Visualizing Divine Descent in Byzantine Church Art

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In the Byzantine Divine Liturgy, the clergy prayed at the Epiklesis that God would send down his Holy Spirit to transform the Eucharistic bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Yet as early as the fifth century, there is evidence that Christians doubted this invisible transformation. Byzantine artists drew on biblical narratives of the Spirit's descent to illustrate the Eucharistic mystery. In the Early Byzantine period, gold and silver doves hung above altars and fonts to represent the Spirit's descent. In the post-Iconoclastic period, spatial icons near altars served similar functions. This paper presents four such images: the Annunciation, Pentecost, the *Hetoimasia*, and the Ascension. It argues that these images encouraged worshippers to visualize the Spirit's descent and the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

The celebration of the Eucharist was central to the religious life of the Byzantine Empire.[1] But even in Byzantium, before the dawn of the modern age, the notion that the Eucharistic bread and wine were Christ's actual body and blood could apparently be a little hard to swallow. Historical sources from as early as the fifth century suggest that some Christians had doubts. In the sayings of Abba Daniel, one of the desert fathers of Egypt who died in 449, a sceptical monk comments, 'The bread which we receive is not really the body of Christ, but a symbol'. When the monk is attending the Divine Liturgy on the following Sunday with two other monks, they all see a vision: 'Their eyes were opened

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and when the bread was placed on the holy table, there appeared as it were a little child to these three alone. And when the priest put out his hand to break the bread, behold an angel descended from heaven with a sword and poured the child's blood into the chalice. When the priest cut the bread into small pieces, the angel also cut the child into pieces'. As the monk drew near to partake of the Eucharist, he saw not bread, but 'bloody flesh'. Converted by the evidence before him, the monk proclaimed: 'Lord, I believe that this bread is your flesh and this chalice your blood!'[2] The episode evokes well-worn sayings about the importance of vision for belief: 'Seeing is believing' and 'A picture is worth a thousand words'. The desire to visualize the mystery of the Eucharist evidently endured throughout Byzantine history, and church sanctuaries accumulated numerous images that encouraged worshippers to do just that. This paper focuses on four motifs in post-Iconoclastic church sanctuaries: the Annunciation, Pentecost, the *Hetoimasia*, and the Ascension. These images encouraged worshippers to visualize divine descent and the transformation of the Eucharistic bread and wine during the Divine Liturgy.

Epiklesis and Elevation

In the Byzantine Divine Liturgy, the celebration of the Eucharist followed the First or 'Little' Entrance and the readings from Scripture.[3] During the Great Entrance, the clergy processed to the altar with the bread and wine. In the Anaphora, the clergy offered the bread and wine to God with the words: 'Offering you your own from your own, in all

[2] J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus, completus, Series Graeca* (hereafter *PG*), *vol.* 65:156–160 (Paris: Gamier Fratres 1864); translation in Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 53–54. For a similar vision of the Eucharist as the Christ child, see: Daniel J. Sahas, 'What an Infidel Saw that a Faithful Did Not: Gregory Dekapolites (d. 842) and Islam', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 31.1–2 (1986): 47–67. Such questions resurfaced in theological debates of the twelfth century. Sharon Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary* (Seattle and London: College Art Association and University of Washington Press, 1999), 44–47; Robert F. Taft, *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, vol. 5: *The Precommunion Rites* (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Orientale, 2000), 376.

[3] On the First Entrance and readings, see Juan Mateos, *La célébration de la Parole dans la liturgie byzantine: Étude historique* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1971).

and for all'.[4] At the Epiklesis, the clergy asked God to send down his Holy Spirit upon the worshippers and upon the bread and wine.[5]

The precise words of the Epiklesis depended upon which liturgy was celebrated. Two major versions of the Divine Liturgy were celebrated during Byzantine history (as in Eastern Orthodox churches today). The Liturgy attributed to St Basil of Caesarea enjoyed widespread use before the Iconoclastic period of the eighth and ninth centuries. After Iconoclasm, the Liturgy attributed to St John Chrysostom, whose prayers were more concise than Basil's, increased in popularity. By the beginning of the tenth century, Chrysostom's Liturgy became the norm, and the celebration of Basil's Liturgy was limited to ten days each year: Christmas eve; Theophany eve; the first five Sundays of Great Lent in the period leading up to Pascha (Easter); Holy Thursday; Holy Saturday; and the feast of St Basil on January 1.[6]

The prayer of the Epiklesis differs slightly in Basil's and Chrysostom's liturgies. In Basil's Epiklesis, the clergy ask God to send his Holy Spirit and *reveal* the bread and wine to be the body and blood of Christ. 'We pray and beseech you […] that your [all-]Holy Spirit may come upon us and upon these gifts set forth, and bless them and sanctify and *show (ἀναδεῖξαι)* […] this bread the precious body of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. And this cup the precious blood of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, [Amen.] which is shed for the life of the world <and salvation> Amen <*thrice*>'.[7] Basil's Epiklesis emphasiz-

[4] 'Τὰ σὰ ἐκ τῶν σῶν σοὶ προσφέροντες κατὰ πάντα καὶ διὰ πάντα', F. E. Brightman, ed., *Liturgies Eastern and Western*, vol. 1: *Eastern Liturgies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1896), 329; English in R. C. D. Jasper and G. J. Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed*, 4th ed., edited by Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2019), 169.

