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Mallow flower - a symbol of food that gives life: from the classical period to early Byzantine art

Анотація. Матвеева Юлія. Квітка мальви – символ їжі що дає життя від класичного періоду до ранньовізантійського мистецтва. У давній Греції мальва складала основний раціон споживання у період до появи та широкого розповсюдження злакових культур. У класичних грецьких текстах мальва неодноразово згадується як священна рослина, що зцілює, дає вгамувати голод та спрагу. Цей зв'язок із священною, корисною їжею робить мальву цінним предметом у проповіді християнства. У ранньовізантійському мистецтві мальва означала відразу кілька понять, пов'язаних із Тілом Христовим та переходом у світ Воскресіння і Царства Небесного. Це були: їжа, яку дає Христос; їжа, якою є Він Сам – Хліб життя; їжа, яка таким чином дає Воскресіння, з'єднання зі Спасителем, можливість, подібно до Христа, увійти до світу смерті та вийти з нього – перемогти із Христом смерть і бути в Царстві Небесному. Квіти мальви як символи Тіла Христа природно зображуються на завісах, які, згідно зі словами апостола Павла, також означали Тіло Христа – двері у Царство Небесне. Значеннєве наповнення таких образів було дуже багатим, важливим і сильним інтелектуальним та емоційним акцентом у зображеннях, при цьому образи мальви були естетичним, зрозумілим і лаконічним символом. Найпрекрасніший приклад цього в ранньовізантійському мистецтві – завіси палацу Теодориха у Сант-Аполлінаре-Нуово. Ці тканини із мальвами зіграли відразу дві важливі ролі: по-перше вони перетворили палац Теодориха на ківорій – символічний вхід у Царство Небесне; по-друге, завіси, зображені на місці самого Теодориха та його свити, показали, що перед ними, як перед єретиками, закритися вхід у Царство Небесне. Мальва як символ Тіла Христа активно використовувалася аж до VII ст., після чого ці зображення поступово зникають, що, було пов'язане із рішенням відійти від символічних образів, що було впроваджено на П'ято-Шостому соборі (692 р.).

Ключові слова: квітка, мальва, роза, євхаристичний символ, орнамент,

хліб, Тіло Христово, іконографія, Царство Небесне.

Mallow flowers or hollyhocks are flowers with heart-shaped petals of rosy-red colour which is getting lighter to the centre.. They could be depicted not only as usual flowers but also as crossed ones or just circles and were a very common symbol in Byzantine ecclesiastical art [23]. They could have a very important context as the Body of Christ and the Eucharist or just fill the backgrounds.

At first sight the use of a crossed circle in church art is quite natural as a symbolic representation of Christ. But why is it just a flower in the same context? If this symbol is so important, the question is why such a significant element is used as a common décor and just accompanies the main image filling the backgrounds. Was it of primary importance in some cases? The lack of knowledge about the history of this tradition results in problems with the authentic use of this symbol in new works and with the understanding of many plots related to it in early Byzantine art.

The aim of this research is to determine the importance the symbol of crossed flowers-circles has and the principles of its employment in iconography. When and why does this symbol of red crossed flowers-circles appear in Byzantine art and what does it mean?

Attributing the flower: a rose or a mallow? Why did it happen that this flower motif became so popular? What did this flower mean in the Christian culture of that time? Why could its image replace bread and even the Communion bread?

