

Abstract. *The disordered scenes of the Arbore Akathiston have been identified, resorting to parallel versions, in connection with the stanzas they illustrate; remarks on the infrequent arrangement of images lead to certain supposed new meanings of the cycle, revealing characteristics of the Moldavian society's life towards the middle of the 16th century: prayer and pain.*

It is obvious to anyone who paid the least attention to the iconography of the Akathistos Hymn in the Moldavian monuments, that the Arbore version (fig. 1) displays a mysterious disorder, the reason of which has not yet been deciphered. The present endeavour to clarify the unknowns started from the “objective examination” of the 24 stanzas, aiming at identifying the illustrations having uncertain connection to the text.

The analysis was directly dependent on the results of the recent investigation of the whole group of nine variants circumscribed – in an approximate order for a number of cases – to the reign of Petru Rares (1527-1538; 1541-1546): Probota, St. George and St. Demetrius in Suceava, Humor, Moldovița, Baia, Părhăuți, Arbore, Voroneț¹.

One of these conclusions² relates a number of images, mainly pertaining to the cycles of Părhăuți and Arbore, with an unexpected source: the Byzantine icon datable to the end of the 14th century, now in the Dormition Cathedral (Uspensky Sobor) of the Moscow Kremlin, *The Praise of the Theotokos with the Akathiston* (fig. 2), which displays a comparable disorder of the last 12 scenes of the hymn³; related to it in terms of version is the cycle in the church at Therapont, painted in 1502 by Dionysius and his disciples.

The illustrators' acquaintance of the references – the mentioned ones and many others – in Moldavia during Petru Rares could be seen in terms of a direct experience, but more likely, of a repertory of drawings stocking the Palaeologan and post-Palaeologan workshops' image invention for this dogmatic, poetic text, abstract in content.

NOTES ON THE AKATHISTON AT ARBORE

Constanța Costea

The exploration of the Arbore Akathiston began with the scene by scene identification as reported to the stanza illustrated. An initial difficulty was set forth by the inscriptions, as, unlike other monuments where they are indicative through the *incipit* of the *kontakion/eikos*, here the situation is perfectly atypical: in many cases they have not been meant at all and, when present, they have a different content, as an *ad hoc* compound – written with many mistakes, sometimes hardly decipherable due to the ignorant use of certain letters – as if the mastermind would have intended to surprise the beholder.

The first part of the hymn – the first 12 stanzas, relying on the chronology of the events in Jesus' infancy – unfolded in two tiers, is lacunary: severe damages, variable in extent, altered stanzas 2, 3, 4, 9-12, while stanzas 5 and 6 (*The Visitation* and *Doubting Joseph*) lack completely.

Out of the preserved scenes, attention could be drawn by the version of the first episode of the *Annunciation* with the Archangel's visitation at the fountain, for the closeness to the Uspensky type, as well as by the composition of the *Nativity* (fig. 3), for the infrequent laconic variant, with the single figure of Joseph and the image of the Universe as a celestial sphere populated by angels, incorporating the earth and its miraculous events; it is a representation of the world originating in

the late 14th century works – the Uspensky icon, Cozia – and in the contemporary ones – Probota – as well.

Though in the first part of the poem the inscriptions appear in no more than two illustrations, the structure of the images reveals a classical – to the iconography of the Akathiston – consecution of the Evangelical events, one scene excepted, which initialize the first surprise of the cycle: the *Return of the Magi* replaced by the unprecedented in the context *Circumcision*, **вбразаниї**⁴ with the Infant in the Virgin's arms (fig. 4); a detail seems to separate the version from its parallels: the much reclined position of the Child, the head close to the Mother's breast and the crossed legs, suggesting *Anapason*, Christ prepared for the sacrifice⁵.

The second, dogmatic part of the hymn, adds to the already introduced strange elements – the disorganization of scenes and the uncanonical form of the inscriptions – a different one: two supplementary images, complicating the clarification of the connection with the text.

The attempt to identify the 14 illustrations has been oriented, in the main, by the parallel, or contemporary versions.

Considering the images in their extant sequence, it results a new order.

