


ARCHITECTURE OF THE SACRED

*Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical
Greece to Byzantium*

Edited by

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

DIVINE LIGHT: CONSTRUCTING THE IMMATERIAL IN BYZANTINE ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Slobodan Ćurčić

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know *that the skin of his face shone* because he had been talking with God. And when Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, *behold, the skin of his face shone*, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. And afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he took the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel saw the face of Moses, *that the skin of Moses' face shone*; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.¹

The quoted passage from the Book of Exodus refers to the visible evidence of Moses' encounter with God atop Mt. Sinai – “the skin of his face shone.” The following passage from the Book of Matthew describes the Transfiguration of Jesus atop Mt. Tabor:

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and *his face shone like sun and his garments became white as light*. And behold there appeared to them Moses and Elijah talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one

for Moses and one for Elijah.' He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.' When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise and have no fear.' And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.²

The quoted accounts of the two quintessential biblical theophanies are key reminders of the invisibility of God in both the Old and the New Testament traditions. In both instances it is *light* that appears as the only manifestation of divine presence. Reflecting the Second Commandment that states: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above ..." (Ex. 20:4) in each of the two theophanies, a human being – Moses and Christ – became instruments of transmission of Divine Light for the benefit of human perception. There is a fundamental difference between the two theophanies, however, that also must be underscored. While in both accounts it was the faces – of Moses and of Christ – that shone, in the case of Christ, his garments also "became as white as light." Moses, we must remember, was a man *chosen by God*; consequently, we might say, he was "irradiated" by Him. Christ, by contrast, was God incarnate, made visible on earth by virtue of his flesh and his distinctive, human form.

While in Judaism the message of the Second Commandment was clear and was universally observed, the Christian tradition grappled with the issue of representation of God for a long time with eventually differing approaches in the Eastern and Western Christian traditions. This paper cannot and will not presume the task of exploring the various aspects and histories of the Christian debate regarding representations of divinity. It will only consider the role of certain specific means of representing Divine Light in the Eastern Christian or Byzantine artistic and architectural tradition. Specifically, I intend to explore how Byzantine painters and builders employed common symbolic language – expressed in media as different as mosaic, fresco painting and brick and mortar – to convey the notion of Divine Light in physical terms.³ What I hope to demonstrate is that the concept of "construction of sanctity," to which this volume is dedicated and as it applies to this context, had not only the predictable symbolic, but also distinctly



11.1. Dorset, England, Hinton St. Mary, Roman villa. Floor mosaic, fourth century. Photo © The British Museum.

tangible, even three-dimensional characteristics in art and architecture of Eastern Christendom.

The problem of depicting Divine Light arose already in the early stages of monumental Christian art. One of the earliest known representations of Christ, on a third-century vault mosaic in a mausoleum discovered in the necropolis under St. Peter's basilica in Rome, depicts Him glorified by a halo and with an arrangement of rays emanating from his head in such a way that they could at once be understood as a *symbol* referring to his name ICOYC XPICTOC (Jesus Christ, in Greek), as well as a *depiction* of rays of Divine Light.⁴ Another fourth-century image image – from the Roman villa at Hinton St. Mary in Dorset, England – while using the very same formula is a bit more intelligible, not to say “literal” – the Greek letters XP here made clearly visible (Fig. 11.1).

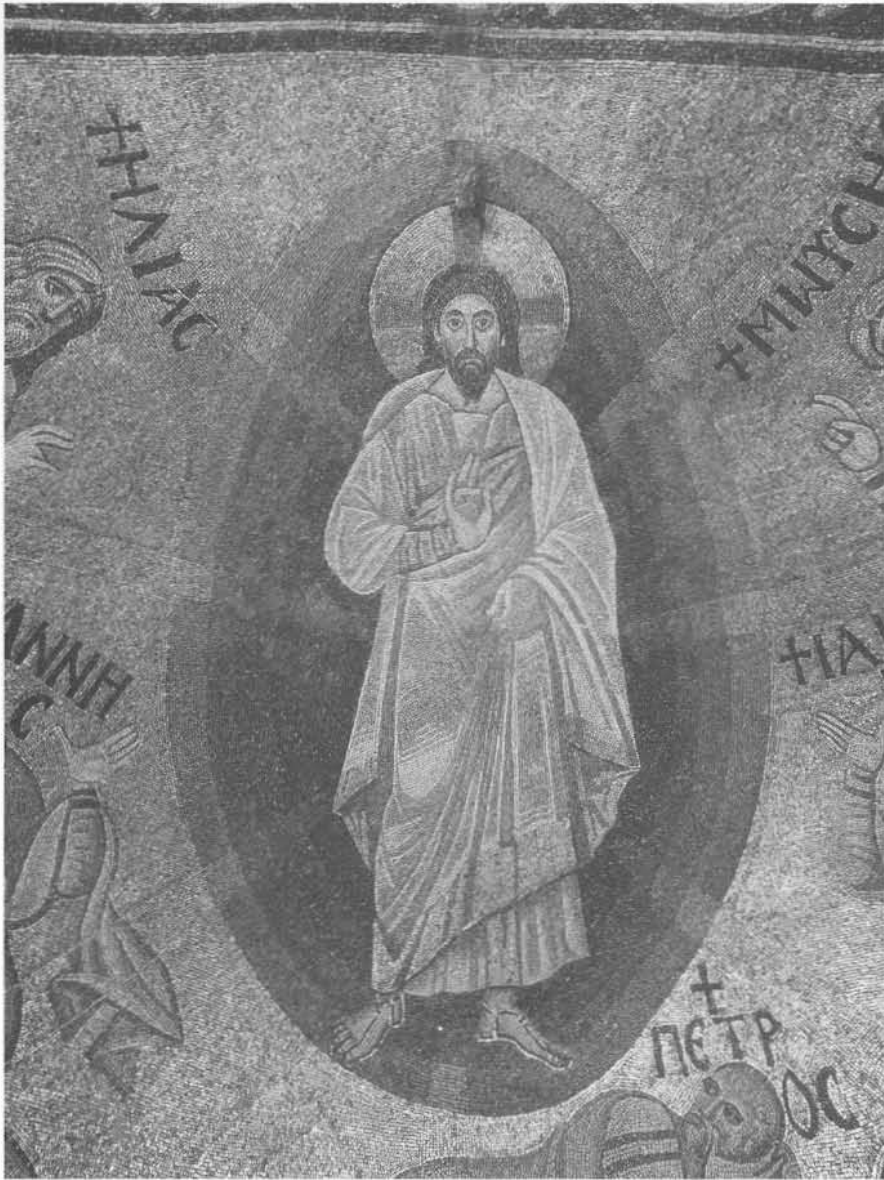
The formula, as illustrated in the mentioned examples, is of interest because it appropriated a pagan idea of the radiant crown as a means of conveying the notion of divinity in the Christian context. Generally understood as coming from the East, the radiant crown became commonplace in the Roman world of the third century, appearing on statues



11.2. Gold coin, minted in Siscia (after 330?). A. Constantine I wearing radiant crown (obverse); B. God Helios (reverse). Photo Belgrade City Museum.

of oriental divinities, and eventually within the context of Roman imperial iconography, linked to the growing significance of the cult of Sun God, Helios. Common on late-third- and early-fourth-century coinage, it appears also on the coinage of Constantine I, as the coin minted in Siscia, now in the Belgrade City Museum, illustrates (Fig. 11.2).⁵