[5] Robert F. Taft, 'Anaphora', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Alexander Kazhdan et al., vol. 1 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 85; Robert F. Taft, 'Epiclesis', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Alexander Kazhdan et al., vol. 1 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 710; Alexander Rentel, 'Byzantine and Slavic Orthodoxy', in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 295; Michael Zheltov, 'The Moment of Eucharistic Consecration in Byzantine Thought', in *Issues in Eucharistic Praying in East and West: Essays in Liturgical and Theological Analysis*, edited by Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 263–306.

[6] Stefanos Alexopoulos, 'The Influence of Iconoclasm on Liturgy: A Case Study', in *Worship Traditions in Armenia and the Neighboring Christian East*, ed. Roberta R. Ervine (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), 127–137. Gabriel Radle, 'Sinai Greek NE/ ΜΓ 22: Late 9th/ Early 10th Century Euchology Testimony of the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom and the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts in the Byzantine Tradition', *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata* 8 (2011): 169–221.

[7] Brightman, *Liturgies Eastern and Western*, 329–330; English in Jasper and Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist*, 178 (emphasis added).

es the importance of perceiving the bread and wine to be the body and blood. In contrast, Chrysostom's Epiklesis asks God to send down his Holy Spirit to *transform* the bread and wine. 'We pray and beseech and entreat you, *send down* (*κατάπεμψον*) your Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts set forth; and *make* (*ποίησον*) this bread the precious body of your Christ, [changing (*μεταβαλὼν*) it by your Holy Spirit] Amen; and that which is in this cup the precious blood of your Christ, changing (*μεταβαλὼν*) it by your holy Spirit, Amen […]'.[8] Despite these different emphases on revealing and transforming in the liturgies of Basil and Chrysostom, the intended result is the same: the bread and wine were understood to be the body and blood of Christ.

Following the Epiklesis, the clergy commemorate the saints as well as living and dead Christians, the deacon leads the people in a litany, and the worshippers recite the Lord's Prayer. The celebrant then prays the Prayer of the Elevation and elevate the Eucharistic bread for everyone to see, proclaiming: 'The Holy Things for the Holy Ones.'[9] The people typically respond: 'One is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father! Amen!'[10] The celebrant then fractions the bread and prepares the chalice for Communion.

The precise moment of the Eucharistic transformation has been an object of debate, both in Byzantium as well as in modern scholarship. In Late Byzantine disputes with Latin Christians, the Byzantines came to argue that the transformation of the bread and wine occurred at the Epiklesis. Recently, scholars have noted that this was a relatively late development in Byzantine thought. Numerous earlier sources suggest that the Byzantines understood the descent of the Spirit to occur at the Elevation.[11] For example, around 1105, Nicholas III Kyrdiniates Grammaticus, patriarch of Constantinople from 1084–1111, stated in his *Response 9*: 'It is fitting to elevate only one prosphora, as everyone does, when the "One [is] holy, one Lord, Jesus Christ," is proclaimed. The rest [of the gifts] set out [on the altar] are blessed by the descent of the Holy Spirit, which we believe happens at this time'.[12] So, while

[8] Brightman, *Liturgies Eastern and Western*, 330; English in Jasper and Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist*, 169 (emphasis added).

[9] Taft, *Precommunion Rites*, 209–225.

[10] For the traditional response and variations of the response, see Taft, *Precommunion Rites*, 240–246.

[11] Zheltov, 'The Moment of Eucharistic Consecration', 263–306.

[12] Greek and English quoted in Taft, *Precommunion Rites*, 219 and Zheltov, 'The Moment of

the celebrant prayed for God to send his Spirit at the Epiklesis, the Byzantines may have anticipated the Spirit's descent as late as the Elevation of the bread.

Past as Present

Byzantine artists often appealed to biblical narratives and long-established hermeneutic strategies to visualize the transformation of the bread and wine. From the earliest centuries of the Church, theologians drew multiple meanings from biblical texts.[13] Christian theologians often interpreted figures and events from the Hebrew Bible not only in a literal, historical sense, but also as prefigurations, or 'types', of Christ. Liturgical commentators extended this logic to the Liturgy, so that Old and New Testament events from scripture found their fulfilment in the ritual actions in the present, a phenomenon Jean Daniélou termed 'sacramental typology'.[14] So, in a liturgical commentary attributed to the eighth-century Patriarch Germanos I of Constantinople, a Eucharistic chalice was an image of Wisdom's wine bowl in the Septuagint version of Proverbs 9:2, the cup at the Last Supper, and the legendary vessel that caught the blood and water at the Crucifixion.[15] In church decoration, images likewise offered multiple meanings: narrating historical events and simultaneously suggesting typological connections between history and the contemporary liturgy.

A number of images—many of them historical 'types'—were deployed in church sanctuaries to encourage worshippers to visualize the mystery of the Eucharist in different ways. Events from the Hebrew Bible believed to prefigure the Eucharist—such as Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine, the Hospitality of Abraham, the Sacrifice of Isaac, and more—appeared in or near the bema.[16] The ubiquitous image of the

Eucharistic Consecration', 295.