Stanza 13/*eikos* 7, *When the Creator appeared he revealed us, through himself, as a new creation*, has been replaced by stanza 16, *The angelic nature was wholly surprised at the great act of thine Incarnation*, in the variant known from Moldovița and Baia, with Emanuel in *clipeus* and with the peculiar feature of the kneeling angels holding the Passion instruments; the inscription reads **крѣпъ**, «*The cross*» (fig. 5).

Instead of stanza 14/*kontakion* 8, *Having beheld a strange Birth, let us be estranged from the world*, it is illustrated stanza 13, *When the Creator appeared he revealed us, through himself, as a new creation*, with Christ pointing to the Book in the tree, as in the Uspensky icon, a variant retrieved at Moldovița, Părhăuți⁶ or Voroneț; the inscription, independent from

the content of the poem, seems somehow misleading: **х̄с̄ по̄каза̄ (оученикомъ своимъ) грамота̄ на̄ дрѣвѣ̄**, «*Christ showed his disciples the Scripture in the tree*» and, on the leaf of the Scripture, with many grammar errors: **слава̄ ѿ̄ц̄ӣ сено̄ ӣ с̄ѣдо̄ д̄о̄ух̄ӣ ӣ н̄н̄ӣ ӣ прӣсно̄ ї̄ въ̄ (в)ѣкӣ** «*Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit now and ever*» (fig. 6).

Stanza 15/*eikos* 8, *The boundless Word was altogether with the earthly ones, but was not absent at all from the heavenly ones*, has not been displaced. It is the illustration of this text, for the evidence of the sources: Uspensky – though its iconography is more complicated, including the Passion instruments and the cave of the dead – and Therapont; the inscription **молениѣ̄** «*Intercession*» registers, once more, the data of the image, in an attempt to escape the relation with the hymn; in the segment of heaven, close to the Ancient of Days, it is noted: **отець̄ ӣ с̄ино̄ ӣ д̄ух̄ӣ** «*The Father and the Son and the Spirit*».

Instead of stanza 16/*kontakion* 9, *The angelic nature was wholly surprised at the great act of thine Incarnation*, there appears stanza 18, *When the Adorner of all wished to save the world, he went to it called by himself*, with *Elcomenos*, Christ lead, hands bound, to the Cross, as in the Byzantine icon in Moscow, as in Moldovița or in Părhăuți; the inscription seems to have never existed.

Instead of stanza 17/*eikos* 9, *Behold, the eloquent with wide speech have become in thy comprehension like fish without voice*, there appears stanza 22, *When the Remitter of the debts of all mankind wished to bestow his grace of the remission of the old debts*, represented as the *Descent into Limbo*, a formula with no Byzantine references in the cycle, but encountered in connection with this case, at Probota, Humor, Moldovița; the inscription **в̄скр̄ѣсеніѣ̄ х̄т̄ва̄**, the «*Resurrection of Christ*» can be met in the corresponding illustration at Humor and Moldovița.

Instead of stanza 18/*kontakion* 10, *When the Adorner of all wished to save the world*,

he went to it called by himself it has been illustrated stanza 20, *All praise falleth short, O holy king, when it stretcheth toward the bounds of thy bountiful compassion* (fig. 7); the inscription missing completely, recourse has been made to the again indicative Uspensky reference (fig. 8), with the identification, accepted by the Russian scholars, of the representation in the icon of a miracle, related by the Russian pilgrims in 14th-15th century, which took place in the monastery of Christ Philanthropos in Constantinople (Ancient Serail): from beneath the walls of the monastery, on which a miraculous image of Christ standing was painted, sprang a saintly water which alongside the surrounding sands, healed the sick people. In the Arbore cycle, as well as in Părhăuți, Christ is represented standing, among bishops, but the panel-wall behind disappeared; in the foreground there is the spring, but while at Părhăuți as in Therapont, the image preserved the raised font and the seated patients, even if less numerous, Arbore introduced a detail unknown to the Byzantine version: the ill people buried up to their shoulders/neck in the miracle-working sands. The detail is not to be found in the Russian reports, but in certain later, 17th century ones of the Western pilgrims, narrating healings worked on the day of the Transfiguration, secretly watched by the sultan himself. In 16th century Moldavia, the miracle could be known either through written sources, lost after, or even through the living experience, since it survived over centuries the disappearance, under the Ottoman rule, of the Christ Philanthropos church.

