art, with strong contrasts between gold and red tones, symbolising greatness and sacrifice.



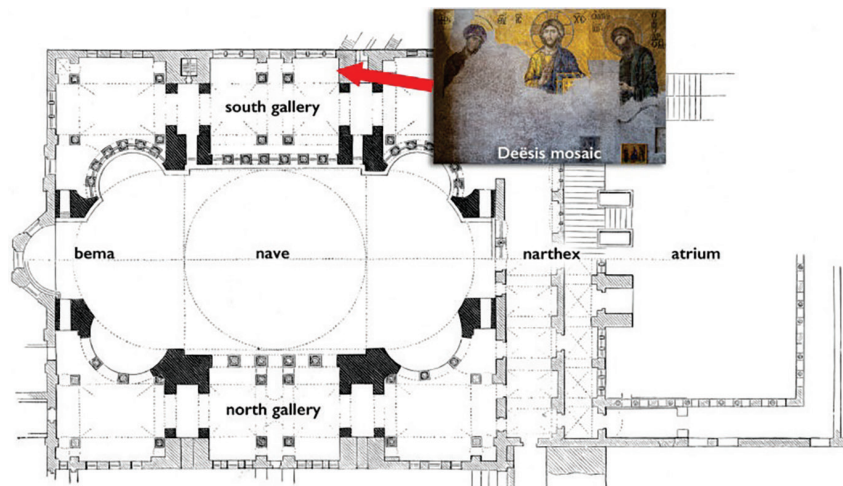


Figure 5. Location of the Deësis mosaic

Source: developed by the author

Historically, the Deësis scene appeared in Byzantine art during the Komnenian period, but it was during the Palaiologoi period that it reached its greatest popularity (Vapheiadis, 2021). In the post-Byzantine period, this iconographic subject spread to the Balkans, where it adapted to regional artistic styles and symbolism. In the Church of Saint Michael, the Deësis is integrated into the iconographic program of the temple as an expression of key theological ideas: salvation, intercession and divine glory. A special role in the paintings of the churches of Vithkuq is played by saints supported by the Ohrid Patriarchate, which emphasises the close connection between religious policy and the artistic tradition of the region (Belba, 2019). Among them, the Sancti Septenarii group stands out, which includes

Saints Sava, Naum of Ohrid and Clement of Ohrid. These saints, known as defenders of Orthodoxy and educators of the Slavic peoples, are widely represented in the paintings of key churches in the region – St. Michael, St. Cosmas and Damian, and St. Peter and Paul (Fig. 6). Their cult not only contributed to the preservation of spiritual traditions, but also emphasised the cultural heritage of the Ohrid diocese, which played the role of a centre of education and theology. Icons and frescoes depicting the Sancti Septenarii are distinguished by the sophistication of details and deep symbolism. The saints are depicted in liturgical vestments with scrolls, symbolising their educational mission, or in prayerful poses, emphasising their mediatorial role between the faithful and God.



Figure 6. Sancti Septenarii in Church of Saints Cosmas and Damian

Source: photo by the author

Of particular importance in supporting their cult were the liturgies and liturgical works printed in Voskopojja between 1740 and 1742. These printed materials spread the veneration of saints among the faithful and helped to strengthen their status as important spiritual symbols.

The inclusion of these figures in the paintings of Vithkuq's churches not only perpetuated their memory, but also created a connection between the tradition of the past and the current theological and cultural challenges of the time.



The Coronation of Mary, represented in the churches of Saints Cosmas and Damian and Saints Peter and Paul in Vithkuq, is a striking example of post-Byzantine art, combining Byzantine traditions with new iconographic elements (Fig. 7). This scene, which honours Mary as the Queen of Heaven, takes on special significance in the

Orthodox context, since the coronation motif is traditionally more characteristic of Catholic art (del Mar Dovol Trueba, 2024). The uniqueness of this scene lies in the combination of traditional Orthodox iconography with influences from Catholic art, which gives it a special aesthetic and theological value.



**Figure 7.** The Coronation of Mary, Church of Saints Peter and Paul; Church of Saints Cosmas and Damian

**Source:** photo by the author

Similar images are found in the Sucevita Monastery in Romania, dating from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 8). Here, the Coronation of Mary is executed with rich decorative design, combining features of both Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The Sucevita Monastery played an important role as a centre of iconographic innovation in the Balkans, and its influence can be traced in the artistic programs of other regions, such as Epirus and Macedonia (Ogden, 2002). The depiction of the Coronation of Mary in Vithkuq is not only a sacred image, but also evidence of the cultural dialogue that shaped the artistic heritage of the post-Byzantine world.



