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DIVINE REVELATION PERFORMED:  
SYMBOLIC AND SPATIAL ASPECTS  
IN THE DECORATION OF BYZANTINE CHURCHES

Textual descriptions of sumptuous mosaics, decorative objects made of precious metals and shimmering textiles testify to the Byzantines' appreciation of beauty<sup>1</sup>. An object or an edifice was appreciated aesthetically, but it was also highly regarded as a reflection of the beauty of the Divine<sup>2</sup>. The famous sixth-century description of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in which the court-writer Procopius relates it directly to the appearance and glory of the Heavenly sphere is just one in the long line of Byzantine *ekphrases* that speak of the direct link between the physical, experienced beauty and the ineffable, mystical character of the Divine<sup>3</sup>. In such descriptions an author usually enumerates the rich materials used in the decoration of the interior, the play of light on various polished surfaces, the magnificent visual impression they leave, and the surrounding 'special effects', such as

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<sup>1</sup> This text represents an extended version of the paper originally presented at the international symposium 'Spatial Icons. Textuality and Performativity' organized by Alexei Lidov in June 2009 at the Russian Academy of Arts in Moscow. I thank Dr. Lidov for inviting me to participate in the symposium.

<sup>2</sup> The pure aesthetic appreciation is illustrated by this passage describing the experience of the church of the Mother of God: "As you behold the beauty of this church, O stranger, your heart is filled with splendid joy, for it shines with variegated radiance of marble and gleams with the gold that covers it all around." (Cod Marc. Gr. 524, in *Mango C. The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453. Sources and Documents*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1972, p. 227). That the Divine can be captured and expressed with artistic means of color and form is a *topos* in Byzantine *ekphrases*. For instance, in describing the painting of the Archangel Michael by Eulalios, Nicephorus Callistus says: "It seems either that the painter has dipped his brush in immateriality to delineate a spirit, or else the spirit remains unobserved in his picture, hiding in colors his incorporeal nature. How is it that matter can drag the spirit down and encompass the immaterial by means of colors? This is [a work] of ardent love (as shown by the facts), and it kindles the heart" (*idem.*, p. 231).

<sup>3</sup> *Idem.*, p. 72–102.

the burning of incense and chanting of hymns that amplify the impression of an other-worldly realm. Indeed, the care and expense that went into decorating church interiors indicates that they were places of particular significance. This is hardly surprising considering that the Byzantines believed that the space of the church was made holy during the performance of the Divine Liturgy. The creation of the 'sacred space' clearly demanded special treatment<sup>4</sup>. Descriptions such as Procopius' also reveal a keen understanding of how physical surroundings influenced the viewer, and how the material could be used to point to the immaterial<sup>5</sup>.

But what of the exterior? Primary sources tell us little, if anything, about the effect that Byzantine church exteriors had on an observer. How did people perceive and experience the churches while viewing them within their daily environment? One can begin to answer this question by looking at the physical evidence of the church façades themselves. This paper will attempt to outline the decorative programs of the façades, their symbolic meaning, and how they were possibly experienced by the Byzantine observer. It will be argued that the façades were designed as part of the general hierotopic program of the church, an architectural construction defining the sacred space. The façade decoration functioned in two ways; on the one hand, it enabled the beholder's mental transition from the natural into the supernatural realm; on the other, it sublimated the core dogmas (already eloquently expressed in the interior), turning them into message-signs of the Divine Revelation. The paper will show how these church exteriors were employed to convey the same dogma of Christ's Revelation in the world and human salvation in Christ, as did the interiors, but in a manner vastly different from the narrative of the figurative frescoes. The subtle

<sup>4</sup> The methods utilized in turning the real into the 'sacred space' have been recently recognized and analyzed within a new field called Hierotopy — the study of sacred space. Hierotopy was first defined by Лидов А. М. Священное пространство реликвии (The Sacred Space of Relics) // Христианские реликвии в Московском Кремле (Christian Relics in the Moscow Kremlin) / Catalogue of an exhibition. Moscow, 2000. See also: *idem*. Hierotopy. Creation of Sacred Spaces as a Form of Creativity and Subject of Cultural History // Hierotopy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia / Ed. by A. Lidov. Moscow, 2006, p. 32–58.

<sup>5</sup> Procopius writes: "A spherical-shaped dome standing upon this circle makes it exceedingly beautiful; from the lightness of the building, it does not appear to rest upon a solid foundation, but to cover the place beneath as though it were suspended from heaven by the fabled golden chain. All these parts surprisingly joined to one another in the air, suspended one from another, and resting only on that which is next to them, form the work into one admirably harmonious whole, which spectators do not dwell upon for long in the mass, as each individual part attracts the eye to itself. <...> No one ever became weary of this spectacle, but those who are in the church delight in what they see, and, when they leave, magnify it in their talk." (Procopius, *De Aedificiis* // The Church of St. Sophia Constantinople / Trans. W. Lethaby and H. Swainson. New York, 1894, p. 24–28.)

vocabulary of largely non-iconic symbols interacted with the decorative program of the interior to reinforce theological messages.

#### PHYSICAL PRESENCE

Precisely because of the fact that the Byzantine *ekphrases* of churches are usually describing the interior space, and that the gamut of the theological apparatus had been employed to create interior spaces with transcendental qualities, it would be unlikely that the exterior was left to chance, excluded from the master plan of the hierotopic undertaking. Furthermore, it would be remiss to overlook the obvious: the churches possessed a significant corporeal presence in the local topography. The ecclesiastical buildings were the tallest structures, built of the most durable of materials. As such, they visually dominated the landscape. Could it really be that it was only the size and characteristic silhouette that communicated their significance? Were their patrons ignorant of the semiotic potential of these large surfaces towering over their surroundings? Since the primary literary sources are mute on the subject of exteriors, one could conclude that they were ignored in general, but the depictions of buildings in two-dimensional media, however, and the remaining buildings themselves, tell a different story<sup>6</sup>.

#### VIRTUAL ARCHITECTURE

Depictions of architecture in paintings provide us with some information about the original appearance of façades and, even more significantly, about their reception by the medieval viewer<sup>7</sup>. A twelfth-century illuminated manuscript with the scene of the Ascension is a case in point<sup>8</sup> (fig. 1). The scene is set within an architectural framework which appears fancifully unrealistic, but upon closer inspection and bearing in mind the Byzantines' ignorance of the rules of geometric perspective, one can assume that the inspiration for this image was found in the real architectural model — the

<sup>6</sup> While no primary sources in Byzantium discuss the meaning of the exterior walls of the church, Western sources are more eloquent on the subject, offering various theological explanations. For instance, a twelfth-century author compares the four walls of the church to the four Evangelists (*Frisch T.* Gothic Art, 1140-c.1450. Sources and Documents. Toronto, 1987, p. 36).

<sup>7</sup> For the general treatment of the subject, see: *Ćurčić S.* Architecture as Icon: Perception and Representation of Architecture in Byzantine Art. Exhibition catalogue. Princeton, 2010. Principles guiding the reading of the three-dimensional form in two-dimensional space are discussed in: *Eutlinger O.* The Architecture of Virtual Space. Ljubljana, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> The Ascension from the Homilies of the Virgin by James Kokkinobaphos, ca. 1125, Constantinople, fol. 3 verso (Ms. Gr. 1208, Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris). For discussion of iconography, see: *Weyl Carr A.* The Frontispieces from the Comnenian Period // *Gesta* 21/1, 1982, p. 10–11.

church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople — which also possessed a five-dome arrangement and was decorated in a similarly lavish manner<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, once we free ourselves from the modern compulsion to read architectural space straight-forwardly and through the exclusive application of a geometrically correct perspective, we notice that this image reveals both a keen perception of architectural features of the church building, as well as its symbolic function as a framework for the Divine Revelation. In this image, the figures that participate in the event — Christ, the Virgin, Apostles and Prophets — are relatively small and less visible than the large brightly colored ornaments gracing the façade. The main purpose of an architectural framework was to lend a sense of realism and symbolic significance to a scene which otherwise remains mystical in character. By employing certain architectural features (arches, domes) with symbolic connotations (giving honor and significance to the framed image) the meaning and value of the scene was amplified and made more spectacular. What transpires from this mire of visual clues is that architecture was deemed an appropriate frame for the Revelation. It also appears that the scene is closely connected to the architectural framework: both are symmetrical, with the emphatic central axis, and the main elements organized along it. The composition is hierarchic: ascending, Christ in the mandorla is additionally framed by the main arch, occupying the point of prominence. Directly above the arch is a square ornament — a marble plaque surrounded by a double frame. The plaque is plain, unadorned by any images or patterns, but it is its emptiness and the appearance of depth created by the dark green color that draws the eye in. The mysteriously blank square is flanked by brightly colored discs, also of marble, lined in a such a manner as to appear rotating: thus, they complement the circular appearance of the mandorla, which is being transported heavenwards by agitated angels. The impression of depth and implied movement is further forced upon the viewer through the inclusion of the outer-flanking panels imitating book-plated marble slabs. Both of these show a large 'X' shape at its core, which acts upon the eye by drawing it towards the center. Each and every ornament on the main façade attracts the attention of the viewer, engaging the eye in a different manner: through appearance of depth, movement, or through the psychological compunction of the eye to be drawn towards the center of a simple geometric shape. These façade ornaments, together with all the others shapes defined by arches, lunettes, drums and cupolas, engage the cognitive faculties of the viewer, so

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the 'inverted perspective' in Byzantine art, see: *Stojaković A.* Arhitektonski prostor u slikarstvu srednjovekovne Srbije. Novi Sad, 1970. More recently, the phenomenon has been explained as a historiographical construct by *Pantelić B.* Fault Lines of the Mind; Or, the Cultural Paradigm (forthcoming).



that he reflects on the beauty of the image and through it on the ultimate origin of all creation. It would thus not be a great leap of imagination to make the assumption that the church façades were designed to accomplish a similar task, and that this miniature just borrows the already developed method applied initially in real space.

