

Nikola Jakšić

Odjel za povijest umjetnosti
Sveučilište u Zadru
Obala kralja Petra Krešimira IV. 2
HR - 23000 Zadar

Izvorni znanstveni rad / Original scientific paper

Primljen / Received: 11. 3. 2023.

Prihvaćen / Accepted: 10. 7. 2023.

UDK / UDC: 75Nerio

75.056:75.033.5

DOI: 10.15291/ars.4335

Two Skilful Iconographic Interpretations of the Biblical Text by Nerio

Dvije Nerijeve vješte
ikonografske interpretacije
biblijskoga teksta

ABSTRACT

Nerio's initial *D(e ventre matris mee...)* from Gradual D of the Zadar Franciscans has been misinterpreted in scholarly literature, earning the miniaturist a bad reputation as an iconographer. L. Mirković did not recognize that the initial depicts simultaneously two connected events from Luke's Gospel: Annunciation to Zechariah (Lk 1:5-25) and the Birth of John the Baptist (Lk 1:57-66). This article aims to prove the opposite, namely that Nerio was unusually skilled in translating the liturgical text into visual language. This opinion is supported by the analysis of Nerio's cutting preserved at the British Library, depicting Christ, an apostle, and an executioner taking a sheep to be slaughtered. So far, no correct interpretation of this scene has been offered. The author considers it to be a visual interpretation of the First Response of the nocturnal Mass for Holy Saturday. The citation is taken from Isaiah (53/7) and reads: *Sicut ovis ad occisionem ductus est et, dum male tractaretur non aperuit os suum* ("He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth"). Nerio wanted to depict Christ's silence and succeeded in doing so by introducing an apostle into the scene to enter into a dialogue with the executioner, indirectly emphasizing Christ's silence. Christ seems to distance himself from the event, turning his back to it. Nevertheless, he turns his head back towards the executioner, recognizing his own fate in the sheep and accepting it without a word.

Keywords: Nerio, 14th century, iconography, Response

SAŽETAK

Nerijev inicijal *D(e ventre matris mee...)* iz graduala D kod zadarskih franjevaca u literaturi je pogrešno interpretiran, a sam je minijaturist ocijenjen kao loš ikonograf. Naime, L. Mirković nije prepoznao da su u tom inicijalu istodobno prikazana dva povezana događaja iz Lukina evanđelja, Navještenje Zahariji (Lk, 1, 5–25) i Rođenje Ivana Krstitelja (Lk, 1, 57–66). Autor, naprotiv, smatra da je Nerije neobično vješt u prevođenju liturgijskog teksta u likovni jezik. To dodatno argumentira analizom Nerijeva ostriška u British Library na kojem su prikazani Krist i apostol te krvnik koji odvodi ovcu na klanje. Do sada nije ponuđeno ispravno tumačenje ovog prizora. Autor zaključuje da je to likovna interpretacija prvog responzorija noćna na Veliku subotu. Preuzet je od Izaije (53/7), a glasi: *Sicut ovis ad occisionem ductus est et, dum male tractaretur non aperuit os suum*, dakle: „Ko jagnje na klanje odvedoše ga, ko ovca, nijema pred onima što je strižu nije otvorio usta svojih". Nerije je inzistirao na prikazu Kristove šutnje, a to uspijeva time što u scenu uvodi apostola koji uspostavlja dijalog s krvnikom čime se naglašava Kristova šutnja. Krist se pritom nastoji udaljiti od događaja, pa mu je okrenut leđima. Ipak, okreće glavu unatrag prepoznajući u ovci vlastitu sudbinu, prihvaćajući je bez riječi.

