AS THE BYZANTINES SAW IT: SENSORIA, SOURCES, APSE AND BRICKWORK AT THE END OF 13TH-CENTURY

In Byzantine art and architecture the Church as spatially determined unity, has an altar with a system alternated with semicircular niches - the apse.\(^1\) As privileged compartment in the church it was mentioned by Prokopios (as semi cylindrical space vaulted with a conch or quarter-sphere) although in the manuscript itself he used rather archaic expressions.\(^2\)

Forming the constitution of the body of the Church, the apse contributes in the same time to the articulation of church compartments as vision of the body of Christ.\(^3\) Prime examples of Early Byzantine Architecture direct us toward conclusion that the exterior of the Church is modelated by tectonic, flat and solid surfaces. One could say that the apse of the church of Hagia Eirine in Constantinople (Fig.1)\(^4\)

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\(^2\) «And the face itself of the church (which would be the part which faces the rising sun, that portion of the building in which they perform the mysteries in worship of God) was constructed in the following manner. A structure of masonry (oikodomia) is built up from the ground, not made in a straight line, but gradually curving inward on its flanks and receding at the middle, so that it forms the shape of half a circle, which those who are skilled in such matters call a half-cylinder (hēmikylindron); and so it rises precipitously to a height.» Prokopios, Buildings, T.1, transl. H.B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press 1940, chapter 1, line 32; C. Delvoye, *Études d’architecture paleochrétienne et byzantine. II. L’Abside*, Byzantion XXXII, 1 (1962), 291-310.


already notes a tendency towards more emphasis, accentuating of the certain structures of the brick and its forms. During the period of Komnenoi, the apses are built as solid, massive and articulated with horizontally stacked bricks and mortar joints. Generally speaking, on the Middle and especially Late Byzantine architecture, the apse was usually the most popular form of articulation of the external surface. Horizontals of the apse obtained supremacy of lines and structural forms (fig.2), until the time when brickwork regained primary function in vivid shaping of the apsidal images, especially at the beginning of Palaiologan rulership whose preoccupations with antiquarianism in its different genres have been fortunate. Byzantine architecture during the Palaeologoi most of all expressed its artistic possibilities on the surfaces of the apse which exterior turns into a kind of tapestry. The exterior of the apse as a space for images has never been discussed and this is the focus of this paper. That is the argument why it is necessary to advance understanding of the exterior articulation of the apses witnessed in Palaeologan architecture and its degree of structural integrity at the end of 13th-century. Precisely said, investigates that examples of brickwork images and changes of meaning attached to certain ornaments do not only depend on transformations in form, content, or iconography but also on changes in the different senses addressed by these images embedded in different sensoria / sensorial visuality.

“What did I have in mind? What I saw.” - Nikitas Choniates

There would probably be nothing paradoxical about what Nikitas had in mind if he read a manuscript about everyday life in Byzantium. Namely, he continues that he saw: “the everyday life of the Byzantines; their habits, their occupations.” (fig.3)

And what accentuates this paradox is that he actually “saw” those narrative snippets of everyday life, habits, and beliefs. The phenomenon that this instance exemplifies is the manifestation of a narrative that is missing, which, in turn, is substantiated, through visual artifacts. Do artifacts, then, tell stories (fig.4)? What I wish to explore and theorize here is how consumers/holders make sense and experience absent narratives through visible images on the walls of Byzantine church (fig.5)

In discussions of the meanings of the exterior images of the apse it is possible to bring several conclusions about how these brickwork images offer paradigmatic stimuli or how might be viewed through the eyes of Byzantines. That is to say synthesis of viewing the Invisible and explaining the Inexplicable (Christ).

The theoretical foundation in Byzantium for images in/on the apse as means of mystic contemplation of Divine is above all to be found in the works of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagites. Like Plotinus before him, Pseudo-Dionysius was a firm believer in a mystic union that transcends subject and object. The aim of Dionysian hierarchy whether celestial or ecclesiastical was assimilation (aphomoiosis) to God and union (henosis) with Him.10

Hypatius of Ephesus – archbishop from 531 – 538 – was justifying images in the very thought and language of Dionysius:

“We allow even material adornment in the sanctuaries…because we permit each other of the faithful to be guided and led up to the divine being in a manner appropriate to it (the order of images) because we think that some people are guided even by these (material decorations) towards intelligible beauty and from the abundant light in the sanctuaries to the intelligible and immaterial light”.11