**Figure 8.** The Coronation of Mary, Sucevita Monastery

**Source:** K. Kontopanagou (2013)

The figure of Saint John Vladimir occupies an important place in the iconographic programs of the churches of Vithkuq, which emphasises the harmonious combination of local and pan-Orthodox traditions in post-Byzantine

art. As a famous martyr and ruler, they embodied the ideal of holiness, which had a deep resonance in the region. In the church of Saint Michael, the image of the saint in the form of a “cephalophore” is a unique example of this type in the territory of Northern Epirus (Fundić, 2022). This interpretation emphasises the martyr nature of his biography, symbolising sacrifice and spiritual triumph (Fig. 9). Of particular interest is the fact that this image was commissioned by the diocese of the Ohrid Patriarchate in Venice, which demonstrates the openness of the Orthodox tradition to Western artistic influence (Saraçi, 2024). The details of the image show feature of a Western style: delicate modelling of form, sophistication of decorative elements, and special attention to textures, reflecting general European trends of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



**Figure 9.** Saint John Vladimir, Saint Naum and Archangel Gabriel, Church of Saint Michael

**Source:** photo by the author

Later, similar images of St. John Vladimir appeared in other churches in the region, in particular in the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Vithkuq and the Church of Saint Nicholas in Voskopoja. This indicates a gradual expansion of the cult of the saint, which became an important component of regional identity. The spread of this image could be associated with both religious and political motives, since the cult of St. John Vladimir emphasised the unity of Orthodox communities and their cultural traditions. Thus, the image of St. John Vladimir in Vithkuq reflects not only theological and iconographic innovations, but also the cultural dialogue between the Orthodox East and the Catholic West, which shaped the unique artistic environment of the region.

A unique iconographic contribution is the image of the young martyr Nicodemus of Vithkuq, created by the brothers Athanasius and Kostandin Zografs. This type of iconography is noted in the churches of Saints Cosmas and Damian and Saints Peter and Paul in Vithkuq (Fig. 10). Its spread was probably the result of the Zografs' connections with Mount Athos, where they worked on the paintings of monasteries. The cult of the New Martyr Nicodemus, presented in these frescoes, emphasises the Albanian ethnocultural component integrated into the general Orthodox tradition.



**Figure 10.** Saint Nicodemus, Saints Cosmas and Damian Church, Vithkuq

**Source:** The New Martyr Nicodemus of Korytsa was honoured in his place of origin and in the place of his martyrdom (2022)

Portraits of the New Martyrs became an important part of Orthodox iconography during the Ottoman period. They responded to the challenges of the time, in particular the conversion of Christians to Islam, and served as a reminder of courage and steadfastness in preserving the faith. Similar images can be found in Serbian and Bulgarian churches, but in Vithkuq they received a local interpretation through the inclusion of local motifs and symbols. The narthex of the church of St. Michael in Vithkuq also presents scenes from the Apocalypse cycle, which were innovative for the region. In the church of St. Peter and Paul, painted by the

Zograf brothers in 1764, apocalyptic subjects reach a new level of artistic interpretation. In Orthodox art, especially of the post-Byzantine period, such subjects were rarely depicted, and complete cycles of the Apocalypse first appeared in the monasteries of Dochiariou and Dionysius on Mount Athos in 1547 (Bernet, 2024). Their iconography was significantly influenced by Western models, in particular 16<sup>th</sup>-century engravings. The depiction of the Apocalypse in Vithkuq predates similar scenes in the church of St. Nicholas in Voskopoia by 17 years, which indicates the innovativeness of the artistic approach in this region. Similar motifs were common in Macedonian churches, such as the Church of St. Clement in Ohrid, but in Vithkuq these scenes take on a more local character thanks to specific symbolism and compositional solutions.

The direct influence of Mount Athos on the iconographic programs of the churches of Vithkuq is evident. The paintings in the narthex of the church of St. Michael interpret typical variants of post-Byzantine art developed on Mount Athos, in particular in the monasteries of Karea (Vapheides, 2021). At the same time, Western elements that penetrated the region through Venice and other European centres became part of the local artistic tradition. Stylistically, Vithkuq's frescoes demonstrate a synthesis of canonical post-Byzantine features with creative innovations reflecting the influence of local artists. The use of the "buon fresco" technique, which involves applying pigments to fresh, wet plaster, ensured the brightness and durability of colours. Thanks to this, the artists created multi-layered compositions, each element of which harmoniously interacted with the others. Unlike the Athos frescoes, which were often executed in the "a secco" technique (on dry plaster), this allowed for greater harmony between the saturation of colours and their depth (Jiménez-Desmond *et al.*, 2024).