Ključne riječi: Nerije, 14. stoljeće, ikonografija, responzorij

Miniaturist Nerio from Bologna and his sumptuous initial in the antiphony of the Šibenik Franciscans have recently been the subject of my paper published in this journal.¹ Nerio painted several miniatures for Dalmatian choir books, which, in my opinion, have been unsatisfactorily evaluated and only rarely adequately interpreted in terms of iconography. In addition to the Šibenik antiphony, Nerio also painted graduals for the Zadar Franciscans (codices A, B, and D), in which he designed a whole series of initials with a predominantly decorative character, treated as *litterae florissae*, that is, with dominant floral patterns. However, in each of the three mentioned codices, he also painted several initials that can be defined as *litterae historiatae*, since they convey a specific content, usually more directly connected to the text, which begins with the said initial.² This means that the miniaturist approached painting according to the *ad verbum* principle, seeking to interpret the liturgical text, literally if necessary. In Gradual A, there are two such initials: *P(uer natus est nobis...)* in folio XXX' has a miniature of the Birth of Christ,³ while the other initial is *S(ederunt principes et advesum me loquebantur...)* in fol. XXXIII, clarified by the rubric: **In sci Stephani protomartyr**, depicting the Stoning of St Stephen.⁴ In Gradual B, there were several initials treated as *litterae historiatae*, but they were all cut out in a sack of the Franciscan art collection in 1974. In folio CCX. there was a picture of the resurrected Christ within the initial *R(esurexi et adhuc tecum sum...)*, while folio CCCXXVIII' contained the initial *V(iri Galilei quid admiramini...)* with a depiction of the Ascension of Christ with the rubric **In die ascensionis ad missam Introitus**.⁵ In Gradual D, there are four *litterae historiatae*: in folio XXVIII, it is the initial *D(e ventre matris mee...)* with the rubric **In nat(ivitatis) sci Iohannis bapt(istae)**; in folio XXXI, the initial *G(audemus omnes in Domino diem festum celebrantes sub honore Marie virginis...)* with the rubric **In assumptione Ma(rie V(irginis))**; in folio XLIV, the initial *S(alve sancta parens...)* with the rubric **In nat(ivitate) sce M(arie) V(irginis)**; and in folio LV', the initial *G(audemus omnes in Domino diem festum celebrantes sub honorem sanctorum omnium...)*, accompanied by the rubric **In festo omnium sanctorum**.

My attention is focused on the initial *D(e ventre matris mee...)* in Gradual D. It is accompanied by the rubric **In nat(ivitatis) sci Iohannis bapt(istae)**, which clearly shows its reference to the Birth of John the Baptist. The scene has been described in detail by Lazar Mirković and Emil Hilje. The child is depicted in the centre of the composition, between the seated parents, and lies on a pink bed, wrapped in white or pale blue bandages (diapers). In the background, there is a wall with an arcade and a thick canopy above, on top of which an angel is landing with an object in his outstretched right hand. Mirković and Hilje have interpreted this object as a scroll that he is about to hand to the two men painted on the right side of the scene.⁶ Noting that there is usually no angel in the Birth of John the Baptist, Mirković concludes: "The miniaturist was not a good iconographer, because he mixed up the Nativity of the Forerunner with the Nativity of Christ. He painted an angel here, which obviously belongs to the Nativity of Jesus Christ, because there are no male figures in the Nativity of the Forerunner except Zechariah, and no angel landing."⁷ This quotation brings us to the problem I want to discuss here: Does Mirković correctly judge that our miniaturist was not a good iconographer?

When it comes to the birth of John the Baptist, we rely on the Gospel of Luke. In that text, the event is extensively elaborated and broken into two parts: firstly, it speaks about the annunciation to Zechariah (Lk 1:5-25) and then, after the annunciation of the birth of Jesus, it turns more directly to the birth of John the Baptist (Lk 1:57-66).

I am transcribing in full those parts that directly refer to the event, so that we can make a judgment about the painted scene:

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, **9** he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. **10** And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. **12** When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. **13** But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. **14** He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, **15** for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. **16** He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. **17** And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

19 The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. **20** And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. **22** When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home. **24** After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. **25** "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

What follows in the Gospel is the annunciation of the birth of Jesus, and then the birth of John the Baptist (Lk 1: 57-64):

57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. **58** Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, **60** but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

61 They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. **63** He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." **64** Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God.⁸

If we take a closer look at Nerio's miniature, we will understand that it depicts the two related events that I have just described: in the upper part, it is the annunciation to Zechariah, and in the lower part, the birth of John the Baptist. The landing angel holds a censer in his right hand, not a scroll as Lazar Mirković and Emil Hilje identified it. Nerio had to include the censer in the composition because the Gospel mentions an angel "standing at the right side of the altar of incense." The angel's right hand with the censer is outstretched to Zechariah,⁹ who is sitting in the Nativity scene, establishing a relationship and dialogue between the angel and Zechariah (Lk



1.

Nerio, Initial D with the scene of the Annunciation to Zechariah and the Birth of John the Baptist, Gradual D, Franciscan monastery, Zadar

Nerije, Inicijal D s uprizorenjem Navještenja Zahariji i Rođenja Ivana Krstitelja, Gradual D, Franjevački samostan, Zadar

1:11). The men standing on the right side of the composition represent the people waiting for Zechariah outside the Temple, while their gaze directed at the angel refers to the vision that Zechariah had in the Temple: “When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak” (Lk 1:22). In the scene depicting the birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah writes the following words on a tablet: “His name is John”; and remains silent until he finishes writing (Lk 1:63).

