

REVIEWS

ALEXEI LIDOV, *HIEROTOPY. SPATIAL ICONS AND IMAGE-PARADIGMS IN BYZANTINE CULTURE*.

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(with an English summary, black-and-white and colour illustrations, a glossary, and an index)

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For the Byzantinological and medievalist community, Alexei Lidov hardly needs an introduction. An art historian and theorist, the founder and director of the Research Centre for Eastern Christian Culture in Moscow (since 1991), a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Arts (since 2007), Lidov is a prolific scholar widely published outside Russia, and a captivating lecturer whose presence at leading universities in Europe (Sorbonne, Oxford, Cambridge) and the USA (Princeton, Harvard, Columbia) unfailingly elicits great attention from the academic community. Over the last two decades Lidov has been an influential presence in the field of medieval studies as the driving force and moving spirit of ground-breaking projects, both in terms of research topics and, especially, methodology. These projects, broadly devoted to the foundations and key phenomena of medieval visual culture, have been realized through a series of international conferences held at regular intervals in Moscow since 1991. The research results have been published in extensive thematic volumes conceptually framed and edited by Lidov. Their fresh and innovative quality is obvious from their very titles: *Jerusalem in Russian Culture* (1994 and 2005); *The Eastern*

Christian Church. Liturgy and Art (1994); *The Miracle-Working Icon in Byzantium and Old Rus'* (1996); *The Ikonostasis. Origins – Evolution – Symbolism* (2000); *Eastern Christian Relics* (2003); *Hierotopy. The Creation of Sacred Space in Byzantium and Medieval Russia* (2006); *New Jerusalem: The Translation of Sacred Spaces in Christian Culture* (2006); *Spatial Icons. Performativity in Byzantium and Medieval Russia* (2011). Apart from an undeniable scholarly breakthrough that they have made, the Moscow conferences have greatly contributed to a vigorous and productive intellectual dialogue between different scholarly milieus such as Western Europe, North America, Japan, Russia and other Slavic countries, Serbia included.

Serbia owes a particular debt of gratitude to Alexei Lidov. His energetic support to the preservation of the heavily endangered Serbian heritage in Kosovo and Metohija, immediately threatened in a period between the beginning of the 1999 war and the 2004 March Pogrom, will certainly be remembered. Lidov considered this commitment a matter of professional and personal ethics, and stood up for his

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values in his various capacities and on a variety of occasions: he was active “on the ground”, as a UNESCO envoy, addressed the general public through the media, took part in a number of Russian and international conferences and forums. A lasting achievement of his committed effort is the lavishly illustrated, bilingual English/Russian book *Kosovo. Orthodox Heritage and Contemporary Catastrophe*, published in Moscow in 2007. In addition to the instructive preface on the *cultural genocide* committed in present times and “in the presence of authorities”, it contains a list of the completely destroyed or damaged Serbian heritage, and an exhaustive catalogue of all Orthodox Christian churches in Kosovo and Metohija.

The book presented here holds a special place in Alexei Lidov’s work. It assembles ten studies published between 2001 and 2008, whose common denominator and core concern is *hierotopy*, the study of sacred space — its manifestations, formation mechanisms, functions and reception. So, hierotopy is the study of one of central phenomena of medieval culture in general, and its visual aspect in particular. It should be noted right away that the book is so much more than a mere collection of articles brought together under one title. Even the reader familiar with Lidov’s work cannot help being at least a little surprised by its sophisticated conception and programmatic integrity. Namely, what we find there is a theoretically well-grounded and, it deserves a special emphasis, factually corroborated explication of the author’s basic methodological premises, which have crystallized over the past two decades. For this purpose, Lidov introduces several new concepts into scholarly discourse, as well as a new pertinent vocabulary. It should be emphasized that these innovations are not an end unto themselves. On the contrary, they result from a patient and steadfast quest for a suitable method for interpreting such an important and multilayered phe-

nomenon as sacred space. In all that, Lidov, rather than discarding the methods and results of traditional disciplines such as the history of art, architecture or religion, archaeology and many others, simply points to their limitations or, more precisely, their inability to recognize all layers of meaning present in some of the phenomena of visual culture. Consequently, in his view, one of the major problems encountered in studies focused on sacred space is the lack of appropriate and precise terminology.

Hierotopy is both the central concept and the broadest research framework of this book. The basic premises of the new method are expounded in the introductory chapter, “Hierotopy: The creation of sacred spaces as a form of creativity and subject of cultural history” (pp. 11–38), and in the concluding study, “Images-paradigms as a new notion of visual culture: A hierotopic approach to art history” (pp. 293–305). Lidov defines hierotopy both as the making of sacred spaces seen as a distinctive form of human creativity and, at the same time, as a field of historical studies concerned with discovering and analyzing some products of that creativity. This particular kind of creativity is deeply rooted in human nature and constitutes a form of man’s knowledge of himself as a spiritual being, while the purposely created sacred places are spaces intended for human communication with the transcendent. Pointing to the fact that *sacred space* has often been an object of attention in human sciences in recent times, but as a rule from narrow specialist perspectives, Lidov highlights the few “integrated” approaches in order to highlight the distinctiveness and functionality of the hierotopic method. This method, Lidov argues, cannot be reduced to the concept of synthesis of the arts, very influential in art theory and practice in the age of modernism, including such remarkably profound and original achievements as that of Pavel Florensky,