[13] Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 161–185.

[14] Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 3–17.

[15] Germanos, *Historia Ekklesiastike kai Mystike Theoria* 22 and 39, in Paul Meyendorff, trans., *St Germanus of Constantinople: On the Divine Liturgy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 70–71, 86–89.

[16] Elizabeth Saxon, 'Art and the Eucharist: Early Christian to ca. 800', in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen van Ausdall (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 93–159; Nancy P. Ševčenko, 'Art and liturgy in the later Byz-

Virgin and Child in the church apse behind the altar suggested parallels between Christ's incarnation through the Virgin and his ongoing incarnation in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.[17] Images of the Last Supper or Crucifixion sometimes appeared near the altar as well, emphasizing the connection between the Eucharist and Christ's Passion. From the Middle Byzantine period, overtly liturgical images began to adorn church sanctuaries. The Communion of the Apostles was reminiscent of the Last Supper, but depicted Christ as a liturgical celebrant, offering the Eucharist to his Apostles. The *Melismos* motif imagined the sacrificed Christ within contemporary Eucharistic vessels.[18] By the Late Byzantine period, churches combined several of these images into the apses, offering worshippers multiple ways of visualizing the Eucharist. Leaving aside the majority of these images, which are beyond the scope of this paper, let us now turn to the images employed to visualize divine descent and the transformation of the Eucharistic bread and wine.[19]

Doves

All four Gospels describe the Holy Spirit descending on Christ in the form of a dove at his baptism.[20] Evidence suggests that Christians employed the image of a dove to visualize the descent of the Spirit in the Eucharist and at baptisms by hanging metal doves over altars and fonts. Yet this practice was apparently controversial since it risked giving the impression that the Spirit was corporeal and actually possessed the body of a dove. The Acts of the Home Synod of Constantinople in 536, also cited at the Council of Nicaea II in 787 when the use of doves continued to be disputed, accuse Severus of Antioch of destroying gold and silver doves over altars and fonts: 'He has appropriated, along with

antine Empire', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, ed. by Michael Angold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 137.

[17] Examples of the Virgin and child in the apse date from before Iconoclasm. See Robin Cormack, 'The Mother of God in Apse Mosaics', in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, edited by Maria Vassilaki, 91–105. Athens: Benaki Museum, and Milan: Skira, 2000.

[18] On the Communion of the Apostles and the *melismos*, see Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary*; Chara Konstantinide, *Ο Μελισμός. Οι συλλειτουργούντες ιεράρχες και οι άγγελοι-διάκονοι μπροστά στην Αγία Τράπεζα με τα Τίμια Δώρα ή τον Ευχαριστιακό Χριστό* (Thessaloniki: Center for Byzantine Studies, 2008).

[19] I make no claims that these were the only such images intended to visualize the Spirit's descent, nor do the few churches I discuss as examples here represent an exhaustive catalogue of monuments where these motifs are present.

[20] Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32.

other things, the gold and silver doves representing the Holy Spirit that hung above the sacred fonts and altars, saying that the Holy Spirit should not be designated in the form of a dove'.[21] The use of doves to visualize the descent of the Spirit must have been widespread enough that it was a source of controversy among Christians over the course of several centuries.

A silver dove survives among the liturgical objects dated between 500–650 from the merchant town of Attarouthi, Syria, now preserved in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (fig. 1).[22] The dove

[21] J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, vol. 8, 1039A–B; vol. 13, 184A (Florence: Expensis Antonii Zatta Veneti; Venice: Apud Antonium Zatta, 1767); Cyril Mango, ed., *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 44.

[22] Helen C. Evans and Brandie Ratliff, *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th–9th Century* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012), 41–44.

Fig. 1. Silver dove, Attarouthi Treasure, Attarouthi, Syria, 500–650. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

spreads its wings and tucks its feet to give the impression of flight. It may well have hung from a ciborium over a church altar, where its dynamic pose and glittering materiality would have made it a focal point for worshippers as it seemed to descend on the chalices—also made of silver—below (fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Attarouthi Treasure, Attarouthi, Syria, 500–650. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

There is also evidence that doves hung in prominent churches in Constantinople. At least two sources attest to a golden dove hanging over the altar of Justinian's Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. In his twelfth-century *ekphrasis*, Michael the Deacon refers to 'The wings, truly golden, of the blameless dove of the church'.[23] Anthony of Novgorod, who undertook a pilgrimage to Constantinople in 1200, also mentions a gold dove hanging from the ciborium in Hagia Sophia.[24] The tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies* also mentions doves from the church

[23] Cyril Mango and John Parker, 'A Twelfth-Century Description of St. Sophia' 7, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 14 (1960): 240.

[24] B. De Khitrowo, trans., *Itinéraires Russes en Orient* (Geneva: Imprimerie Jules-Guillaume Fick, 1889), 92. Jelena Bogdanović, *The Framing of Sacred Space: The Canopy and the Byzantine Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 23.

of the Virgin of the Pharos in the imperial palace and the church of the Holy Apostles.[25]

Hypatius, archbishop of Ephesus from c. 531–538 C.E., during the same era when the Attarouthi dove was made, offers insight into how church leaders probably viewed such doves. Although Hypatius does not mention doves explicitly, he speaks about the power of visible objects to point worshippers toward invisible realities, suggesting the Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysios.

