

## More on the High Altar, Cathedral of the Dormition, Pechersk Lavra, Kyiv

Claire Brisby, London

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Olena Serhiy's contribution to the *Series Byzantina* website *Ukrainica* about the silver-gilt revetment of the high altar in the Orthodox Cathedral of the Pechersk Lavra in Kyiv, translated into English by Zeram Zeitullaieva for the benefit of greater accessibility, prompts further comment.<sup>1</sup> The revetment images illuminate mechanisms of iconographical development in Christian religious art representing the conjunction of European cultural currents in eighteenth-century Kyiv.



Fig. 1 Cathedral of the Dormition – the High Altar prior to destruction, as in photo 1942

The subject - relevantly chosen with regard to the current turmoil in Ukraine recalling the loss of the high altar in wartime explosions of 1942 - of two surviving sheets of the silver revetment of the high altar display embossed and chased figural compositions which appear to have been derived from Biblical engravings (Fig. 1) This visual appropriation of imagery would therefore demonstrate the Orthodox Church in eastern Kyiv's selection of models in

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<sup>1</sup> This article is illustrated thanks to Olena Serhiy's generous agreement to the re-use of images she published originally.

1751 from printed illustrations to a Bible published in western Europe a century earlier, as well as the competent interpretation of such models by the individual artisan. The following remarks arise from related research on the role of cultural centres in Ukrainian and neighbouring northern European lands, such as Kyiv, Lviv, Vilnius and Ostroh, in the development of printed Orthodox religious imagery beside developments in Venice and Vienna, as published in my contributions to *Series Byzantina* and elsewhere.

The adornment of the Kyiv cathedral high altar with a revetment of silver justifiably warranted a documented record of its commission and execution between 1751 and 1755 which is of value to study today for specifying Master Mykhailo Yurevych's instructions for images modelled on drawings by artists at the Kyiv Pechersk monastery. Although the model drawings are not identified by Olena Serhiy, she names the source for the compositions displayed on the silver revetment as the illustrative engravings of a Bible published by publishers in Amsterdam headed by Claes Jansz Visscher. This Bible, commonly referred to as the 'Piscator' Bible using the Latin form of the publisher's name, importantly presented the first interpretation of Biblical texts in German by a likewise named but unrelated Reformation theologian, the German Johannes Fischer (1546 – 1625). The 'Piscator' Bible was published in several editions in Amsterdam (1639, 1643, 1650, 1674) and also in Alkmaar (1646).



Fig. 2 Theatrum Biblicum, Amsterdam 1639, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Based on the earlier Protestant Lutheran Bible, this Calvinist version controversially sought a literal word for word translation of scriptural sources and Visscher's mid-seventeenth century illustrated edition supplemented the didactic function of the translated texts with visual images, comprised of some 277 engravings of Biblical episodes after prominent European artists (Fig. 2).

Due to the Amsterdam publishers' renown in central and eastern Europe, resting on such publications as a map of Muscovia (1631), editions of their 'Piscator' Bible were highly sought in Ukrainian and later Russian lands for practical use as sources of imagery, as attested by painters' and craftsmen's workshop archives from Kyiv and the Tsarist court in Moscow. The Pechersk Lavra commission for embellishing their high altar with images modelled on the engraved western European compositions of the Protestant Biblical publications manifests the Kyiv Orthodox Metropolitanate's receptive regard for these western images as models even a century after their publication. Not only does this reflect the debt – albeit derivatively through locally-made intermediary copy-drawings – to western religious imagery with western artistic principles, it also demonstrates the acceptance of printed images as valid sources for artists. With regard to the issue of authorised sources, the role of prints at the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra workshops and academy puts into relief the Orthodox Patriarchate in Moscow's prejudice against mechanically made images which had compelled the pioneering Moscow printer Ivan Fedorov and his colleague Mstislavets to migrate from the Russian capital in search of more favourable printing environments in the western cities of Lviv, Vilnius and Ostroh two centuries earlier in 1564.

The Pechersk Lavra altar commission spotlights the Kyiv Orthodox Metropolitanate's reception of western artistic compositions as sources for religious imagery despite their inherent disregard for the doctrinal norms of traditional iconography by expanding dimensions of narrative content. Further to a-canonical practices is the Pechersk Lavra's designation of the role of imagery to an altar thereby extending the function of the iconostasis as the screen for icon-display to the architectural feature of the altar itself and endowing it with the role of promoting narrative imagery. Relative to the issue of non-canonical imagery is the question of viewer, which in the case of an altar secluded behind an iconostasis, is strictly privileged to senior clergy. Relative also to the issue of engagement with non-

canonical imagery is the craftsman, complicit in practice with the privileged few by reason of his role executing the commission.

Moreover, the execution of Biblical episodes in embossed and chased relief unconventionally endowed the images with a sculptural three dimensionality at variance with the doctrine of icons, to which master Yurevych made only minor concession. Yurevych's embossed forms replicate closely the anatomical modelling and drapery folds of the monochrome engravings, conveyed there through tonal shading.



Fig. 3 Left "The Sacrifice of Abraham".  
Silver-gilt embossed, chased 1755.  
165x176x85 cm; altar front north  
Master M. Yurevich. KPL-M-10796.

right The Sacrifice of Abraham, engraving  
'Piscator' Bible, Amsterdam. c.1650

Yurevych's treatment of the *Sacrifice of Abraham* composition faithfully copies the original except for emphasising the heavenly presence of the angel by elevating the figure clear of Abraham's raised knife and introducing a halo of light-rays behind the angel's head (Fig. 3) On the other hand, the Kyivan master's treatment of the *Sacrifice of Noah* episode re-interprets the original to a greater degree through two-dimensional graphic stylisations of the Ark resting on Mount Ararat as well as the stylisation of the sun's rays and plumes of smoke from the sacrificial fire (Fig. 4). The treatment of the kneeling figures is re-invented by reducing the number in the group and the left-hand foreground figure of Noah is reconfigured to be shown in profile facing the altar, thereby rejecting the backward-looking

figure in Piscator's engraving and tempering the extreme *contra-posto* pose characteristic of academic western baroque virtuosity.



Fig. 4 left "Sacrifice of Noah".  
Silver-gilt embossed&chased 1755.  
165x176x85 cm; altar-front south,  
Master M. Yurevich.. KPL-M-1147.

right "The Sacrifice of Noah, engraving  
'Piscator' Bible, Amsterdam. c.1650

The surviving sheets of silver revetment with the two images from the front of the high altar reflect the commissioning patrons' intention for an ornamental scheme expressing the altar's theological function as the site of the Eucharist consecration commemorating Christ's obedience to God in the Crucifixion and in turn, God's sacrifice of his Son Jesus. The two episodes of Old Testament sacrifice displayed at the altar-base present two visual prefigurations of the New Testament's obedience and sacrifice liturgically celebrated in the Eucharist on the altar above. The selection of Old Testament episodes judiciously picked two from the first book of Genesis which tell of Noah's sacrificial thanksgiving for the end of the great flood (Genesis 8 20-22) and of Abraham's sacrificial obedience to God's command at the cost of his son Isaac (Genesis 22 1-19).

This pair of silver-gilt embossed images therefore bears witness to the theologically innovative importance of the altar-revetment commission. It represents the designation of an unconventional role to imagery in liturgical performance and the promotion of an equally unconventional religious image type and technical format. It represents an enterprising selection of sources and inventive interpretation of models by the master craftsman resulting

in an artwork that exemplifies the harmonious cultural confluence of religious theological thought and artistic traditions in the age of the European Enlightenment in Kyiv.

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