The fourth register of the Akathiston at Arbore opens with stanza 19/ *eikos* 10, *Thou art, O virgin Theotokos, a wall to virgins, and to all who hasten unto thee*, which remained, as stanza 15 did, undisplaced; the inscription followed the same principle of the subject description, in terms different from those of the *eikos*: **БОГЪРОДИЦЪ СЪ КЪ(Ъ)ЛЪГЪРНИЦЪ**, «*Theotokos with the nuns*».

Replacing stanza 20/*kontakion* 11, *All praise falleth short, O holy king, when it stretcheth toward the bounds of thy bountiful compassion*, there has been illustrated stanza

21, *We behold the holy Virgin as a lamp containing the Light, appearing unto those in darkness, having kindled the immaterial Light*; the inscription is hard to decipher: **БОГОРОДИЦА...«Theotokos...»**.

In the place of stanza 21, *We behold the holy Virgin as a lamp containing the Light*, it has been represented stanza 23, *Since thou art a living temple, O Theotokos, we all praise thee, singing to thy birth-giving*, identified after the Uspensky “prototype” and the Therapont version, from which the imperial couple vanished⁷; the inscription reads: **ВИД(Е)НІА...ПРЪПОДЪНАА НАШЕ БОГОРОД(Е)ЦЕ НА ЦДЪ** (sic!) «*The Vision...of our Holy Theotokos (probably on the church)*» (fig. 9).

As a substitute for stanza 22/ *kontakion* 12, *When the Remitter of the debts of all mankind wished to bestow his grace of the remission of the old debts*, it has been introduced stanza 17, *Behold, the eloquent with wide speech have become in thy comprehension like fish without voice*, in which the Virgin and Child float, in a nimbus suspended over the philosophers, a version probably inspired by the 14th century manuscript variants of the Akathiston – the Tomić and the Serbian Psalters – slightly modified at Moldovița, Baia and Părhăuți; the inscription is again surprising: **АВЫСЕ Ѡ(Т) НЕВО ПРЪЧИСТА СЪ МЛ(А)ДЪЦЕ И (СІ)ДЪШЕ НА ПРЪСТЪЛА**, «*The Most Pure and the Child appeared from heaven and seated on the throne*».

Stanza 23/ *eikos* 12, *Since thou art a living temple, O Theotokos, we all praise thee, singing to thy birth-giving*, was replaced by stanza 18, *When the Adorner of all wished to save the world*, the second version, *Anapeson* (fig. 10), with the Passion instruments, a liturgically supported association⁸, known to the 14th century Byzantine monuments and later, in Moldavia (Bălinești); the relation between *Anapeson* and stanza 18 – including the personification of the Cosmos – was current in 16th century Wallachia, at the hospice church of Cozia, at Snagov or Tismana, without reference to the Passion; the Arbore illustration – where the spear,

the sponge and the nails are kept by the angel in the bowl with the gall and the vinegar – having no written mention, is significantly set under the foundation stone inscription.

The following scene renders, instead of stanza 24/ *kondakion* 13, *O all-praised, O Mother that gave birth to the Word, more holy than all the saints*, a different one, number 14, *Having beheld a strange Birth, let us be estranged from the world*, following the Uspensky, Therapont, Probota or Părhăuți version; the inscription simply announces: **АВИ(С)Е БОГОРОДИЦА ВІЦІМНІ** «*Theotokos has shown herself to the fathers*».

The fifth tier introduces the supplementary illustrations: for stanza 25 it brings back stanza 16, *The angelic nature was wholly surprised*, the second variant, with the angels glorifying the cross flanked by the Passion instruments, on the altar table, known at Probota and Părhăuți; the inscription, with uncertain deciphering in the second part, reads: **ПРѢСТОЛО К(Р)ЪСТЬ И СЛ(А) АНГЛ(Ъ)О** «*The throne of the Cross and the glory of the angels*» (fig. 11).

The last, 26th scene, illustrates the final stanza 24, *O all-praised, O Mother that gave birth to the Word*: a ceremony of the icon as in the Byzantine cycles, recuperates the Therapont version, contaminated, in its turn, by the *prooimion* *To the invincible general* of the Uspensky recension from which it takes the imperial family and the bishops, while maintaining, from the source-illustration of stanza 24, the icon bearer. The Moldavian version, to be met at Baia, Părhăuți and Arbore shows a preference for stanza 23 of the icon, with the emperor and the empress standing aside; the inscription includes a mysterious reference: **ИКОНО ПРѢЧСНПЕ ОУБРАЗА ЧОУДО ПВОРИИ** «*The icon of the most pure face wonder-worker*» (fig. 12).