In addition to their aesthetic and theological function, frescoes also served an educational role. They served as a kind of means of religious education, conveying the moral values of the Orthodox tradition. Of particular importance in this context are the images of local saints, such as Saints Sava, Naum and Clement, who symbolised spiritual authority and supported the unity of the community. These images combine traditional iconography with local details, which gave them special authenticity and cultural value. Vithkuq's frescoes not only preserved the sacred heritage, but also reflected the daily life of the community, creating a unique connection between the past and the present. They are evidence of the complex interaction of spiritual and socio-cultural processes that shaped the identity of the local population. Thanks to this, the frescoes have become a "living archive", which not only preserves the memory of the past, but also forms the foundation for future generations. However, the process of their preservation faces a number of challenges that require a comprehensive approach and coordinated efforts.

The main factors affecting the condition of the frescoes in the Vithkuq churches are the environment, insufficient care and anthropogenic impact. The humid climate,



temperature changes and ultraviolet radiation contribute to the destruction of the surface through microorganisms, cracks and moisture penetration (Çota *et al.*, 2020). The remoteness of the churches makes regular maintenance difficult, which leads to the progression of damage. Uncontrolled access by visitors often causes mechanical damage and vandalism. To protect the frescoes, it is necessary to implement strict access control, information campaigns and apply modern technologies and scientific methods in cooperation with the local community.

Creating a stable microclimate inside churches is a key factor in the preservation of frescoes, as humidity, temperature fluctuations and insufficient lighting cause cracks to form, the development of microorganisms and the discoloration of pigments (Fabbiano *et al.*, 2022). To minimise these risks, microclimate control systems are implemented that maintain a constant level of humidity and temperature. Passive ventilation systems ensure natural air exchange, while modern sensors allow real-time monitoring and automatic activation of dehumidifiers when necessary (Ranesi *et al.*, 2021). Innovative technologies, including the use of nanomaterials, create an invisible protective layer that protects frescoes from moisture, ultraviolet light, and mechanical damage, preserving their colours and textures (David *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, digital scanning allows for the creation of 3D models of frescoes, documenting their condition, analysing damage, and developing restoration solutions (Montusiewicz *et al.*, 2022). Such models become accessible to a wide audience, contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage even in the event of the loss of the original.

The experience of other countries, including Greece, Italy and Serbia, has demonstrated the effectiveness of an integrated approach to fresco restoration, combining modern technologies, scientific analysis and traditional methods. At the Hilandar Monastery on Mount Athos, the introduction of modern monitoring systems was a key step in the preservation of the unique frescoes (Traparić, 2023). These systems allowed for real-time monitoring of changes in humidity, temperature and other microclimate parameters, preventing the emergence of conditions that could contribute to the degradation of works of art. In addition, the installation of dehumidifiers and the modernisation of ventilation systems made it possible to maintain a stable microclimate, minimising the risk of mold formation and physical damage to the plaster.

In Italy, in particular in St. Peter's Basilica, the use of laser technology has been a real breakthrough in the field of restoration (Costanzo *et al.*, 2022). This technique allowed for the delicate cleaning of fresco surfaces, removing years of dirt, soot and microorganisms without damaging the paint layer. The uniqueness of laser cleaning lies in its precision, which allows for the selective removal of contaminants without affecting the original pigments. A similar approach was also used in the restoration of the Sistine Chapel frescoes, where the technology was combined with careful analysis of the chemical composition of the paints

and the substrate, ensuring the gentlest approach possible (Rosebrock, 2020). This successful experience highlights the importance of innovation in restoration and can serve as an example for the conservation of the murals in Vithkuq, where similar technologies could significantly improve the effectiveness of conservation efforts. The results not only reveal the artistic and cultural value of Vithkuq's frescoes, but also emphasise the need to integrate traditional and innovative methods for their preservation.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study have highlighted the unique iconographic features of the wall paintings in the Vithkuq churches, highlighting their cultural, religious and artistic significance in the broader context of post-Byzantine art. By examining specific iconographic motifs, stylistic innovations and cultural influences, this discussion aimed to explore the broader implications of the study findings and their alignment with existing research. The integration of Byzantine and local artistic traditions significantly shaped the wall iconography in the churches of Vithkuq, creating a unique artistic style that combined elements of sacred art from different eras. The results of the study showed that images such as the "Three-Faced Christ" and the "Communion of the Apostles" demonstrate both traditional Byzantine compositional schemes and innovative iconographic approaches that reflect local cultural influences and the creative pursuits of the masters.