> We allow even material adornment in the sanctuaries, not because we believe that God considers gold and silver and silken vestments and gem-studded vessels venerable and sacred but because we permit each order of the faithful to be guided and led up to the divine being in a manner appropriate to it [the order] because we think that some people are guided even by these [gold, silver, etc.] towards intelligible beauty and from the abundant light into the sanctuaries to the intelligible and immaterial light.[26]

Based on the words of Hypatius, hanging doves were likely intended to encourage worshippers to contemplate the invisible descent of the Spirit and transformation of the bread and wine.

Apart from the above references to doves in churches in Constantinople, I am unaware of further evidence of doves hanging in churches in the post-Iconoclastic era, although we cannot conclude based on an argument from silence that additional examples did not exist. Nevertheless, iconographic programs in numerous churches functioned in a similar manner, encouraging worshippers to visualize the descent of the Holy Spirit at the Epiklesis. Such Epiklesis imagery built on symbolic views of church architecture and the spatial potential of post-Iconoclastic church art.

[25] Constantine Porphyrogennetos, *De ceremoniis* 2.15.

[26] Franz Diekamp, *Analecta patristica. Texte und Abhandlungen zur griechischen Patristik*, Orientalin Christiana analecta 117 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1938), 128; translation in P. J. Alexander, 'Hypatius of Ephesus: A Note on Image Worship in the Sixth Century', *Harvard Theological Review* 45.3 (July 1952): 180; see also the discussion of this text in Jaś Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 98.

Microcosms and Spatial Icons

Commentators interpreted Byzantine church buildings as microcosms from the Early Byzantine period. A Syriac hymn that was likely composed for the dedication of the church of Hagia Sophia in Edessa c. 543–554 offers an early reading of a Byzantine domed church as a microcosm.[27] 'It truly is a wonder that its smallness is like the wide world, not in size but in type […] Its ceiling is stretched out like the sky […] its lofty dome—behold, it resembles the highest heaven […] the splendor of its broad arches—they portray the four ends of the earth […] other arches surround it like crags jutting out from a mountain'.[28] In Constantinople, Prokopios and Paul the Silentiary similarly interpreted the architecture and materials of Justinian's Hagia Sophia in Constantinople as an image of the cosmos.[29] This tradition continued in the post-Iconoclastic era, as seen in the tenth-century *ekphrasis* of the Stoudios Monastery in Constantinople by John Geometres.[30] 'If you long to see all the beauties of earth together with those of the heavens and every costly material, cease from wandering the long breadths of the earth and leave off searching the distant heights of the sky; look, if you please, at everything assembled here in this small house, the imitation of the universe'.[31]

In 1947, art historian Otto Demus described mosaics in Middle Byzantine churches as 'spatial icons'. Demus observed that in contrast with images of the Italian Renaissance, which often seek to create an illusion of receding space behind the picture plane, the figures in Byzantine mosaics appear to occupy the same spaces as the viewer.[32] Byzantine artists often set their figures against a gold ground rather than attempting to create illusionistic backdrops through the use of perspective. The curved and faceted surfaces of Byzantine churches enabled

[27] Kathleen E. McVey, 'The Domed Church as Microcosm: Literary Roots of An Architectural Symbol', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 37 (1983), 91.

[28] McVey, 'The Domed Church as Microcosm', 95. In his twelfth-century ekphrasis, Michael the Deacon similarly interprets the golden domes of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople as an image of the heavens. Mango and Parker, 'A Twelfth-Century Description of St. Sophia', 237–239.

[29] Procopius of Caesarea, *Buildings* I.i, trans. H. B. Dewing with Glanville Downey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 3–33. Paul Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentiarius* (Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1912), 227–265.

[30] Greek and English in Warren T. Woodfin, 'A Majestas Domini in Middle-Byzantine Constantinople,' *Cahiers Archéologiques* 51 (2003–2004): 45–53.

[31] Woodfin, 'A Majestas Domini in Middle-Byzantine Constantinople,' 46.

[32] Otto Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1947), 9.

artists to position figures across from each other in the church space. Often, figures also seem to gaze and gesture at each other, creating the impression of communication between figures in the church space. For viewers, the figures in icons seem to dwell, move, and communicate in the actual space of the church itself.

Building on this architectural symbolism and spatial potential of icons, images in post-Iconoclastic church vaults became a means of visualizing God in the heavens. Around 864, Photios described an image of Christ in the church of the Virgin of the Pharos in Constantinople: 'On the very ceiling is painted in coloured mosaic cubes a man-like figure bearing the traits of Christ. Thou mightest say He is overseeing the earth, and devising its orderly arrangement and government, so accurately has the painter been inspired to represent, though only in forms and in colours, the Creator's care for us'.[33] While the Pharos does not survive, several post-Iconoclastic churches do preserve images of Christ in their domes, such as the Panagia tou Araka in Lagoudera, Cyprus, dated to 1192 (fig. 3). If doves dangling from ciboria encouraged viewers to visualize the descent of the Spirit in the Epiklesis, spatial icons in microcosmic churches set an even more dramatic stage for the Spirit's descent.