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11 F. Diekamp, Hypatius von Ephesus, Analecta Patristica (OCA 117), Rome 1938,
Reflecting upon Byzantine art many years ago, the eminent scholar Hans Buchwald made some valuable remarks, which are symptomatic for the Byzantine architecture in its totality, and most helpful in assessing the connections between antiquity and Christianity.12 Buchwald pointed out that: "The existence of rich and extensive examples of the brick meander in prominent positions on important facades in Constantinople no later than the late 11th and early 12th-centuries leads to the conclusion that the application of similar but simpler motifs in the Byzantine provinces in the 11th and 12th-centuries is ultimately dependent upon Constantinopolitan prototypes".13

Without questioning which facades exactly and in which sense their “importance” is regarded in Constantinople, especially if have in mind that present studies of art historians are operating with only 30 percents of heavily accessible Byzantine heritage, in the same time it must be clearly understood that doctrine of Byzantine architecture led to the fixing of antiquarianism of images and rhetoric which explained all visual manifests in the sacred space.14


That was the result of specific ontological mode of antiquity existence for the Byzantine subject in rapport with past, with creation of the Empire and state orders (fig. 6). Without understanding that antiquity is actual mover and initiating force of the visuality, it is not possible to understand competently imagery storage in Late Byzantine art and architecture.

In pursuance to demonstrate such ideas, the analysis of monumental architecture in this period helps to assemble a cohesive group of churches with brick engaged as primary building material.

The apse programme offers several narrative scenes – Theophanies from a hierarchy of images. Visual concealment of the mystery which happens in the altar and its exterioriation is but one dimension of a complex phenomenon in Byzantine architecture. The hymns associated with the feasts of the Virgin are depicted on the interior surfaces of the walls and all depictions emphasized the theme of Mary

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as the true temple.\textsuperscript{18} Equivalent liturgical messages are expressed with the brickwork ornaments, often schematized and on the low level of preservance, but still possible to be understood (fig. 7). The brickwork executed on the apse set up at the very end of 13\textsuperscript{th} – century and in the first half of 14\textsuperscript{th}-century with many executive variables, belong to a period which witnessed a tremendous rise of ornamentation of the facades. The ornaments are placed with meticulous attention. Particularity is that these ornaments are contemporary to those used in Constantinople „trending facades“: chess fields, \textit{opus reticulatum} as sort of antiquarianism in the architecture, meander which in the same time could be seen as image of multiplicative crosses made of brick, heraldry insignias of ktetor, \textit{opus spicatum}, reduced version of Tree of Life\textsuperscript{19} which appeared also in known Cosmas Indicopleustes descriptions of Heavenly Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{20}

The question of interest is what is visual discourse of the east façade and how to interpret exteriorized images of the apse at the very end of 13\textsuperscript{th}-century? At this point, one should recall the notion of engaging the visual framing of the facade. Having in mind that images are examined as visual sensations or \textit{stimuli} that activate the nerve cells in the eyes to convey information to the brain,\textsuperscript{21} frames are iden-


ified by enumerating the objects and discrete elements actually shown in the visual; frames result from recognizing design features and by organizing or combining visual sensations into sensory “themes” following some principles of organization.22

What is of importance for all examples with developed ornamental language is the symbol of the Virgin Mary. Shape of the apse is analogous to the representation of the Virgin Mary as the Seat of Wisdom in the apse. Apse is in the same time visual equivalent of the cave where Christ was born.23 At the very end of 13th-century the apse epidermis consists of extensive repertoire of ornaments as part of the phenomenology of the mystery performed at the altar, behind/ in front of the viewer’s standpoint. East facade as exterior shape of the interior altar became not only the spot with developed brickwork vocabulary, but visual screening of the mystery that happens inside the church, starts from the lower parts visible from the remote vantage. Approaching to the apse provides closer observation of the brickwork “table of contents”: on the top of the apse is not the beginning of the believer’s journey, but its end with ornaments which flares and spiralling around the mysteries of the God. The Eucharist was one of these mysteries. In countless written sources the Eucharist remained the most sacred event in the life of the Church. The recognition of the Eucharistic presence of Christ on the altar during the liturgy and the directing of adoration toward that presence is strikingly attested in the writings of St. John Chrysostom (347-407): «For thou dost see Him not in a manger but on an altar, not with a woman holding Him but with a priest standing before Him, and the Spirit descending upon the offerings with great bounty».24 Likewise, in another Homily he states: „Not in vain do we at the holy mysteries make mention of the departed, and draw near on their behalf, beseeching the Lamb who is lying on the altar, who took away the sin of the world.”25 A similar vigilance regarding the smallest fragments of the Eucharist is enjoined in the instructions of St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) for the newly baptized: „partake of it [the Eucharist], giving heed lest thou lose any part of it; for whatever thou shouldest lose would be evidently a loss to thee as from one of thine own members. For tell me, if any one gave thee grains of gold, wouldest thou not hold them with all care, taking heed lest thou shouldest lose any of them and suffer loss?”26