This hybrid style is consistent with patterns identified by Y. Tzedopoulos (2023), who discussed similar religious-artistic syntheses in other Balkan regions under Ottoman rule. Artistic adaptations in iconography reflect the complex sociocultural realities of the time, when spiritual values were preserved through revisions of established canons and creative interpretations of traditional subjects. The stylistic fusion was crucial, as it showed how local artists negotiated religious identity while taking into account external influences. The use of themes inspired by Western European art, such as the Coronation of Mary, demonstrated an ability to adapt iconographic motifs to a new cultural context. These images, while atypical for the traditional Byzantine heritage, organically woven into the local artistic language, giving religious art a renewed meaning. The inclusion of Western subjects was not only a result of contacts with the Catholic world through trade and political ties, but also a response to the aesthetic demands of the local community (Skakandi, 2023). The unique combination of Western and Byzantine stylistic features indicates an attempt to overcome cultural boundaries and create a new form of artistic expression that reflected the multifaceted identity of the Orthodox community.

This synthesis reflected broader regional artistic trends, consistent with K. Kirchhainer (2007) findings on cross-cultural exchanges in Balkan church art. The researcher emphasised the interpenetration of styles as a characteristic feature of the art of a region that was at the



crossroads of different empires and cultural influences. Similar examples of cultural exchange can be found in the church paintings of the Western Balkans and the Carpathians, where the influence of the Italian Renaissance and South Slavic traditions is felt. Furthermore, the inclusion of regional saints, such as Saints Naum, Sava, and Clement, emphasised the churches' spiritual and political affiliation with Orthodox centres such as Ohrid. This iconographic emphasis strengthened community identity while asserting spiritual autonomy. For remote communities such as Vithkuq, these images served as a visual confirmation of a shared religious heritage, fostering a sense of belonging amidst external pressures.

The innovative use of colour, composition, and symbolism also reflected a cutting-edge artistic sensibility. In Vithkuq's wall paintings, a bold combination of rich shades of red, blue, and gold is observed, creating dramatic contrast and enhancing the expressiveness of the images. This colouristic approach, which goes beyond the strict Byzantine canons, testifies to the development of local aesthetic ideas and openness to innovative artistic practices. In *The Communion of the Apostles*, the colour symbolism emphasises the spiritual struggle: the dark shades around the figure of Judas hint at his spiritual fall, while the light and radiant colours around Christ emphasise his divine nature. The psychological depth depicted in the scene of *The Communion of the Apostles*, where Judas is shown burdened by the devil, demonstrates a narrative sophistication that can be compared to works found in Ohrid and Mount Athos, as noted by M. Mihaljević (2021). The inclusion of a demonic figure as a visual representation of evil enhances the drama of the scene and the emotional impact on the viewer. Such emotionally charged images were probably intended to enhance religious participation by making the sacred narratives more accessible and immediate. Thanks to this, the paintings performed not only a decorative but also a didactic function, helping parishioners to understand spiritual truths more deeply through artistic interpretation of biblical stories.

The artistic creativity of Vithkuq's frescoes goes beyond religious narrative, demonstrating complex interrelationships between spiritual and secular motifs. The dynamic compositions, characterised by multi-figure scenes, as well as the expressive gestures of the characters, indicate the influence of itinerant artists, whose mobility facilitated stylistic exchanges in the Balkans (Bardik, 2023). The influence of different artistic schools, including Macedonian and Epirus, is traced in the expressive faces of the saints and the sophisticated ornaments. This is consistent with A. Belba (2019) findings on the movement of master painters between Albania, Macedonia and Greece, which contributed to the development of a common but locally adapted artistic tradition. Vithkuq became an important node of this cultural dialogue, enriching the local artistic heritage with innovative figurative solutions.

Despite their historical and cultural significance, the Vithkuq frescoes face numerous conservation challenges.

Environmental factors such as high humidity, temperature fluctuations and biological damage significantly threaten the longevity of these unique artistic treasures (Ivashko *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, limited funding and a shortage of qualified restorers often make it difficult to implement large-scale conservation projects. Comparative studies by L. Fabbiano *et al.* (2022) and D. Traparić (2023) have shown that the implementation of advanced technologies such as 3D scanning, climate control systems and digital archiving can significantly reduce the risks of damage and ensure the long-term preservation of the frescoes. Conservation efforts should be prioritised to preserve this unique cultural heritage for future generations, promoting deeper research and international cooperation in the field of cultural heritage protection (Shumka, 2019).