The Annunciation

In the post-Iconclastic era, images of the Annunciation often appeared at the east end of churches, in or near the bema, where the altar was located. Such is the case at the church of St George in Kurbinovo, North Macedonia, dated to 1191 (fig. 4).[34] As is common in post-Iconoclastic churches, the scene has been split in two. The Virgin sits on the

[33] Photios, Homily 10.6, in Basileios Laourdas, ed., *ΦΩΤΙΟΥ ΟΜΙΛΙΑΙ* (Thessaloniki: Hetaireia Makedonikōn Spoudōn, 1959), 102; English translation in *The Homilies of Photius Patriarch of Constantinople*, trans. Cyril Mango, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 187–188; also in C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 186. In the central dome in the eleventh-century Karanlık Kilise in Göreme, Cappadocia, an inscription from Psalm 53:2 encircles the image of Christ: 'God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God'. Psalm 53:2 (NRSV); Thomas F. Mathews, 'The Transformation symbolism in Byzantine architecture and the meaning of the Pantokrator in the dome', in *Church and People in Byzantium: Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies, Twentieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Manchester, 1986*, ed. Rosemary Morris (Birmingham: Center for Byzantine, Ottoman, and Modern Greek Studies, University of Birmingham, 1990), 209.

[34] Lydie Hadermann-Misguich, *Kurbinovo: Les fresques de Saint-Georges et la peinture byzantine du XIIe siècle* (Brussels: Éditions de Byzantine, 1975).

Fig. 3. Church of the Panagia tou Araka, Lagoudera, Cyprus, 1192.
Image: © Вера Заварицкая, used with permission.

Fig. 4. Church of St George, Kurbinovo, North Macedonia, 1191. Image: Byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

south side of the church, while the archangel Gabriel approaches from the north with the news: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you'.[35] The splitting of the scene implies that the Spirit's descent and the mystery of the incarnation is unfolding in the space between the two figures, in other words, in the church bema where the altar is located. The artist at Kurbinovo has also depicted rays of light and a modest dove descending on the Virgin for good measure. Although no dove or rays appear in the biblical account, they appear in several post-Iconoclastic images of the Annunciation. Moreover, as Maria Evangelatou has noted, gold chalice-like vessels also appear with Mary in a number of these post-Iconoclastic images,

[35] Luke 1:35 (NRSV).

driving home the connection between Christ's incarnation in the Virgin's womb and his subsequent incarnation in the Eucharist.[36]

Pentecost

At the eleventh-century katholikon church of Hosios Loukas Monastery in Boeotia, Greece, a mosaic image of Pentecost appears in a shallow domical vault above the altar (fig. 5).[37] The Hetoimasia, or 'prepared throne,' occupies a blue sphere at the apex of the vault (fig. 6), although no such detail is present in the account of Pentecost in Acts. A Gospel book and the haloed dove of the Holy Spirit rest on the throne. Tongues of fire radiate out from the Hetoimasia like spokes on a wheel, descending on seated apostles below, illustrating Acts 2:2–4. Additional figures appear within four pendentives beneath the Apostles. They are labeled: '*φυλαί*' and '*γλῶσσαι*' ('tribes' and 'tongues'). These inscriptions refer to the 'devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem' who each received the Apostles preaching in their 'own native language' in Acts 2.[38]

The Gospel book on the prepared throne mirrored the Gospel book on the church altar below, suggesting a visual parallel between the prepared throne above and the altar beneath it. As such, the presence of the dove in the Hetoimasia suggested the Spirit's descent on the altar below. The cascading, vertical composition of the mosaic further implied the Spirit's descent: in the flames descending on the Apostles—many of whom also hold Gospel books—as well as in the figures in the pendentives who gaze upward toward the Apostles and the Hetoimasia.

This image closely parallels the words of the Epiklesis, which ask God to send his Spirit down on the bread and wine, as well as on the people, since it depicts the dove over the altar and descending on the Apostles and the 'tribes' and 'tongues.' As noted above, the celebrant in Basil's Liturgy prays, 'We pray and beseech you […] that your [all-]

[36] Maria Evangelatou, 'The Purple Thread of the Flesh: The Theological Connotations of a Narrative Iconographic Element in Byzantine Images of the Annunciation', in *Icon and Word: the Power of Images in Byzantium. Studies Presented to Robin Cormack*, ed. Antony Easmond and Liz James (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 261–275.

[37] Carolyn L. Connor, *Saints and Spectacle: Byzantine Mosaics in their Cultural Setting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21–22.

[38] Acts 2:5–13.

