

KU LEUVEN

Hierotopy – studies in the making of sacred spaces

H i e r  t o p o p y



EASR EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

EASR
European Association for the Study of Religion
Annual Conference 2017
Special Conference of the IAHR
International Association for the History of Religion
18-21 September 2017

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Hierotopy between Art History and Religious Studies

Compendium of Abstracts

The Sacred Space as a Multimedia Phenomenon: Hierotopy between Art History and Religious Studies

Alexei Lidov, Moscow, Russia

The concept of hierotopy – a new academic field dealing with the creation of sacred spaces – was first conceived in the context of art history as a new way of seeing artistic phenomena, yet it spans various humanities, including the history of religion.

Sacred spaces do not easily lend themselves to positivist methods of conventional anthropology, which are focused on material objects and actions. Having nevertheless a fundamental place in religious traditions (and in fact being seen by the faithful as a means of approaching the divine), they communicate powerful spiritual messages. At the same time, these special spaces are merely human creations. How are they made? How do they come to be infused with such a transcendental and ‘numinous’ atmosphere? How were the armies of workers and artists involved in hierotopic projects – such as Byzantine churches or sacred Japanese landscapes – guided by such a remarkable sense of unity? Could one speak of a ‘composer’ of a sacred space? What do religious ceremonies hold in common with multimedia installations of the modern age?

Hierotopic study addresses precisely these sorts of questions. It studies the way architecture, image, light, scent and ritual each contribute to forming sacred spaces as single, united wholes. This paper presents an historical review of the field by focusing on the following highlights of past hierotopic research topics: the re-creation of the Holy Land, or the ‘New Jerusalem’, as a major trend of medieval Christian hierotopy; the performative nature of ‘spatial icons’ created by concerted action of various media; the dramaturgy of fire and light that resulted in spatial ‘icons of light’; and lastly, the recent reconceptualization of the spatial nature of icons and iconicity.

Chôra, Theurgy, and the Deification of Man

Hierotopy and theios anthropos

Nicoletta Isar, Copenhagen, Denmark

This paper will address an important issue not yet clarified concerning the manifestation of the sacred (*hieros*) in the *chôra* – a cosmogonic term emerged in the Platonic systematic thinking of the universe, which remained throughout time a model for the non-dualistic definition of space, including the Byzantine *chôra*. The unsolved quiz concerns the idea cultivated within the hermetic circles of the later Platonists around the theurgic powers of the *chôra*. The question is whether residues of theurgic thinking survived and nourished the Neoplatonic thinking of Dionysius the Areopagitus whose contribution to the Christian liturgical shaping remains undoubtful albeit controversial for some Christians.

This paper will search into the hidden mysteries of the *chôra* at the beginning of Christianity, aiming to reveal more of its hierotopic capacity in terms of its theurgic operation. In my studies of the Byzantine *chôra*, I have shown how the Platonic *chôra* was instrumental in Christian theology, in the ritual praxis and the shaping of the apparatus that accompanied it. The Byzantine chorography with its binomen *chôra-chorós* has been exemplary as a specific form of hierotopic manifestation of sacred space. Here, I set up a new task to explore the appropriation by the Christians of the mystagogic capacity of the *chôra*, available through the Neoplatonic circles. I will take a radical penchant for the hermetic idea of the deification of man as well, by inquiring whether the idea of deification of man might have played a role in the Christian doctrine of what has been called *theios anthropos*. For the Byzantine “charismatic” culture, which denied any division of God’s creation into sacred and profane, it would have been natural that the human agent was too a hierotopic channel through which the world was permeated by the holy, so that man could become himself “god by grace.”

The Image of the Heavenly Jerusalem in Kyivan St. Sophia Cathedral: The City of God and the Temple

Ruslana Demchuk, Kyiv, Ukraine

Hierotopic creativity of new Kyivan Christian converts of the 10th century was inspired by a prediction, traditionally ascribed to St. Andrew the Apostle: "The city will be great on these hills". Seeing this prediction come true, Metropolitan Hilarion praised the new City of God in expressions reminding of the book of Revelation, in which the Heavenly City is compared to the Temple of Solomon. If the whole city of Kyiv was an icon of the Temple, this should have been particularly true of its central cathedral, dedicated to St. Sophia. And indeed - above the mosaic of the Virgin-Orans in the apse, one finds the passage from Psalm 46:4, quoting a famous King David's dream of the City of God. An image of the Heavenly Jerusalem can be found even in the architectural concept of the cathedral, for which no prototypes could be found across the Byzantine world. It can be shown that its ancient foundation is a symbolic image of the New Jerusalem. Indeed, its proportions agree with the dimensions of the Heavenly City reported by the seventh angel (Rev. 21:15, 16). Architectural patterns of twelve gates and twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem can be identified in its twelve arches and twelve cross-shaped piers in the interior of the cathedral.

While Kyiv, according to the words of a Medieval chronicler, was "the second Jerusalem", Saint Prince Volodymir was "the second Moses". Kyiv is directly linked to Jerusalem and gets its holiness from the Biblical prototype. It is a sacred place under a special divine protection, which can be seen as a base of a vertical pointing at its heavenly counterpart. I will also argue that even the architectural image of Kyiv in times of Ukrainian Baroque was influenced by a hierotopic formula "Kyiv is the second Jerusalem".

The materiality and aesthetics of early Islamic hierotopy

Bea Leal, University of East Anglia (UK)

My paper will explore the role of materials and materialised imagery in the creation of sacred spaces in the early and medieval Islamic period.