Another twelfth-century illumination gives us a further insight into the potential of architecture to transform natural space and to sacralize the image (fig. 2). The portrait of St. Gregory is a veritable picture of space made sacred through the presence of the saint as well as through architectural symbolism<sup>10</sup>. The saintly figure is depicted in the traditional pose of a classical scholar laboring in his study. He is immersed in his task, yet turned in such a manner so that we can observe his features clearly. The mediation of real space and the exigencies of pictorial depiction (by convention, saints were depicted *en face* or in three-quarter profiles) are underlined by real architectural forms that define space and contextualize the scene. The saint's presence and the character of his writing are given due importance through the employment of a golden background — a convenient method of designating the spiritual realm, and the most recognizable feature of Byzantine art. The golden background itself tells us that we are in the presence of the Divine and thus not in natural space. If the gold was enough to bestow this transformative quality onto the scene, what function does copious architecture perform? In this example architectural features are even more numerous, albeit condensed, than was the case in the previous one of the Ascension. Here, the visual precedence is given to the large ogee-arched opening framing the saint. The columns of this arch are decorated with the so-called Knot of Solomon, the same as in the Homilies of the Virgin by John Kokkinobaphos' image. The Knot of Solomon was a well-known ornament with distinct apotropaic properties; its inclusion in both of these images testifies to its purposeful employment, motivated by its symbolic value<sup>11</sup>. Above the arch is another *tambour carré*, topped by a cupola, the drum of which is used as a frame of another iconic image: Christ in Majesty. Gregory's study is amalgamated with the space and architecture of the church where the image of Christ is represented in one of its traditional positions — either in a lunette above the entrance or in the dome. Hence, Gregory's Divine inspiration is thus clearly revealed and visually explained by indicating that he resides in the same space as Christ. In this image we can also discern urban texture created by the accretion of roofs of basilical and centrally-planned structures,

<sup>10</sup> The portrait of St. Gregory from the Homilies of St. Gregory of Nazianzos, folio 4. verso, 1136–1155 (St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai).

<sup>11</sup> Kalavrezou-Maxeiner I. The Byzantine Knotted Column // *Byzantina kai Metabyzantina* 4, Byzantine Studies in Honor of Milton V. Anastos / Ed. Vryonis S., Jr. Malibu, 1985, p. 95–103.

walls covered by ornamental marble plaques and doors opening into gardens — clearly intended to be associated with their heavenly counterpart. The architecture is used both as generator of space and vehicle for conveying the concept of the Kingdom of God. The architectural vocabulary lends an aura of sanctity to what is framed by the invented edifice(s), while also imparting the portrait with a degree of realism through the depicted urban landscape which is generic and hence familiar. The image is intended to be read as both earthly and heavenly, bridging the gap between the profane and the sacred — between recording the historical event of the creation of Gregory's Homilies and the Divine agency that provoked the authorship.

In both illuminations, color and light play a major role in the perception of space and character of architecture<sup>12</sup>. The colors are bright and cheerful, clearly chosen to evoke the beauty of the Heavenly realm. The light emanating from the invisible source is primarily conveyed through the use of gold leaf that covers the background of the main scenes, giving precedence to the figures and events. Yet, the inanimate architectural setting is not insignificant in the overall iconography. It injects the otherwise tame depictions with vivacity and dynamism and bestows meaning and significance onto the figures it frames. All of this speaks in favor of the view that the medieval audience was not immune to, nor ignorant of, architectural aesthetics, but that their taste for bright colors and a plethora of ornament was significantly different from the modern taste for less gaudy color schemes — and is thus not immediately recognizable as a conscious aesthetic choice. The riotously colorful exteriors embellished with marble panels and discs seen in these manuscripts are not complete inventions of the illuminators, but images inspired most probably by real architecture<sup>13</sup>. Considering their appearance, it is obvious that they do not copy faithfully any particular exterior, but are rather composed of elements extant in the architectural vocabulary of the time, particularly of symbolically-significant features. As to how the real buildings looked can still be best observed, of course, on the buildings themselves, although poor state of preservation and lack of precise archaeological evidence are obstructing the view.

<sup>12</sup> One is tempted to make a parallel between Byzantine church façades, which today are stripped of much of the colorful layers of paint and added ornaments, and the similar Classical Greek temples pristine in their whiteness today, but originally colorfully embellished. Not to claim any direct aesthetic affinity between the two building traditions, I would merely like to point out that color in general was a valued and employed in the ancient and medieval world far more than in modern architecture.

<sup>13</sup> An eye-witness account of Ruy González de Clavijo, a Castilian traveler who visited Constantinople in 1403, described the exterior of the eleventh-century church of St. Mary Peribleptos: "And the body of the church is on the outside completely decorated with pictures of different kinds, rich in gold and azure and many other colors." (*Mango, The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 217.)

## THE EVIDENCE OF CHURCH FAÇADES

The real problem with forming a broader view of the original state of Byzantine church exteriors lies in the dearth of well-preserved examples and, consequently, in our ignorance of the original appearance of the façades. Many, if not most, of the façades were once covered with mortar and painted, but this top layer has since disappeared<sup>14</sup>. What we are left mostly with is the fabric of the building, which can also be considered to be the lower layer. Based on some archaeological material, it appears that the ornaments embedded in the mural surface were sort of ‘under drawings’ that were repeated in paint and probably in greater detail<sup>15</sup>. This paper concerns itself with obtaining at least some degree of knowledge about the original appearance of the buildings, based both on the earlier mentioned evidence of painted architecture and on the archeological evidence of that built lower layer<sup>16</sup>. Its true focus will concern the experience of architecture, once such reconstruction can be outlined.

The most accessible point of entry into the analysis of church façades is provided by the ornaments and their symbolism. Some of them appear in other contexts (on objects, in manuscripts, in the interior decoration of churches, etc.), which additionally facilitates the task of discerning their symbolic meaning. These ornaments fall into the figurative-representational and non-iconic groups; it will be shown that both were endowed with an ability to convey noetic concepts by themselves and through relative combinations with each other.

Figurative symbols are mostly confined to stone reliefs that adorn window and door frames and, because of their complexity, are rarely executed in brick. One such example is a figurative ornament — a composition to be precise — known as the Fountain of Life motif (fig. 3). Properly speaking, it

<sup>14</sup> That church façades were once painted can be inferred from numerous archaeological evidence, and has been discussed in: Čurčić S. *Middle Byzantine Architecture on Cyprus: Provincial or Regional?* Nicosia, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See fn. 45. For studies concerning the question of the painted façades, see: Čanak-Medić Lj. *Slikani ukras na crki Sv. Ahilija u Arilju* // *Zograf* 9, 1977–1978, p. 5–11; Đurić V. *Nastanak graditeljskog stila moravske škole* [The emergence of the architectural style of Morava School] // *Zbornik za likovne umetnosti* 1. 1965, p. 35–64; *Hadermann-Misguich L. Une longue tradition byzantine. La décoration extérieure des églises* // *Zograf* 7. 1976, p. 5–10; *Orlova M. A. Naruzhnye rospisi srednevekovykh pamyatnikov arhitektury*. Moscow, 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Many a painted façades have been lost down the centuries for a variety of reasons: relatively short life-span of the material, difficulty of repeating the imagery in subsequent re-painting, desire for lesser visibility in the landscape during the rule of the Ottoman Turks, and last, but not least, modern conservation projects that favored ‘honest’ nakedness of the exposed walls, if for no intellectual reason, then for the aesthetic preference formed by modern architectural taste.

is a scene depicting two affronted birds drinking from a vessel. This is an illustration of Revelation 21:6 in which Christ describes his infinite nature (Alpha and Omega) and his life-giving character (like a fountain). The birds represent the faithful who, by drinking from the fountain, are given life<sup>17</sup>. Since the image has a singular symbolic meaning and appears as a decorative feature on church furniture and façades, we can consider it to be an ornament, one that is both pictorially sophisticated and semiotically legible<sup>18</sup>. It communicates the idea of eternal life in Paradise, available to the faithful through the Resurrection of Christ<sup>19</sup>. Because of its paradisiac connotations and the symmetrical arrangement, it was one of the most commonly employed motifs in sculptural reliefs and was equally popular in manuscript illumination<sup>20</sup>. It associates the façade with the Heavenly garden and indicates God's presence<sup>21</sup>.