Fig. 5. Hosios Loukas Monastery, Boeotia, Greece, 11th century. Image: Byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Fig. 6. Pentecost mosaic, Hosios Loukas Monastery, Boeotia, Greece, 11th century. Image: Byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Holy Spirit may come upon us and upon these gifts set forth'.[39] In Chrysostom's version the priest asks God: 'Send down your Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts set forth'. While the Pentecost mosaic at Hosios Loukas certainly illustrated the historical event recounted in Acts 2 as part of the larger cycle of historical images in the church, its location directly above the altar, as well as its vertical composition, enabled it to function as a visualization of the Spirit's descent on the worshippers and the Eucharistic gifts at the Epiklesis. Later liturgical sources reinforced this association between Pentecost and the Eucharist by inserting the Troparion of the Third Hour, which speaks of the Spirit's descent at Pentecost, into the Liturgy at the Elevation and later at the Epiklesis.[40]

The Prepared Throne

The Hetoimasia was a versatile image in Byzantine art.[41] It combined such disparate elements as a throne, a Gospel book, a cross, the instruments of the Passion, and the dove of the Holy Spirit (extracted from the Baptism narrative), although the precise combination of these different elements often varied. The use and meaning of the Hetoimasia varied as well; it appears on portable objects and in monumental art, located in various parts of churches, sometimes incorporated into larger compositions such as the Last Judgment or Pentecost (as we have seen at Hosios Loukas), and in other instances standing alone. The motif evoked Christ's Passion, the *parousia* and Last Judgment, the Holy Spirit, and perhaps even the Trinity.[42] At Hosios Loukas and

[39] The Anaphora in the Jerusalem liturgy of James explicitly mentions such historical events as Christ's Baptism and Pentecost: '[…] Send out upon us and upon these [holy] gifts set before You Your [all-]Holy Spirit […] Who descended in the likeness of a dove upon our Lord Jesus Christ in the river Jordan [and remained upon Him,] Who descended upon Your holy apostles in the likeness of fiery tongues [in the Upper Room of the holy and glorious Zion on the day of the holy Pentecost; send down, Master, Your all-Holy Spirit Himself upon us and upon these holy gifts set before You] […]'. Brightman, *Liturgies Eastern and Western*, 53–54; English in Jasper and Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist*, 146.

[40] Zheltov, 'The Moment of Eucharistic Consecration', 298.

[41] On the Hetoimasia, see Thomas von Bogyay, 'Zur Geschichte der Hetoimasie', *Akten des XI. Internationalen Byzantinistenkongresses München*, 1958, eds. Franz Dölger and Hans-Georg Beck (Munich: Verlag Beck, 1960), 58–61; Ashton L. Townsley, 'Eucharistic Doctrine and the Liturgy in late Byzantine Painting', *Oriens Christianus* 58 (1974): 138–153; Annemarie Weyl Carr, 'Hetoimasia', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Alexander Kazhdan, 926; Ida Sinkević, *The Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi: Architecture, Programme, Patron* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000), 35–39.

[42] Carr, 'Hetoimasia', 926; Sharon E. J. Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of*

elsewhere, it was also a means of visualizing the descent of the Spirit at the Epiklesis.

The church of St Panteleimon at Gorno Nerezi, North Macedonia provides an example of the Hetoimasia standing alone as an image of the Epiklesis. Here, a fresco of the prepared throne appears in the church's eastern apse, immediately behind the altar (fig. 7).[43] Nerezi is one of several churches that featured the Hetoimasia in this location.[44] At Nerezi, the draped throne holds a Gospel book, the dove of the Spirit, a cross, the crown of thorns, as well as the spear and the sponge.

Fig. 7. Hetoimasia, Church of St Panteleimon, Gorno Nerezi, North Macedonia, 1164. Image: Byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

the Byzantine Sanctuary (Seattle and London: College Art Association and University of Washington Press, 1999), 38–39.

[43] Sinkević, *The Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi*, 35–36.

[44] See Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary*, 22–23, 37–39; Sinkević, *The Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi*, 35–37.

The dove seems to alight on the throne, its wings still upraised in flight much like the silver dove from Attarouthi.

As at Hosios Loukas, the presence of liturgical objects creates visual parallels between the prepared throne and the church altar at Nerezi. The depiction of a Gospel book on the prepared throne mirrored the actual Gospel book that rested on the church altar at Nerezi. Additionally, the prepared throne at Nerezi incorporates an angel on either side. Both angels wear the *sticharion* and *orarion*, the characteristic vestments of deacons, and they waved *rhipidia* (liturgical fans) over the throne just as deacons wave *rhipidia* over the Eucharistic bread and wine immediately before the Epiklesis in the Anaphora.[45] Several bishop saints in liturgical vestments, who also hold liturgical scrolls, orient themselves toward the Hetoimasia as if concelebrating around an altar.[46]

As at Hosios Loukas, the Hetoimasia at Nerezi also employs spatial strategies to emphasize its relationship with the altar. Its position and scale enable it to mirror the church altar. It would have been directly visible to the celebrant who stood at the altar asking God to send down his Holy Spirit in the Liturgy. Even today, from certain views within the church, it can seem as if the Gospel and dove in the Hetoimasia rest atop the altar itself (fig. 8).[47]

Athens National Library Cod. 211, a late ninth-century manuscript containing homilies of John Chrysostom, makes the connection between the Hetoimasia and the Eucharist even more clear. Folio 56r depicts several figures gathered around an altar (fig. 9). Eucharistic bread appears on the left and a chalice filled with wine appears on the right, indicating that the Divine Liturgy is underway. Three characteristic elements of the Hetoimasia occupy the centre of the altar: a cross, a Gospel book, and the dove of the Holy Spirit. As at Nerezi, the dove