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Resuming, the cycle unfolds orderly in the first part, up to its end when, substituting the *Return of the Magi in Babylon*, it illustrates the *Circumcision*, probably intending to add to the significance proper to the subject – Christ's

humility in submitting to the law – ideas distinct from the context⁹.

The complication intervenes in the second part of the hymn, with almost all the scenes in a different order than the text itself and with two supplementary images – doubling the illustrations to stanzas 16, *The angelic nature was wholly surprised* and 18, *When the Adorner of all wished to save the world*, and furthermore, with intermittent, not *de rigueur* inscriptions, the manifest simplicity of which contrast with the sophisticated morphology/syntax of the cycle.

After dismembering the last 14 scenes' suite and identifying the compositions according to the versions, it resulted: in the third tier, the sequence of strophes 16, 13, 15, 18, 22, 20 for the scenes 13-18 and in the fourth, the sequence of strophes 19, 21, 23, 17, 18 (the double one), 14, for the scenes 19-24; in the fifth tier, stanzas 16 (the double one) and 24.

The setting of the known images in a different way, as if they would lay over other texts than those for which they were conceived, was likely meant to displace certain mental habitudes – as it happened in other iconographic contexts of the same monument – in order to release new senses.

In this abstract part of the hymn it is to be noticed, generically, a different arrangement of illustrations, in keeping to the main subject, an apparently “rational principle” not to be expected after the surprises encountered so far: the third tier concentrates the iconography of Christ, while the next one, that of the Virgin (fig. 13) – with a slight contrapuntal variation, the Virgin in the *Deesis* and Emanuel in *Anapason*.

But inside every level, the association of subjects unveil other meanings: the *Intercession (Molenie)* – the fixed point of this section of the illustrated poem and, visually, the centre of the cycle – has, on one side, Emanuel and the Cross, then the „new creation” and on the other, the Passion, the Resurrection and the Healing/Mercy; the presence of the Theotokos is conceived, in the register beneath, in most cases as a vision/appearance as it results from the inscriptions (stanzas 23, 17 and 14).

Hard points define further the uncommon discourse: these are the „doubles” indicative for the Passion.

Beyond the Anapeson suggestion in the *Circumcision*, Emanuel directed towards the Crucifixion – indicated by the Cross, the lance and the sponge under the nimbus borne by angels – initialize, in a place of utmost visibility, the dogmatic address of the Akathistos, pointing out, through displacement, the „new creation”: angelic and pierced by sorrow. A return to the iconography of pain is made by the image of the angels worshipping the Cross on the altar table, in the beginning of the supplementary tier, but also by the *Anapeson* with the instruments of the Passion, in a place-focus of significance: under the foundation inscription, above the entrance to the church.

Associated to the calling upon Jesus’ name, involved in the sense of the *Circumcision*, of the Prayer/*Deisis* as well

as in the Virgin’s visions, the concentration on the Passion would reconstitute a form of hesychasm deepened in the human sorrow, not indifferent to the tragedy of the founder. It would be as an echo filtered by the grace of the Intercession, to the history of betrayal and pain sublimation, underlying the Forerunner cycle in the narthex. The way of constituting the Akathistos discourse – by dismembering and reorganising the poem structure – reminds the new syntax achieved by cutting up the homily of the Baptist’ Beheading, a conception attributed to the inventive bishop Macarius¹⁰.

The atypical use of images in both instances and the convergent secondary sense would endorse the extension on the Arbore Akathistos, of the figurative initiative of this practised scholar, whose technique of composition is revealed by his Chronicle, through the similar treatment of sources (as is the case with the Manasses Chronicle)¹¹.

¹ C. COSTEA, *Sub semnul Miresei nenuntite. Despre reprezentarea Imnului Acatist în Moldova secolului XVI*, in *Ars Transilvaniae* XIX (2009), p. 99-108; certain conclusions regarding the cycle at Arbore have been resumed in the present NOTES.

² It is a result partially indebted to the contribution of our colleague Constantin Ciobanu, who previously explored the illustration of the 15th stanza of the hymn.