The importance of Divine Light in relationship to Christ became an issue of prime importance in the work of early theologians. Thus, according to the fourth-century Cappadocian Church Father, Gregory Nazianzos, the light that illuminated Jesus on Mount Tabor was *one* of the visible forms of Divinity. The sixth-century Byzantine artist, who set the famous apse mosaic of the basilica in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, must have relied on such a theological formula in making one of the earliest known pictorial renditions of the event on Mount Tabor (Fig. 11.3).⁶ Thus – as though illustrating Evangelist Matthew verbatim – he made Jesus garments “white as light.” Additionally, he chose eight linear rays to illustrate radiant energy emanating from the transfigured Jesus and affecting the present witnesses – the three fallen Apostles and the standing Prophets, Elijah and Moses. The iconographic model thus created, became a virtual norm in subsequent Byzantine art, as the Transfiguration mosaic in the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, executed by Byzantine mosaicists for the Norman King Roger II, around 1142–1143 illustrates (Fig. 11.4).⁷ “Divine Light made visible” was here rendered



11.3. Mt. Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine, Church, Christ Transfigured; detail from apse mosaic, sixth century Photo Roberto Nardi.

even more emphatically – the rays having been given rigidly defined, almost metallic shapes. Finally, in the closing century of Byzantine artistic production, an image of the Transfiguration demonstrates that its iconographic scheme was still faithfully maintained. Yet, the spiritual followers of the influential Hesychast mystic, Gregory Palamas, also produced a new visual expression of “uncreated light,” or emanation of



11.4. Palermo, Cappella Palatina, Transfiguration mosaic, 1142–1143. Photo Slobodan Ćurčić.

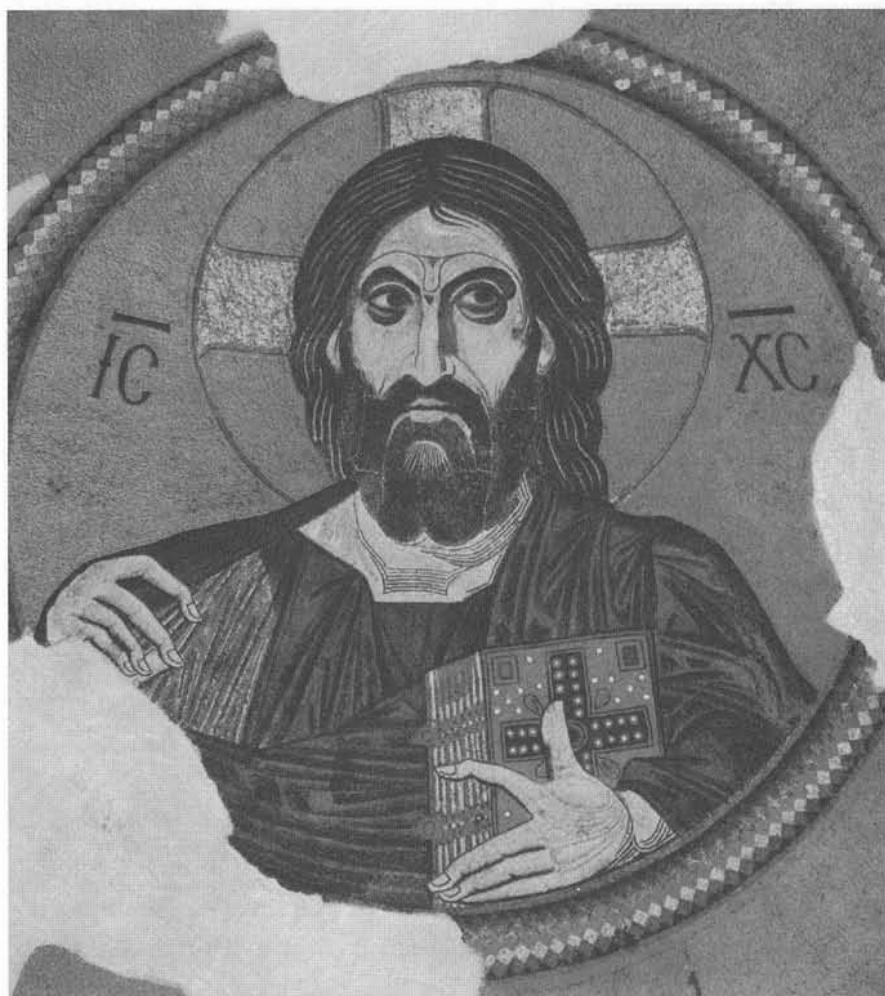
“divine energy” as Palamas himself referred to it. The full-page illumination from the Theological Works of John VI Kantakouzenos, now in the Bibliothèque National in Paris (Ms.Gr. 1242), painted circa 1370–1375, effectively depicts the dramatic release of “divine energy.”⁸ Despite the vastly increased complexity of the rays of light in this composition, their visual rendition would nonetheless have been intelligible to the beholders.

The last point was one of the key challenges of Byzantine art, in general given over to the central objective of communicating things immaterial, and therefore invisible, by visual means. This paradoxical aspect of Byzantine art is well known and hardly requires further elaboration. Yet, Byzantine scholarship is still far from having reached the level of full comprehension of the range of possibilities relative to the means by which Byzantine artists achieved this goal. In the remainder

of this chapter, I intend to explore how Byzantine painters and builders employed common symbolic language – expressed in media as different as mosaic, fresco painting and brick and mortar – to convey the notion of Divine Light in physical terms. Though my remarks will be mostly limited to the Middle and Late Byzantine periods (roughly ninth through the fifteenth centuries), we must bear in mind that the conceptual framework for examples I will be considering was already fully articulated in late antiquity.