[45] On the deacon's vestments, see Pauline Johnstone, *Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery* (London: Alec Tiranti, 1967), 13–18; Warren T. Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon: Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5–6. The twelfth- or thirteenth-century *diataxis* in *Athens Ethnike bibl. 662* describes the deacon standing to the right of the priest and fanning the gifts after the recitation of the Creed and the removal of the aer (a liturgical veil) from the bread and wine. Panagiotes N. Trempelas, *Αἱ τρεῖς Λειτουργίαι κατὰ τοὺς ἐν Ἀθήναις κώδικας* (Athens, 1935), 11. The eleventh-century *Protheoria* suggests that the deacons continued waving the rhipidia over the gifts until the Epiklesis. Nicholas and Theodore of Andida, *The Protheoria*, in *PG* 140:448B.

[46] Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary*, 15–36.

[47] A similar spatial strategy can be observed with the *melismos* motif at the church of St George at Kurbinovo, North Macedonia, which creates the appearance that the sacrificed Christ in the apse is actually lying on the church altar in front of it.

Fig. 8. Church of St Panteleimon, Gorno Nerezi, North Macedonia, 1164. Image: Byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Fig. 9. Athens National Library Cod. 211, folio 56r, Athens, Greece (Princeton University The Index of Medieval Art).

in *Athens 211* appears to be alighting on the altar, its wings upraised in flight. This image seems to adapt the iconography of the Hetoimasia to illustrate the moment of the Epiklesis in a Byzantine church. It suggests that the Epiklesis may have been a common meaning of the Hetoimasia in Byzantine art.

The Ascension

The Ascension appears on the eastern wall or in the bema vault of a number of post-Iconoclastic churches. At the church of St George at Kurbinovo discussed above, the Ascension is positioned on the eastern wall in the register above the Annunciation (fig. 4). Two well-preserved examples in bema vaults can be found in the geographically distant eleventh-century basilica of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid, North Macedonia (fig. 10), and the church of the Panagia tou Araka in Lagoudera, Cyprus, (fig. 3). In both cases, Christ appears enthroned on a rainbow within a circular mandorla, borne aloft in the apex of a barrel vault by four angels. Below, on either side of the vaults, the Apostles and angels gaze upward from the earth toward the ascending Christ in the heavens.

Images of the Ascension in church sanctuaries resonated in multiple parts of the Liturgy. The Ascension was associated with the First Entrance, when the clergy enter the sanctuary with the Gospel book. The procession culminated with the bishop entering the sanctuary and ascending the *synthronon*, the stepped seating for the clergy in the church apse. From the Early Byzantine period, liturgical commentators such as Maximus the Confessor interpreted the First Entrance as an image of Christ's entrance into the world, and the bishop's ascent and enthronement in the *synthronon* as an image of the Ascension.[48] This association of the First Entrance with the Ascension endured well into the post-Iconoclastic era, as seen in the commentaries of St Symeon of Thessaloniki, even after the *synthronon* fell out of use.[49]

[48] Maximus the Confessor, *On the Ecclesiastical Mystagogy 8,* Greek in *Maximi Confessoris: Mystagogia*, ed. Christian Boudignon (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 36–37; Greek and English in Saint Maximus the Confessor, *On the Ecclesiastical Mystagogy*, ed. Jonathan J. Armstrong (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019), 72–73.

[49] St. Symeon of Thessalonika, *Explanation of the Divine Temple, 50; On the Sacred Liturgy* 130, in *The Liturgical Commenatries*, ed. and trans. Steven Hawkes-Teeples (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2011), 116–117, 246–247.

Fig. 10. Hagia Sophia, Ohrid, North Macedonia, 11th century.
Image: © Gábor Tikos, used with permission.

Yet after the First Entrance concludes, and the clergy proceed with the Anaphora and Epiklesis, the implied verticality of the Ascension frescos above altars must have taken on Eucharistic meanings. At Lagoudera, an inscription taken from the account of the Ascension in Acts accompanies the fresco. Running from north to south on either side in the space between the ascending Christ and his Apostles below, the inscription quotes the angels who appeared at the Ascension: '"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky?"' And, 'This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven […]'. This second inscription is only half as long as the first and it abruptly cuts the rest of the quotation recorded in Acts, encouraging the viewer to call the rest to mind: '[…] will come back in the same way you have

seen him go into heaven'.[50] The placement of the Ascension at Lagoudera, as well as the prominent position of the inscription that refers to the Apostles 'looking into the sky', emphasize the verticality of the image. In the First Entrance with the Gospel book, liturgical commentaries encouraged worshippers to imagine the incarnate Christ ascending heavenward. But later, during the celebration of the Eucharist, the Ascension and inscription at Lagoudera must have encouraged worshippers to imagine Christ descending bodily from the space above the altar.