While the injunctions against figuration were routinely discounted in many Islamic contexts, from the beginning figural imagery was almost completely avoided in mosques. Following the often-assumed division of Islam into distinct religious and secular spheres, the vegetal, geometric and calligraphic decoration of mosques have been seen as anti-images, conceptually distinct from and opposed to both figuration and the material world itself. I will suggest, however, that the binaries of secular and religious are not the most useful with which to approach Islamic material culture, and that figural and non-figural images – including script – belonged (and were understood to belong) to a common world of experience and associations.

I will explore the materialised aspects of ornament and script with which the 'holy' was constructed in early and medieval mosques, as part of the wider world in which the transcendental could be experienced. I will question the capacity of patterns to carry material or spatial associations of holiness, and taking examples from mosques and other Islamic buildings from the eighth to tenth centuries, will look at how motifs and materials were organised to present these spaces as locations for experiencing the divine. In the last part of the paper I will move to the related issue of aniconic agency. In both Christian and Islamic traditions, aniconic motifs could be substituted for human or divine agents. Some materials also seem to have carried associations with living presences, for example elaborately-veined marble and wax-resist dyed textiles. Taking these as a starting point I will discuss the impact of media and motifs which move between abstraction and anthropomorphism, again focusing on the resulting experiences of the spaces they decorated.

The Composition of an Icon as a Design Principle at work in Byzantine Churches

(as exemplified by “The Eye of Providence” icon)

Olena Osadcha, Kyiv, Ukraine

In the present study I discuss a correlation between the composition of “The Eye of Providence” icon and the structure of sacred spaces of Medieval Christian churches in Byzantium and Ancient Rus. More specifically, the structure of sacred spaces was a prototype for the iconography of “The Eye of Providence”. According to my hypothesis, this iconography initially appeared as a schematic drawing, used to design and build Byzantine churches, particularly those dedicated to St. Sophia, the Holy Wisdom. With the passage of time, this drawing transformed into a two-dimensional model of church interior, which, in its turn, came to be used as a prototype for the canonical pattern of “The Eye of Providence”. This study also touches upon the origin and evolution of this iconography, which are clarified in the light of its similarities to icons depicting St. Sophia. It is shown that the typology and symbolism of “The Eye of Providence” correlate with iconographic programs of churches in Byzantium and culturally related regions, and that its composition follows the chorographic principle, i.e., represents the “whirling space” of a Byzantine church.

Carved Angels on Guard for the Holy of the Holies in Ukrainian Baroque Churches

Svitlana Olianina, Kyiv, Ukraine

The wooden sculptures of angels, which were added to many Ukrainian iconostases in the 17th and 18th centuries, are seen by most researchers just as one more Baroque-styled decorative element. In the present research I study their purpose and meaning in the context of contemporary religiosity as well as their role in the hierotopic formation of church spaces. I argue that the angels functioned as guards protecting sacred spaces of the sanctuaries. It was in ancient Byzantium that they first took their positions as sentinels on altar barriers, reminding of the Old Testament cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant as well as articulating the parallel between an iconostasis and the Temple Veil curtaining off the Holy of the Holies. In the time of Baroque, painted images were replaced by wooden carved sculptures, which were integrated into new symbolic compositions emphasizing liturgical as well as eschatological aspects and touching sensitive strings of contemporary piety.

I argue that these innovations came about as a response to inter-confessional struggle in 17th century Ukraine. In the context of religious confrontation, the heavenly warriors acquired their role as guards to protect the altars from potential desecration. Standing on guard for altar spaces, which represented the heavenly realm on earth, the evoked associations with cherubs on the Temple Veil, as well as with the cherub guarding the entrance to the garden of Eden. The angels watched over the entrances into the sanctuary and occupied most essential points of the elevation of a typical iconostasis: entablatures, consoles, columns bases. Being integral part of the iconostases, the angels imbued the overall spatial design of Ukrainian Baroque churches with important new meanings. They communicated forceful messages addressed to contemporary Ukrainian Orthodox community with the use of expressive visual artistic language of Baroque.

Image-paradigms in Hierotopy: Sacred Spaces as Communicating Media

Andrew Simsky, Leuven, Belgium

The concept of the image-paradigm was first put forward and developed by Alexei Lidov as a means of analyzing the way that we perceive sacred spaces. An image-paradigm is a guiding image-vision, created through the use of various media, that aims at evoking a similar image in the mind of beholders of a sacred space. Being itself neither a picture nor an ideological concept, it is rooted in religious imagery and symbolism as well as in theological and literary associations. It constitutes a kernel of meaning that ensouls an overarching hierotopic project and helps to articulate its spiritual message. One example of an image-paradigm is Heavenly Jerusalem, which could be 'seen' everywhere in Medieval churches although it was nowhere depicted.

This study focuses on the ontology of image-paradigms as well as on their communicative function. Ontologically, image-paradigms belong to a broadly defined class of religious mental images that are given shape in the minds of believers via multiple sources, such as education, liturgical experience, reading, prayers, etc. Such 'image-concepts', which attracted hitherto little attention in the study of religion, form an integral part of religious traditions. Image-paradigms are made manifest within sacred spaces. They inspire the designers of churches and sanctuaries and are transmitted to the faithful initiated into the same tradition. Being non-illustrative in nature, they are generated by the entirety of typological and symbolic elements that make up a sacred space. I argue that a sacred space can be seen as an organized ensemble of symbols or a 'symbolic landscape' of sorts, where an image-paradigm is engendered in much the same way as a key theme of a musical symphony is perceived through an orchestrated array of melodies created by unified

work of many instruments such that it leaves in our minds a lasting impression.