Digital documentation and international collaboration can facilitate further research, allowing scholars to explore understudied aspects of Vithkuq's iconography. J. Montusiewicz *et al.* (2022) suggested that interdisciplinary research that integrates art history, theology, and conservation science will provide a full understanding of the cultural and spiritual dimensions of these artworks. The discussion emphasised that the frescoes in the Vithkuq churches are more than religious artifacts; they are visual records of the historical, spiritual, and cultural journey of a community. Their iconographic richness reflects the dynamic interplay of tradition, innovation, and resilience. This study has contributed to a broader understanding of the post-Byzantine artistic heritage and highlights the importance of preserving and studying these cultural assets.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has analysed the iconographic features of the wall paintings in the Vithkuq churches, providing a substantial understanding of their religious, cultural, and artistic dimensions. The findings contributed to a deeper understanding of how local traditions, external influences, and theological concepts were integrated into the visual language of Vithkuq religious art. A key finding of this study was the discovery of a unique hybrid style in the Vithkuq frescoes, combining Byzantine, post-Byzantine and local artistic traditions. This fusion is particularly evident in iconographic motifs such as the Trinity of Christ and the Communion of the Apostles, which combine both traditional and innovative elements. The analysis showed that these frescoes were not simply reproductions of established iconographic types, but adaptations and reinterpretations that reflected the local context and theological considerations of the Vithkuq community. Another significant result was the recognition of the high artistic sensitivity demonstrated in the frescoes, particularly in the use of colour, composition and symbolism. The psychological depth of scenes such as the Communion of the Apostles, where Judas is burdened by the devil, reflects a sophisticated approach to narrative. This not only enhances the emotional impact of the scenes, but also makes the sacred stories more accessible and appealing to local audiences.



However, the study revealed certain limitations in fully understanding the artistic and theological significance of the frescoes. While key iconographic features and stylistic trends were identified, further research is needed to uncover the full theological and social context of these works. The lack of comprehensive historical documentation makes it difficult to understand the full motivations and intentions of the artists. Additionally, the physical condition of some frescoes, with areas of damage obscuring important details, limited the scope of iconographic analysis. Future research should explore the connections between these frescoes and the broader religious, cultural, and social dynamics of the post-Byzantine region. Archival research and modern conservation methods, such as digital imaging and 3D scanning, could provide further insight into the original form and meaning of the frescoes.

The study emphasises the importance of preserving these frescoes not only as works of art but also as key cultural artifacts that offer a glimpse into the religious and artistic life of the Vithkuq community. Given the threats posed by environmental factors and insufficient

restoration efforts, it is crucial that future conservation projects prioritise the protection of these frescoes, using modern technologies to prevent further damage. In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the iconographic features of the wall paintings in the Vithkuq churches, revealing how local and external artistic traditions intersected in the creation of these religious artworks. The research highlights the role of these frescoes not only as sacred representations but also as cultural and historical documents, reflecting the complex social and theological dynamics of the region during the post-Byzantine period.

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<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6044-1766>**Деякі іконографічні особливості настінних розписів у церквах Віткука**

**Анотація.** У цьому дослідженні розглянуто іконографічні особливості настінних розписів у церквах Віткука в Албанії з метою дослідити походження, еволюцію та значення іконографічних особливостей фресок. Дослідження зосередилося на виявленні гібридного стилю цих фресок, які поєднують візантійські, поствізантійські та місцеві традиції, а також проаналізувало конкретні іконографічні теми, такі як «Трійця Христова» та «Причастя апостолів». Дослідження також показало, як місцеві традиції та зовнішні впливи вплітаються у візуальну мову цих релігійних творів мистецтва. Аналіз показав, що ці фрески були не просто репродукціями усталених іконографічних типів, а радше адаптаціями, які відображали місцевий богословський і культурний контекст. Дослідження також підкреслило високу художню чутливість фресок, особливо з точки зору використання кольору, композиції та символіки. Дослідження виявило вплив мандрівних художників, які принесли в регіон нові стилістичні елементи, сприяючи динамічному обміну мистецькими традиціями на Балканах. Результати дослідження висвітлили проблеми збереження цих фресок, пов'язані з екологічними факторами та недостатніми реставраційними зусиллями. Дослідження запропонувало цінну інформацію про те, як місцеві та зовнішні мистецькі традиції перетиналися у створенні цих розписів, і сприяє глибшому розумінню соціальної, релігійної та мистецької динаміки поствізантійського періоду на Балканах. Зроблено висновок, що фрески у церквах Віткука є не лише важливими релігійними творами мистецтва, але й ключовими культурними артефактами, які відображають складність історичного та богословського розвитку регіону в поствізантійську епоху

**Ключові слова:** фрески; візантійський вплив; балканське релігійне мистецтво; художня еволюція; культурна спадщина