It is noteworthy that the image of Christ within his circular mandorla at Ohrid and Lagoudera would have mirrored the circular shape of the *diskos* (or paten) that held the Eucharistic bread on the altar below. Some Byzantine patens displayed images of Christ on them, suggesting close visual parallels with the image of Christ in the circular mandorla.[51] The commentary attributed to Germanos of Constantinople even suggests that the Byzantines associated the circular shape of the diskos with the dome of heaven: 'The diskos on which Christ is carried is also interpreted as the sphere of heaven, manifesting to us in miniature the spiritual sun, Christ, and containing Him visibly in the bread'.[52] Germanos suggests that Byzantine viewers associated the bread on the diskos with images of Christ in domes or circular mandorla, as in these Ascension images.

Admittedly, the placement of the Ascension above the altar and its mirroring of the diskos below did not depict the descent of the Spirit

[50] Acts 1:11 (NRSV).

[51] Such patens include the well-known alabaster paten in the Treasury of San Marco in Venice H. R. Hahnloser, ed., *Il Tesoro di San Marco* (Florence: Sansoni, 1965), no. 67, 72; David Buckton, ed. *The Treasury of San Marco Venice* (Milan: Olivetti, 1984), no. 118, 168–170; Helen C. Evans and William D. Wixom, eds., *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A.D. 843–1261* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), no. 29, 68; as well as more modest, tinned copper patens, e.g. the eleventh-century paten with Christ enthroned, *Byzantium: Light in the Age of Darkness* (New York: Ariadne Galleries, 1988), no. 34; the eleventh- or twelfth-century paten in Berlin with Christ flanked by Constantine and Stephen, Victor H. Elbern, 'Byzantinische Paten emit Ritzzeichnung in den Berliner Museen', *Berliner Museen* 21.2 (1971): 61–68; Petra Sevrugian, *Liturgisches Gerät aus Byzanz: Die Berliner Patene und ihr Umkreis* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 1992); Ludwig Wamser, Die Welt von Byzanz – Europas Östliches Erbe: Glanz, Krisen und Fortleben einer tausendjährigen Kultur (Munich: Archäologische Staatssammlung, 2004), 116, no. 149; and the eleventh-century paten depicting Christ between two palms in Kiev, Miroslav Lazović, et al., *Objets byzantins de la collection du Musée d'art et d'histoire* (Geneva: Musée d'art et d'histoire, 1977), fig. 6a; M. Mango, 'The Significance of Byzantine Tinned Copper Objects', 221–227; Sevrugian, *Liturgisches Gerät*, 10, fig. 4; Susan A. Boyd, 'Art in the Service of the Liturgy: Byzantine Silver Plate', in *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium*, ed. Linda Safran (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press), 182, fig. 6.30.

[52] Germanos, *Historia ekklesiastike*, 38 in Meyendorff, *On the Divine Liturgy*, 86–87.

as such, but it did evoke Christ's anticipated, bodily return in the space above the bread and wine on the altar. In this respect, it resonated less with the Epiklesis, and more with the Prayer of the Elevation that the celebrant prayed a little later: 'Lord Jesus Christ our God, look down from your holy dwelling place and from the throne of glory of your kingdom, and come to sanctify us, you who are seated on high with the Father, and yet are invisibly present here with us. And deign by the might of your hand to give a share of your Immaculate Body and Precious Blood to us, and through us to all the people'.[53] This prayer was not spoken as part of the Epiklesis. But as Michael Zheltov notes, it accompanied the Elevation of the bread and wine, when many of the Byzantines understood the descent of the Spirit to take place, finally transforming the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood.[54] A liturgical commentary in verse, dated between the eleventh and thirteenth century, interprets the Elevation as an image of Christ's ascension, confirming that Byzantine viewers would have associated these images of the Ascension near the altar with the Elevation during this part of the Liturgy.[55]

Conclusion

As we have seen, the invisibility of the Spirit's descent did not stop the Byzantines from visualizing it with a variety of images. Gold and silver doves hung over church altars in the Early Byzantine period, and in the case of Hagia Sophia, as late as 1200. The microcosmic symbolism of church architecture and spatial icons served a similar function in post-Iconoclastic churches. Some churches depicted biblical events featuring the Spirit's descent, such as the Annunciation at Kurbinovo and the Pentecost at Hosios Loukas. In contrast, the Hetoimasia at Nerezi visualizes the descent of the dove without any narrative context. The Ascension appears on the eastern wall at Kurbinovo and in the vaults at Ohrid and Lagoudera. This image does not represent the descent of the Spirit as such, but it anticipates Christ's bodily return, resonating with

[53] Brightman, *Liturgies Eastern and Western* 341; English in Taft, *Precommunion Rites*, 201.
[54] Zheltov, 'The Moment of Eucharistic Consecration in Byzantine Thought', 298.
[55] Roland Betancourt, "A Byzantine Liturgical Commentary in Verse: Introduction and Translation" 232–233, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 81 (2015): 471.

the Prayer of the Elevation, which the Byzantines long understood to be the actual moment of the Spirit's descent. In post-Iconoclastic churches, such images of divine descent combined with additional Eucharistic images—including Old Testament episodes, the Virgin and Child, and more overtly liturgical scenes such as the Communion of the Apostles and the *Melismos*—to encourage worshippers to visualize the mystery of the Eucharist: bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ.