

# THE SYMBOL OF GRAPEVINE IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SACRED SPACE

## SIMBOLUL VIȚEI DE VIE IN ARHITECTURA SPAȚIULUI SACRU

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**Abstract.** *The symbol is an emblem or an image associated with a few words or abbreviations on the item it represents. Religious symbols, the oldest symbols of the world, have always helped to retrieve or to identify certain values, beliefs, ideas and confessions of faith, having the primary goal of gathering together those who share the same religious or cultural beliefs. To survive, the symbols must be recognized as such and be properly interpreted within the context that generated them. In modern times the question of the meaning and existence of these symbols arose. To understand this symbolism, the history of the construction types is not enough and references to biblical culture, which renders the origin and development of symbols, are needed. This paper identifies different representations of the grapevine being presented as decorative motifs in sacred art and architecture. The grapevine appears from ancient times represented in the drawings of the catacombs, in the Byzantine mosaics or carved on the walls of the medieval cathedrals.*

**Key words:** *sacred space, symbol, grapevine*

**Rezumat.** *Simbolul este o emblema sau o imagine asociată cu câteva cuvinte sau prescurtări referitoare la elementul pe care-l reprezintă. Simbolurile religioase, cele mai vechi simboluri din lume, au ajutat întotdeauna la regăsirea sau identificarea anumitor valori, convingeri, idei sau mărturisiri de credință, având drept prim scop adunarea la un loc a celor ce împărtășeau aceleași convingeri religioase ori culturale. Pentru a supraviețui, simbolurile trebuie să fie recunoscute ca atare și să fie corect interpretate în cadrul contextului care le-a generat. În epoca modernă s-a pus problema sensului și existenței acestor simboluri. Pentru a înțelege aceasta simbolică, istoria constructivă nu este de ajuns și pentru aceasta, referiri la cultura biblică, ce redă originea și dezvoltarea simbolurilor sunt necesare. Lucrarea de față identifică diferite reprezentări ale viței de vie prezente ca motiv decorativ, în arta și arhitectura sacră. Aceasta apare din cele mai vechi timpuri reprezentată în desenele din catacombe, în mozaicurile bizantine sau sculptată pe fațadele catedralelor medievale.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *spațiu sacru, simbol, viță-de-vie*

## INTRODUCTION

The Christian sacred spaces have an architectural component and in the same time a symbolical one.

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The word „symbol”, derives from the Latin word „*symbolum*” which means „representation”. The symbol is often an emblem or an image associated with a few words or abbreviations on the item it represents.

Religious symbols are among the most popular, most used and oldest symbols in the world. Symbols have always helped to retrieve or identify certain values, beliefs, ideas, or professions of faith. They had the main purpose of gathering together those who share the same religious or cultural beliefs.

In order to survive, the symbols must be recognized as such and be properly interpreted within the context that generated them. In the modern age questions about the meaning and existence of these symbols were raised. When contemplating the decorations or shapes of the facades of cathedrals, one asks himself what those are, which is their symbolic significance that often escapes to the viewer. The history of architecture and constructions is not enough for understanding this symbolism, references to the biblical culture, which renders the origin and development of symbols are needed.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

This paper identifies different representations of the grapevine, being presented as decorative motifs in sacred art and architecture. As research methods were used: theoretical and photographic documentation, observation and case study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

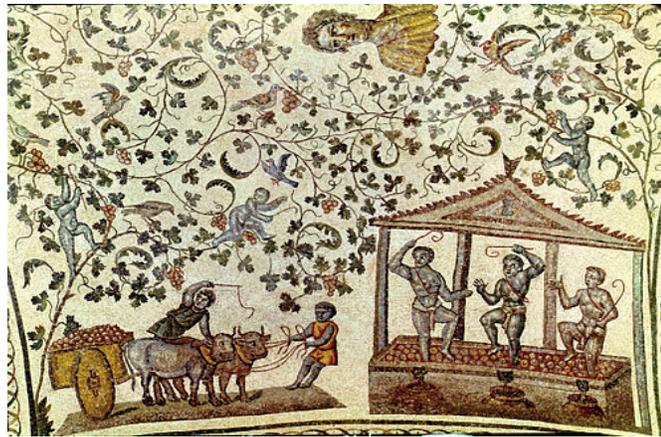
The image of the grapevine is often seen as a decorative motif (Fig. 1). In both art and sacred architecture its image appears from ancient times represented in the drawings of the catacombs, in the Byzantine mosaics or carved on the facades of medieval cathedrals. Vines and its fruits, grapes, are often considered the symbol of Christ and his sacrifice, as well as the symbol of the Christian faith. The symbolism of (grape) vine extends to every human soul.

In their spiritual meaning symbols may be fitted in allegorical (referring to a historical reality), anagogical type (referring to eschatological meaning, in times of angels and saints) or tropological (referring to moralizing spiritual sense) (Herea, 2013).

Grapevine as a symbol is very common in the art of the early centuries. It is a clear transposition of the words of Christ:” *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.*” (John 15, 4-5). These words and the image have both ecclesiological and sacramental sense. When the vine and the branches are represented, it is about Christ and His Church: „I am the vine, ye are the branches”.