Well-known iconic motifs are less recognizable when executed in brick<sup>22</sup>. But even the simple bricks, arranged skillfully, can form ornaments with precise and profound meanings. A tree can be depicted in an abbreviated manner by simple bricks branching from the main stem, as the examples from the katholikon of the Monastery of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki, and the Church of St. Theodora in Arta illustrate (fig. 4). The meaning of the tree is in this case clarified by its association with the cross, which is placed right next to it and in an emphatic manner. There can be little doubt that both of these represent the Tree of Life. This ancient symbol, ubiquitous in many artistic traditions was given distinct Christological meaning in Byzantine

<sup>17</sup> Revelation 21:6: "He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life'" (The Bible, New International version, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> *Velmans T.* L'iconographie de la 'Fontaine de Vie' dans la tradition Byzantine à la fin du Moyen Age // *Synthronon, Art et Archeologie de la fin de l'Antiquitee et du Moyen Age.* Paris, 1968, p. 119. See also: *Höltgen K. J.* Arbor, Scala, und Fons vitae: Vorformen devotionaler Embleme in einer mittelenglischen Handschrift // *Emblem und Emblemrezeption* / Ed. Sibylle Penkert. Darmstadt, 1978, p. 97–105; *Reykekiel W. von.* Der 'Fons vitae' in der christlichen Kunst // *Niederdeutsche Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 12, 1934, p. 87–136.

<sup>19</sup> The connection between the Holy Sepulchre and the fountain of life is attested in later sources: as in the *De Imaginibus* of St. John of Damascus, the Sepulchre is *zoephoros* and in the *Oratio I.a*, the Holy Grave is the source of our Resurrection (*he pege tes anastaseos*).

<sup>20</sup> *Velmans*, L'iconographie, p. 119–134; *Underwood P.* The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels // *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 5, 1950, p. 41–138.

<sup>21</sup> The fountain, who is Christ, can also be linked to light: "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9, The Bible, New International version, 1984). The interweaving of attributes will be discussed in the following pages.

<sup>22</sup> The Tree of Life, in Moses Book of Genesis, is a tree whose fruit gives everlasting life, that is, immortality. Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden after having eaten fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God, fearing that Adam and Eve will also eat from the Tree of Life and become immortal, set angels to guard the entrance to the Garden.

art<sup>23</sup>. The True Cross on which Christ was crucified was believed to have been fashioned from the Tree of Life, which grew in the Garden of Eden. Hence, the tree became a symbol of Resurrection, and consequently of Eternal Life<sup>24</sup>. It is apparent that the two motifs — the Tree and the Fountain of Life — communicate similar messages, evoking the Divine.

Semiotic overlapping, which prevents clear separation of meaning, was characteristic of most façade ornaments, making them almost indistinguishable as signifiers, and thus interchangeable. It was primarily the overall impression of and the association with the celestial sphere where all vibrates with light and energy that was desired<sup>25</sup>. Whether this effect was achieved with one or the other kind of materials and decorative patterns was less significant, as testified by a great variety numerous combinations of ornaments (fig. 5). This is especially true for highly abstract ornaments, whose meanings seem impenetrable. Such ‘field’ patterns cover larger areas like luscious carpets, turning mural surfaces into shimmering, moving fields, negating the reality of the wall (fig. 6). This visual trick is not new or typical of façades. Rather, it was adopted from Roman mosaics. *Trompe l’oeil* effects of surfaces decorated with geometric ornaments can be seen in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna where the central domical vault represents the starry heavens with zoomorphic symbols of the four Evangelists. The golden stars are organized in concentric circles and their relative arrangement, as well as the effect of gold on dark blue background, creates the impression of the open sky, soaring higher than the true curvature of the vault would be able to convey. A similar visual deception is evident on the exteriors of churches, although the rough manner of execution (mostly a combination of brick and mortar) does not produce such a sumptuous effect. During the Late Byzantine period, the façades were increasingly more bedecked in these in-

<sup>23</sup> Apart from its presence in Judaism and Christianity, it is also found in the Islamic world (Bucci G. *L'albero della vita nei mosaici pavimentali del Vicino Oriente*. Bologna, 2000, p. 1–25), in Norse mythology, ancient Sumner and Egypt, and even in Mayan civilization. See also: James E. O. *The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study*. Leiden, 1966.

<sup>24</sup> The Tree of Life which grew in the Garden of Eden was the cause of death to man, but the tree in the heavenly Paradise was life-giving. The actual relic of the True Cross was believed by some to have come from the Tree of Life in Eden, but saturated by the blood of Christ, it became imperishable and a witness to salvation in Paradise. See references to the Tree of Life in the Bible, especially: Genesis 2:9, and Revelation 2:7.

<sup>25</sup> A written account describes how Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos embellished the main reception hall in the imperial palace with mosaic decoration that was intended to create an impression of a garden: “...Chrysotriklinos which the ingenious Emperor turned into a blooming and sweet-smelling rose-garden by means of minute, variegated mosaic cubes imitating the colors of freshly opened flowers. Enclosed by spiral convolutions and shaped by the composition itself, these (?) are altogether inimitable” (Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 209).

tricate geometric patterns. The eastern façade of the fourteenth-century Panagia Olympiotissa in Thessaly is covered with wide bands of geometric zig-zag patterns that similarly confuse the eye which is transfixed by shimmering, moving red lines on the white surface; the solid wall below them seems to disappear (fig. 7). A preference for geometric, labyrinthine patterns could also be related to mystical devotional practices, especially popular in the later Byzantine centuries, whereby the abundance of intricate shapes was intended to entice and trap the eye, leaving the mind free to wander in a meditative trance. This would also suggest that the people in the Middle Ages were adept at using the patterns as conduits of religious experience. From all this evidence it transpires that the symbolism of individual motifs was no more significant than their collective achievement of producing something unexpected and supra-natural.

These general associations between the mural surface and the heavenly sphere become even more apparent when we look at ornaments purposefully employed to evoke the Garden of Eden. These also ultimately derive from Roman mosaics with images of gardens filled with life and nature's bounty. This iconography was given a new meaning of the Garden of Eden during the early Christian centuries, thus translating the earthly delights into heavenly ones<sup>26</sup>. Various floral patterns covering church facades in similar profusion and with the same insistence on dissolving the solid tectonic surface of the walls and converting it into pleasure-inducing visions of celestial gardens can be seen on a number of Late Byzantine churches (fig. 8). Floral patterns were mostly carved on the archivolt and window frames, while the larger areas of the walls were given over to geometric patterns and ornaments. Their placement was symbolic: they were situated around the openings, framing windows, rosettes and doors, and letting the light into the interior of the church. If they were intended to be abstractions of the Edenic flora, then the light that filtered through them could also be interpreted as the Divine Light emanating from the same heavenly source<sup>27</sup>.

Nonetheless, it is likely that most of the floral and geometric patterns did not possess a more specific meaning beyond general paradisiacal connotations. In contrast to the semiotically legible Fountain and Tree of Life, iconographically less distinguished floral and geometric 'field' ornaments constructed symbolic meaning through the overall visual impression they imparted onto the viewer. The overwhelming sense of variety, abundance, and optical satiation were intended to make one receptive to the viscerally-communicated message of the Divine Revelation.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, the vaults of the ambulatory in the Mausoleum of Sta. Constanza in Rome, or those in the Rotunda of St. George in Thessaloniki.

<sup>27</sup> See fn. 29.

## ARCHITECTURE BESTOWS MEANING

As the evidence of 'field' ornaments with fluid meanings has already indicated, the decorative program of the exteriors, regardless of its communicative function, was not designed to be a linear narrative like the Christological cycle depicted in the interior. Rather, the meaning was constructed through a system of formal relations. The ornaments were organized in a hieratic structure, whereby their positioning on the façade gave them different degrees of prominence and, consequently, determined their relative importance. Formal arrangements and combinations of symbolism-infused ornaments gave them more precise meaning. The sense of order thus created spoke of God's Divine plan and the orderliness of the Christian universe. This can be appreciated best in those ornaments that are large, displayed high up on the façade, and as such are the most visually dominant; they directly refer to some aspect of God's Divine nature<sup>28</sup>.

The second level of meaning, beyond the paradisiacal garden, is expressed by the introduction of a highly theoretical concept of the Divine, Uncreated Light, the same light seen by the Apostles who witnessed Christ's Transfiguration on Mount Tabor<sup>29</sup>. Symbols of the Divine Light, which accompanies Christ as his attribute, were executed by the visually unassuming decoration. In scholarship they are conventionally known as the 'dentil' or 'dog-tooth' friezes and were used for framing windows, eaves and occasionally enveloping the whole building. Symbolically, they are identical to the inverted triangles frieze, covering the eaves of apses and domes<sup>30</sup>. Recent research shows how these simple brick ornaments were in fact architectural equivalents of the 'folded tape' motif, a pattern taken from Late Antique decorative vocabulary and given a new meaning; because of their comparable form and placement, and especially because of their symbolism, both have been referred to as the 'radiant frieze'<sup>31</sup>. The

<sup>28</sup> The importance of placement of the ornaments-signifiers can be illustrated by proscription, found in the Edict of Theodosius (427) that no one is permitted to paint or carve the image of the cross upon the floor or the pavement, because such a lowly position negates the power of the cross and the symbol (Cod. Just. I, viii, Edict of Theodosius (427) in *Mango, The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 36).

<sup>29</sup> For description of the Divine Light, see: The Bible, Matthew 17:1–8. For comprehensive discussion of the Divine Light in Byzantine art, see: Ćurčić S. Divine Light: Constructing the Immaterial in Byzantine Art and Architecture // *Constructions of Sanctity: Ritual and Sacred Space in Mediterranean Architecture from Classical Greece to Byzantium* / Ed. R. Ousterhout and B. Wescoat. New York: forthcoming; Nelson R. Where God Walked and Monks Pray // *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground. Icons from Sinai*. Los Angeles, 2006, p. 1–38, considers the issues of relationship between 'natural' and 'Divine' light.