In contrast to Mirković’s interpretation that our miniaturist was “not a good iconographer,” I believe exactly the opposite. Nerio tried to convey in his composition all the most important details contained in Luke’s Gospel. In the upper part of the scene, he painted the Annunciation to Zechariah, but Zechariah himself is seated in the lower part of the composition, in the scene of the Birth of John the Baptist. Between Gabriel and Zechariah, however, a more immediate relationship is established through the angel’s outstretched right hand holding the censer.¹⁰ In my opinion, Nerio very skilfully connected two interdependent yet temporally and spatially separated events into a single composition. Therefore, he knew the text of the Gospel very well and tried to convey a lot of information to the viewer in a unique artistic composition. Some authors, however, did not recognize Nerio’s effort to communicate so many important details from the Gospel to the observer.

Nerio’s endeavour of translating the content of the liturgical text into a recognizable scene in the initial according to the *ad verbum* principle, that is literally as much as possible, is specifically evidenced in a cutting preserved at the British Library. In my opinion, this is one of Nerio’s most beautiful creations. Within the initial S, there is a group of people and one sheep. In the right part of the composition, one sees a Roman soldier with a shield and a prosthesis instead of his left leg. With a sword raised in his right hand, he is leading the sheep to the slaughter, moving away from the other two figures: Christ and an apostle, most likely Peter. And while the apostle behind Christ’s back is facing the soldier and addressing him directly (as evidenced by the apostle’s raised right hand), Christ is facing the opposite direction, as if he wanted to leave the scene. However, his head is turned backwards over his shoulder, and he directs his gaze towards the soldier (executioner) and the sheep.

In scholarly literature, we encounter the problem of how to name this unusual staging. In the British Library digital catalogue where this cutting (size 105 x 95 mm) is kept under the call no. Add. ms. 32058, c2, one finds the following definition: “Historiated initial ‘S’ of two saints stopping a soldier from killing a sheep.”¹¹ Writing about Nerio (whom he calls *Il grande maestro*), the quality of his work, and his models, Alessandro Conti brings an illustration of exactly this cutting and writes: “... poi una *storia evangelica* dove è evidentissimo lo studio delle Storie di Giovacchino della Cappella degli Scrovegni, attraverso il quale Nerio giunge ad un colore più limpido e luminoso.”¹² In other words, Conti, emphasizing Nerio’s clear and bright palette, indicates a direct influence of Giotto’s painting cycle in Padua, especially those scenes related to the cycle about Joachim. Nevertheless, he refers to our cutting as a *storia evangelica*, failing to offer a more specific name. Both definitions I have quoted, be they from a prominent scholar (Alessandro Conti) or from a prominent institution (British Library), are completely mistaken. When it comes to the one offered by the British Library digital catalogue, it is clear that the couple on the left side consists of Christ and a saint, most likely an apostle, which means that the wording “two saints” is erroneous. And it is not certain that the two of them are trying to prevent the soldier from killing the sheep, as the digital catalogue wants us to believe.

Conti, on the other hand, hoped that with the wording *storia evangelica* he had solved the problem at least to some extent. Unlike the author from the British Library digital catalogue, he clearly recognized Christ in the scene, so he based his for-



2.
Nerio, Initial S with the scene depicting the text of the First Response to the Holy Saturday nocturne, British Library, Add. ms. 32058, c2 (<https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=31516>)

Nerije, Inicijal S s uprizorenjem teksta prvog rezponzorija nokturna na Veliku subotu, British Library, Add. ms. 32058, c2

mulation on that. However, it remains unclear which scene from the gospel it could be if one cannot recognize it in its entirety and name it more specifically?

Apart from the scene itself, which should lead us to some answer, the fact that it is an initial helps us detect it, which means that at least the first grapheme referring to the text illustrated by Nerio is known, which is S. Since the said cutting almost certainly originates from a choir book, there is nothing left but to look for liturgical content in choir books that begin with the mentioned sibilant, and that mentions at least something of what is depicted here.

And there, among the numerous quotations, one comes across the First Response of the Nocturne of the Feast the Holy Saturday which reads: *Sicut ovis ad occisionem ductus est et, dum male tractaretur non aperuit os suum.*

“He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”¹³

Here is the Italian version: “Come l’agnello condotto al mattatoio, come la pecora muta davanti a chi la tosa, egli non aprì la bocca.”¹⁴

The text is taken from the prophet Isaiah (53/7). It is one of those verses announcing the coming of the Messiah and his sacrifice.

