

Mary Multiplied: The Devotion to Mary Three-Handed in Bulgaria and the Mechanism of Sacred Multiplication

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2025.4.38> © 2025, Vihra Baeva

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This study aims to substantiate and explore the concept of *multiplication of a sacred prototype* (*sacred multiplication*), according to which the sacred prototype is continually reproduced across a multitude of images that replicate the original. The focus is on a specific Marian image – Mary Three-Handed – and its cult in Bulgaria. To this end, I follow a chain of replicas: from the legendary first Marian icons and associated miracle narratives, through the emergence of the Three-Handed type with its variants, to contemporary manifestations of its cult in Bulgaria. I employ an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on historiography, art history, cultural anthropology, ethnology, and folkloristics. For recent developments, I rely on my own fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2025, supplemented by media publications and online sources. The analysis of a series of images associated with the veneration of the Three-Handed Mary demonstrates that the multiplication of a sacred prototype is a central mechanism in Marian devotion and, more broadly, in Orthodox piety, preserved through centuries. It bears witness to the enduring potency of icons to mediate grace across time, space, and media, as lived by believers. Through sacred multiplication, the universal Christian image becomes embedded in the sacred geography and history of local communities. In this process, it acquires distinctive features and shapes communal identity, while devotees continually reaffirm their personal bond with the holy.

Keywords: Marian devotion, Three-Handed Mary, Orthodox Christianity, contemporary religiosity, sacred prototype

How to cite: Baeva, V. (2025). Mary Multiplied: The Devotion to Mary Three-Handed in Bulgaria and the Mechanism of Sacred Multiplication. *Slovenský národopis*, 73(4), 492–513. <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2025.4.38>

Introduction

Devotion to the Mother of God, the Most Holy Ever-Virgin Mary, occupies a central place in both Orthodox and Catholic Christian religiosity. From the Church's standpoint, Mary is venerated as the only human being to have attained such personal perfection and holiness that she fulfilled the aim of the Incarnation – human deification. Though she belongs to fallen humanity, bearing the consequences of original sin, her unparalleled purity and dignity as the Mother of God atone for Eve's transgression. She was granted bodily assumption into heaven, thereby crossing the boundary between the human and divine realms in a manner akin to her Son, Jesus Christ (see Uspenskiy, 1987).

In Bulgarian tradition – as in that of many other Christian countries – Mary¹ ranks among the most beloved and revered sacred figures, regarded as an intercessor before God and protector of humankind, especially of women and children. She serves as patroness of numerous churches and monasteries throughout Bulgaria, among the most prominent those of Bachkovo, Troyan, and Rozhen. Her main feast days – the Dormition on 15 August and the Nativity on 8 September – are celebrated with solemn liturgies, communal gatherings (*sabor*), and sacrificial feasts (*kurban*) in many villages and towns (Baeva, 2013b; see also Vakarelski, 1993; Georgieva, 2000). The miracle-working icons of the Mother of God play a key role in her veneration: they constitute the chief symbolic capital of holy sites, lead liturgical processions on feast days, draw pilgrims as their ultimate destination, and give rise to specific ritual practices and rich collections of miracle narratives.

Generally, holy icons occupy a central place in Christian teaching, in church practice, and in everyday informal expressions of devotion, especially in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Both theologians and scholars of Christian art stress one basic Orthodox tenet: that icons as sacred images do not carry divine power in themselves, and thus they are not objects of idolatrous worship. What makes them holy is their status as reflections of the heavenly prototypes: God, Mary, and the saints who dwell in transcendent eternity (see Brubaker, 1994a; Lidov, 2009; Bakalova, 2016). Icons appear metaphorically “transparent”: they function as “windows” through which the faithful behold the invisible sacred personages and invoke their miraculous intervention. The quintessence of this understanding is captured in the well-known words of St. Basil the Great: “The honour given to the image is transferred to its

1 Among Orthodox Slavic people, including Bulgarians, the designation *Bogoroditsa* (Богородица) is conventional. It corresponds to the Greek *Theotokos* (Θεοτόκος), literally “God-bearer”. For the purposes of this publication, I use the designations Mary, Virgin Mary, and Mother of God, accepted in English-language scholarship on Orthodox Christianity (see Dubisch, 1995, pp. 235–236).

prototype” (see Brubaker 1994a, p. 4). Over time, the number of images increases, some of those generating further images, and so on ad infinitum. We thus encounter “images of images of images,” as Leslie Brubaker vividly puts it (1994b, p. 213).

The proliferation of iconographic types that represent variants of a single sacred invariant is also an aspect of this process. This variety is especially pronounced with Marian icons, which occupy a privileged place among sacred images. As Russian theologian and art historian Leonid Uspenskiy notes, Marian icons differ from icons of other saints and angels not only in their sheer number and intense veneration but also in the variety of their iconographic types. In the Russian Church calendar, for example, one finds some 260 distinct types, and according to other sources, their number reaches 700 (Uspenskiy, 1987).

Although all icons are deemed sacred, certain ones – those credited with multiple miracles – acquire special status. These miracle-working icons, predominantly Marian, are reproduced to the greatest extent. In the early centuries of Christianity, such icons belonged principally to Constantinople’s churches; later, many were located in Mount Athos monasteries and emblematic Russian *lavras*. Thereafter, each renowned icon, in its turn, became a prototype that was reproduced in countless replicas that varied only slightly or more substantially. Regardless of differences, it was believed that these images mystically “inherited” the miracle-working power of the original. Paradoxically, their sacredness did not diminish; on the contrary, it reproduced itself through symbolic reiteration of the holy original. Observing the long-term development of the iconographic tradition, a cultural mechanism characteristic of religious art and culture becomes apparent: the sacred prototype is continually reproduced across a multitude of images that replicate the original.