<sup>30</sup> As can be observed on the apse of the *parekklesion* of Constantinopolitan Church of Panagia Pammakaristos or the dome of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Pyrgi on Chios.

<sup>31</sup> Ćurčić, Divine Light.

connection between the brick frieze and its painted equivalent can be seen on the dome of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Peć, where the two appear together, side by side (fig. 9). The use of architectural and painted decoration to depict the 'radiant frieze' suggests that the Divine Light, although an abstract theological concept, was conceived of in physical terms as a rainbow and it can be seen as such framing the conch of the apse in the same church<sup>32</sup>. In the Church of St. Demetrius, abutting the Church of the Holy Apostles, the same radiant frieze is also evident, here framing the figure of the Virgin (fig. 10). The complex series of associations between exterior and interior decoration, and between figurative imagery and ornaments were particularly frequent in Later Byzantine centuries, indicating a certain development of theological ideas and methods of translating them into visual terms.

It is quite possible that Hesychast teaching, which dominated Orthodox theological thought during this late period of Byzantium, informed artistic production. This refers especially to the visual expression of the Divine Light. According to the ideas of Gregory Palamas, an archbishop and the most influential theologian of the fourteenth century, it was possible to experience the Divine Light in this life and to be completely transformed by the experience. He equated the Uncreated Light with the Energies of God. The former was His visible character, the manner in which God communicated Himself to the world<sup>33</sup>. It is very likely that Palamite ideas were applied in art and architecture through the plethora of 'radiant friezes' executed in paint in the interior and in brick and stone on the exterior.

The hierarchy of visual prominence and semiotic significance culminates in the most significant category of aniconic ornaments — the discs (fig. 11). These circular embellishments were made of brick or stone, or simply painted. The ones carved in stone or constructed of brick are known as the 'swirling' discs, while the painted ones are referred to as the 'whirling' discs, purely for the sake of distinction. In the church interior, swirling discs are frequently found on parapet slabs of templon screens and transennas. On these panels, the disc is usually combined with other orna-

<sup>32</sup> Illuminated miniatures depicting Christ are frequently framed by this frieze. The same is true of church decoration: the image with Christ Pantokrator in the dome of Daphni monastery is also framed by the folded tape motif.

<sup>33</sup> According to Lossky: "[Uncreated light] is the visible character of the divinity, of the energies in which God communicates Himself. <...> This uncreated, eternal, divine, and deifying light is grace, for the name of grace also refers to divine energies insofar as they are given to us and accomplish the work of our deification <...> [grace] is God Himself, communicating Himself and entering into ineffable union with man" (*Lossky V. In the Image and Likeness of God* / Ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird. Crestwood, New York, 1974, p. 58, 59).



ments, such as the cross, the Tree of Life and the Fountain of Life. Starting in the twelfth, and continuing into the following centuries, whirling discs frequently appear painted on icons and frescoes<sup>34</sup>. According to Radojčić, these were believed to be miraculous signs that had the power to physically fortify the church, because they represented the Logos, the Word of God upon which everything was based<sup>35</sup>. Another reading was proposed by Stričević who believed them to be the wheels in the Vision of Ezekiel (Ezekiel I: 16–18 and X: 9–13)<sup>36</sup>. Similarly, Weitzmann deduced from their placement and function in the Sinai icons that they were associated with Divine Light and with the Holy Spirit<sup>37</sup>. Schwartz was more circumspect about assigning them particular meaning; rather, she suggested an all-encompassing sense of holiness<sup>38</sup>. This is probably closer to the truth, since, as we will see, these ornaments possessed unquestionable semiotic potency, but their precise signification was formed every time anew, and was defined by the larger context in which they were found.

<sup>34</sup> Despite their high visibility, they, to my knowledge, have not been examined as semiotic signifiers in Byzantine art. The only study that addresses some of them directly is: *Schwartz E.* The Whirling Disc: A Possible Connection between Medieval Balkan Frescoes and Byzantine Icons // *Zograf* 8, 1977, p. 24–29. For swirling discs painted in manuscripts, see: *Franz A.* Byzantine Illuminated Ornament, 57. For their existence and meaning in Western art, see: *Reuterswärd P.* The Forgotten Symbols of God II // *Konsthistorisk Tidsskrift. Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis* 35. Stockholm, 1985, p. 47–63.

<sup>35</sup> Radojčić interprets the whirling discs in precise theological terms, although he does not explain how he arrived at such precise connection: “Believing in the sure power of miraculous signs, which strengthen the church, they place, below the pendentives, eight discs. Each of them is painted as three concentric circles, which spin in opposite directions. These strange discs, vibrating in their own circular motion, hover in the air as symbols of the Logos, of the Word of God upon which everything else is based. The distribution of the sign of the Logos as a seal of security on the high vaults and arches is nowhere so well planned in any Serbian church as in Mileševa. The architecture which grows in straight vertical rhythm ends in the heights with a light cupola which hovers in the air on the propellers of the Logos” (*Radojčić S.* Mileševa. Belgrade, 1971, p. 16).

<sup>36</sup> *Schwartz*, The Whirling Disc, p. 27–28, fn. 22.

<sup>37</sup> The essential qualities — motion and luminescence — were best interpreted in gold, which although flat could be made to appear three-dimensional and rotating, depending on the movement of the beholder. The twelfth-century Annunciation icon from Mt. Sinai shows a ray of light coming from the sky, carrying the Holy Spirit. The disc framing the dove of the Holy Spirit is executed in the same technique, as is the part of the luminous sphere representing the Divine. The alignment of the heavenly sphere and the disc on the axis underlines the connection between them. The composition thus confirms that the discs are the manifestations of the Divine. *Weitzmann K., Radojčić S., Chatzidakis M.* The Icons. New York, 1980, p. 16, Pl. 54. See also: *Weitzmann*, Mt. Sinai, p. 188; *idem.*, Byzantium and the West around the Year 1200 // *The Year 1200: a Symposium at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.* New York, 1975, p. 71, Pls. 17, 20, 22, 24.

<sup>38</sup> *Schwartz*, The Whirling Disc, p. 24–29.

On the façades, there are roughly three most common types of swirling discs, and all of them, I argue, are symbolic of the Divine<sup>39</sup>. They appear on the key points of the façade, flanking an important architectural feature (like an apse or a prominent window), filling a lunette, or marking the apex of the gable. Such emphatic arrangements suggest the semiotic importance of the motif, as well as possible meaning (fig. 12). If we examine the façade of the church known as Kypseli, we can begin to understand how the relative placement of the motifs reveals their meaning, just as the sacral aura of the symbols infuses the building with hierotopic properties<sup>40</sup>. The two large discs with sun burst motifs at their core are flanking the main apse. One of the traditional symbolic interpretations of the apse is that it represents the Virgin; its shape is analogous to the cave where Christ was born, as well as to the Virgin's womb. Additionally, images of the Virgin as the Seat of Wisdom often decorate the conch of the apse<sup>41</sup>. Bearing in mind the association of the apse with the Virgin, it can be inferred that the discs flanking it are to be connected to her<sup>42</sup>. An even more precise reading of this arrangement can be found when comparable examples from frescoes are taken into consideration. The formal arrangement of Kypseli's east façade finds a parallel in a fresco painted inside the Church of the Virgin Hodegetria in Peć (fig. 13). As on the façade, two discs flank the central element, in this case an arch which recalls the shape of the apse<sup>43</sup>. The arch frames the figure of the Virgin. The painted discs are decorated with centrally-arranged three-dimensional folded tapes, thus encapsulating the Divine Light<sup>44</sup>. By analogy, the sunburst discs

<sup>39</sup> The three types include: a disc with sun burst motif (radiating straight lines), the swirling disc with undulating lines, and the disc made by superimposing two or three concentric circles of varying size.

<sup>40</sup> Kypseli is the popular name for the thirteenth-century Church of Hagios Demetrios in Tourkopalouko, near Arta.

<sup>41</sup> Wessel K. *Apsider, Bildprogramm // Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst*, vol. I. Stuttgart, 1966, p. 268–293.

<sup>42</sup> Examples for this are numerous. For instance, a fresco with a Virgin flanked by the whirling discs can be seen at the Church of St. Demetrios in Peć, where the two discs levitate right above the outstretched palms of the Virgin Orans, making the visual connection between her figure and the Heavens above.

<sup>43</sup> It should also be added that the apse of the same church repeats this association, but with a slightly different arrangement: a single whirling disc appears right above the Virgin's head. Since she is the central figure in the apse, the disc is situated at the very apex of the conch. This placement itself recommends it as an element of supreme importance. The identical arrangement was again applied in the Church of St. Demetrius, as can be seen on fig. 10.

<sup>44</sup> The association of the swirling disc with light can be illustrated also by the twelfth-century Annunciation icon from Mt. Sinai (see fn. 37). In Armenian medieval art this motif symbolized the Universe, because its implied rotating motion and the round shape suggested perfection, completeness and eternal movement (*Documents of Armenian Architecture* 20: Gandzasar, 7). For the study of symbolic meaning of the swirling disc's and other circular ornaments within the Armenian artistic tradition, see: *Mnatsakanian S. Pahanitch khorh-*

at Kypseli can be understood as the manifestations of the same concept: the Virgin gave birth to Jesus Christ, who is the Divine Light.