³ E. B. GROMOVA, *Problemi Ikonografii Akafista Bogomateri v iskusstve Vizantii i Drevnei Rusi XIV veka*, abstract of the Ph.D. thesis, Moscow, 1990 (considers the painter to be a Greek; the dissertation has been published: *Istorija Russkoj Ikonografii Akafista. Ikona „Pochvala Bogomateri s Akafistom” iz Uspenskogo Sobora Moskovskogo Kremlja*, Moskva 2005); E. S. SMIRNOVA, «*Smotrja na obraz drevnih jivopiscev*». *Tema pocitanija ikon v iskusstve Srednevekovoi Rusi*, Moskva 2007, 295-306. The icon, large in dimensions (198/153 cm) was circulated in Russia around 1500 as its versions of the scenes could be retrieved, almost unmodified, in the Akathistos cycle of the Therapont church. The illustrations of the second part of the hymn in the icon are accompanied by inscriptions guiding to their identification.

⁴ In a first instance the image has been identified and published (see n. 1) as the *Presentation to the Temple*, following the increased analogy in structure of the two subjects; later on, the inscription read, the identification changed. Strange to the Akathistos cycle, the *Circumcision* is quite uncommon in the iconography of Byzantine source, illustrating mostly

the Menologion (January the 1st), as in the codex of Basil II [*Il Menologio di Basilio II (Cod. Vaticano Greco 1613)*, Torino 1907, I, p. 78-79, II, p. 287] or in the 16th century Moldavian frescoes (in the Synaxarion): Proboata, Moldovița, Neamț (where the restored frescoes in the nave, the chronology of which is still under scrutiny, could be later than those at Arbore), Sucevița; in the same *milieu* the theme is not unknown to the wood carving, being included in the decoration of a processional cross dated 1561: *Arta în Moldova de la Ștefan cel Mare la Movilești* (Muzeul Național de Artă al României, Catalog de expoziție), Bucharest, 1999, cat. 46 (M.I. SABADOS), 194-195.

⁵ The *Circumcision* announcing the sacrifice, as it seems to be indicated in the Arbore murals, could have been inspired by certain homilies or other commentaries.

⁶ Though hardly visible due to the dust and smoke sediments, the cycle at Părhăuți seems to reveal an increased degree of fidelity to the Uspensky *type*; in illustrating this stanza, the lectern in the icon and the tree have been compulsed.

⁷ The cycle at Părhăuți retained the imperial pair.

⁸ A reading from Gen. 49: 1-2, 8-12 is introduced during the Vespers of the *Palm Sunday*, as mentioned in the Triodion.

⁹ Part of them would refer to the giving of the name (Luke 2: 21) „the glorious calling of Lord’s name” (as it appears in the chants of the feast: *Menaion* for the month of January, written in 1504 for the monastery of Dobrovăț, now in the Library of

the Romanian Academy, ms. sl. BAR 538, 9v) and to the significance of the eighth day „which bears the fashion of the world to come” (*idem* 4v) as well as to the „spiritual circumcision not made with hands” (*idem* 201r); they outline an interest in the central points of the hesychasmus: the concentration in calling upon Christ’s name, in acquiring inner quietness and experiencing eternity while living.

Iconographically supported by the suggestion in the position of the Child, the literary background of the image could involve a reverse-meaning, referring to certain painful contemporary historical facts: readings from the Proverbs 10, 31-11, 7, provided for the feast of the *Circumcision* seem suited to comment the tragic event of the founder’s beheading, innocent in the descendants’ view – at the orders of the prince whom he raised – through the plot of the councillors: „The mouth of the righteous bringeth forth wisdom, but the perverse tongue shall be cut off... A false balance is an abomination to Jehovah, but a just weight is his delight.. Riches profit not in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivereth from death... The righteousness of the perfect shall direct his way, but the wicked shall fall by his own wickedness (*idem* 2v-3r); it is a remote type of allusion, having feeble

traces in the image, as compared to the „unmasking” in St. John the Baptist cycle decorating the narthex.