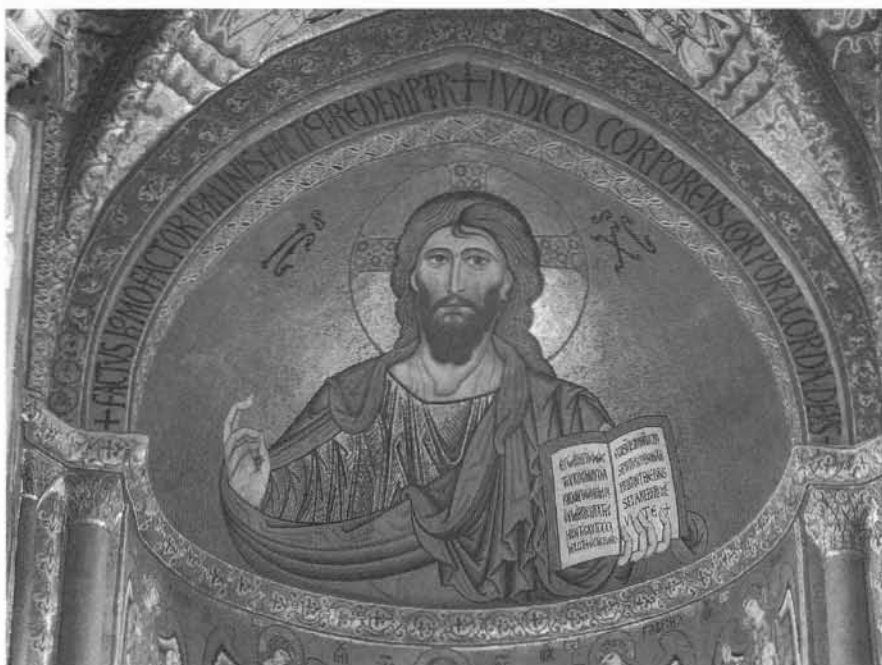
To set the stage for my exploration I will refer to two well-known monuments – the late-eleventh-century Katholikon of the monastery of Daphni and the twelfth-century apse of the Cathedral of Cefalù in Sicily. The dome of the main church of Daphni monastery contains the paradigmatic image of Christ the Pantokrator (the Universal Ruler) (Fig. 11.5). Notwithstanding the controversy regarding the mosaic restoration that may have affected some of its details, the authenticity of the image of Christ depicted book in hand, within a rainbow mandorla against the background of gold tesserae, is not in doubt and, as such, it has been used in most general books on Byzantine art. The rainbow mandorla has also been noted as a paradigmatic image of the heavenly glory (H DOXA).⁹ Its band made up of beautifully composed small squares organized in five concentric rings, each of a different color, together producing the “rainbow” effect with its unmistakable allusion to the Divine Light emanating from Christ, its source. “I am the light of the World” – according to the Gospel by John 9.5 – are the words spelled out in Greek and in Latin on the opposite pages of the open book held by Christ in the famous apse mosaic from Cefalù (Fig. 11.6), assuring us of the correct manner of interpreting this type of an image.¹⁰ We should also note that both, the idea of the heavenly glory, and the manner of its representation at Daphni, have their unmistakable roots in late antique art, as the detail from the late fourth-century mosaic in the dome of the Rotunda in Thessaloniki illustrates (Fig. 11.7).¹¹ Though the order of colors varies in the two representations, the symbolic message in both is unquestionably the same – the circular rainbow frame is a rendition of Divine Light.

As already alluded to in my earlier comments, complexities in the manner of depicting heavenly glory increase in later Byzantine art. One of the more characteristic forms of depicting the heavenly glory takes



11.5. Daphni, Monastery church, dome mosaic, circa 1100. Photo Wikipedia Commons (public domain).

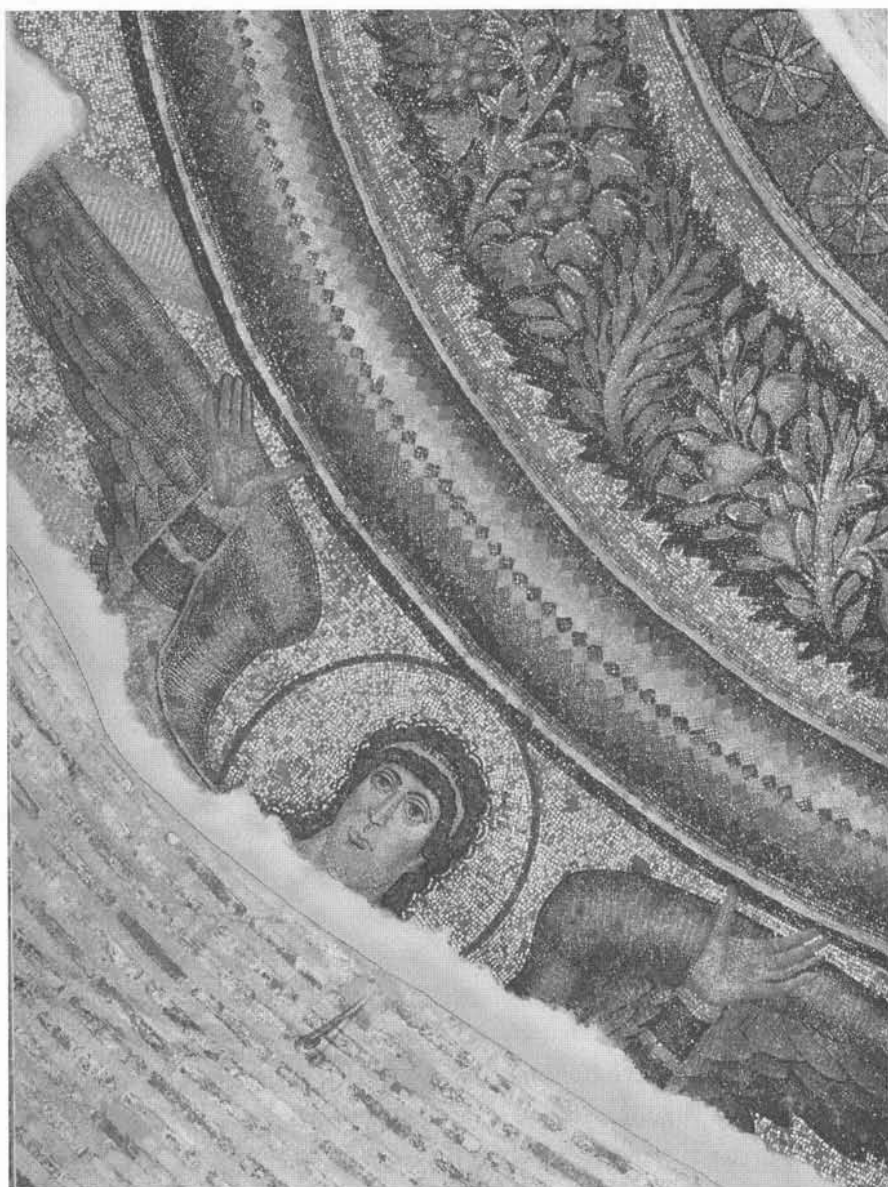
the form of zigzag lines contained within a circular band outlining the medallion with a bust of Christ, the late-twelfth-century example from Lagoudera in Cyprus being a good example of this scheme (Fig. 11.8).¹² Here, the zigzag pattern consists of a red and a blue band with individual elements that make up the bands given an illusion of *three-dimensionality* by virtue of shading and by setting the “folded” band elements against a black background. Thus, the symbolic reference to the Divine Light – in this case – has been given a curious, almost paradoxical, illusion of the third dimension.



11.6. Cefalù, Cathedral, apse mosaic, Christ Pantokrator. Photo Wikipedia Commons (public domain).

One of the most explicit manifestations of the phenomenon of “three-dimensionality” of Divine Light is undoubtedly the thirteenth-century narthex fresco from Hagia Sophia at Trebizond (present Trabzon in Turkey) (Fig. 11.9).¹³ The unusually complex scene on the large cross vault of the central narthex bay depicts the hand of God at the apex of the vault, surrounded by a burst of Divine Light framed by the four Evangelist symbols each holding a jewel-studded Gospel Book. From the four corners of the Light-Burst emanate four streams of light depicted in the form of what may be described as “three-dimensional rainbows.” The three-dimensional effect is achieved by using a folded-plate method of depiction, with one side of each of the folded-plate ridges rendered in darker tones than the opposite side, thus creating the desired illusion of three-dimensionality.¹⁴ This method of rendering a multicolored folded-plate illusion is also known from late antiquity, as may be seen in floor mosaics and other media.