Another eloquent example of the preeminence of the discs as carriers of meaning is seen on the façades of the church at Veljusa<sup>45</sup> (fig. 14). Prominently displayed above the cross, and emphatically framed by the arch, the disc appears as a visual revelation of the Divine in a form of radiating presence expressed by the geometrically simplest and the most ancient of the ciphers-symbols — the circle. The shape of the circle suggests perfection and eternity, and this meaning stretches into the distant history of the human species. Hence, to interpret it in this context, there is no need for a dictionary of religious symbols: its pure shape and presence, as well as its placement in the composition suggest Divine Revelation.

Around the middle of the fourteenth century, discs made of brick become rare and a round window appears instead. It is framed by an arch, an iconographic formula frequently employed in manuscript illumination<sup>46</sup>. As mentioned before, the arch possessed certain symbolic connotations that could be used to confer greater significance onto an image, as can be seen on the portrait of St. Gregory (fig. 2). Similarly, the oculi acquired importance by being surmounted by blind arches. By the last quarter of the fourteenth century, the oculus is superseded by a full, perforated rosette which is larger in size and far more decorated. Radially-organized lines, though here interpreted as intricate interlace, are reminiscent of the sunburst (fig. 15). Some of them are similar to Western rose windows which, based on the figural images depicted in the colored-glass sections, were interpreted as emblematic of the Divine Light and Divine Wisdom<sup>47</sup>. They have not been studied in the Byzantine context,

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danshannere; *Karapetian B.* Gandzasari; *Orbeli I.* Bytovye rel'efy. The swirling disc almost always appears as a complement to the cross on medieval *khachkars* (Armenian tomb stones). The two are centrally placed and aligned along the vertical axis. Nevertheless, the close relationship between the two is quite clear, even to a casual observer. Another location where the swirling discs appear prominently are the church domes, such as at the Greek church of Tigran Honents in Ani (Documents of Armenian Architecture 12, fig. 27).

<sup>45</sup> The eleventh-century church of Virgin Eleusa in Veljusa, near Strumica, is one of the rare churches where the original painted layer has been preserved. As such it is paradigmatic of the relationship between the ornaments built into the exterior walls and the painted layer of decoration that once covered them. The two layers are almost identical; the painted ornaments being the near-exact copies of the brick ornaments underneath. For images and discussion about the painted decoration of the façades, see: *Miljković-Peppek P.* Veljusa. Manastir Sv. Bogorodica Milostiva vo selo Veljusa kraj Strumica. Skopje, 1981.

<sup>46</sup> See manuscript illumination: Scheide MS. 1, folios 4r and 4v. Princeton University, Rare Books Collection.

<sup>47</sup> This is especially true for rosettes on Naupara monastery in central Serbia, which are basically the same as spoked-wheel rosettes on Gothic churches. They even feature figurative decoration that relates them closely to the Romanesque and Gothic sculpture of the Adriatic coast. In

since the Morava group churches to which most of the examples belong were not recognized until recently as part of the mainstream developments in Byzantine architecture<sup>48</sup>. However, regardless of where one places the Morava churches, there can be little doubt that its rosettes were not as semiotically significant, just as were those of Romanesque and Gothic churches<sup>49</sup>. They participated in the creation of sacred space, not just by ushering light into the interior, but by being the most important symbolic elements of the exterior. Within the façades that are divided both vertically and horizontally into bays and zones they occupy the place of honor: the largest rosettes are found in the upper-most zone of the façade; smaller rosettes are situated in tympana of the arches defining the *tambour carré* that supports the dome (fig. 16). No other ornament revealed the Divine presence quite so convincingly as the rosettes, through their prominent placement, intricate interlace decoration and general symbolism associated with these circular ornaments<sup>50</sup>.

Ontologically speaking, the rosettes represent the final stage in the development of circular ornaments. And like their antecedents, the swirling discs, they expressed the same idea of the Divine presence through the visual association of its qualities: light and perpetual motion that imply the eternal life. Thus, the church building, infused with a plethora of ornaments-signifiers, was intended as a vehicle for conveying theological doctrines.

#### ORNAMENT AS SEMIOTIC AGENT

To return to the question posed in the introduction — what was the peoples' experience of church exteriors — is to embark on a precarious ground of a historically-removed culture with its own *sensus communis* which one can never fully understand from the vantage point of today. The point of departure for this discussion is then limited to the question of how the façades conveyed meaning to the medieval viewer. It can be assumed, based on the

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instances where the window is surrounded by the images of the evangelists the iconography and composition imply that they are the wheels in the apocalyptic Vision of Ezekiel.

<sup>48</sup> Trkulja J. *Aesthetics and Symbolism of Late Byzantine Church Façades, 1204–1453*. Ph. D. Diss., Princeton University, 2004, p. 159–166.

<sup>49</sup> For the symbolism of rose windows in the West, as well as in Islamic East, see: Franz H. G. *Les fenêtres circulaires de la cathédrale de Cefalù et le problème de l'origine de la 'rose' du Moyen âge* // *Cahiers Archeologiques* 9, 1957, p. 253–270; *idem.*, *Neue Funde zur Geschichte des Glasfensters* // *Forschungen und Fortschritte* 29, 1955, p. 306–10; *idem.*, *Transennae als Fensterverschluss, ihre Entwicklung von frühchristlicher bis in islamische Zeit* // *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archaeologischen Institut in Istanbul*. 1956.

<sup>50</sup> For specific discussion of the origins and meaning of the Morava rosettes, see: Trkulja J. *The Rose Window — A Feature of Byzantine Architecture?* // *Festschrift in Honor of Slobodan Ćurčić*. Ashgate, 2012.

evidence presented thus far, that church façades communicated with the viewer through the set of ornaments-signifiers, which elicited certain cognitive processes in the viewer. The ornament imbued with meaning, or what anthropologist of art, Alfred Gell, calls the ‘index’, permitted a particular cognitive operation to occur. This operation which he terms the ‘abduction of agency’, was based on the semiotic potential of the index (ornament) to convey certain ideas through visceral association of simple forms with aspects of the Divine<sup>51</sup>. An ‘index’ in Peircean semiotics is a ‘natural sign’, that is, an entity from which the observer can make the casual inference of some kind. Just as smoke denotes fire, so simple geometric forms, or patterns formed by them, elicit certain predetermined associations in one’s mind. The geometric shape of the circle (swirling disc) implies eternity and perfection. The radiant, life-affirming appearance of the radiant frieze (dog tooth, folded tape, inverted triangles frieze) alludes to the illumination of the Divine Light. The visual satiation one feels while gazing upon the fields of intricate patterns links that impression with a different kind of satiation: one of the abundance of the Heavenly garden.

Since words were insufficient for describing an entity such as the ineffable, mysterious Divine, the intuitive reason, initiated by viscerally-experienced forms, provided the logical alternative. Their continuous use over the centuries, surviving artistic epochs, suggests that there was something inherently meaningful about the form that insured its persistence in various contexts. According to Peirce’s semiotic theory, the discs would be classified as ‘qualisigns’: a shape possessing a certain property that makes it a sign<sup>52</sup>. These are the natural signs that do not depend on the context, culture, or convention to be understood. In effect, these are the most basic of signs, which insured their perpetual use throughout history (even stretching into the Pre-Historic period)<sup>53</sup>. Their longevity was thus not conditioned upon an uninterrupted line of adoption and assimilation from one culture into another, but rather by their innate quality to communicate essential ideas.

By employing forms that could be understood intuitively, the most abstruse theological dogmas, such as the seminal one of the invisible, yet ubiq-

<sup>51</sup> Gell A. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 13.

<sup>52</sup> “...A *Qualisign* is a quality which is a Sign. It cannot actually act as a sign until it is embodied; but the embodiment has nothing to do with its character as a sign”. “...A *Qualisign* is any quality in so far as it is a sign. Since a quality is whatever it is positively in itself, a quality can only denote an object by virtue of some common ingredient or similarity; so that a *Qualisign* is necessarily an Icon. Further, since a quality is a mere logical possibility, it can only be interpreted as a sign of essence, that is, as a Rheme” (A Syllabus of Certain Topics of Logic / Eds. Houser N., Kloesel C. // *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings*. vol. 2, 1893–1913. Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998, p. 291, 294).

<sup>53</sup> Pierce distinguishes two other categories of signs — *sinsigns* and *legisigns* — but these do depend on convention.

uitous Godhead, could be conveyed by visual means. According to Peirce, in the case of natural signs, whose shape communicates the meaning directly, signification takes place outside of communication<sup>54</sup>. In fact, Peirce's interpretant does not even presuppose consciousness in the receiver of the sign; merely the capacity for response. This model of semiosis perfectly reflects the character of ornaments-signifiers and their intended function. This is best illustrated by the role that field patterns play on the façades: they capture the attention of the viewer, thus becoming literal 'mind traps'<sup>55</sup> (fig. 6). This cognitive adhesiveness engages the viewer, potentially holding him bound to contemplate the pattern indefinitely. In reality, few would spend extensive amounts of time glancing upon the intricate decoration of the façade of the church, simply because the learned behavior prompts them to act, that is, to move on towards the final destination of their visit, and to enter the church. The façade, replete with visually viscous ornaments, thus becomes 'an unfinished business', and as such compels one to return to it again at some point.