The veils of Theodoric's palace in the mosaic in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna present one of the earliest and brightest examples where ecclesiastic textiles abundantly use an ornament of crossed flowers and circles [2, c. 43]. The flower ornament on the veils of Theodoric's is well-known in works on Coptic textiles [3, c. 151; 32, p. 134; 29, p. 80], where similar images were extremely popular. The most prominent characteristics of these flowers are the heart-shaped petals, getting lighter to the base, placed in a cross, and dark diagonal crosses exceeding the flower outline. There are no direct analogies among the plants of today. Most researchers agree that the flower could have originated from the rose. The paper about the purpose of the flower was written by D. Renner-Volbach [28, p. 83 – 89] who attributed the flower as *Rosa richardii* Rehd [28, p. 85 – 87] and studies the symbolism of the rose marking out "the sign of comprehensive

happy waiting for immortality” [28, p. 84], the relations to Aphrodite of Roman Venus because of its fragrance and charming aroma [28, p. 88]; a symbol of the highest manifestation of a successful fulfilled life, magnificent luxury, beauty, joy, and harmony, and simultaneously the relation of the rose to burial cult because of “its quick fading and fast losing its petals serving as a reminder of the transience and inconstancy of life and the changes to fate” [28, p. 88]. However, this does not suit a flower to replace symbolically the communion bread.

A. Paetz gen. Schick from Germany is the only one to notice that the flower may also be attributed as a mallow” [25, p. 125, fig. 7f]. Such interpretation set a new research and study direction.

The mallow and the rose are flowers of different species, their relations in images could be a result of some variations of their names. The rose, the collective name for the species and kinds of the genus *Rosa* [6], has no references to the mallow, neither in the origin of the species nor in its name. The plant mallow in different cultures and languages is often related to the rose, and due to its abundance the mallow has a series of alternative names with the root “ros”. For example, in addition to “мальва”, similar in pronunciation to the Latin word “malva” and to the Greek words “μάλβα” and “μαλάχνη”, Russian also borrowed “штокроза” [7] – one of the German names of this flower (Stockrose), where it is also called “Stockmalve” and has several synonyms with the root “rose” – “Pappelrose”, “Bauernrose” or “Garten-Stockrose” [33], i.e., almost all its names are associated with the rose. In French, a similar connection can be observed – “Passe-rose”, “Passerose” or “Rose trémière” [10]; in Italian – “alcea rosea”, “malvarosa” or “malvone”; in Polish – “Malwa różowa”, “prawoślazem różowym” [22], etc.

The mallow (*Alcea rose*) of the family Malvaceae can be found everywhere even in wild varieties [4; 10], where one can clearly see heart-shaped petals yet. When looking at the mallow flowers from a distance, we see them as a cross-like shape despite the presence of not four petals but five. This cross-like pattern in the position of the petals, without the crosses exceeding the flower outlines, can be found in the most ancient images of the mallow, e.g. in the fabric of 3rd century from the excavation site in Dura-Europos [28, p. 84]. Images of cruciform flowers with heart-shaped petals gradually began evolving, and this applies both to the shape of the flower on fabrics and, obviously, to the plant itself. Ordinary modern mallows can serve as an example of this

evolution – they preserve the pronounced heart-shaped form of petals and the clear, smooth gradient transition towards the light-colored center, but they lose the separation between the petals, approaching circular shape. Depicting flowers, the patterns that followed in the 4th – 8th centuries acquire the same characteristics: for example, the flowers on the Coptic fabric from Dronka at Asyut necropolis, 5th – 6th century, from the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts collection, and many others.

Mallows in Antique and Byzantine Texts. During the Classic period either hollyhock or mallow flowers represented the simplest and the most useful healthy food and also a medicine. It was the food that dead people could eat to come to life. A big number of references to this flower appears in diverse sources: texts on funeral cult, philosophy, medicine, cookery.

It is attributed to Pythagoras that he actually promoted the mallow to the center of the universe. He was said to begin speaking to his pupils with “The most sacred thing in the world is a leaf of a mallow, the wisest is the number, and after it – that among people who have named all things” [9, IV. 17, lines 11 – 13].