There are, in the Romanian collections of Old Slavonic manuscripts, copies of a homily *Word to the eighth day Circumcision of our Lord, God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, which includes, in short, the praise for Basil the Great*, attributed in ms. sl BAR 152 (15th century, Neamț monastery), 56-58, to St Gregory of Nyssa (P.P. PANAITESCU, *Manuscrisele slave din Biblioteca Academiei RPR*, I, București, 1959, 202) or, some other parts, to Amphilochius bishop of Iconium (BHG 5/261; I.R. MIRCEA, *Répertoire des manuscrits slaves en Roumanie. Auteurs byzantins et slaves*, Sofia, 2005, cat. 307).

¹⁰ C. COSTEA, *The Sources of the Medieval Painter. The Cycle of Saint John the Baptist at Arbore*, in RRHA XLIII (2006), 3-9.

¹¹ I. BOGDAN, *Cronici și texte literare vechi. Cronica lui Macarie*, in *Scrieri alese*, Bucharest, 1968, 320-335; „Thus he read and read several times the chronicle of Manasses, noted all the passages he liked and, when composing his chronicle, especially when writing the part regarding Rares he endeavoured to find, for each situation of his hero, the corresponding expression in Manasses...: 327.



Fig. 1 - Arbore, South façade.



Fig. 2 – The Uspensky icon.



Fig. 3 – Arbores, *The Nativity*.



Fig. 4 – Arbores, *The Circumcision*.



Fig. 5 – *The angelic nature was wholly surprised.*



Fig. 6 – *Arbore, When the Creator appeared he revealed us... as a new creation.*

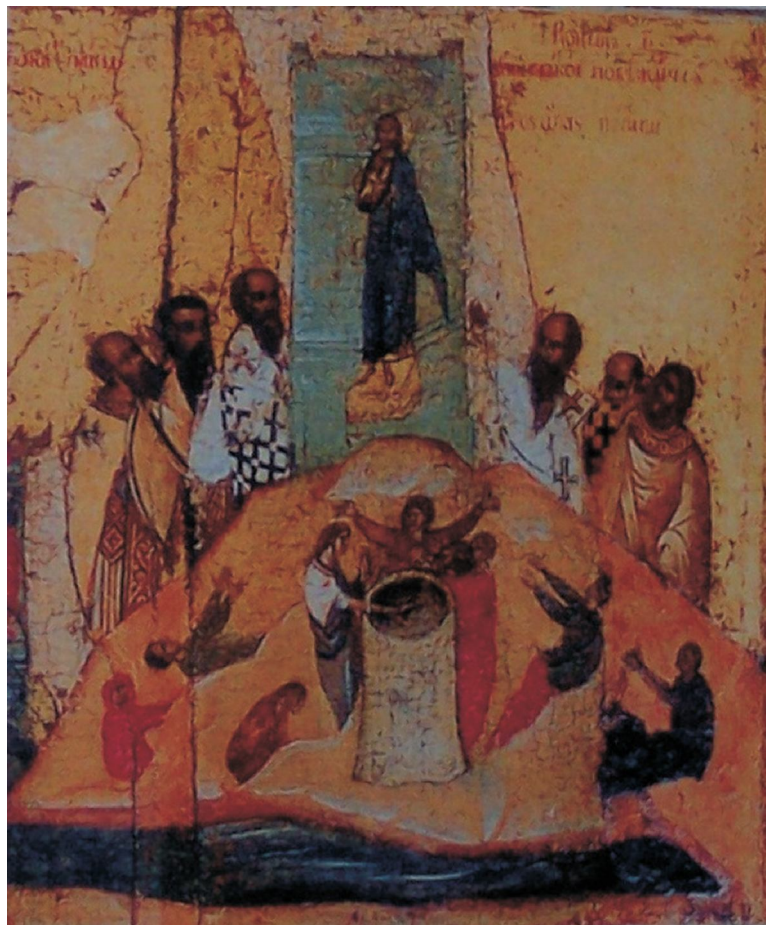


Fig. 7-8 – Arbore and the Uspensky icon (detail)
All praise falleth short.



Fig. 9 – *Since thou art a living temple.*



Fig. 10 – Arbore, *When the Adorner of all wished to save the world*, the second version: Anapeson.



Fig. 11 – Arbore, *The angelic nature was wholly surprised*, the second version.



Fig. 12 – Arbore, *O all-praised, O Mother that gave birth to the Word*.



Fig. 13 – Arbore, 2nd-5th tiers of the Akathistos cycle.