In Hagia Sophia at Trebizond we note that, placed in a diagonal manner, the four “streams” recall vault ribs. Spreading toward the bottom of



11.7. Thessaloniki, Rotunda, dome mosaic, detail of mandorla and Archangel, circa 400. Photo 9th Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities, Thessaloniki.

the vault, they acquire an almost architectural character at its springing points. Thus, both in terms of their illusionistic rendition *and* by virtue of their placement, the four streams confront us with a contradictory impression – by conveying the notion of the intangible and uncontainable through the employment of artistic devices of two media – the



11.8. Lagoudera, Panagia Araka, dome fresco, 1192. Photo Annemarie Carr.



11.9. Trebizond, H. Sophia, narthex, vault fresco, thirteenth century. Photo Robert Ousterhout.



11.10. Canon Table, detail; Gospels (Ms. 9422), Matenadaran collection, Yerevan, circa 1280, f. 8. Photo E. M. Korkhmazian.

formal logic of architecture and the illusion-making potential of painting. Subject of a discussion in a recent publication by Antony Eastmond, the four multicolored streams are described by him as “... perhaps an attempt to match in paint the light-reflecting quality of mosaic ...”¹⁵ While correct as an observation of physical realities, this assessment falls short of detecting the intent to convey the idea of Divine Light by relying on conventions of *two* visual media.

Discussing the mentioned fresco at Hagia Sophia at Trebizond and its origins, Eastmond also made a passing comment regarding the possible “... influence of the decoration of canon tables in contemporary Armenian manuscripts ...”¹⁶ Beyond an example cited by him, we may profitably turn to two other Armenian examples of special relevance in the context of our discussion. The first is a canon table from the Gospels (Ms. 9422) in the Matenadaran collection in Yerevan (Fig. 11.10).¹⁷ Dated around 1280, the canon tables appearing on f. 8 is a work of an unknown, but accomplished painter. The second canon table is from the Gospels in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (MS. W.539). Dated precisely to 1262, this canon table, in this case also on f. 8, is the work of a distinguished Armenian illuminator, T'oros Roslin (Fig. 11.11).¹⁸ Rigidly defined, and elaborately decorated architectural frames characterize both examples. Both feature prominent arches

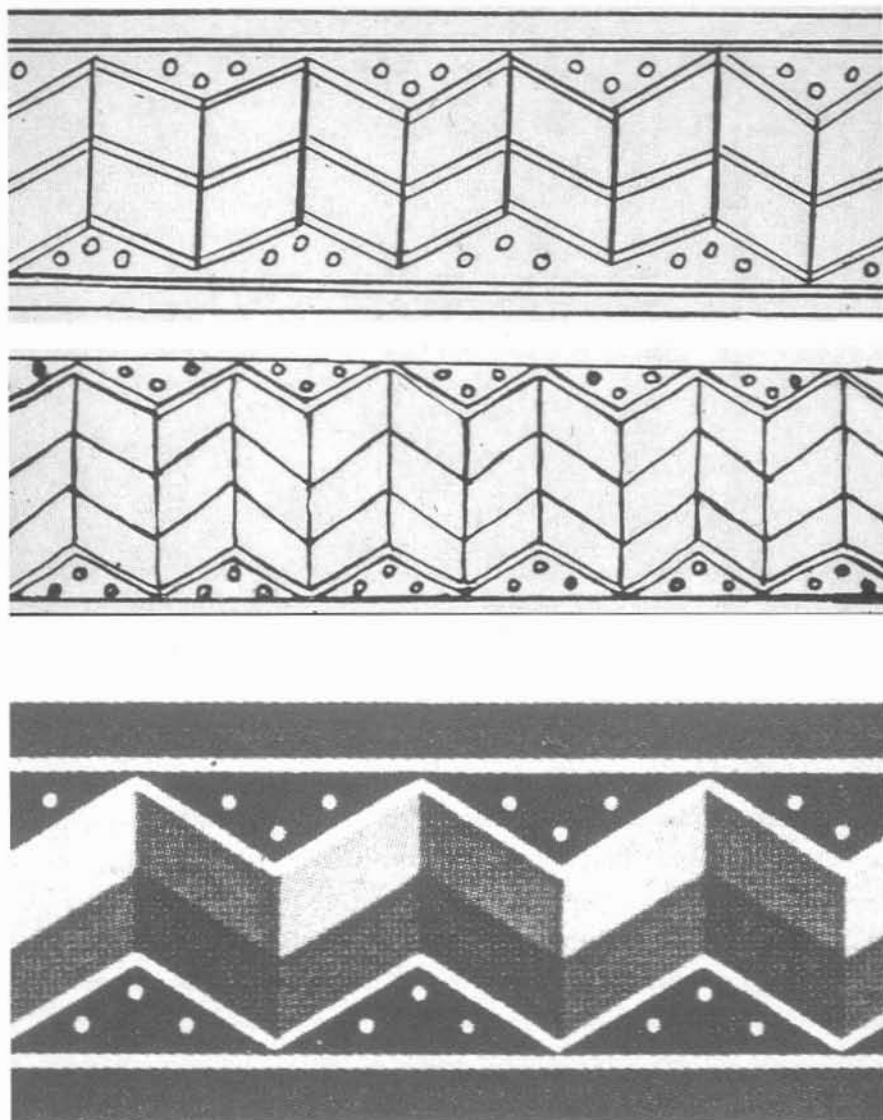


11.11. Canon Table, detail; Gospels (Ms. W. 539) Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, f. 8. Photo T. F. Mathews.

whose faces are articulated by the familiar “three-dimensional” folded-plate pattern executed in multiple colors with typical tonal shading creating the illusion of depth.

The Yerevan canon table arch is embedded within fields filled with scrolls of exotic plants populated by different creatures. In the geometric center of the arch we find a small disc executed in stippled gold leaf, in imitation of mosaic technique. Its shimmering effect was clearly the goal of the illuminator whose objective was to allude to the source of light in this symbolic display. The Baltimore canon table features a personification of the Sun in exactly the same position – the geometric center of the arch – with undoubtedly the same symbolic message. What furthermore distinguishes both canon tables is the elaborately lush depiction of exotic plants and animals in a clear allusion to Paradise. The Armenian manuscripts, then, may be said to combine the symbolic representations of Divine Light and of Paradise in a highly imaginative fashion.

The idea of a “three-dimensional” folded-plate, that I have attempted to define, became a standard feature in Byzantine monumental painting, manuscript illuminations, icons, and so on during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Used particularly in bands, featuring double, triple, or even multitiered arrangements this motif appears especially in