#### PERFORMATIVITY OF THE INTERIOR AND THE EXTERIOR

Together with the monumental fresco program of the interior, church furniture, light, fragrance and music, the decorated church façades created conditions for the performance of the liturgy and experiencing the Divine. Their striking visual appearance brought about aesthetic enjoyment, while their semiotic potency induced associations with the Divine beauty. The idea of spiritual transformation, ultimately accomplished in the interior during the service, was thus introduced; the first act of the 'performance' commenced in advance of crossing the threshold of a building. Thus, the beholder would be put into the appropriate frame of mind and prepared for what was to come.

The exterior and the interior, however, were not epistemologically equal. The manner in which they conveyed theological dogmas differed. In the interior, the images were usually organized in zones, each with a different kind of imagery. According to the theory of Otto Demus, the ideal Byzantine church possessed three levels of meaning, each corresponding to a zone of frescoes or mosaics<sup>56</sup>. The lowest zone, populated by an array of saints, who once lived in the world, was symbolic of the earthly sphere. Their images were painted as icons: they were depicted without narrative detail about their deeds and hagiographic background. This zone was reminiscent of a picture gallery, a display of portraits of (spiritual) ancestors, like

<sup>54</sup> This would explain why no *ekphrasis* deals with the subject of the façades.

<sup>55</sup> For the explanation of how simple fields of geometric pattern function as mind traps, see: Gell, *Art and Agency*, p. 77–88, fig. 6.5/2.

<sup>56</sup> Demus O. *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration, Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium*. London, 1948.

the private collections that were once found in patrician Roman homes. In contrast, the second zone possessed a strong narrative component. It depicted scenes from the Christological Cycle and other Biblical stories, theoretically bridging the earthly and the heavenly spheres. The third and highest zone was the most holy one; it was supposed to reveal the Heaven itself. It was reserved for the Celestial Hierarchy and visionary images. This tripartite painted program guided the eye of the beholder upwards, gradually 'lifting' him into the Heavenly realm. As the eye would ascend from the picture gallery of the spiritually deserving individuals, towards the images witnessing Christ's presence on earth, and into the upper-most celestial sphere, the viewer would undergo a slow cognitive transformation. From the most straightforward looking into the saintly faces, which in itself required no deep intellectual involvement, over a more demanding task of reading and interpreting the Biblical narrative and its complex iconographic structure, to the most intellectually demanding sphere where the goal was to perceive, and then comprehend the nature and the realm of the Divine. It was a difficult, but well-structured exercise, and it obviously functioned well, considering that this formula — once established during the Middle Byzantine period — was never changed.

The façades also possessed hierarchical structure consisting of general paradisiacal decoration, the more emphatic Divine Light friezes, and finally the Revelatory symbols of the Divine in the form of the discs. However, the manner in which they communicated with the viewer was profoundly different from the interior: the narrative and the didactic aspects were missing; also absent was the gradual transition towards the Divine. Instead, the Heavenly realm was revealed instantaneously, although it was hidden behind the veil of aniconic ornaments<sup>57</sup>. Visually and conceptually, the façades announced the triumph of Christ even before one entered the sacral realm of the church building. On the level of perception this meant that the same message about God's role in the world was conveyed twice, and in two distinct manners.

Because the specific aspects of the Divine were only indicated by symbols — the shape of which could be understood intuitively — they engaged

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<sup>57</sup> For instance, the Divine Light, both as the radiant frieze and as the luminous spheres or discs, appears only in the images of Ascension, Pantokrator, the Throne of Wisdom, and other scenes found on the highest zone within the church. The ornaments that appear on the exterior, particularly the rosettes looking like the mandorla or nimbus, and bursts of light convey the idea of Heavens, and specifically allude to Apocalyptic images: Christ's Ascension, Christ in Majesty, wheels in the Vision of Ezekiel, etc. They replicate the images usually found on the highest registers in the churches interior: in the dome, conches, and the intrados of the vaults. Hence, these images convey central tenets of the Christian dogma: Christ's Second Coming.

cognitive faculties of the beholder to a lesser degree than the narrative and the didactic fresco cycles of the interior; rather, they viscerally communicated the presence of God in the structure they enclosed. According to Peirce: “The only way of directly communicating an idea is by means of an icon; and every indirect method of communicating an idea must depend for its establishment upon the use of an icon”<sup>58</sup>. It can be said that this communication was both easier, because it was immediate and intuitive, and more difficult because it lacked narrative explanation that aided viewer in understanding the overall message. One wonders then, whether only a select few of the clerics who dedicated themselves to the study of theology and were engaged in the production of ecclesiastical architecture and art understood what this aniconic program of the façade was intended to communicate. It seems unlikely that the illiterate laity was attuned to the semiotic nuances of such a complex and highly impenetrable language of symbols. At the same time, they must have been impressed by the beauty of decorated exteriors, and, in the minds of many, the aesthetic experience was permuted into the religious experience.

The church building, we should be reminded, was not experienced piecemeal and as intellectually or as consciously as the previous discussion suggests, but rather as an event and in its totality. The passing of time necessary to appreciate the church from the outside and inside was the important element that shaped perception of the medieval beholder, and it was time that enabled the performative aspects of Byzantine art and architecture to emerge. The experience thus produced would be layered, gradual, because of the dichotomy between the interior and the exterior, and the time necessary to experience them both.

The decorative program of the façade can only be understood if we are to divest ourselves of the traditional notion of ‘art as object’ and begin to think of ‘art as experience’, because the thought and artistic agency that went into the design of these exteriors makes little sense otherwise. (Why use such unassuming patterns and in such frugal materials, when intricately crafted objects in rich materials were entirely possible, judging from their appearances in the interior?) The decorative program of the façades was situated precisely at the junction of spatial and temporal experience. The modern misconception that ‘arts of space’ (painting, sculpture, architecture) and ‘arts of time’ (music, performance) are different and incongruous is based in materialism; it springs from the excessive focus on the *object* rather than the

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<sup>58</sup> Of course, he does not refer to the ‘icon’ in a sense that students of Byzantine art would use it, but to any image, especially a sign. (*Peirce C. S. Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 2 / Eds. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss. Cambridge, MA, 1932, p. 278).



*behavior of the perceiver*<sup>59</sup>. Judging from the foregoing analysis of the decorative programs, this modern attitude was not shared by the Byzantines, who, rather than to focus on rich, individual embellishments — beautiful in themselves — spent their energies orchestrating the visual response that simple ornaments, arranged in a certain manner, could elicit from the viewer. The creators of these churches — and here we see how ungrateful modern taxonomy is since these were not just painters, just sculptors, or just architects, but individuals whose purview exceeded these artificial professional boundaries — should be credited not just with making an object (façade), but with setting the stage for the performance. The goal of their work was to provide the beholder with a glimpse into the religious experience awaiting him inside the sacred space of the church. Ultimately, the creators of these programs were not only craftsmen, nor even only artists (although their work is undoubtedly ‘artistic’), but also savvy psychologists and true masters of ceremonies, who gave preference to the experience and the ritualistic aspects of the built environment over the formal aesthetics considerations. Religious art of the Byzantines seems to have been located partly in real space and partly in psychological space, a complexity not properly appreciated by modern scholars, probably because the scholarship has been strictly limited to exclusive fields of inquiry, with art history focusing strictly on the material side<sup>60</sup>. Considering the findings of this brief study, it seems that it is precisely such interdisciplinary approach that is called for because the people who created these objects-events were equally ‘interdisciplinary’ in their approach.

A possible scenario for the way that the façades interacted with the viewer could have gone as follows: for the visitor, the performance of the church-going ritual begun with seeing the edifice from a remote vantage point and observing its silhouette<sup>61</sup>. The perception of the building intensified with the approaching steps and coming into focus of the exterior decoration. Standing in front of the church and seeing its walls allowed the viewer to feel him or herself already transported half way between the profane na-

<sup>59</sup> For the discussion of situational aesthetics and the role played by time in perception of an art work, see: *Burgin V. Situational Aesthetics // Art in Theory, 1900–2000 / New edition.* Ed. by C. Harrison and P. Wood. Blackwell Publishing, 2008, p. 894–896.

<sup>60</sup> The relatively new interdisciplinary approaches that encompass knowledge from various fields — psychology, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, art history, etc. — that has marked the study of the modern period is only a very recent development in the study of Byzantine art, and topics such as a façade decoration had certainly not been subjected to such inquiries with wider theoretical scope.

<sup>61</sup> From the Middle-Byzantine period onward churches were expressly designed as free-standing structures, separate from the surrounding urban fabric, and as such could be observed and appreciated from all sides. This sculptural quality of architecture is obvious in equal distribution of decoration on all four façades.

ture of the surroundings and the sacred space of the building. By engaging with the decorative program of the façade, the viewer ‘entered’ the liminal space for experiencing the otherworldly, with ornaments revealing the Divine presence. With the passing into the interior of the building and witnessing the liturgy one was transported into a different sphere, reaching the high point of the experience. Eventually, the reversal of the transcendental experience was accomplished upon one’s egress from the building; nonetheless, glances back to its walls and the view of its façade iconography reminded one of the glories of God residing therein.

Art and architecture thus facilitated the performance in which the observer’s perception of real space was altered, he was mentally transported into the otherworldly realm, and then brought back, the memory of the experience lingering and being reinforced by the Revelation displayed on the façade. The exterior walls played important roles before and after one’s participation in the liturgy. Before one’s entrance, they served as apt ‘advertisements’ of what was to come. After one’s egress, they became reminders and repositories of memory of the spiritual transformation experienced inside. Their design (the lack of narrative and the presence of instantly understandable symbols) made them ideal mnemonic devices. The ornaments, as well as their decorative program performed a salient role in the overall spiritual life of a pious churchgoer. Perhaps, since they were the ones that shaped perception and memory, they effectively exceeded in importance the experience of the liturgy itself. According to Langer, memory is the great organizer of consciousness that simplifies and composes our perceptions into units of personal knowledge. To remember an event (performance of liturgy, a sense of being in a sacred space) is to experience it again, but not in the same way as the first time, because memory is a special kind of experience, composed of selected impressions<sup>62</sup>. Hence, the programs of the façades served as appropriate mnemonic aids, enabling one to reconstruct — and thus experience again, albeit always slightly differently — the ultimate joy that a religious person could hope to feel — the beauty and glory that awaited him in the world beyond.

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<sup>62</sup> Langer S. K. *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*. New York, 1953, from: Shirley R. Steinberg, Joe L. Kincheloe, Patricia H. Hinchey, eds. *The Post-Formal Reader: Cognition and Education*. Routledge, 1999, p. 188.

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ФАСАДНАЯ ДЕКОРАЦИЯ ВИЗАНТИЙСКИХ ЦЕРКВЕЙ:  
СИМВОЛИЧЕСКИЕ, ПРОСТРАНСТВЕННЫЕ  
И ПЕРФОРМАТИВНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ

Изучение иеротопии — деятельности по созданию сакральных пространств — в последние годы достигло значительного развития в области византийских и средневековых исследований, что открывает новый путь для анализа религиозного искусства и архитектуры с учетом их отношения к таким формообразующим аспектам церковного пространства, как свет, запахи, музыка и литургическое действо. Византийская церковь как миметическое воспроизведение небесного царства, с ее многообразием деталей и компонентов, по праву может восприниматься как своего рода перформативный *Gesamtkunstwerk* (совокупный художественный продукт), который в качестве предмета изучения приходит на смену традиционной статической модели прежних исследований по истории искусства.

Важная проблема, которая возникает в контексте иеротопической теории, — это роль наружного декора византийских церквей: их облика и его влияние на зрителя до и после посещения самой церкви. Данная работа основана на утверждении, что построение сакрального пространства церкви изначально включало в себя создание экстерьерера, а в более широком плане — церковного окружения и внешней среды в целом. Это было неотъемлемой частью ритуального опыта людей, посещающих церковь. Мы пытаемся показать, как фасады покрывались особой, нефигуративной иконографией — системой семиотических знаков, представленных в виде простых геометрических и растительных орнаментов, насыщенных символическими смыслами. Среди них можно отметить, например, круги, «вращающиеся диски», выложенные формованным кирпичом или нарисованные на штукатурке, которые означали вечную жизнь Христа, но в то же время ассоциируются с «солнечным диском», дарующим жизненную силу. Фриз из кирпичей, положенных наискось, и нарисованные мотивы складчатой ткани символизируют Божественный свет. Иначе говоря, простые орнаменты представляют разные атрибуты Бога, о чьем присутствии напоминалось верующим еще до того, как они вступали в храм.

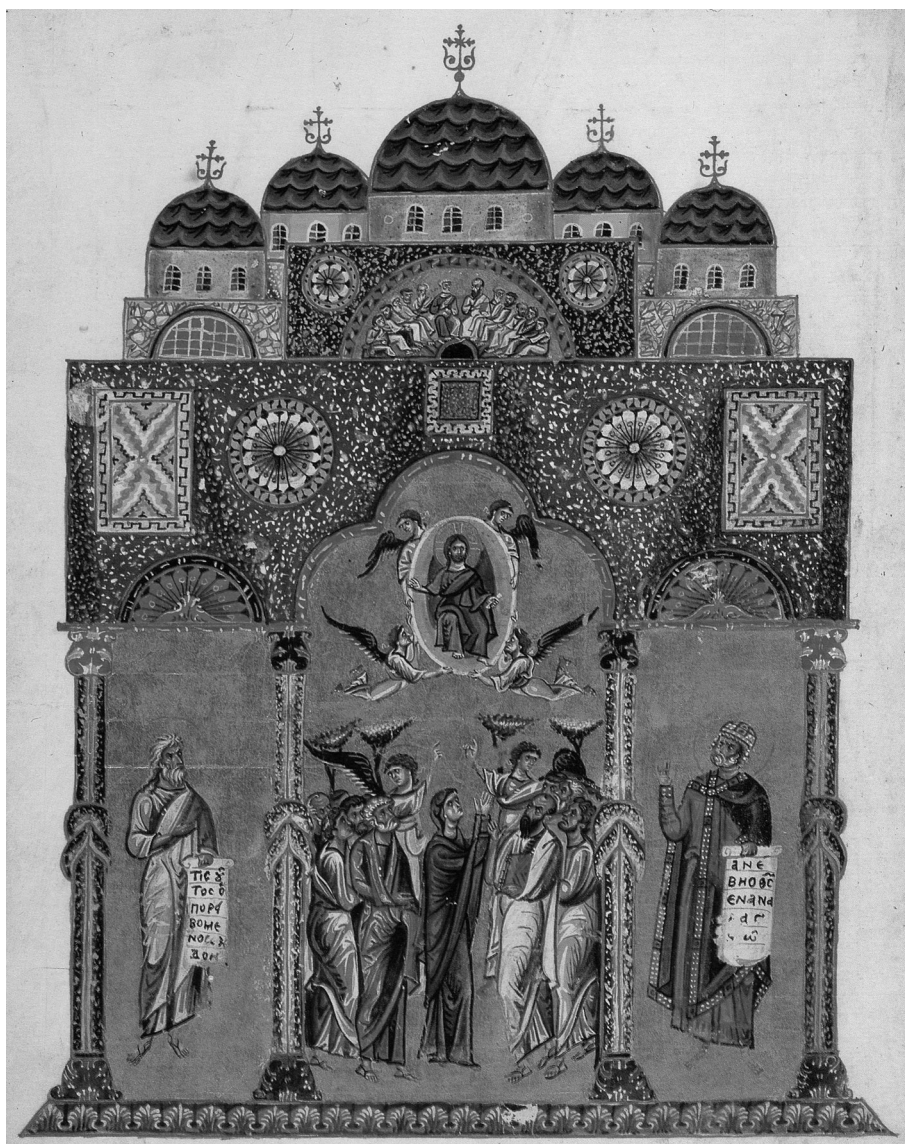
Язык орнаментов-символов был закодированным, но его долговечность и вездесущность говорит об осмысленности и важности знаков в общем облике церкви. Композиции нефигуративных образов на фасадах развивались на протяжении столетий, достигнув кульминации в богатом

декоре церквей поздневизантийского периода. Интегрировав индивидуальные орнаменты, существовавшие в художественной традиции первых веков христианства, в структурированную и продуманную в символическом плане программу, византийские мастера создали новый, нефигуративный язык монументальной храмовой декорации. Церковные здания Палеологовской эпохи переполнены такими орнаментами-символами, организованными согласно иерархической логике и целенаправленно выбранному богословскому замыслу. Исключительные атрибуты Божества, представленные в виде упомянутых выше дисков, размещались на самых заметных местах, всегда высоко и по центру фасада. Чтобы подчеркнуть их значимость и смысл, византийские строители обрамляли их арками (которые сами по себе символизировали небесное царство) и окружали символами «вторичного» ряда: теми, что указывали на райский сад (например, пальметты и виноградные лозы). Интуитивное прочтение некоторых таких мотивов, в частности, фризов с колоритными «складками ткани», зачастую расположенными как обрамление окон (украшение софитов), может со всей очевидностью указывать на свет; естественные солнечные лучи, проникающие в церковь сквозь окна, были визуальным выражением теологической концепции Божественного Света. Такой простой визуально-ассоциативный метод помогает в прочтении декорации фасадов без специальных и сложных богословских толкований. Следовательно, иерархическое расположение «первостепенных» орнаментов, обозначающих само Божество, и поддерживающая их «вторичная» иконография, связанная с небесным царством, передавала значение декора несложным, почти интуитивным способом.

Способ передачи религиозных посланий зрителю весьма важен, поскольку обладает собственной семиотической ценностью. По контрасту с церковным интерьером, в котором тщательно согласовывались визуальные и другие чувственно воспринимаемые стимулы, направленные на создание атмосферы священного, в экстерьере применялись только орнаменты-знаки, прямо и наглядно указывающие на божественное присутствие в окружающем мире. Более того, поскольку определенные аспекты Божества — вечная жизнь, жизнеподательная сила и т. п. — были обозначены только символами, чья форма могла восприниматься интуитивно, — непрерывно вращающимся колесом с исходящими от него солнечными лучами, они активизировали познавательные способности зрителя в меньшей степени, чем нарративные и дидактические циклы фресок в интерьере; скорее, они на более тонком уровне сообщали о присутствии Бога в здании, которое они помечали. Более того, они передавали христианское послание светскому окружению, сакрализуя его. Таким образом, естественный мир оказывался сопричастным святости иеротопического пространства.