Hesiod speaks about a mallow already in the first lines of the poem “Works and Days”. He wrote: “Fools! They know not how much more the half is than the whole, nor what great advantage there is in mallow and asphodel” [19, 40 – 41]. In one of scholiya to Hesiod, the following comment is given to these lines: “The simplest food we can eat, is the mallow and the asphodel; from them we receive the juice which is used in food. There is a lot of advantage in them, and more than in the most magnificent dishes which do harm, or in the most prosperous life, so to speak” (Hesiod). Possibly, the poet tells it from his own experience. Germip in the composition “About Seven Wise Men” speaks about the mallow as of food satisfying hunger. Gerodor remembers it satisfies hunger as well (the fifth book “Word about Heracles”). Plato in the third book of “Laws” says that Epimenides spent a whole day without sustenance and food, using something small and edible instead. And it was made from asphodel and mallow, and kept him from being hungry and thirsty” [30, 41.1 – 41.15].

Horace mentions “As for me, olives, endives, and mallows provide sustenance” [20, 31, ver. 15]. A lot of antique authors consider mallows a food of great taste, and a healing medicine, e.g. Epimenides [13, 5, 19], Plutarch [26, 157, F, 4], Galen [16, 9, 3] et alia. It is possibly

using the plant for food that accounts for the abundant images of mallows filling baskets like bread or fruits. The wish to emphasize what species of the flower is there in the basket is of importance: if the flower mass in the basket is represented in the generalized form of pink circles, then several separate flowers of distinct shape are put close to it, if the composition precludes the presentation of separate open flowers in front of the basket, then in the basket itself, just a single flower of distinct shape is depicted in the basket sticking out of it. Such specimens are quite well-spread. These examples enable understanding of the cross not being perceived as an integral part of the flower but a separate introduced detail. Such cross is either absent or depicted as one stripe over the flower, further examples are also available [24, p. 208 – 225, fig. 4, 6, 8, 10; 34, kat. 37, 39, st. 3, t 3].

Mallows and asphodels appeared on funeral cult as food which can give life to dead people [12, 120; 21, p. 107; 1, c. 90], so we can see mallows very often on the plates in the funeral context (and with symbols or gods connected with resurrection. Stylization of flowers and their details is sometimes very close to natural. Not whole plants but its parts could be used, often petals only, which we can compare with natural ones.

The flowers and loaves are often very similar in images. Let us compare the flowers in the baskets and baskets with bread. Both of them have a similar shape, silhouette, object perspective and the drawing style, and they are executed with almost identical artistic techniques. Only by relying on the knowledge of the plot, context, and several details we can judge the objects filling the baskets. The flowers with crosses became very similar to loaves with crosses lines which were imprinted on loaves for “*fractio panis*” (because people that time didn’t cut bread eating but broke it.

With the arrival of Christian era flowers began to symbolize food of Revival and life which Christ gives, as with Communion bread – the Body of Christ. The association of mallow with bread, leads to stylizations of mallow as bread (in the form of a circle or a crossed circle) or to images of flower in the context similar to bread. We saw that in a lot of cases before.

But not only illustrations show the connection of mallow to bread. It is in the names of the flower itself. The names have the general lexical roots with the word bread in different tongues and cultures. For example, these words are closely related in Hebrew: the mallow

with borrowed הולמ "malvah" is called חמלה "chalamith" and bread – לחם "lechem" [8]. In Arabic, the words mallow – "hubeza", and "hubz" bread just have the same root "[8]. In Russian and Ukrainian, one of the synonyms for "mallow" is not just «bread», but exactly «Communion bread» – «просфорник» [4]! In Russian and Greek, the Communion bread is called «просфора» (prosphora). The term «калачик» (kalachik) just means a small loaf of bread.

Let's return to the images. What was added to them by the image of mallow as of bread? First of all, it is the active preaching of the main idea of salvation stated by Christ: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world (Joan. 6: 51). Or: "Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live forever". (John. 6: 55 – 58).

Why is the image of a mallow preferred to that bread? Because such images addressed pagans as such: "The mallow which you considered revival food was a prototype of the real heavenly bread – Christ's Flesh. The mallow recovered your ancestors for a while, (only when they ate it), and Christ gives you life eternal". The image of mallow as of bread was also a confession, – a peculiar refusal of paganism. Therefore, they begin to depict the mallow near a cross or covered with a cross lines.