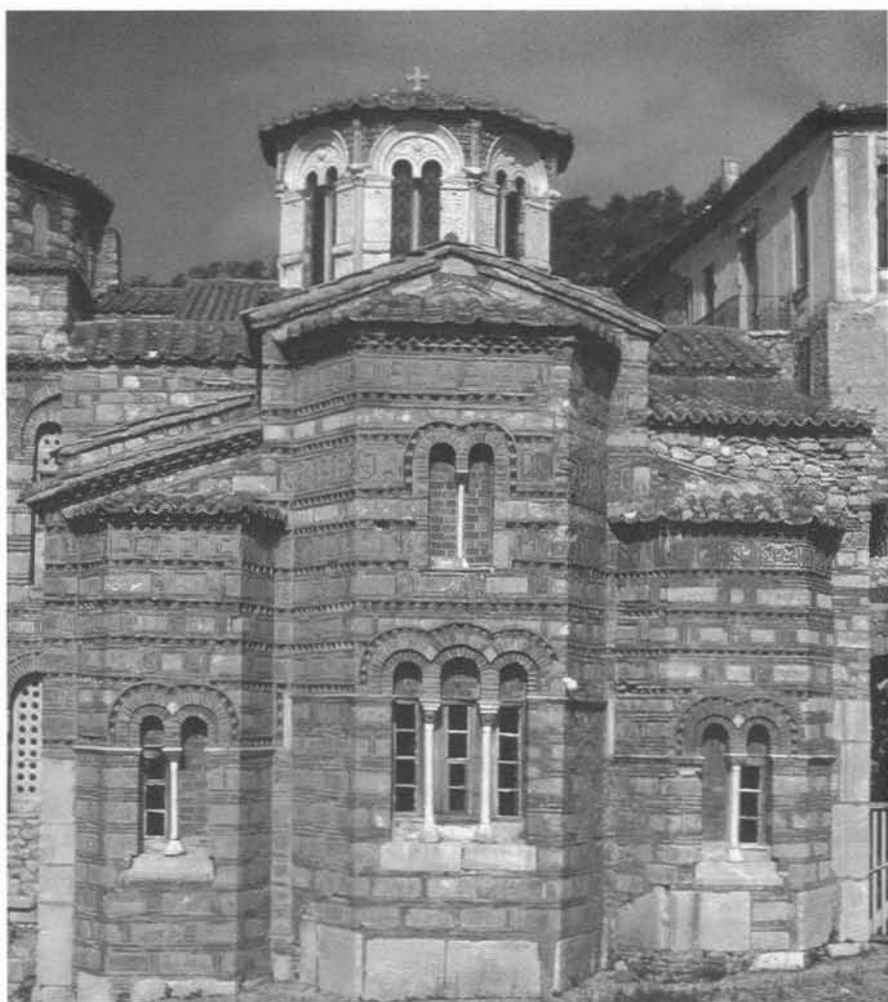
11.12. Fresco border details: Top Serbian churches, thirteenth century. After Z. Janc. Bottom Chora Monastery church, Constantinople, circa 1320. After D. Pughier.

horizontal bands. Treated in scholarship as elements of a distinct “decorative vocabulary” and used for separating pictorial compositions, these motifs have been recorded, as a group from the Serbian thirteenth- and fourteenth-century churches illustrates (Fig. 11.12 top).¹⁹ An essentially identical band from the Monastery of Chora in Constantinople, painted ca. 1320, underscores the geographic spread of the motif, all of

its essential details included (Fig. 11.12 bottom).²⁰ While the practice could be, and has been, discussed as evidence of the general reliance of painters on pattern books, the far more important question of the significance and meaning of this motif has *not* been addressed.

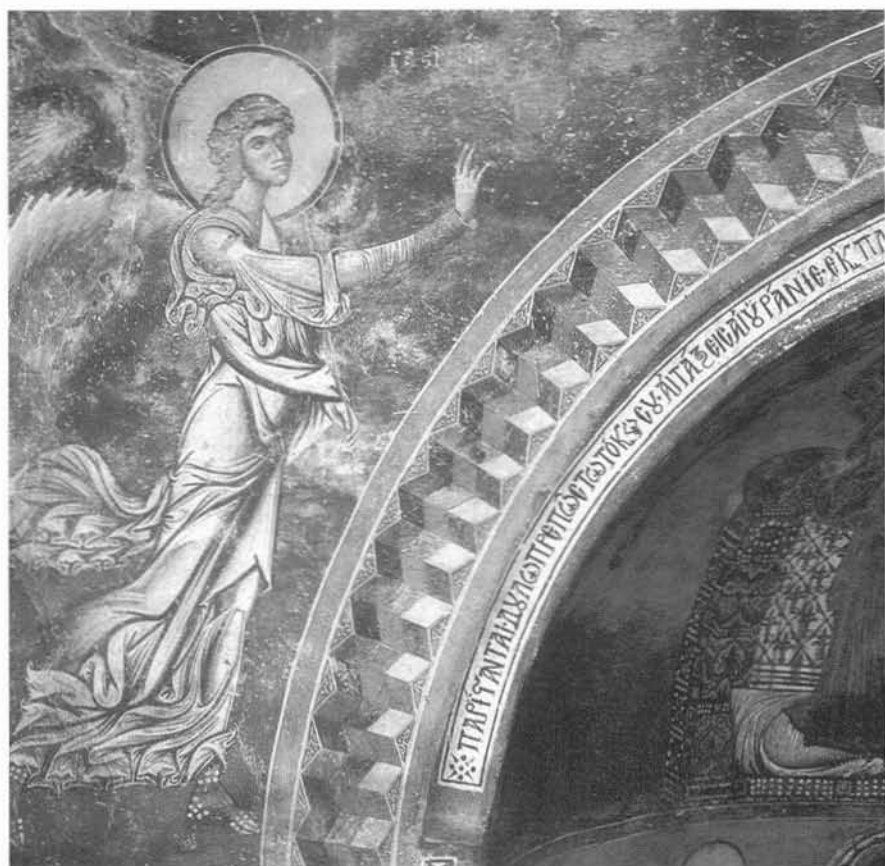
The same motif, it should be noted, also appears regularly on the exteriors of Middle and Late Byzantine churches. Made of brick, and more rarely of stone, this motif has been ascribed a banal name in English – *dog-tooth*, or *saw-tooth frieze* – and has thus suffered even greater ignominy than its painted interior counterpart. I would argue, in fact, that the two share not only similarities of form, but that they are bearers of the same symbolic meaning and should be associated with Divine Light. The term “dogtooth frieze,” under these circumstances reveals at once the initial inability of scholars to recognize the potential of meaning in what have been referred to as “purely decorative” forms, but also a pressing need to find an alternative term that would adequately respond to the current investigation. Another term – *chevron* – used in writings on western medieval architecture, is also formally descriptive and fails to address the issue of symbolic intent.²¹ For our purposes, therefore, I will adopt the term “*radiant freeze*” as a tentative solution to this dilemma.

The “radiant frieze” makes an early appearance on the facades of the tenth-century church of the Panagia at the monastery of Hosios Loukas in central Greece. Though perhaps not the earliest, this is certainly the best known of the monuments on which the feature in question was used extensively (Fig. 11.13).²² It appears characteristically in two distinctive ways – as a corbelled frieze below the roof eaves and as multiple recessed bands on the upper portion of the east and south facades of the church. The manner in which the bands wrap around the apses and windows of the eastern end of the church underscore the location of the “holy of the holies,” the church sanctuary, highlighting it, along with the dome, as the most important parts of the church building. The so-called Pseudo-Kufic letters that also appear on the east façade of the church have been subject of considerable scholarly attention. At the same time, the “radiant friezes” have been all but ignored. In my opinion, they are to be understood together, as references to the holy; the “radiant friezes” specifically underscoring the notion of illumination by the Divine Light.



11.13. Hosios Loukas Monastery, Church of the Panagia; east end, tenth century. Photo Slobodan Ćurčić.

The clearest confirmation of such an association comes from the appearance of the same motif in church interiors, in the context of their painting programs. One of the most prominent places where the motif commonly appears is on the face arches framing the entrance into church sanctuaries. Several churches in the Göreme region of Cappadocia, for example, have arches in those positions decorated in just such a manner. Elmalı Kilise and a parekklesion at Kılıçlar, both from the eleventh century, illustrate the point in very clear terms.²³ The motif also appears in the same position in the small, late-twelfth-century church of St. George at Kurbinovo in the F.Y.R.O.M (Fig. 11.14).²⁴ Treated more elaborately,



11.14. Kurbino, Church of St. George, Annunciation fresco, 1191. Photo L. Hadermann-Misguich.

here it relates to the scene of the Annunciation in which the Divine Light plays the central role.