Коммуникативная функция экстерьера и свойства церковного интерьера, изменяющие реальность, тем не менее, действовали в унисон, их значения дополняли друг друга. Формируемый таким способом опыт восприятия складывался из разных уровней, в силу самой природы трехмерного пространства, дихотомии интерьера и экстерьера и времени, необходимого для восприятия того и другого. Время было решающим фактором, так как оно актуализировало перформативные аспекты византийского искусства и архитектуры, создавая духовный опыт значительной сложности. Он начинался с того момента, когда в отдалении перед прихожанином возникали общие очертания церкви; по мере приближения к храму восприятие становилось более ярким и фокусировалось на декоративной программе на его стенах; когда человек вступал в интерьер, участвовал в литургическом действе, он переносился в иную сферу. Очевидно, обратное движение в его трансцендентном опыте достигалось, когда он двигался из церкви; тем не менее, возможный взгляд назад, на стены храма и иконографию фасада, напоминал о славе Бога, обитающего внутри. Таким образом, искусство и архитектура облегчали организацию «перформанса», в ходе которого менялось восприятие реального пространства прихожанином, и он мысленно переносился в иной мир, откуда затем возвращался, и память о пережитом опыте оставалась с ним, подкрепленная знаками откровения на церковном фасаде.

С течением времени, отделяющего нас от средневековья, когда семиотические и перформативные аспекты византийского религиозного искусства развивались и совершенствовались, значения орнаментальных мотивов и программ нефигуративных образов забывались. Мы можем только угадывать их смысл, основываясь на изучении программ изображений в интерьере и экстерьере, хотя изначально закодированный язык орнаментов-знаков был в равной мере понятен духовным лицам и мирянам, так что и те и другие были способны воспринять послание: в церкви обитает Бог, и Он раскрывает себя и в окружающем мире. Таким образом, иеротопический опыт византийского зрителя расширялся, распространяясь от сакрального пространства церкви на мир вокруг нее, подтверждая универсальность христианского мироздания.



1. The Ascension. The Homilies of James of Kokkinobaphos on the Life of the Virgin, fol. 3 v., ca. 1125, Constantinople.  
Ms. Gr. 1208, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris



2. The portrait of St. Gregory.  
The Homilies of St. Gregory of Nazianzos, fol. 4. v., 1136–1155.  
St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai



3. Fountain of Life from a tympanon  
of the Church of the Presentation of the Virgin, Kalenić Monastery, 1407–1418

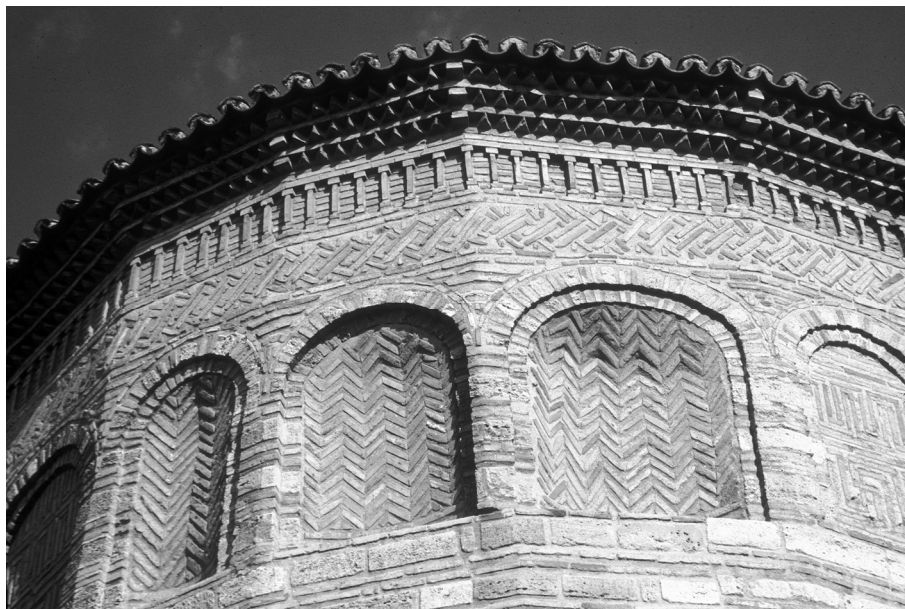


4. Tree of Life from the west façade of the Church of St. Theodora,  
Arta, thirteenth century

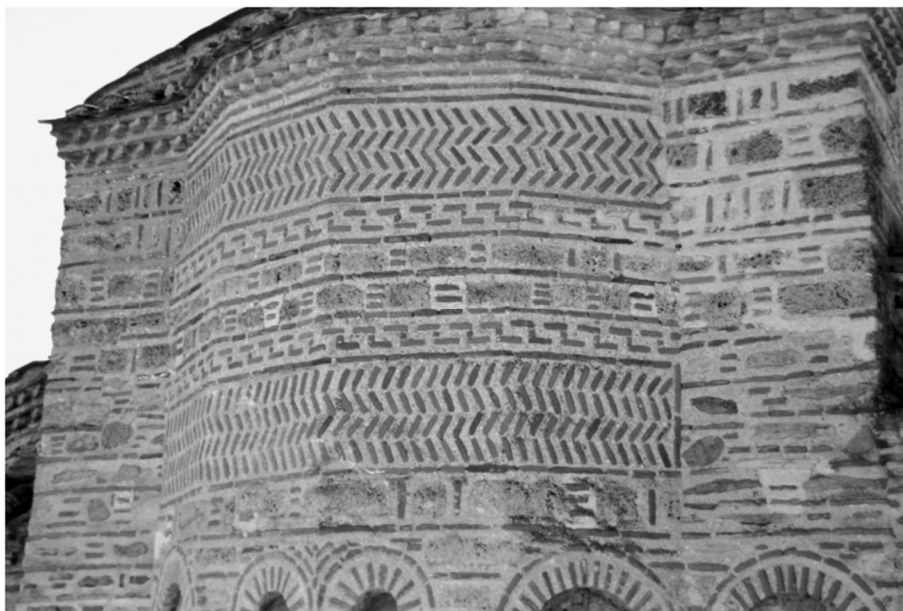




5. Detail of the façade, Kato Panagia, near Arta, thirteenth century



6. Detail of the façade, Profitis Elias, Thessaloniki, ca. 1360–1370



7. Detail of the main apse, Panagia Olympiotissa, near Trikkala, fourteenth century



8. Floral borders from the Church of the Presentation of the Virgin,  
Kalenic Monastery, 1407–1418



9. The dome of the Church of the Holy Apostles, Peć, ca. 1220



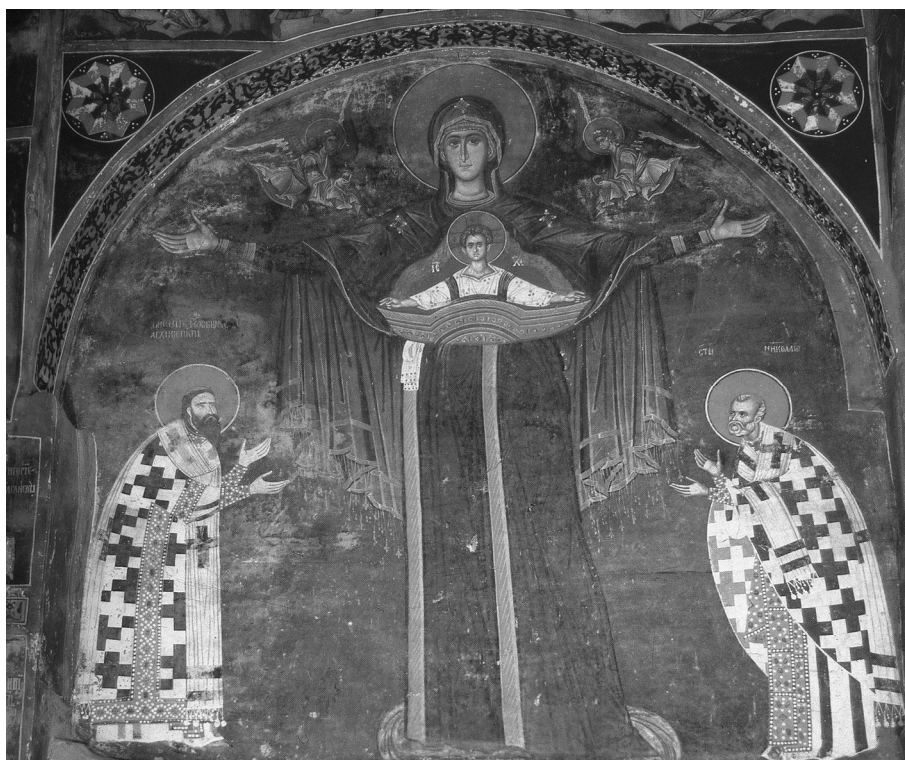
10. The conch of the apse of the Church of St. Demetrius, Peć, 1322–1324



11. Detail of the east façade of the South Church, Constantine Lips (Fenari Isa camii), Istanbul, 1282–1304 (photo: M. Mihaljević)



12. East façade of the Church of St. Demetrios, Kypseli (Tourkopalouko), mid-thirteenth century



13. The narthex of the Church of the Virgin Hodegetria, Peć, ca. 1330



14. Façade of the Church of the Virgin Eleusa, Veljusa, ca. 1080  
(photo: M. Mihaljević)



15. Rosette from the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin,  
Ljubostinja Monastery, ca. 1385



16. South façade, The Church of the Assumption of the Virgin,  
Ljubostinja Monastery, ca. 1385