**Fig.1** - The interior of Santa Agatha Church, Queige – Beaufortain © Savoie Mont Blanc  
(<http://www.savoie-montblanc.com>)



**Fig. 2** - Harvesting Grapevine, Vault Mosaic, Santa Costanza, Rome, 35

But more often, the image of the vine is complemented by that of harvesting the grapevine (Fig. 2) or of birds that feed on grapes (Fig. 3). In this case, the vine reminds Christians especially the central mystery of the Church, the Eucharist. 'Vine gives us the wine as the Word gave His blood, „says Clement of Alexandria (Clement Alexandrinul, 1982). People who harvest and birds that feed on grapevine represent Christians who share the body and blood of Christ.



**Fig. 3** - Birds feeding on grapevine



**a)**



**b)**

**Fig. 4**

**a)** - Capitel Biserica Saint-Priest

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/29223544@N08/8067494053/>

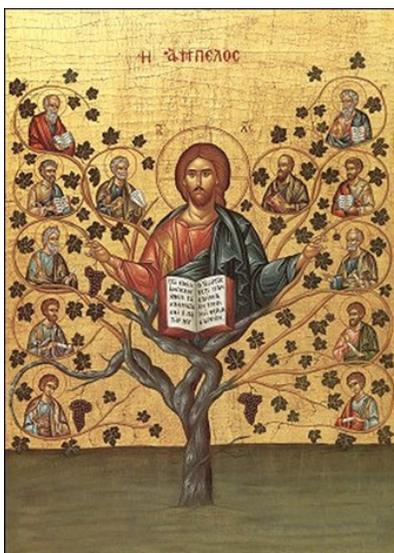
**b)** - A man holding a glass of wine in his right hand, and clusters of grapes in his left hand.

*Bas-relief, Church of the Holy Cross, Akdamar Island, Turkey*

[http://travelswithsheila.com/outside\\_of\\_church.htm](http://travelswithsheila.com/outside_of_church.htm)

The decorative motif of the grapevine still exists today in the sacred art of the Orthodox Church, preserving its symbolic interest (Fig. 4 - a, b).

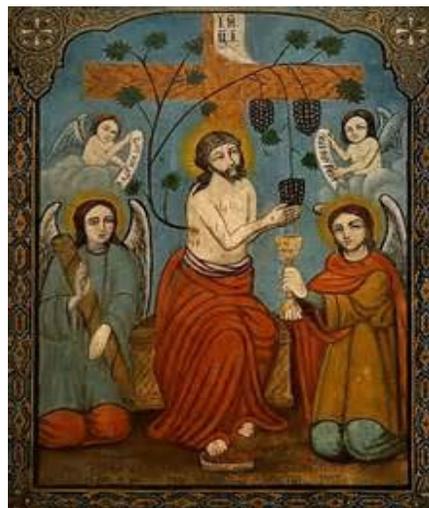
Grape-vine is considered to be the image of Christ (Fig 5). As lively branches of grapevine that are grafted on the stem, so Christians are having life only as long as they live a genuine life in Christ. This plant is chosen by Christ, with great understanding, grapevines cannot reach maturity and fruition on its own, thus it should be helped out. Therefore, if this plant is not nurtured by human hands and is not helped even by a prop or a tree, on which to climb, it cannot give its fruit.



**Fig. 5 - Grapevine, tree and Christ**  
 „I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.”. (John 15,1).



a)



b)

**Fig. 6 - a), b) - Jesus and the grapevine**

(<http://icoaneromanestipesticla.blogspot.ro/2008/11/>  
[-http://www.icoane-taranesti-pe-sticla.ro/?attachment\\_id=156](http://www.icoane-taranesti-pe-sticla.ro/?attachment_id=156))

As Grape vine needs to be cut in time, trimmed and bound to yield its fruit, so, one needs to be directed, when wrong, to be able to bear fruit forever.

For its wonderful significance, the grapevine was immediately embraced by church painters, both as a decorative element, its leaves and branches adorning the

edges of icons and church vaults, and as icon itself, it depicting the Lord Jesus Christ (Gherge and Ciuca, 2010).

The grapevine appears in icons depicting the genealogical tree of Jesse (Fig 5), Abraham or any noticeable founder. Also, grapevines appear on many iconostases belonging to old churches, its branches embracing icons of Jesus, of the Apostles and of other saints (Fig. 6).

However, the most prominent representative of this symbolic plant remains one in which Christ is depicted as strain and the Apostles are represented as branches (Fig. 5). Dionysius of Furna, in his famous book of Erminia of Byzantine Painting states: "*Christ blessing with both hands and having at his chest the Gospel, says: I am the vine, ye are the branches! And out of Him coming out coiled grapevine branches, and apostles sitting among them.*" (Dionisie din Furna, 2000).

## CONCLUSIONS

The decorative motif of grapevine and grape has three states of appearance in an ornamental register of a sacred space:

- as a branch with vine leaves;
- as a rope vine leaves, grapes and tendrils on it;
- as a cluster repeated on an ornamental register;
- as vine (shoot) of climbing plant.

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