The “radiant frieze” also appears in a curious “shorthand” symbolic fashion in the scene of the Annunciation in the Psalter and New Testament Ms., illuminated circa 1084, now in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection in Washington, DC.²⁵ Here a single “radiant frieze” band may be understood as a capping of the wall enclosing Virgin Mary’s house garden (Fig. 11.15). At the same time, however, it links the blessing Archangel Gabriel and Virgin Mary as a substitution for the here curiously missing ray of Divine Light and the dove commonly part of the Annunciation iconography.

Once introduced as an aspect of church façade articulation, the “radiant frieze” became a common aesthetic feature, but its symbolic role has



11.15. Annunciation, illumination; Psalter and New Testament Ms. circa 1084, Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington, D.C. Photo Dumbarton Oaks.

gone undetected in modern scholarship. Even a simple listing of monuments where the motif appears would probably fill pages. Highlighting but a few more interesting ways in which the motif was employed during the Late Byzantine period will suffice. The east façade of the thirteenth-



11.16. Arta, Church of H. Vasileios, east end; detail, gable, twelfth century. Photo Slobodan Ćurčić.

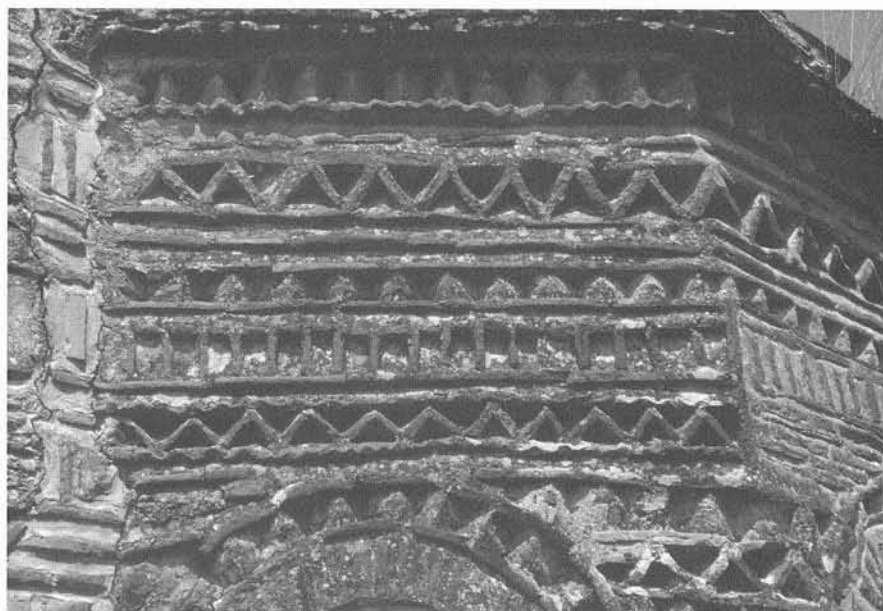
century church of H. Vasileios at Arta, in Epiros, displays the use of a single-banded “radiant frieze” under its roof eave and as a means of framing a window flanked by two shallow niches that contain two ceramic icons (Fig. 11.16).²⁶ Other decorative bands made of specially cut bricks produced for this purpose enhance the decorative character of the east façade and add to its symbolic reading as the enclosure of the holy of the holies. Below the window one notices the reduced version of the “rainbow band” a familiar reference to the Divine Light that we have encountered before.

An even more dramatic manifestation of this phenomenon may be seen on the east façade of the thirteenth-century church of the Arhestrategos at Kostaniani in Epiros. Here, the entire tympanum of the east façade is completely filled with multiple parallel bands of “radiant friezes” – ten in all (Fig. 11.17). The effect is stunning and may be conceptually likened with a flickering surface covered with gold mosaic. The church at Kostaniani reveals another popular device related to the radiant frieze motif – a frieze of pitched bricks set in such a way that their thicknesses form a zigzag line of larger dimensions than a simple radiant frieze band. Its face within the wall plane, this motif is essentially two-dimensional, graphic, in nature.



11.17. Kostaniani, Church of the Archstrategos, east end, thirteenth century. Photo Robert Ousterhout.

The same motif, on occasion, acquired a three-dimensional quality by virtue of the fact that the areas surrounding individual bricks that form the zigzag line were not filled with mortar, thus creating dark voids against which the zigzag line appears in an even more emphatic way. Combined with the conventional “radiant frieze” band, as in the case of the thirteenth-century Panagia tou Vrioni at Arta, and again concentrated on the east façade of the church, the motif is effective, leaving little doubt as to its symbolic message (Fig. 11.18).²⁷ Coming even closer to the actual wall surface of the Panagia tou Vrioni we note that the theme of the zigzag line recurs – on a much smaller scale – on individual faces of each brick (Fig. 11.19). With the help of a sharp tool, each visible flat brick surface was incised before firing with a zigzag pattern of its own. This miniaturized texturing, reminiscent of woodcarving in its effect, was clearly an aesthetic as well as a symbolic choice. It should be noted that among the rare preserved fragments of painted church façades we also find the mini-zigzag motif, as for example that



11.18. Arta, Church of Panagia tou Vrioni, thirteenth century; east end, detail, upper part of apse. Photo Slobodan Ćurčić.

on the apse of the twelfth-century church of the Panagia at Asinou in Cyprus (Fig. 11.20).²⁸

Another related architectural motif that appears in the course of the Middle Byzantine period is a frieze consisting of large corbelled triangular elements each made of several rows of bricks of variable dimensions. These usually appear as corbel-table friezes below church roof eaves, on domes, and so on, as seen on the early fourteenth-century parekklesion of the Virgin Pammakaristos in Constantinople and the Katholikon of Hilandar Monastery on Mount Athos.²⁹ Their practical function in such positions is clear, but given our investigation of the symbolic meaning of certain architectural forms, such friezes should also be added to the list of features with a symbolic meaning related to the concept of Divine Light. This is illustrated even more effectively by such features appearing on church domes as, for example, on the twelfth-century church of Hagoi Apostoloi at Pyrgi on Chios (Fig. 11.21).³⁰ Here the triangular elements are arranged radially in relationship to the arches above the dome windows, creating an effect resembling that of a radiant crown. The form of this zigzag arched band was in all likelihood plastered and painted,