That is why, in Nerio’s interpretation, Christ tries to distance himself from the event, but significantly, he looks back and follows with his eyes the executioner who is taking the victim to the slaughter, thus clearly recognizing his own destiny. An even more important detail that Nerio wanted to show in this staging refers to the part of the text that refers to Christ’s silence. In order to illustrate Isaiah’s words “he did not open his mouth,” Nerio introduced an apostle into the scene, who then enters into a dialogue with the executioner. Thus, the third participant in the scene, Christ, remains silent, that is, he does not open his mouth.

This interpretation of ours can be partly verified by the preserved textual fragment. Namely, modest remains of the Response have been preserved on the back of the cutting, under two four-line staves with musical notation (: ...*occi ...est...*)¹⁵ Considering that they fit harmoniously into the whole, we show them here in **bold** print within the Response:

*Sicut ovis ad **occi** si
onem ductus **est** et,
dum male tractaretur non aperuit os suum.*

I believe that we have shown with this interpretation that Nerio was extraordinarily skilled at translating the liturgical text into a visual scene, exactly the opposite of Lazar Mirković’s criticism that he was “not a good iconographer.”

NOTES

¹ NIKOLA JAKŠIĆ, Nerijev inicijal A iz antifonara šibenskih franjevac [Nerio’s initial A in the antiphony of the Šibenik Franciscans], *Ars Adriatica* 11 (2021), 105-114.

² MASSIMO MEDICA, Nerio, in *Dizionario bibliografico dei miniatori italiani* (ed. Milva Bollati), Milan, 2004, 820; FEDERICA TONIOLO, Liturgia in figura: le miniature dei Corali di San Francesco a Zara, in: *Letteratura, arte e cultura italiana tra le sponde dell’Adriatico* (ed. Luciana Borsetto), Padua, 2005, 49, reprinted in: *Medioevo adriatico – circolazione di modelli, opere, maestri* (ed. Federica Toniolo and Giovanna Valenzano), Viella Roma, 2010, 111-132; FEDERICA TONIOLO, Manoscritti miniati di area Veneta e Padana nelle biblioteche della Croazia: alcuni esempi

dal XIII al XVI secolo, in: *Letteratura, arte, cultura tra le sponde dell’Adriatico* (ed. Guido Baldassari, Nikola Jakšić, and Živko Nižić), Zadar, 2008, 201-218.

³ Hilje is mistaken in identifying it as an initial O, since the text says: *Puer natus...* (cf. EMIL HILJE – RADOSLAV TOMIĆ, *Slikarstvo – Umjetnička baština zadarske nadbiskupije* [Painting: Artistic heritage of the Zadar Diocese], Zadar, 2006, 135).

⁴ LAZAR MIRKOVIĆ, *Minijature u antifonarima i gradualima manastira sv. Franje asiskog u Zadru* [Miniatures in the antiphonaries and graduals of the monastery of St Francis in Zadar], Belgrade, 1977, 60, identifies it as an initial E and transcribes the text accompanying the miniature as *Ederunt principes...* But this, in fact, does

not make any sense. Hilje has also identified it as an initial E (cf. EMIL HILJE – RADOSLAV TOMIĆ, *Slikarstvo /as in n. 3/, 134*), obviously reiterating Mirković's erroneous interpretation.

⁵ LAZAR MIRKOVIĆ, *Minijature* (as in n. 4), 62-64.

⁶ LAZAR MIRKOVIĆ, *Minijature* (as in n. 4), 65; EMIL HILJE – RADOSLAV TOMIĆ, *Slikarstvo* (as in n. 3), 136.

⁷ LAZAR MIRKOVIĆ, *Minijature* (as in n. 4), 65.

⁸ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%201&version=NIV> (last accessed on September 10, 2023).

⁹ Not towards the two men, as suggested in LAZAR MIRKOVIĆ, *Minijature* (as in n. 4), 65 and EMIL HILJE – RADOSLAV TOMIĆ, *Slikarstvo* (as in n. 3), 136.

¹⁰ Let us recall that the censer is Zechariah's attribute referring to the Temple, so it is with the censer that he is depicted on a mosaic in the Euphrasiana; cf. ANN TERRY – HENRY MAGUIRE,

Dynamic Splendor – The Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrosina at Poreč, Pennsylvania University Press, 2007, fig. 107.

¹¹ <https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=31516> (last accessed on March 10, 2023).

¹² ALESSANDRO CONTI, *La miniatura bolognese – Scuole e botteghe 1270-1340*, Bologna, 1981, 65.

¹³ <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Isaiah%2053%3A7> (last accessed on March 10, 2023).

¹⁴ https://www.laparola.net/wiki.php?riferimento=Is+53%2C+7-12&formato_rif=vp (last accessed on March 10, 2023).

¹⁵ <https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=18915&CollID=27&NStart=32058> (last accessed on March 10, 2023).