who looked at the sacred space of an Orthodox Christian church as a “synthesis of the arts” and emphasized the essential “aesthetic” quality of all components of the liturgy. Lidov draws a clear distinction between his own concept of *hierotopy* and that of *hierophany* as conceived of by Mircea Eliade, his famous predecessor in the study of the phenomenon of sacredness. While hierophany is the revelation of the divine in a certain place or space, which thereby assumes sacred qualities and becomes marked off from the profane, hierotopy is the form of human creativity which lastingly materializes the memory of a hierophany.

Lidov uses two more important concepts as helpful *instrumenta studiorum*. One of them is the *spatial icon*, which he describes as an image endowed with iconic qualities and existing not only as a flat plane but emanating into the space as a “vision”, bonding the image and the viewer together in an essential way. The image functions in reality as a constantly changing and pulsating iconic space and dynamic structure. It integrates a variety of elements: the rite and its participants, the light, the scent, the sound. Lidov makes the observation, as perceptive as it is accurate, that the concept of the Byzantine *spatial icon* finds its typological analogies in modern art forms such as performances and multimedia installations. The other concept used by Lidov is the *icon-paradigm*, a sort of icon-idea, which, although incorporating a wide range of literary and symbolic associations, cannot be reduced to a mental construct and is not an illustration of a text. It has neither an established iconography nor a fixed and definitive form, but it does belong into visual culture, it is visible and recognizable, and, in a sense, functions as a metaphor. In Lidov’s view, it is this “hieroplastic” perception of the world — based on contemplation with the “mind’s eye” and on visually shaped spiritual contents

— that the Byzantines saw as trustworthy confirmation of the divine presence.

Lidov further explicates his theoretical premises, outlined here only briefly, using concrete examples. This aspect of Lidov’s work demonstrates his vast erudition and knowledge of medieval culture, both Eastern and Western Christian, as shown by the broad chronological and geographical span that his considerations are based upon. Given the framework of his concerns — sacredness and the sphere of the miraculous — it comes as no surprise to see that miracle-working icons and relics, a widely popular research topic over the last twenty years, are the focus of his attention.

The concepts of *hierotopy* and *spatial icons* are particularly exhaustively elaborated in the chapter “Spatial icons: The miraculous performance of the Hodegetria of Constantinople” (pp. 36–69). Based on the written sources, Lidov offers a new interpretation of the well-known rite known as the “Tuesday miracle”. Namely, every Tuesday, on the square in front of the monastery of Hodegon, the miracle-working double-sided icon of the Virgin Hodegetria and the Crucifixion would “fly” into the air, marking out a distinctive iconic space created as much by the icon and elements such as the light, smells and sounds, as by the participants in the event. Lidov’s well-argued interpretation suggests that the ritual re-enacted the failed siege of Constantinople in 626, through the recurring iconic presence of the Virgin, the city’s miracle-working protectress. The Constantinopolitan miracle-working icons are the focus of yet another chapter, “The miraculous icons of Hagia Sophia: The emperor as creator of sacred space” (pp. 163–209). Apart from bringing new and significant observations on the original system of images around the Imperial Door at Hagia Sophia, Lidov proposes a convincing reconstruction of the remarkably complex and studied programme

realized through icons and relics, which integrated into a single sacred space not only different parts of the Great Church but also the Great Palace. Offering the arguments in support of his view that the architect of the “project” was the sagacious and theologically highly learned emperor Leo VI, Lidov opens the very important but little-studied question of the identity of the creators of sacred spaces in the Byzantine world.

The relationship between icons and relics, and their function, is a topic Lidov addresses, from different perspectives, in a few more studies. Thus, “The Theotokos of the Pharos: The imperial church-reliquary as the Constantinopolitan Holy Sepulchre” (pp. 71–109), offers a convincing interpretation of the programme of the palatine chapel of the Byzantine emperors, which enshrined the most precious relics of the Christian world, as an expression of the belief that the Virgin of the Pharos was the Constantinopolitan Holy Sepulchre and an emulation, in miniature, of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Lidov’s interpretation, which continues the recent string of versatile studies on relics, strongly supports the assumption that, in the Christian tradition, the Virgin of the Pharos was a powerful *topos* and the prototype of every subsequent *cappella palatina*, from the most famous one, the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, to its echoes in the Slavic world, Serbia included. Some emphases in the programme of the Constantinopolitan palatine chapel have led Lidov to venture a step further and revisit yet another, currently very appealing, research topic: Mandyliion and Keramion. His study “The Mandyliion and Keramion: An iconic image of the sacred space” (pp. 111–135) puts forth the well-argued assumption that the two images of Christ were suspended in the central bay of the Virgin of the Pharos, thus creating a mystical space where the miraculous presence of the not-made-by-hand icons corresponded to the miraculous conversion of

bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. In that way, the icon and the Eucharist were integrated in a single spatial “image” of paramount sacredness. The study “Holy Face–Holy Scripture–Holy Gate: An image-paradigm of the ‘blessed city’ in Christian hierotopy” (pp. 137–162) addresses a related topic. The Saviour’s not-made-by-hand image, traditionally believed to have been set up in a niche above the gate of Edessa by the emperor Abgar himself, was a relic of the highest order and as such had an apotropaic function, as had Christ’s autograph letter to Abgar. These relics, in a particular space, elicited in the minds of the contemporaries the recognizable image-paradigm of the “blessed” city of Edessa.

Lidov examines the concept of image-paradigm and the intricate mechanism of its creation in his remarkably multidimensional study “The katapetasma of Hagia Sophia: Byzantine installations and the image-paradigm of the temple veil” (pp. 211–225). Embarking on a topic which has escaped the attention of researchers, he scrupulously studies the phenomenon of altar curtains from the sources and on a quite broad sample. Noteworthy is his attempt to reconstruct the katapetasma of Hagia Sophia, its original appearance and significance, and its role in the entire design of the sanctuary. Drawing attention to the sources that liken the katapetasma of the Great Church to the curtain of the Jewish temple, Lidov concludes that it was the central component of a *spatial icon*, a sort of “installation” and a part of a carefully built system which included liturgical vessels and textiles, crosses, votive crowns etc. The structure of the *spatial icon* was dynamic or, to use another of Lidov’s favourite terms, it was *performative* in character.

Art historians concerned with iconography and iconology will certainly find the study “The Priesthood of the Virgin: An image-paradigm of Byzantine iconography” (pp. 227–259) particularly interest-

ing. The subject is highly complex and delicate, even more so as the idea of the Virgin's priesthood in Byzantine theology was never dogmatically articulated. Lidov's pioneering research brings into relation hymnographic and homiletic patterns with visual metaphors for the Virgin, arriving at the conclusion that some pieces of the Virgin's garment echo the priest's vestments. His attention especially focuses on the Virgin's "liturgical handkerchief", associating it with the Eucharistic sacrifice. It appears that the image of the priesthood of the Virgin is an excellent demonstration of the effectiveness of Lidov's method. The image is not amenable to interpretation from particular perspectives, as an illustration of a text or theological teaching, but only from the perspective of its totality, as an image-idea or *image-paradigm*. Lidov uses the same conceptual apparatus to interpret a miracle which is still perpetuated in Christian tradition in his study on "The Holy Fire: Hierotopic and art-historical aspects of the creation of 'New Jerusalem'" (pp. 261–291). The miracle of the Holy Fire, which comes down upon the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on Holy Saturdays, is traditionally believed to be the proof of the reality of the resurrection and future life in the Kingdom of Heaven. This has endowed the Holy Fire with the status of a precious relic, distributed across the Christian world for centuries. Lidov offers a detailed analysis of some architectural elements, above all the *kouvouklion* or aedicule over the tomb of the Lord, and the shape of the lamps for distributing the fire, and suggests that they produced multiple echoes in new contexts — in processional crosses, paschal candlesticks, funerary lanterns etc. An essential aspect of such replication of a hallowed form was the "transfer of sacredness" or, more precisely, the shaping of "New Jerusalem" in local environments. Therefore, Lidov sees the Holy Fire, and with good reason, as a powerful and enduring paradigm of Christian

visual culture and a convincing example of hierotopic mechanisms in constructing sacred expanses.

What the actual reach and effectiveness of hierotopy as a new and still developing scholarly method will be on the whole and in the long run, only time will tell. There is no doubt that some of the views and propositions put forth in this book will be subject to further discussion and verification. Yet, if we are to judge by the response to the conferences Lidov organized and to the volumes he edited, it seems safe to say that the hierotopic approach has already proved highly inspiring in the field of visual culture and humanities, producing very interesting outcomes and, in some cases, genuine breakthroughs.

It may seem a paradox, but the hierotopic method gives best results when used by rigorous and disciplined scholars whose interpretations are based strictly on factual evidence: documentary sources and material remains. This is the strategy that Lidov himself consistently pursues, even when addressing the most intricate and controversial issues, or when looking at a problem from an unexpected and unconventional angle. Consequently, he cannot be responsible for the occasional superficially imitative and irresponsible use of the openness and broad associative potentials of the hierotopic method. What Alexei Lidov, occasionally challenged by "traditionalists" and "positivists" within his own scholarly community, has proposed is exactly the opposite: a consistent, intellectually strong and eruditely grounded method, which so far has proved remarkably helpful in understanding the central phenomena of medieval culture. Finally, Lidov has shown in the best possible way how useful and beneficial a shift in scholarly perspective can be. Or, as Lidov likes to put it — scholarship always benefits from our being able to ask the old and well-known sources new questions.