I propose the term *multiplication of the sacred prototype*² – or, in its concise form, *sacred multiplication* – to designate the continual reproduction of a miracle-working image once it has attained prototype status. Its defining features are replication with varying fidelity to the original and the belief that copies mystically inherit the prototype’s sacred efficacy. Unlike mere artistic reproduction or imitation, the concept of sacred multiplication explains how replicas intensify rather than dilute sacred power, and how prototype status is achieved through the interplay of miracle attribution, devotional practice, and institutional sanction.

This study aims to examine in detail the concept of sacred multiplication and assess its applicability to the example of a specific Marian image: Mary Three-Handed (in Bulgarian, *Bogoroditsa Troeruchitsa*, *Богородица Троеручница*; in Greek, *Panagia Tricherosa*, *Παναγία Τριχερούσα*). Although the reproduction of holy icons is not specific to Orthodox tradition and is not limited to the type of Mary Three-Handed,

2 The term *multiplication of the sacred prototype* and some of the ideas and examples presented here first appeared in my earlier work published in Bulgarian (Baeva, 2021). Other authors use the term *ritual multiplication* to refer to the repetition of rituals aimed at achieving the same practical and spiritual goals (see Stahl & Venbrux, 2011).

this particular article will not make broader comparisons and will concentrate only on the veneration of this specific iconographic type in the Bulgarian context. I trace the development of the Mary Three-Handed cult diachronically, following a chain of images from the legendary first icons of the Mother of God and associated miracle narratives, through the emergence and development of the Three-Handed type with its variants, to contemporary manifestations of its cult in Bulgaria.

I employ an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on data from historiography and art history, and applying methods from cultural anthropology, ethnology, and folkloristics in the analyses of narratives and rituals. For recent developments, I rely on my own fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2025 in the monasteries of Troyan, Sokolski, and Arbanasi using the methods of observation and participant observation, free and semi-structured interviews, and photo and video documentation.³ I have also utilized media publications and online sources referring to the veneration of Mary Three-Handed in Bulgaria in recent years. The analysis of the chain of images is expected to illuminate characteristic features of the mechanism of sacred multiplication as a significant dimension of devotion to the Mother of God and, more broadly, of religious culture and mentalities.

The First Images: Marian Icons Painted by Saint Luke

The direct link between the sacred figure of Mary and its images is illustrated by a traditional church narrative (*predanie*) concerning Saint Luke the Evangelist. He is regarded as Christianity's first iconographer, for his vita reports that he studied painting in his youth. "Sacred tradition says that he painted two icons: one of the Holy Virgin Mary holding the Divine Infant, and one of the foremost apostles Peter and Paul. In this way, he inaugurated church iconography to the glory of the Mother of God and all the saints" (*Zhitiya na svetiite*, 1991, pp. 524–525). Another version holds that Luke painted three Marian icons, corresponding to the main iconographic types: the *Virgin Eleusa* (Tenderness), the *Hodegetria* (She Who Shows the Way), and the *Deesis* type without the Child (Uspenskiy, 1987).

The motif of Luke as the author of the first Marian icons developed further in Orthodox discourse. It gained currency that the Virgin personally sat for Luke, who executed her portraits *from life*, and these became the first Marian icons. As Hans Belting points out, this claim contains a clear anachronism: Luke, companion and

3 I visited the Troyan Monastery in July and August 2019, August 2020, September 2021, and July 2023. I observed and documented the feast of Mary Three-Handed on 11–12 July 2019 and the monastery's patronal feast of the Dormition of Mary on 14–15 August 2019. My visits to the Arbanasi monastery took place in August 2019, August 2020, and September 2021, and I observed and documented the patronal feast of the Dormition on 14–15 August 2020. The Sokolski monastery near Gabrovo was visited in July and October 2019, and I observed and documented the celebration of the Dormition on 15 August 2025.

disciple of Christ, could not have painted him from life as an infant in Mary's arms (Belting, 2002, p. 77). Yet, apostolic authorship remains a key argument for icon veneration: it connects icon painting to a sacred precedent, the work of one of the Church's most revered saints. This legend spread widely over the course of time, and many icons have been ascribed to Luke. Uspenskiy reports that in the Russian Church about ten icons are attributed to the Apostle, as are up to twenty-one on Mount Athos and in the West, eight of which reside in Rome. However, Uspenskiy clarifies: "Of course, none of the icons attributed to him actually came from his hand – none have survived. 'Luke's authorship' should be understood as meaning that these icons are copies of icons (or rather copies of copies) originally painted by him" (Uspenskiy, 1987). Thus, the narrative of Luke's life-portraits of the Mother of God functions as a legitimizing *topos* for icon worship, grounding it in an apostolic act. Through the direct correspondence of image to prototype, the icon's sanctity and supernatural power are vindicated.⁴

Some versions of the Luke narrative go even further. According to these, the Virgin herself endorsed and blessed the icon with her own handprint, thereby imparting unique grace to it. This element reinforces the sacred character of all the icons' copies, since they reproduce Mary's true features as captured by Luke's brush (Uspenskiy, 1987; see also Belting, 2002, p. 78). A similar motif appears in legendary accounts of the miraculous third hand on icons of Mary Three-Handed:

But some stories hold that this is one of the four Marian icons painted by Saint Luke the Evangelist, about which he inquired: 'Lady Mistress, does this holy icon please you?' And the Mistress replied: 'It pleases me, and may the grace of Him born of me abide upon it forever.' She then pressed her hand as a seal of witness – hence the third hand visible even today, and the icon's name Three-Handed (Turilov, 1996, p. 526).

This account never gained wide circulation in official discourse, but it neatly illustrates the mechanism of sacred multiplication. The narrative logic ascertains that the Three-Handed icon is a direct image of the Virgin, produced jointly by Saint Luke and by Mary herself – by leaving her blessed handprint upon it. By means of this dual authorship, the iconography of the Three-Handed receives a "double sanction": first from the saintly painter, then from the most holy prototype whom it depicts.

4 For example, the famous Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God in Russia (Uspenskiy, 1987; Chudotvornii ikoni, 2006, p. 131), the icon of the Annunciation of Tinos in Greece (Dubisch, 1995, p. 241), and the miracle-working Marian icon at Bachkovo Monastery in Bulgaria (Baeva, 2013, p. 13) are attributed to Luke.

The Skopje Legend of the Three-Handed Virgin

Studies have identified the existence of an earlier legend – now largely forgotten – about the origin of the icon of Mary Three-Handed. The narrative is preserved in a sixteenth-century Russian text known as the “Hilandar Legend.”⁵ According to this account, the first Three-Handed icon appeared in Skopje through a miraculous event. A local icon-painter was painting an image of the Virgin *Hodegetria* on a church wall when, overnight, a third hand holding the Christ Child appeared on the image of its own accord. The painter washed it away with a lot of labour, but on the next morning, he discovered that it had reappeared; he scrubbed it off again, only to find it restored yet again the following day. Alarmed, the painter summoned the local metropolitan bishop, who sealed the church for the night and returned with clergy and laypeople of Skopje the next morning. To everybody’s astonishment, the seal was untouched, but the third hand still stood on the icon. Recognizing a miracle, the metropolitan ordained that the icon remain in its three-handed form. A local noblewoman then took it to her home, and on the spot where it had stood, a “non-man-made, self-painted” image appeared. There, a monastery dedicated to the Three-Handed Virgin was founded. Later, the Skopje icon miraculously travelled on the back of a mule to the Hilandar Monastery, where it was placed in the catholicon and continued to work miracles (Turilov, 1996, pp. 517–519).

The data from the cited legend are corroborated by historical evidence indicating the existence of a cult of the Three-Handed Mary in Skopje during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries (Miljković, 2006–2007). Art historians have found that in the Skopje iconographic type, Mary was depicted with three natural hands; the third hand was also a right hand and supported the Infant’s feet (see Gergova, 2018).

At the same time, the passage given above can be interpreted as a manifestation of the mechanism of sacred multiplication on three separate levels: first, the icon in process, *Hodegetria*, was itself a copy of an apostolic prototype; second, the miraculous third hand multiplied itself through repeated appearance; and third, the icon duplicated itself when a new, “self-painted” image was spontaneously produced in the icon’s former location. In this manner, the legend claims, each copy authenticates the sanctity of the emerging Three-Handed iconographic type. At the same time, the story also offers an explanation of how the icon was miraculously doubled and therefore its cult was multiplied – one copy remaining in Skopje, the other carried to Hilandar to launch a new centre of devotion.

Over time, the Skopje cult waned and its legend of origin faded away. A new legend was created at Hilandar Monastery and, accordingly, the iconography of the Three-Handed also changed. Yet the memory of the Three-Handed Virgin endured: a copy

5 The legend was published by Turilov (1996) with a brief preface. For an analysis of the text and iconography of the first Three-Handed, as well as its reflection in surviving monuments and reconstruction of its history, see Gergova, 2018 and the cited literature.

of the Skopje icon was sent to Russia in 1661 and presented to an influential religious centre, the New Jerusalem Monastery. In this way, the Skopje icon spawned countless Russian copies of Mary Three-Handed, preserving the old iconography, even as the original legend was forgotten (see Gergova, 2018, pp. 84–85). Although the early legend of the non-man-made third hand is no longer remembered in the present, it is still held that “in Russian replicas there exists a tradition of depicting the third hand as belonging to the Mother of God herself, rather than as a separately affixed votive element.”⁶

Original or Copy: Mary Three-Handed of Hilandar

Today, both church sources and media publications maintain that the “original” miracle-working Three-Handed icon is Serbian and resides in the catholicon of Hilandar Monastery on Mount Athos.⁷ That image depicts the Virgin holding the Christ Child on her right arm. By the late nineteenth century, a gilded metal cover (*riza*) encrusted with precious stones was installed that covered all but the faces and the hands of Mary and the Child’s feet. Just below the Virgin’s right hand, craftsmen affixed a third votive right hand, seemingly supporting the Child’s right foot (see Benchev, 1996; Janković, 2001, pp. 122–123).

Art historians generally date the Hilandar Three-Handed icon to about 1350 and attribute it to a Greek painter (Benchev, 1996; Janković, 2001, pp. 122–123) or, more precisely, to a Thessalonian workshop (Gergova, 2022, pp. 18–19). Photographs of the icon without its *riza* reveal that it is an original *Hodegetria* with no third hand; on the reverse appears an image of St. Nicholas of Myra. Traces of a handle at the base indicate that the panel was once processional – intended to be carried during liturgical processions. These findings suggest that the icon was transformed and re-semantized at a later stage by adding the votive hand. However, when and why exactly this happened remains unclear (Benchev, 1996). Recent art-historical studies date the replacement of the original *Hodegetria* between 1725 and 1745 (see Miljković, 2006–2007, p. 226; Gergova, 2022, p. 21).⁸ Bulgarian art historian Ivanka Gergova established that Mary Three-Handed from Hilandar follows the model of the Skopje icon to the greatest extent, with the only difference that the third hand is not painted on the panel but is fixed additionally to it in the form of a votive (see Gergova, 2018).

6 See Hram Troicy (2025, May 6), http://hram-troicy.prihod.ru/ikony_bozhiejj_materi/view/id/1133956

7 For the history, architecture, and art of Hilandar, see Bogdanović, Đurić, Medaković, 1978; Prashkov, 1987; Kocева, 1992; Janković, 2001; Subotić (Ed.), 2008. A comprehensive bibliography appears in Melcer, 2003. An overview of Serbian research on Hilandar is available on the monastery’s official website Hilandar info (2024, January 20), http://www.hilandar.info/strana.php?strana_id=226

8 I explore this question further in my ongoing research.

Correspondingly, a new legend appeared that explained the new iconography. It linked the icon to the eighth-century iconoclast persecutions in Byzantium and to the figure of St John of Damascus – hymnographer, theologian, and defender of icons. According to that narrative, while serving as secretary to the caliph in Damascus, John was falsely accused of treason and condemned: his right hand was amputated at the wrist. However, the holy man did not despair. Instead, he offered fervent prayers before his household icon of the *Theotokos*, pressing his severed hand against its joint. Miraculously, the hand was healed and completely restored. In gratitude, John commissioned a silver votive hand to be forged and fastened to the icon – hence its name Three-Handed. After the miracle, John entered monastic life at the Monastery of the Capadocian saint Sabbas the Sanctified near Jerusalem, taking the icon with him. In the thirteenth century, Serbian archbishop and saint Sava gifted the icon to the newly founded Hilandar Monastery in fulfilment of an ancient prophecy (see Chudotvorni ikoni, 2006, pp. 52–54).⁹

Multiple versions exist regarding the icon's later fate (see the summary in Benchev, 1996). According to the most popular one, at that time Serbia was beset by unrest and enemy invasions. To save the icon, it was loaded onto a mule or donkey, which journeyed on its own to the Hilandar Monastery on Mount Athos. The brotherhood received the sacred image with solemn reverence and, in memory of the miracle, began holding an annual procession to the spot where it appeared. The patronal feast of Mary Three-Handed is celebrated on July 12 (25)¹⁰ with an all-night solemn vigil.¹¹



Figure 1: *The miracle-working icon of Mary Three-Handed from the Hilandar Monastery. Credit: <https://pravoslavieto.com/ikonopis/Bogorodica/hodegetria/troeruchica.htm>.*

9 I recorded a variant of this narrative in an interview with the current abbot of Troyan Monastery, Bishop Sioniy. See also Janković, 2001, pp. 116–117; Bakalova, 2016, p. 99; Hilandar info (2024, December 1), http://www.hilandar.info/strana.php?strana_id=179

10 Some Orthodox churches follow the Julian (Old Style) liturgical calendar while others use the Revised Julian or the Gregorian (New Style) calendar. Where the Old Style is observed, dates are 13 days earlier than the civil (Gregorian) calendar in the current period; thus the patronal feast celebrated on 12 July (Old Style) falls on 25 July (New Style). While the Bulgarian Orthodox Church uses the

This version of the appearance of the third hand developed relatively late; it likely crystallized in the mid-eighteenth century, around the time the original Three-Handed icon from Skopje was supplanted. How the newer legend displaced the older Skopje narrative remains an open question. Scholars note that the Russian Hilandar legend mentions another miraculous icon of the Mother of God which was gilded. It was believed to have healed St. John of Damascus' hand (Turilov, 1996, p. 23). This suggests that the two Hilandar legends might have been conflated, leading to the emergence of the contemporary version of the third votive hand (Turilov, 1996, p. 513; Gergova, 2018, p. 82).

It turns out that the present miracle-working Hilandar icon, popularly known today as the prototype of the iconographic type of Mary Three-Handed, was in fact created at a relatively late stage in the cult's development. Practically, it represents a copy of the old Skopje Three-Handed original, but formed through a kind of "reworking" and re-semiotization. Adding a votive third hand altered the iconographic type and functions of a *Hodegetria* intended for processional use, along with the adjacent legend. However, this in no way diminished its symbolic value. On the contrary, the Hilandar Three-Handed icon was still regarded as miracle-working and exerted enormous influence in the Orthodox world, especially among the Slavs. In turn, it produced numerous replicas in the form of icons and prints, many of which remain in the Bulgarian lands.

Copy of the Copy: The Three-Handed Icon of Troyan

In Bulgaria, devotion to the Three-Handed Virgin entered directly under Athonite influence, owing to Bulgarians' long-standing ties with the Hilandar Monastery. The cult of the Three-Handed began to take root here in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, chiefly through printed accounts of the Athonite monasteries and the oral narratives of *taxidiot* monks who travelled across Bulgarian lands collecting alms for their monasteries. The image of the miracle-working Hilandar icon was duly adopted by Bulgarian iconographers – above all, those of the Samokov and Tryavna schools (Gergova, 2011). The number of known depictions is vast: the Three-Handed appears in prints, goldsmith work, manuscript decoration, mural painting, and especially panel icons.¹² Some of these icons remained in private hands for "domestic" devotion, while others gained widespread renown for their miracle-working power and gave rise to local cults.

Revised Julian (new style) calendar for fixed feasts, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church use the Julian (old style) calendar for liturgical dates.

11 For more detail see Hilandar info (2024, December 1), http://www.hilandar.info/strana.php?strana_id=179

12 In her recent monograph, Bulgarian art historian Ivanka Gergova provides a thorough study of Bulgaria's Three-Handed replicas, richly illustrated with examples (Gergova 2022, pp. 16–107).

A prime case is the Stavropegial Monastery of the Dormition of Mary near the town of Troyan – the undisputed centre of Three-Handed devotion in Bulgaria. It ranks third in size and influence after the monasteries of Rila and Bachkovo, and is considered the foremost pilgrimage destination in northern Bulgaria.¹³ Although some scholars posit medieval origins of the shrine, most agree it was founded circa 1600. According to the monastery chronicle (unfortunately lost by the early twentieth century), the monastery was founded at that time by an anonymous hermit and his disciple, who initially built a wooden hut in the “Troyan wilderness” and later a small church that has not survived. The present main church of the Dormition was erected in 1835 and frescoed in 1847 by the eminent Bulgarian painter Zahari Zograf. His murals cover the interior walls and feature rare and striking scenes (Prashkov, 1992; see also Vasiliev, 1962; Pandurski, 1973; Gergova, 1988).

The monastery’s principal treasure and focal point for the faithful is its miracle-working icon of the Three-Handed Mother of God, which is housed on a carved icon-stand (*proskynetarion*) to the right of the nave. The central image, which follows closely the Hilandar prototype with minor alterations, is set within a frame of additional narrative scenes. Silver overlays with crowns are placed on the halos of Mary and the Christ Child, and silver votives cover both of Mary’s palms. A third silver hand (a right one) is appended in the middle of the icon’s lower end – thus transforming the *Hodegetria* type into a Three-Handed, just like the Hilandar prototype (Gergova, 2012, pp. 156–157).

Stylistic and historical evidence date the Troyan Three-Handed icon to the early nineteenth century, most likely painted by Simeon Tsonyov of the renowned iconographer family Vitanovtsi from Tryavna. Since, according to tradition, the icon was brought two centuries earlier, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, some researchers assume there once existed an earlier Troyan Three-Handed that disappeared during the attacks and plundering of the monastery in that period (see Gergova, 2012, pp. 157–158). Therefore, it is possible that the Troyan Three-Handed is a replica of a lost original. According to other opinions, however, the icon comprises not one but three painted layers, which explains the time discrepancy.¹⁴

The founding legend of the miracle-working icon and of the origins of the monastery itself was recorded relatively late – in the monastery chronicle of the early nineteenth century (Hariton, 1958) – and persists in various forms today. According to that narrative, a monk from Mount Athos passed through these parts on his way to Wallachia, carrying with him a miraculous icon of the Mother of God. The Athonite stayed for a while with the Troyan hermit for joint prayer, and the holy icon began to work miracles. When it was time to depart, the guest saddled his horse and set off. But before long, the horse stumbled and fell. The monk returned, and after

13 For the history, architecture, and church art of Troyan Monastery, see Hariton, 1958; Gergova, 1988; Prashkov, 1992.

14 Interview with Bishop Sioniy Velichki, Abbot of Troyan Monastery.



Figure 2: The miracle-working icon of Mary Three-Handed from the Troyan Monastery during a litany procession on 15 August 2019. Photo: Vihra Baeva.

a few days set out again – only for the horse to fall at the same spot. The brothers perceived this as a sign that the icon wished to remain within the Troyan region. News of the miracle spread, other monks soon joined them, and thus the Troyan Monastery was founded.¹⁵

Although this legend may preserve traces of genuine historical events, as some researchers suppose (see Gergova, 2012, pp. 153–155), it notably echoes motifs from the Skopje and Hilandar narratives – namely, the motif of the animal that carries the icon to its destined home. Thus, the Troyan Three-Handed Virgin not only replicates the Hilandar prototype in image, but through elements of its founding legend the Troyan Monastery itself becomes a “copy” of Hilandar, lending its inherent prestige

and miracle-working potential. Multiplication here operates on a ritual level as well: each year on the Dormition feast (15 August), the miracle-working icon of Troyan is carried in procession to the site of its miraculous discovery – now marked by an open chapel – drawing the largest crowds of pilgrims from across Bulgaria, especially the Balkan and northern regions. A second major feast of the Three-Handed is held on 12 July with an all-night vigil beginning on the eve of the holiday.¹⁶

The establishment of Three-Handed Mary devotion in Bulgaria spurred further multiplication of its sacred image – a process that commenced during the Revival period¹⁷ and intensified in our own day in diverse forms. One of the earliest examples is the fresco of the Three-Handed Virgin above the narthex entrance, painted by

15 A fuller account appears on the monastery website Troyanski manastir (2025, May 5), *Ikonata* “Sv. Bogoroditsa Troeruchitsa”, <https://www.troyanmonastery.com/ikonata-sv-bogoroditsa-triraka/>, and I recorded a similar version in an interview with Abbot Sioniy.

16 In my earlier work I give detailed ethnographic description of these two celebrations (Baeva, 2020).

17 The term “Bulgarian National Revival” (*Vazrazhdane*) designates the epoch of significant educational and cultural flourishing from the beginning of the eighteenth century until the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878. This period is marked by the emergence and development of bourgeois economic and social relations, the creation of a new type of culture, the struggle for an independent Bulgarian Church, the formation of the Bulgarian nation, and the preparation and realization of the national liberation revolution in the Bulgarian lands.

Zahari Zograf. Positioned at the threshold, it symbolically welcomes the pilgrims and “prepares” them for an encounter with the sacred icon. Early printed replicas of the icon – small engravings produced at the monastery and distributed country-wide – served as an early form of devotional souvenirs (for more about those see Gergova, 2012, pp. 158–160).

Multiplication of the Cult of Mary Three-Handed in Bulgaria

Beyond Troyan, on Bulgarian territory there are two other holy sites where distinct local cults have formed around miraculous icons of Mary Three-Handed: Sokolski Monastery of the Dormition of Mary near the town of Gabrovo, and Arbanasi Monastery of the Dormition of Mary near the old Bulgarian capital of Veliko Tarnovo. As I will show below, viewed historically, both of these local cults emerge as a kind of “copy” of the veneration of Mary Three-Handed at the Troyan Monastery and may be seen as yet another form of sacred multiplication of the sacred prototype.

Sokolski Monastery of the Dormition of Mary was founded in 1832 by Josif Sokolski (1786–1879), a former monk of the Troyan Monastery. After leaving the Troyan brotherhood, he resolved to build a new monastery above his native town of Gabrovo in the Central Balkan Mountains, about 70 km east of Troyan. Well versed in the history of the Troyan Monastery, Sokolski modelled his new foundation after it. One of the very first icons he commissioned for the newly erected monastery was precisely Mary Three-Handed – a copy which is still regarded as miracle-working today. Though the image was executed in a more modern for its day realistic style, the poses of the Virgin and Child closely follow the Troyan “original” (Gergova, 2012). This new icon quickly attracted pilgrims and became the monastery’s chief draw (Temelski, 2004, p. 24; Gergova, 2011, p. 397). In this case, the mechanism of sacred multiplication is bound to a drive to localize the sacred prototype, to embed it in the local cultural landscape and transform it into part of the community’s symbolic capital. The Sokolski copy of the Three-Handed icon from Troyan functioned to symbolically transmit the prototype’s sanctity to the Gabrovo region, duplicating and legitimizing the Three-Handed cult locally.

Arbanasi Monastery of the Dormition of Mary is also situated in the Central Balkan Mountains, about 100 km east of Troyan. It stands on the north-western edge of the village of Arbanasi, close to the city of Veliko Tarnovo. Its foundation probably dates back to the Second Bulgarian Empire (twelfth–fourteenth centuries), when it formed part of the Tarnovo “Holy Mountain” – a crown of monasteries encircling the city. The monastery was destroyed during the Ottoman onslaught on Bulgarian lands, then revived in the early seventeenth century. Around 1680 the present Church of the Dormition of Mary, with its adjacent Chapel of the Holy Trinity, was erected. Periodically renovated and enlarged over the centuries, the monastery remains active today and currently functions as a women’s convent. Its principal relic



Figure 3: The miracle-working icon of Mary Three-Handed from the Sokolski Monastery. Photo: Vihra Baeva.

is an icon of Mary Three-Handed, dated to the late eighteenth century and painted by a Tryavna-school artist. The Mother of God from Arbanasi is depicted full-length, frontally, seated on a throne, and surrounded by twelve prophets. On the halos of the Virgin and the Christ Child metal mountings are fixed; two votive offerings in the shape of a right hand have also been added, bearing donor inscriptions. In fact, this image differs radically from the Three-Handed iconographic type of Hilandar and Troyan. A Romanian prototype of this composition has been identified, most likely introduced here via print (see more detail in Gergova, 2012).

Thus, the pertinent question arises: how did an image of a completely different iconographic type become transformed into a Three-Handed, being renowned and venerated as such? The existing literature

offers no answer, but in my fieldwork, I encountered a narrative preserving the memory of the event that turned the Arbanasi icon into a Three-Handed. According to one of the nuns – who had heard accounts from older sisters – the third hand of the Mother of God was donated as late as 1928 as a votive offering, in commemoration of a miracle worked by the icon, the healing of a seriously ill child:

*And then, in 1928, they brought a boy by cart from Gorna Oryahovitsa who was already dying. He was choking, his whole body had turned blue. When they laid him here, on the ground in front of the icon, he'd already stopped breathing. And then he came back to life! His relatives placed the little hand onto the Mother of God's, and from that moment on she became Three-Handed.*¹⁸

The nun's story is confirmed by the donor inscription on the votive of the smaller right hand of the Mother of God, reading the year 1928 and the initials T. S.

18 Interview with Sister Siluania, nun and abbess of the Arbanasi Monastery of the Dormition of Mary.

In the Arbanasi case, we observe how the existing miraculous icon of a different iconographic type was transformed into a Three-Handed by adding a third votive hand. As we have already seen, this mechanism of multiplication through ‘reworking’ is not new: the Hilandar Three-Handed itself was created in a similar fashion, having originally been a processional *Hodegetria*. Interestingly, in the legend from Arbanasi, adding a votive third hand to commemorate a healing echoes the very origin of the Hilandar Three-Handed icon, where a miraculous cure similarly prompted St. John of Damascus to attach a third hand as a permanent reminder of divine intervention.

I am inclined to suggest that the transformation of the Arbanasi icon into Three-Handed took place under the influence of the Trojan Monastery, which lies not far from Arbanasi and whose sphere of influence encompasses the village. Thus, the Trojan Three-Handed served as a well-known, prestigious model for both the nuns and the local community. By attaching the third votive hand, the image was brought into line with the famous sacred prototype from Trojan, thereby enhancing its prestige and symbolic value.



Figure 4: The miracle-working icon of Mary Three-Handed from the Arbanasi Monastery. Photo: Vihra Baeva.

Postmodern Multiplication

The development of contemporary technologies has expanded the means of producing copies and thereby intensified the mechanism of sacred multiplication. In this section, I present field observations concerning the Trojan Three-Handed icon and the various modes and forms in which it is reproduced in our times. Many of the phenomena documented here are widespread beyond the Three-Handed cult, but this case provides a convenient lens for tracing how sacred prototypes are replicated today.

An important aspect of sacred multiplication concerns the so-called religious souvenirs. Although these have existed since the most ancient times across various religious communities, with the advance of modernity, they have become increasingly mass-produced, inexpensive, and widely accessible.¹⁹ As heirs to the Revival-era prints, mentioned above, in more recent times, numerous reproductions of the Troyan Three-Handed icon have appeared on religious souvenirs – thus transforming the sacred image into a commodity which can be sold and “consumed”. In the two church shops at the Troyan Monastery – as well as at the numerous stalls and stands along the road leading to it – one can find a rich variety of items bearing replicas of the Three-Handed icon. It is reproduced in countless home icons designed for hanging on the wall or placing on a domestic iconostasis. Among these are hand-painted copies in various sizes, but the most numerous are photographic reproductions on paper affixed to wooden or plastic panels, sometimes with ‘gilded’ details. Small portable icons in the form of diptychs or triptychs with folding ‘wings’ are also available, in which the Three-Handed is ‘accompanied’ by other saints such as St. Clement of Ohrid and St. Nedelya. There are also inexpensive reproductions on postcards or small laminated cards that can be carried in a purse or clothing pocket for apotropaic protection.²⁰ The image also appears on stickers meant for affixing to various surfaces, refrigerator magnets, keychains, double-sided hanging car icons (for suspending from the rear-view mirror), medallions, and bracelets.

On the one hand, this production of religious goods for sale reflects the commercialization of the sacred and its conversion into an economic resource from which both the church and private entrepreneurs profit. On the other hand, the commercial supply meets consumer demand for objects that combine the religious and the utilitarian, fulfilling both cultic and practical functions. By obtaining reproductions of the sacred image, believers gain continuous access to its perceived grace and protective efficacy, not only within the church’s sacred space but also in private contexts such as the home or the automobile. In some cases, direct bodily contact with the sacred is effected: individuals may carry the image on their person – e.g., in a wallet, attached to clothing, or worn as an amulet around the neck or wrist – thereby enabling them to internalize its attributed divine power and protection.

In another modern aspect of multiplication, the sacred prototype is replicated digitally. In recent years, I’ve observed in the field how pilgrims eagerly photograph various miracle-working images with their mobile phones – and sometimes with a camera.²¹ I recorded the same trend at the Troyan Monastery during my visits in

19 For more on religious souvenirs in the Orthodox context, see Baeva, 2009; Moira, Mylonopoulos, Paraxi, 2019.

20 Other authors also address paper reproductions of icons as a contemporary phenomenon – see Gergova, 2009; Stahl, 2024.

21 For similar observations, see Wojcik, 2019; Stahl, 2024.

2019. Some pilgrims snapped pictures of the icon inside the church space when they came to venerate it, despite the usual ban by church authorities on photography in the temple. Photography was even more intensive during the 15 August procession, when the icon is carried out of the church interior – there are no restrictions on shooting, and the light is more favourable. Likely, the very moment of the procession is perceived as special, ritually charged and therefore “miraculous.” This new practice naturally reflects the rapid development of technology, whereby photography is no longer an expensive, specialized activity but an opportunity available to everyone. At the same time, believers create their own digital replica of the miracle-working image, which they can carry with them always and everywhere on their mobile phone, and also share on social media.

As part of the ‘do-it-yourself’ trend, there is yet another type of multiplication of the miracle-working image that I discovered during my online research. These are tapestry kits depicting the Trojan Three-Handed icon, marketed as a commercial product (alongside copies of other famous icons). The purchaser receives the tapestry pattern together with a set of the necessary threads for stitching, offered in two versions – standard and deluxe – with the price varying accordingly.²² Thus a specific kind of copy of the sacred image emerges – one that the individual does not receive ready-made but crafts personally, investing time, labour, and specialized skills. In this way, the religious image becomes linked to realms that at first glance seem remote: handicrafts, hobby, leisure. Moreover, in some cases stitching such a tapestry can be understood as an act of religious devotion akin to the traditional vow of unpaid labour laid upon worshippers for the benefit of the church or monastery (see Baeva, 2013a, pp. 114–115). Here, too, the voluntary labour invested in embroidering the tapestry may be understood as a form of sacrifice offered in the hope of healing or answered prayer. This interpretation is reinforced by the presence of such tapestry icons in churches, where they are sometimes left as votive gifts by their makers. The convergence of devotion, craftsmanship, and leisure thus points to a new horizon in personal piety characteristic of the postmodern context.

In my fieldwork in Trojan Monastery, I also observed an intriguing new practice that has spread in recent years, whereby culinary “copies” of the sacred prototype are created. This involves preparing *kolivo* – a ritual dish of boiled wheat with additions such as sugar, cinnamon, raisins, and more. According to Bulgarian custom, *kolivo* is prepared and distributed at funerals and during the subsequent memorial rites in honour of deceased relatives (see Genchev, 1985, p. 198). It is believed that the dead will ‘receive’ what is distributed in the other world, and the symbolism of the wheat grains points to the idea of new life after death. In this case, however, the practice is borrowed from the Athonite monasteries, where such *kolivo* is prepared not only for the dead brothers but also for the patronal feast days – likely as a symbolic offering

22 See Solaria Gallery webpage (2025, February 2), <http://www.solaria-gallery.com/gobleni/gob/i56.htm>



Figure 5: Preparing a kolivo with the image of Mary Three-Handed in the Troyan Monastery on 11 July 2019. Photo: Vihra Baeva.

to the saint under whose protection the monastery stands. There, the practice has also developed of decorating the *kolivo* with intricate images of the patron saint, crafted from cinnamon and coloured sugar (see Dveri, 2014).

Following the Athonite model, a group of women – regular pilgrims to the Troyan monastery – began crafting similarly decorated *kolivo* under the guidance of a devout young theology student. Because she was not as skilful as the Athonite monks, she first commissioned a small sugar-fondant reproduction of the miracle-working icon from a confectionery. The women placed this fondant icon atop the sugar-sprinkled *kolivo* and meticulously framed it with fondant flowers, sugar sticks, and beads. The process took about an hour or two and was accompanied by chanting prayers and readings from the Gospel. Toward the end of the service, the decorated *kolivo* was ceremoniously carried into the church and set before the miracle-working icon of Mary Three-Handed. After the service was over, the ritual food was blessed by the priests and distributed to the faithful “for health” in specially prepared plastic cups. A *kolivo* made in the same way was also prepared for the monastery’s patronal feast on 15 August – this time with a printed image of the Dormition of the Mother of God.

In the “sweet” copy of the Three-Handed icon, veneration of the miracle-working image intertwines with elements of personal involvement, handicraft, and hobby in crafting the frame – elements we already observed in the case of the tapestry. Here, however, the culinary code is added, so the divine power of the image is combined

with the role of communal food in reinforcing collective identity and sacred presence. Additionally, here the impulse to be bodily close to the sacred is taken to its extreme: it is literally ingested, becoming part of the believer's body. This model, moreover, is not foreign to the Christian tradition, in which the Eucharist with bread and wine symbolizes Christ's body and blood, ritually consumed by the faithful.

Conclusion

This article has examined a series of images associated with the veneration of the Three-Handed Mary in Bulgaria: starting from the earliest Marian icons attributed to St. Luke, which establish the model of iconographic depiction; through the multiplication of iconographic types and the appearance of the Three-Handed icon in Skopje; to the "transfer" of the cult to Hilandar, whose miracle-working icon became the sacred prototype of the Three-Handed image. Under the influence of the Hilandar cult, the Troyan Monastery emerged in the Bulgarian lands around a miracle-working icon – a replica of the Hilandar image – and the model was subsequently transmitted to Gabrovo and Arbanasi. The evidence from historical sources and art-historical research was compared with traditional religious narratives that delineate the sacred history of each holy image.

The analyses conducted indicate that the dynamic between prototype and copy/replica proves to be a persistent element both in concrete historical events and in narrative expressions. On the one hand, copies of prestigious exemplars – regarded as sacred prototypes – are produced periodically, sometimes by direct repainting and sometimes by a form of "reworking" that involves adding a third votive hand. Frequently, the distinction between prototype and copy becomes blurred, and the copy in turn becomes a prototype that continues to be reproduced, thereby transmitting its sacred efficacy to subsequent copies. Therefore, each replica of the sacred image preserves and further multiplies its power.

On the other hand, copying and multiplying appear as recurring motifs in the miracle stories referring to the appearance and different manifestations of icons. The first icons are presented as exact "copies" of Mary's image, created from life under the brush of a saint. On the Skopje icon, the third Marian palm appears again and again, and the icon itself doubles: one image stays in Skopje and the other departs for Hilandar. The foundational legend from Troyan repeats the motif of the icon that chooses where to lodge and that of being carried on the back of a mule or horse, which also appear in the Skopje and Hilandar narratives; the ritual of the procession with the icon on the monastery's patronal feast is repeated as well. Thus, in individual cases, together with the icon, there are multiplied narratives, rituals, and whole cults that are localized in new places. The multiplication of the sacred prototype through successive copies functions as a strategy for legitimizing the sanctity of an icon, a ritual, or a sacred site.

In the modern and postmodern era, multiplication extends beyond artisan replication into the realms of commerce, industry, digital media, and even cuisine. Laminated paper reproductions and smartphone snapshots, DIY tapestry kits, and edible *kolivo* replicas all enact the same impulse: to make the sacred image one's own, to carry it bodily or virtually, and to cross the line between reverent veneration and everyday practice. These new forms reveal how devotion adapts to technological, economic, and leisure-driven imperatives without losing its fundamental yearning for proximity to the divine.

Taken together, all these layers of replication demonstrate that the multiplication of the sacred prototype is a central mechanism in Marian devotion, and more broadly in Orthodox piety, preserved through centuries. It bears witness to the enduring potency of icons to mediate grace across time, space, and media, as lived by believers. Through the mechanism of sacred multiplication, the universal Christian image becomes embedded in the particular landscape and in the sacred history of local communities. In this process, it acquires distinctive features and shapes communal identity, while devotees continually reaffirm their personal bond with the holy. The example of Mary Three-Handed shows that in Christian culture, to copy is not merely to imitate – it is to participate in the very life of the sacred.

Acknowledgements

Part of this research was supported by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria under the National Research Program "Cultural and Historical Heritage, National Memory and Social Development", funded by the Ministry of Education and Science in accordance with Decision No. 577 of the Council of Ministers, August 17, 2018.

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