

*Alexei Lidov*

**The Virgin of the Burning Bush in the Boyana Church and the Symbols of the Whirling Light in Byzantine Hierotopy**

The paper will concern the iconographic motif of the ‘luminous’ or ‘whirling’ disc, which played a significant role in the programs of Balkan churches of the thirteenth and fourteenth century. In the present paper a new interpretation will be proposed, I will argue that the Luminous disc gives a key for the understanding of the entire sacred space, going back to the early Byzantine ideas of the Whirling Church.

In some cases whirling discs are displayed at the entrances of the churches as in the mid-13th century iconographic program of the lower church of the Boyana monastery near Sofia. Above the image of the Virgin with the Child three medallions are represented, in the centre with the Hand of God, flanking by two whirling discs. It is interesting that the Theotokos icon is originally inscribed as ‘the Burning Bush’, with clear reference to the miracle of divine fire – the luminous theophany at Sinai. The author of the image emphasized the parallelism between the mystical fire of the “Burning Bush”, which became a regular metaphor of the Virgin Mary in hymnography, with the idea of the Divine Fire and Light embodied in three discs over the entrance. At the threshold of the church space, as in some other cases, it marks the special zone of the sacred light.

Until recently the dominating opinion was that the motif of the whirling disc appeared in the iconography in the 13th century only, after the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204. Yet it is possible to prove that the motif appeared much earlier, already in Early Byzantine period, and in the Paleologian period, when the number of whirling discs considerably increased in Byzantine church iconography.

Prof.Dr. Alexei Lidov

Institute for World Culture, Moscow State University

Academician of the Russian Academy of Arts