Such species of the flower are emphasized even more in its similarity with real bread, when it is divided into four or eight parts. We will look at an example of how the idea of salvation was eloquently depicted in images.

One of surprising examples of the Eucharistic context is represented by this image of a hare feasting on a grapevine. The hare is represented twice: running to a grapevine and already reaching and tasting it – even stretching its tongue to it.

In the early Christian tradition, a hare is an image of a terrified

person, who is looking for salvation in Christ and Church. In the context of this image, it is an image of a human running to a rescue, despite the dangers and the fear, and then finding it in Church and the Communion. The hare is presented not only tasting, but it also surrounded with a grapevine having four mallow flowers interwoven into it, that is to say it found rescue and salvation in the Body of Christ and Church. The frame is a knot with an infinite ornament in a circle as symbol of dwelling of church in Eternity.

There is another example of picturing of mallow together with grapevine and peacocks. The image of peacocks is an immortality symbol; the image of grapevine and bunches of grapes is a symbol of Christ and his blood in the Eucharist, and two mallows placed under them in the center finalize the composition and complete its semantic unity, being a symbol of meal of immortality and revival – bread of life and the Body of Christ. If images of peacocks and grapevine are usual and obvious signs of the Eucharist and immortality, it became clear now that two mallow flowers are more significant elements than often presented, especially in an Eucharistic context where they mean the Communion bread – the Body of Christ. Pay attention to the fact that two mallow flowers are placed on a foreground underlining their significance for this image.

The biggest distribution of images of a mallow in Christian iconography falls on the IV-VI century. Steady correlation between the mallow and bread is reinforced by depiction of similar flowers on bread and on Communion bread.

Many of these symbols are used on burial textile and clothes, sarcophagi, murals and mosaics of funeral chambers and veils where they signify new life, Revival, transition to the Kingdom of Heaven or Holy of Holies.

Frequently, we can see crosses from petals very close to a possible real model. Sometimes in mosaics, we can see a petal near the crossed flower.

They appear in large number on objects and in architectural details of entrances to sacral space.

In temples, these symbols of Revival decorate conditional border, like transition from the earthly world to heavenly – from a lower case to a top, from a naos to the altar – the Kingdom of Heaven and the Holy of Holies.

On the Evolution of the Flower Symbol. It should be mentioned

that despite quite satisfactory – from the point of view of meaning – pagan symbolism of the mallow, in the Christian interpretation it was attracted to giving a more accurate definition to its image which can be proved with the appearance of recognizable and traditional colors alongside the images more suitable to breads of the Communion bread stamps. In the cases, when the symbols play a role of special significance and are depicted in isolation from other details, the instantiation becomes of importance. For example, on the main veil of Theodoric's palace in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, there is no ambiguity in the symbols which are distinct crossed circles – the symbols of bread without any intimation to images of petals. It is especially clear read around the medallions with the Amnos or with the cross, e.g. in the presbytery cupola in San Vitale.

One can make a very probable guess that it were Christian monuments where the cross began its active development. This cross is depicted with expressly wide, distinct and contrast lines, often both in the «plus» sign (fig. 3), and in the form of an “X”, the closeness to which is emphasized with widening bends at its ends. In the early examples on textiles similar to real plants, mallow flowers bear no crosses.

As for the image of the cross sign on the circle attributed as a flower and a bread, one should admit a constant evolution in its variants. In the mosaics of Ravenna, when compared to the same symbols in the earlier Coptic textiles, there is an obvious attraction to a more circular shape without a specific emphasis in the silhouette of heart-shaped petals, without employing flower bright red and crimson hues but closeness to more golden and terracotta. The alternations of circular and heart-shaped-segment forms, using images more ambiguously presented as breads at the places of utmost importance proves the considerable evolution of this symbol towards using it as the Communion bread.

Conclusions. The mallow had several meanings related to curtains and transition to the world of Resurrection and Christ. It was: the food that Christ gives; the food He represents – the Bread of life; the food that leads to the Resurrection, unity with the Savior, opportunity to enter the underworld and come out of it like Christ – to overcome death with Christ and to be in the Kingdom of Heaven. The mallow flowers as symbols of the Body of Christ are naturally depicted on curtains, which, according to the apostle Paul, also signified the

Body of Christ as a door to the Kingdom of Heaven. These images were filled with the meaning that constituted a very rich, important and strong emotional accent, while the images of mallows were an aesthetic, understandable and laconic symbol. The mallow as the symbol of the Body of Christ was actively used until the 7th century, after which these images gradually started to disappear, which may have been due to the departure from the symbolic images of Christ in iconography after the Quinisext Council (AD 692). The mallow flower is one of the key symbols in the early Byzantine art as it is associated with the Body of Christ and the Eucharist.

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Ю. Г. Цветок мальвы – символ пищи, дающей жизнь: от классического периода до ранневизантийского искусства. В древней Греции мальва составляла основной рацион питания в период до повсеместного распространения злаковых культур. В классических греческих текстах мальва неоднократно упоминается как священное растение, дающее исцеление, утоляющее голод и жажду. Эта связь со священной, полезной пищей делает мальву ценным предметом в проповеди христианства. В

ранневизантийском искусстве мальва означала сразу несколько понятий, связанных с Телом Христа и переходом в мир Воскресения и Царства Небесного. Это были: пища, которую дает Христос; пища, которая есть Он Сам – Хлеб жизни; пища, дающая Воскресение, соединение со Спасителем, возможность подобно Христу войти в мир смерти и выйти из него – победить со Христом смерть и быть в Царстве Небесном. Цветы мальвы как символы Тела Христа естественно изображаются на завесах, которые, по слову апостола Павла, также означали Тело Христа – дверь в Царство Небесное. Смысловое наполнение таких образов было очень богатым, важным и сильным интеллектуальным и эмоциональным акцентом в изображениях, при этом образы мальвы были эстетичным, понятным и лаконичным символом. Прекраснейший пример этому в ранневизантийском искусстве – завесы дворца Теодориха. Эти ткани сыграли сразу две важные роли: во-первых, они превратили дворец Теодориха в киворий – символический вход в Царство Небесное; во-вторых, завесы, изображенные на месте самого Теодориха и его свиты, показали, что перед ними как перед еретиками закрылся вход в Царство Небесное. Мальва как символ Тела Христа активно использовалась вплоть до VII в., после чего эти изображения постепенно исчезают, что связано с решением отойти от символических образов, принятом на Пято-Шестом соборе (692 г.).

Ключевые слова: цветок, мальва, роза, евхаристический символ, орнамент, хлеб, Тело Христово, иконография, Царство Небесное.



Ил.1. The flower of pink mallow, Kharkiv, 30.06.2014. As shown in: the photo by J. Matveyeva.



Ил.2. A fragment of a Coptic fabric with three multicolored inserts – a bowl of flowers and two four-petaled cruciform rosettes from the Dronka at Asyut necropolis, 5th – 6th century, from the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts collection, #KT 606. Drawing by J. Matveyeva. Original – see: [3, p. 146–147, cat. 65].



Ил.3. The circle-flower beneath the arcs around the central coffer in Galla Placidia mausoleum. As shown in the photo from A. Chekal's archive.



Ил.4. Communion Breads in the scene of The Sacrifices of Abel, Melchizedek, and Abraham in Sant'Apollinare in Classe, with distinctly highlighted crosses in circles in the center. As seen on the photo from L. I. Lifshitz archive.



Ил.5. Sant Apollinare Nuovo Theodorix palace



Ил.6. Саркофаг архиепископа Теодора. Сант-Аполлинаре-ин-Класе