Him who is honored thereon with a great cry and with every kind of entreaty, and pleading with Him. . . . Placing her head on the altar with another great cry and with a wealth of tears, like one who of old bedewed the feet of Christ, and declaring that she would not let go until she was made well, she then applied to her whole body this medicine which she had, even such a portion of the antitypes of the honorable body and blood as she treasured in her hand, and mingled with this act her tears."

The mystery of the holy altar in Christianity was founded on the notion of Divine presence – the fearful reality that the altar itself is the body of Christ: “The body of Christ is upon the altar.” Liturgical texts consistently describe the Eucharist as fire. The altar is called “heavenly and spiritual altar,” says the Patriarch Germanus because the serving hierarchy of the immaterial and celestial powers must also be “as a burning fire.” This is important especially because of the way how brick was made: with usage of fire.

This is the case of the iconographical visualisation of Divine said by brickwork. The association between the hidden vision of the sacred and the mystery

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28 St Ambrosie, « De sacramentis », Sources chrétiennes, Les Éditions du Cerf : Paris, 1949: 80. Similar thoughts are expressed later in Kabasilas’ time (c. 1322-1391): “This is the final mystery. Beyond this, it is not possible to go, nor can anything be added to it.” Nicholas Kabasilas, The Life in Christ, PG, 150, col. 548B, English translation by C. J. de Catanzaro (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press Crestwood, 1974): 114.
29 St Germanus of Constantinople, On the Divine Liturgy, Ecclesiastical History and Mystical Contemplation, 60.
behind the wall is expressed in the Dionysian line and visual discourse of the apse: “the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence”.

Bearing in mind the association of the apse – interior and exterior – with the Virgin’s womb in the same time these images imply codified meaning of incarnated Logos and illumination through Him, vision of the senses: “the Truth will shine, illuminating the eyes of the soul with its own rays”.

Sensory vision of the sacred place is not permitted to “profane” eyes; it is the privilege of those initiated into the mysteries. As the veil of the iconostasis inside the church, exterior surface of the apse acts as a transparent medium; a membrane made by secondary Holy relic Keramion, the sacred image of the altar behind the walls where the Eucharistic mystery is performed. In a paradigmatic way, from the standpoint of sensory modality, these exteriorized images illustrate the nature of the mystery-concealing device in the architecture at the very end of 13th-century. In that sense one of the key thoughts and valuable mental frame for sensorial understanding of brickwork patchworks (on the apse and its contemporary visual comparanda) is contained in Theodore Metochites Seimeioseis Gnomikai on the study of History where he declared that: “Even as plant requires water, only the ancients can provide the examples and guidance, to be inscribed on the image producing tablets of memory.”

This attempt shows that sensual addressings of images may strongly...

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31 Dionysius the Areopagite, De Mystica Theologia, I, 1.
35 M. J. Featherstone, Theodore Metochites’s Seimeioseis Gnomikai: Personal En-
influence the interpretation of brickwork images executed on the apse. The deconstruction of sensual addressings contributes to understand Byzantine sensorial and overall communication processes. In order to understand the implications of the sensoria it will be necessary to develop semiotic methods of brickwork analysis. Therefore, especially in sensory experience of the brickwork forms compared on the figures in this article show how certain images and stories from Antiquity are transformed into Byzantine context, from the perspective of sign systems as well as of sensual addressing. This field of studies opens a potent dialogue by which we can start to deconstruct our own preconceptions to make more sense of the Byzantine society at the end of 13th-century.
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