11.19. Arta, Church of Panagia tou Vrioni, thirteenth century; apse, detail, wall masonry. Photo Slobodan Ćurčić.

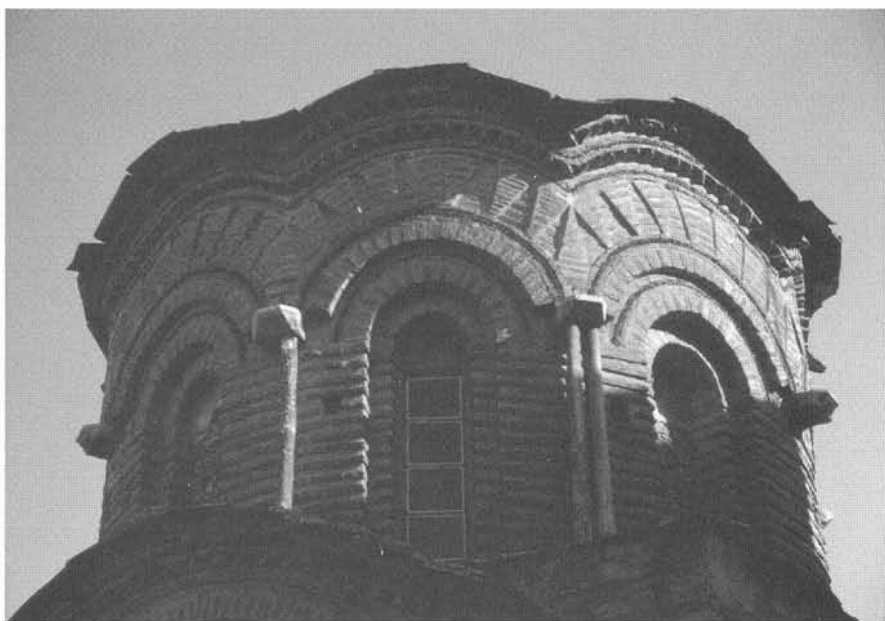
as several later partially preserved examples suggest. The partially preserved exterior painted decoration on the complex of churches of the Serbian Patriarchate at Peć has been a subject of an important study that has provided invaluable insights into the probable appearance of these churches around the middle of the fourteenth century when their exteriors were evidently fully plastered over and painted. Reconstruction drawings of the dome on the Church of the Mother of God illustrate



11.20. Asinou, Church of the Panagia, twelfth century; apse, detail of preserved exterior painting. Photo Slobodan Ćurčić.

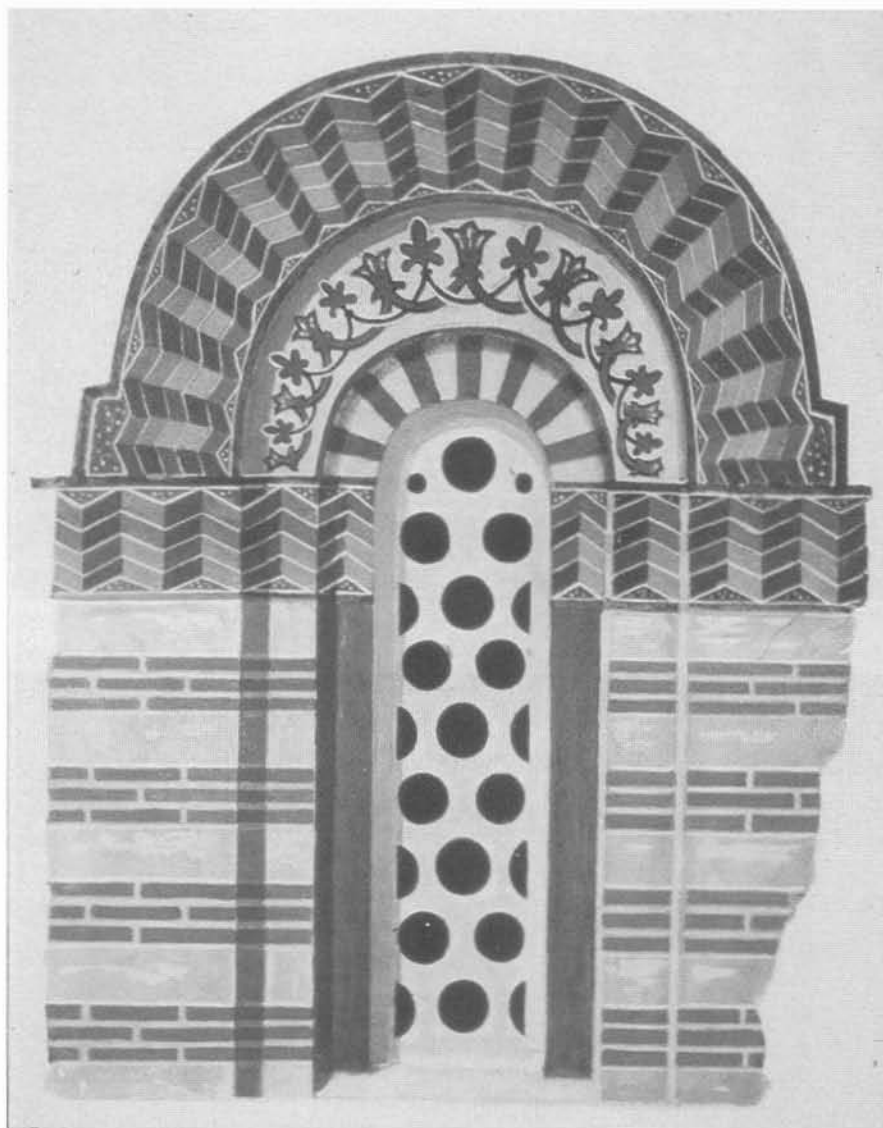
vividly the emphasis placed on the radially disposed “folded plate” multi-colored band with all the characteristic details (Fig. 11.22).³¹ The arched multi-colored band is echoed in a somewhat smaller, horizontal multicolored “radiant frieze” band. The third element in this composition is an arched arrangement involving intersecting palmette-bearing vines depicted against white background directly above each of the dome windows. The motif is certainly a symbolic reference to Paradise. The pairing of this motif with that of the “folded-plate” multicolored band and its symbolic allusion to Divine Light was certainly no accident, as we have already seen in other contexts, such as the two Armenian canon tables referred to earlier.

Invaluable additional insights into this symbolic language may be gleaned also from the east façade of the twelfth-century Church of SS. Maria e Donato at Murano, an island in the Venetian lagoon. In this case the entire façade is spanned with a double zigzag band situated at its mid-height. Partially restored, this double zigzag band still preserves some of its original exterior revetment in the form of triangular marble slabs richly decorated with different patterns, all of them based on variations of vine-scrolls, palmettes and split-palmettes.



11.21. Pyrgoi, Chios, Church of Hagioi Apostoloi, twelfth century; dome exterior. Photo Slobodan Ćurčić.

These elements have not been studied closely since the days of John Ruskin, who lovingly recorded them in two drawings published in his *The Stones of Venice* (Fig. 11.23).³² We are reminded of the links between Venice and Byzantium in the course of the twelfth century.³³ The motif, here under investigation, has unmistakable aesthetic and symbolic parallels in Byzantium, as another look at the arch framing the apse of Kurbinovo will convince us (Fig. 11.14). Despite the fact that the Kurbinovo arch is internal and its face painted in fresco technique, the differences between its and the Murano symbolic vocabulary are those between two dialects of the same language. This observation can be extended to include a great many Byzantine monuments of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with their subtle variations on the same theme. Underlying these similarities and differences is the basically firm, geometric structure alluding to the notion of Divine Light, and an equally telling inclusion of the sinuous vine-scroll motifs alluding to the Garden of Paradise. As such, together, they echo early formulas that were being explored already by the sculptors in the age of Justinian, as the superb capital now in the garden of the



11.22. Peć, Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate, Church of the Mother of God, 1324–1337, single face of a dome drum exterior, reconstruction of painting, V. J. Djuric.

Archaeological Museum in Istanbul illustrates (Fig. 11.24). This capital is also significant because examples of exactly the same type exist in locations as widely scattered as Parenzo (modern Poreč), Venice, and Jerusalem. The universal Byzantine artistic language of abstract symbolism, therefore, much like the figural language that we are more familiar with, was clearly in the making already in the period before



11.23. Murano, Church of SS. Maria e Donato, twelfth century; east façade, detail of window arch. Watercolor by J. Ruskin.



11.24. Istanbul Archaeological Museums, Byzantine capital, Constantinople, twelfth century. Photo Slobodan Ćurčić.

Iconoclasm. Its fruition, as in the case of figural iconography, however, took place only during the Middle Byzantine period.

It was during the twelfth and the thirteenth century that the impact of this new symbolic language became major, its effects felt over a vast



11.25. Bivongi, Church of S. Giovanni Vecchio, 1122; domed bay, interior view. Photo M. Johnson.

geographic territory from as far as Sicily and Calabria in the southwest, to Novgorod and Vladimir in Russia, in the northeast. The church of S. Giovanni Vecchio at Bivongi, near Stilo in Calabria, dedicated in 1122, for example, reveals uses of the “radiant frieze” that were completely consistent with the Byzantine practice.³⁴ On the exterior we find such a frieze executed in brick wrapped around the upper part and the base of the apse, while inside we see a monumental three-dimensional version of the same motif executed in stone, prominently placed directly under the main dome (Fig. 11.25).

A similar attitude – using a large-scale “radiant frieze” depicted in fresco technique – is found in prominent places in the church of the Assumption at Volotovo Polyé, near Novgorod in Russia.³⁵ Painted in 1363, this remarkable ensemble of frescos was destroyed in 1941 during World War II. Detailed records of the church have been published that illustrate practically all aspects of the original program. For our purposes, the monumental “radiant frieze” band demonstrates the significance attached to this feature within the building interior. Nearly a century later, frescoes in the church of Hag. Giorgios in Apáno Symi at Monofatsi on the island of Crete, painted in 1453, unmistakably speak the same visual language, despite enormous geographic and cultural

distances that separate the two painted church interiors.³⁶ Associated with the Christological fresco cycle, the “radiant frieze” in both cases reverberates with the notion of “Christ, the Light of the World” with which my analysis began.

We should not leave these observations without noting an interesting phenomenon of cultural appropriation of the “radiant frieze” motif that took place in the context of Ottoman religious architecture. Occurring in symbolically relevant places, the motif appears on exteriors and interiors of many Ottoman mosques. Externally, it appears in familiar three-dimensional form on monuments such as the sixteenth-century minaret of the Ibrahim Pasha Cammi, a converted medieval church in the town of Rhodes. Internally, we see it employed at the dome base of the Mustafa Pasha Camii, built in 1492 in Skopje. The painted variation of the radiant frieze motif appears here in the company of other distinctly Islamic elements, but it preserves its folded-plate characteristics seen in many Byzantine churches in precisely the same position. What the eyes of the Islamic believers may have perceived in this motif is unclear, but its visual and architecturally contextual similarity with its Byzantine uses could hardly have been totally accidental.

My remarks have sought to demonstrate that certain so-called decorative features in Byzantine architecture and painting were actually imbued with important symbolic messages. Prominent among these, as we have seen, was the “radiant frieze” used to convey the notion of Divine Light. Whether executed in paint, in brick and mortar, or some other material, the rendition of this symbol depended on the medium in which it was executed, but its ultimate visual effect, regardless of the medium, was invariably three-dimensional. The exact implications of this observation do not have a ready answer, though its appearance in the context of an artistic tradition that generally tended to play down the significance of three-dimensionality is striking. Are we entitled to contemplate three-dimensionality in Byzantine art as a distinctive manifestation, generally off-limits to humans, and therefore by extension – in its selective symbolic use – as an exclusive prerogative of Divinity? The question and its implications are too great to have received adequate treatment here. If the question that I have posed is the right question, then my goal for now will have been accomplished.

Notes

1. Exodus, 34: 29–35.
2. Matthew 17:1–8.
3. A different approach to the subject of “Divine Light” in the context of the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai was published recently by Nelson 2006, pp. 1–38, who considers the issues of relationship between “natural” and “Divine Light.”
4. Grabar 1968, p. 80.
5. Christodoulou 1998, pp. 56–57.
6. Andreopoulos 2005. The apse of the basilica in the Monastery of St. Catherine has been a subject of several studies. Of particular relevance here is Elsner 1994, pp. 81–102.
7. Regarding the iconographic implications of the Transfiguration scene in the Cappella Palatina, cf. Krönig 1956; also Čurčić 1987, esp. pp. 127–38.
8. Lowden 2004, pp. 286–7; cf. also Andreopoulos 2005, pp. 228–9 (“The Hesychastic Mandorla”).
9. On the “mandorla,” see a useful overview with older literature in Andreopoulos 2005, pp. 83–86.
10. Demus 1949, p. 11.
11. Cleaned and conserved following the 1979 earthquake that damaged the Rotunda, the dome mosaics have not yet been published. For a brief overview with several good photographs cf. Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou and Tourta 1997, pp. 50–68.
12. Stylianou and Stylianou 1985, esp. p. 159, where the bust of the Pantokrator in the dome medallion is described without even a mention of the zig-zag band within the rim of the medallion frame.
13. Eastmond 2004, pp. 120–3, where special emphasis is placed on their iconographic significance in the fresco program as a whole.
14. Eastmond 2004, p. 120, where what I refer to as the “three-dimensional rainbows” is described as “... perhaps an attempt to match in paint the light-reflecting qualities of mosaic ...,” a notion that ignores their sophistication of design and symbolic implications.
15. Eastmond 2004, p. 120.
16. Eastmond 2004, p. 120.
17. Korkhmazian 1984, pp. 132–9, fol. 8.
18. Mathews and Wieck 1994, pp. 149–50, and pl. 12.
19. For the illustration of the Serbian examples cf. Janc 1961, Tab. XVI, nos. 100–1.
20. Pulgher 1878, pl. XXII, fig. 16.
21. Borg 1967, pp. 122–40.
22. Stikas 1970, pp. 148–73, with several helpful photographs that illustrate the method of laying the masonry elements of the “radiant frieze.”
23. Restle 1967, vol. 2, pl. 160; Rodley 1985, pl. 37.
24. Hadermann-Misguich 1975.
25. Vikan 1973, pp. 100–3, and fig. 35.
26. Papadopoulou 2002, pp. 125–7. Trkulja 2004 (a revised updated version as a book is currently in preparation) is an important general contribution to the study of aesthetics and symbolism of decorative elements in Middle and Late Byzantine architecture.

27. Velenis 1988, esp. pp. 279–80, with the basic information and older literature.
28. Ćurčić 2000, pp. 29–30, and fig. 30.
29. Vokotopoulos 1981, esp. p. 558, who refers to the motif as “pendant triangles.”
30. Bouras 1974, pp. 42–45; esp. p. 44, uses the term “saw-tooth bands.”
31. Ćurčić 2005, esp. p. 25.
32. Ruskin 1853, vol. 2, pl. V (facing p. 45).
33. Richardson 1988, pp. 1–8, and *passim*.
34. Romano 1988, pp. 176–9, pls. 58–62.
35. Alpatov 1977, pl. 1; and a more detailed study: Vzdornov 1989, pls. 65–66 (Documentation)—Crucifixion and Deposition frescoes.
36. Gallas, Wessel, and Borboudakis 1983, pp. 447–9; pl. 139.

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