

“Blachernitissa” or “Axion Estin”: On the name of the fresco of the Mother of God from Tomb E of the Chora monastery

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Abstract. The present study is focused on clarifying the origin of the pictorial model of the subject “Theotokos Blachernitissa” and its dogmatic and Eucharistic significance as a visual expression of the idea of the Holy Mother of God as a “living altar” of God. This subject enjoys a great variety of names and iconographic variations, hence sometimes questions arise about the correct identification of some models. A typical example in this regard is the fresco of the Mother of God, decorating the tomb of Irene Raoulaina Palaeologina in the outer narthex of the Chora Monastery (*Tomb E*). This paper aims to prove that the fresco, designated as “Theotokos Blachernitissa” actually has a hymnographic content and should be identified rather as “Theotokos Axion Estin (It is Truly Meet)”.

Keywords: Theotokos; Blachernitissa; Platytera; Axion Estin (It is Truly Meet); Chora Monastery

[es] “Blachernitissa” o “Axion Estin”: Sobre el nombre del fresco de la Madre de Dios de la Tumba E del monasterio de Chora

Resumen. El presente estudio se centra en esclarecer el origen del modelo pictórico del sujeto “Theotokos Blachernitissa” y su significado dogmático y eucarístico como expresión visual de la idea de la Santa Madre de Dios como “altar viviente” de Dios. Este tema goza de una gran variedad de nombres y variaciones iconográficas, de ahí que en ocasiones surjan dudas sobre la correcta identificación de algunos modelos. Un ejemplo típico en este sentido es el fresco de la Madre de Dios, que decora la tumba de Irene Raoulaina Paleologina en el nártex exterior del Monasterio de Chora (Tumba E). Este artículo tiene como objetivo demostrar que el fresco, designado como “Theotokos Blachernitissa” en realidad tiene un contenido himnográfico y debería identificarse más bien como “Theotokos Axion Estin (Es verdaderamente justo)”.

Palabras clave: Theotokos; Blachernitisa; Platytera; Axion Estin (Es verdaderamente justo); Monasterio de Chora.

Contents. 1. Introduction. 2. The subject “Theotokos Blachernitissa”. 3. The fresco of the Mother of God from Tomb E in the Chora Monastery. 4. The hymnographic content of the image and its Akathist character. 5. Conclusión. 6. References

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1. Introduction

After the end of the iconoclastic controversy in the ninth century, the Mother of God became the most frequently depicted figure in the altar apses in Byzantium, whether represented alone or with Child in her arms. At the beginning of the eleventh century, a new subject emerged in the iconography of the Theotokos, depicting the Virgin Mary at the waist, with her hands raised upwards and with a mandorla on her breast depicting the Infant Christ. Due to its origin, this subject is called

“Theotokos of Blachernae (Blachernitissa)” or “Platytera (Wider than the Heavens)” and became unprecedentedly widespread into the monumental painting of the time of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos.

The subject “Blachernitissa” is an example of the influence of theological disputes on the iconographic canon of the respective era, because it was created in response to Christological heresies and related problems having to do with the person of the Blessed Virgin. At the time of the Komnenos dynasty, the Christological heresies were largely liturgically focused on the con-

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² In the present study, the terms “Blachernitissa” and “Platytera” are used to denote the same iconographic scheme. According to most modern scholars, the more correct name of this pictorial scheme is “Blachernitissa”, while “Platytera” is one of its post-Byzantine names – the Greek equivalent of the name “Wider than the Heavens” which is popular among Bulgarians and other Slavic peoples. Despite the popularity of this late name, it has no direct connection with the roots of the iconographic formula itself, so the more research-wise toponymic epithet “Blachernitissa” is used here.

secration of the Holy Gifts into the Eucharist. These theological issues were directly reflected in the development of the Byzantine iconographic canon through the emergence of a number of subjects focused on the visualization of the consecration of the Holy Gifts and the association of the incorruptible flesh of the Eucharist with the Divine Infant. Thus, at the end of the twelfth century, the image of *Amnos* crystallized, the formation and popularization of the subject of the young Christ in Glory was encouraged, the independent subject “Christ Emmanuel” was finally formed and the subject “Theotokos Blachernitissa” became widespread. All of them illustrate the idea that the depiction of the Son of God as a Divine Infant symbolizes the Eucharist and that aspect of the person of Christ associated with the salvation and immortality of the flesh.³

The great variety of the names of the subject “Blachernitissa” is accompanied by the diversity of its iconographic variations, hence sometimes questions arise about the correct identification of some models. A typical example in this regard is the fresco of the Mother of God, decorating the tomb of Irene Raoulaina Palaeologina in the outer narthex of the Chora Monastery (*Tomb E*). This paper aims to prove that the fresco, designated as “Theotokos Blachernitissa” actually has a hymnographic content and should be identified rather as “Theotokos Axion Estin (It is Truly Meet)”.

2. The subject “Theotokos Blachernitissa”

The reasons for the permanent presence of the images of the Mother of God in the altar apses after the ninth century are numerous,⁴ but the most important among them are: the growing veneration of the Virgin Mary because of her power as a mediator and her role in the Incarnation; the position of the Virgin Mary in the celestial hierarchy immediately after God coincides with the hierarchical position of the apse immediately after the dome of the temple; the perception of the altar as the throne of God corresponds to the understanding of the Virgin as the throne of Christ – a formula often used in Byzantine literature; last but not least, it should be mentioned and the idea of the Mother of God as a bearer and means of Christ’s Eucharist, which makes her face especially suitable for the place crowning the area above the Holy See.⁵

The attitude towards the Virgin Mary as a “living altar” of God is visualized through various subjects, some of which contain a mandorla, further condensing the theological significance of these images. This is not strange, because the visual symbol of the mandorla here serves as an aid to express certain nuances in the religious content of these compositions. The permanent retention of this symbol in the iconography of the Virgin corresponds to the fact that after the ninth century the theological interest in the person of the Most Holy Mother of God has increased. Immediately after the iconoclasm, the writings of the Church fathers and church writers created the appropriate basis for the emergence of new subjects in the iconography of the Virgin. The clearest example in this respect is the formation in the tenth century of the subject of the Dormition of the Mother of God, and during the Komnenian period the homage to the Virgin Mary and her role in the salvation of mankind emanated in the transformation of the ancient subject of Virgin Orans into the image we know today as the Most Holy Theotokos Blachernitissa (*Episkepsis, Platytera, Wider than the Heavens*).

The symbol of the mandorla is present in the treasury with expressive means of the iconographic canon, where it expresses the complex idea of the glory of God.⁶ The mandorla denotes the spatial and ‘light-giving’ (*photodosia*) manifestation of God’s presence in various iconographic scenes.⁷ In the specific subjects, concerning the Lord Jesus Christ and the Mother of God, the emphasis is placed on various aspects of the manifestation of the glory of God.⁸ In some cases, the symbol of the mandorla is interpreted as a literal expression of the incarnation of the Infant Christ in the womb of the Blessed Virgin. Examining the iconography of the Annunciation, A. Grabar pays special attention to a subject that he believes came into use in Byzantine art in the ninth century and presents the Virgin Mary with raised hands in prayer, while on her breast is depicted the Infant Christ, surrounded by a round outline. According to him, this surprising motif depicts the future birth of the Savior in order to show quite clearly the beginning of the Incarnation.⁹

This iconographic type of depiction of the Blessed Virgin in Byzantine art is complex in terms of both the name and the composition, and the interpretation of its meaning. The main names by which it is called are

³ Carr, Annemarie Weyl, „Gospel Frontispieces from the Comnenian Period”. *Gesta*, 21, No. 1 (1982): 8-10.

⁴ Mantás, Apóstolos, *Το Εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα του ιερού βήματος των Μεσοβυζαντινών ναών της Ελλάδας: 843-1204*, Αθήνα: Εθνικό και Καποδιστριακό Πανεπιστήμιο Αθηνών, 2001, 57-83.

⁵ Evangelatou, Maria, “Krater of Nectar and Altar of the Bread of Life: The Theotokos as Provider of the Eucharist in Byzantine Culture” in Arentzen, Thomas, Cunningham Mary B. (eds), *The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium: Marian Narratives in Texts and Images*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 94-96.

⁶ Тодорова-Енчева, Ростислава, *Символ и значение: концептът за Божията слава в къснoвизантийската иконография*, Шумен: УИ „Епископ Константин Преславски”, 2020, 20-48

⁷ Todorova, Rostislava, “Visualizing the Divine: Mandorla as a Vision of God in Byzantine Iconography”. *IKON Journal of Iconographic Studies*, 6 (2013): 287-288.

⁸ Тодорова, Ростислава, “От слово към образ: коя е първата исихастка мандорла?”. *Преславска книжовна школа*, т. XV, Шумен: УИ „Епископ Константин Преславски”, 2015, 427-430.

⁹ Grabar, Andre, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, 128, figs. 304, 305.

“Blachernitissa”,¹⁰ “Platytera”¹¹ and “Episkepsis”.¹² Its composition contains the Virgin, usually depicted at the waist, with the Infant Christ in front of her, her hands occupying different positions in relation to the image of the Lord, represented as Emmanuel. The iconographic images of the Mother of God always have a multi-layered and diverse meaning, and separating the essence of a particular image of her is often a complex process.¹³ In this case, one of the problems of interpretation is rooted in the question of what is this oval or round geometric shape embracing the Infant Christ in or in front of the body of the Virgin. This element is often seen not as a mandorla, but as a medallion that stands freely in front of the body of the Blessed Virgin or she holds it with her hands.¹⁴ The iconographic scheme in its entirety always hints at the physical purity of the Virgin Mary and in both cases of interpretation of the geometric form, this subject gives a visual expression of faith in the Virgin Mother of God, not in a literal, but in a dogmatic and hierarchical sense.¹⁵

This type of images, showing the Blessed Virgin Mary as a true “tabernacle” of the Word, are present in both Eastern and Western iconography. In the Orthodox imagery, the Theotokos appears as a “means of salvation”,¹⁶ and the mandorla is used mainly as a visual symbol of God’s glory and appears only where the Source of Energies (*dynamis*), the Source of Uncreated Light, the Center of the Universe, the Creator of everything that exists is depicted. Therefore, from a theological and dogmatic point of view, in the context of the significance of the considered iconographic subject, it is difficult to speak of a medallion, but of a mandorla – not an ornament,¹⁷ not an image frame, but an active symbol¹⁸ denoting a different space, different state of matter, different dignity of the depicted person and emphasizing His presence, as well as the means of His coming.

From the fourteenth century onwards, some changes have appeared in the way the mandorla is depicted in Byzantine art. A combination of two superimposed squares has become a standard way of representing the glory of God, and the iconographic subject of the Virgin Blachernitissa quickly incorporated the eight-pointed star-shaped mandorla around the Infant Christ. This change is especially visible in the post-Byzantine era, when the subject became popular on the Balkans under the hymnographic name “Wider than the Heavens”, in Greek – with its equivalent epithet “Platytera”, and in

Russian – with the name “Znamenie (Our Lady of the Sign)”. The composition stays unchanged and differences are observed only in the type of the mandorla – it could be a round mandorla, eight-pointed mandorla or a mandorla with atypical shape.

3. The fresco of the Mother of God from *Tomb E* in the Chora Monastery

The fresco from the outer narthex of the Chora monastery (Fig. 1) is an extremely important example, because it is the only one among the many images of the Mother of God of this type with such model of mandorla. The image decorates the tomb (*Tomb E*) of Irene Raoulaina Palaeologina – widow of Constantine Palaeologus, brother of Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologus and mother-in-law of the daughter of the ktetor of the Chora Theodore Metochites Irene. Dated ca. 1325-1330, the fresco depicts a bust of the Virgin in the pose of an orant with the Infant Christ in front of her breast. Both of them are surrounded by a five-pointed star-shaped mandorla, from whose concave sides the figures of four seraphim are peering out. The mandorla is colored in pale gray-blue, framed with two stripes in pale blue-green, and the seraphim are presented in yellow, with red outlines and white lights. Underwood defines the image as “Blachernitissa” and describes the mandorla as “cusped”.¹⁹

The central themes in the iconographic program of the Chora church are salvation and incarnation, so the subject of the Virgin Blachernitissa is often found in different interpretations in it. According to R. Ousterhout, the emphasis on the dual dedication of the church to both the Lord Jesus Christ and the Virgin, as well as on the special significance of the Blessed Virgin Mary for the salvation of mankind, leads to a marked search for means suitable to express a sort of “women’s equality”. The Lord Jesus Christ and the Virgin appear regularly in medallions, as those in the domes are match sets, the cycles with scenes from their lives are presented in parallel, in the donor “Deesis” mosaic are present the male and the female patrons, in the majestic “Resurrection of Christ” fresco the Lord Jesus Christ simultaneously raises up both Adam and Eve. Even the name of the church is related to Jesus Christ, who is “*Ἡ Χώρα των Ζώντων*” (“The Land (or Dwelling-Place) of the Living”) and to the Holy Mother of God, who is “*Ἡ Χώρα του Αἰχωρήτου*” (“The Container

¹⁰ Underwood, Paul, *The Kariye Djami: Historical Introduction and Description of the Mosaics and Frescoes*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, vol. 1, 1967, 40-41.

¹¹ Ševčenko, Nancy, “Virgin Blachernitissa” in Kazhdan, Alexander (ed), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 3, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991, 2170-2171.

¹² Carr, Annemarie Weyl, *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered: The Thirteenth Century Murals of Lysi, Cyprus*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991, 43-46.

¹³ Ousterhout, Robert, “The Virgin of the Chora: An Image and its Contexts” in Ousterhout, Robert, Brubaker, Leslie (eds), *The Sacred Image East and West*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995, 93.

¹⁴ Mathews, Thomas, “The Early Armenian Iconographic Program of the Ējmiacin Gospel (Erevan, Matenadaran MS 2374, olim 229)” in Garsoïan, Nina, Mathews, Thomas, Thomson, Robert. (eds), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Symposia Proceedings, 1982, 208.

¹⁵ Pentcheva, Bissera, *Icons and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, 145-164.

¹⁶ Carr, Annemarie Weyl, *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered*, 56.

¹⁷ Kazhdan, Alexander (ed), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 3, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991, 1535-1536.

¹⁸ Trilling, James, *The Medallion Style: A Study in the Origins of Byzantine Taste*, New York: Garland Publications, 1985, 73.

¹⁹ Underwood, Paul, *The Kariye Djami*, vol. 1, 270, 281-282.

(or Dwelling-Place) of the Uncontainable) both depicted above the entrances to the church. This special epithet of the Virgin Mary undoubtedly derived from the Akathist Hymn – the most important Byzantine hymn to the Virgin, written in the seventh century, although the epithet itself is older and is often used in hymnography.

In addition, a protective function similar to that of the miraculous icon of the same name from the Blachernae church, which was the palladium of Constantinople,²⁰ can be attributed to the entrance mosaic of the Virgin

Blachernitissa. That is, the entrance image presents the Holy Mother of God as a vessel of God, as a protector, as well as a portal (“The Gate of the Word” – also a popular hymnographic theme).²¹ It can be read also as another imperial claim of Metochites, who ambitiously expresses his closeness to the imperial family and his own power in the imperial court, and through the language of the iconographic program of the Chora church joins the ranks of the imperial family and puts himself under the same spiritual protection.²²



Fig. 1. *Virgin Blachernitissa*, c. 1325-1330, fresco, outer narthex, Tomb E, Chora Monastery. Photo: the author

But the fresco with the “cusped” mandorla we are talking about here is not a classic example of “Blachernitissa” in the sense in which B. Pencheva presents the subject.²³ Here the mandorla around Christ Emmanuel is missing, and such is circumscribed around the figure of His Mother. In addition, the mandorla is combined with four seraphim, reminiscent of the scheme of Christ Tetramorph. The composition is complemented by the bust figures of St. Cosmas of Maiuma on the left and St. John of Damascus on the right – two hymnographers who also appear in the eastern pendentives of the dome of the parekklesion. They are depicted in medallions with a red background and hold scrolls with the *incipits* of chants for the funeral service for monks.²⁴ Proceeding from their presence around the image of the Virgin Blachernitissa, which cannot be accidental, we can try to read this iconographic scheme in a hymnographic context and more specifically in an Akathist context.

St. Cosmas of Maiuma is known for writing the second half of the Virgin’s *megalynarion* “Axion Estin” – “More honorable than the cherubim”, and St. John of Damascus is known for the composed by him *stichera* in the *Octoechos* of the Sixth mode, which became the basis of the “Axion Estin” hymn. Their presence around the image of the Blessed Virgin with the Infant Christ, depicted in glory and surrounded by four seraphim, creates a hymnographic context, very relevant to the time when the fresco was created. According to historical data, the Akathist of the Blessed Virgin has been variously dated between shortly after the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the middle of the sixth century. Its content is divided into a historical part (*oikoi* I-XII) and a theological part (*oikoi* XIII-XXIV), because the former focuses on the events of the early life of the Lord Jesus Christ, while the latter focuses on the Incarnation, the two natures of the Son of God and the simultaneous glorification of the Holy Mother of God and God the Word. Despite its

²⁰ It is noteworthy to add that the icon palladium of Theotokos “Axion Estin” from the Protaton church on Mount Athos (second half of the fourteenth century) should be a copy of a Constantinopolitan icon, maybe that of the Blachernae church. See: Τσιγαρίδας, Ευθύμιος, ‘Η εικόνα ‘Αξιον Εστίν’ του Προτάτου και η Παναγία Κυκκώτισσα’, in *Πρακτικά Συνεδρίου – Η Ιερά Μονή Κύκκου στη βυζαντινή και μεταβυζαντινή αρχαιολογία και τέχνη*. Λευκωσία: Μουσείο Ι.Μ. Κύκκου, 2001, 181-19; Semoglou, Athanasios, “Le voile « miraculeux » de la Vierge Kykkotissa et l’icône du « miracle habituel » des Blachernes: Un cas d’assimilation dans l’iconographie byzantine”. *Cahiers balkaniques*, 34, (2006), 26.

²¹ Ousterhout, Robert, *The Art of the Kariye Camii*, London – Istanbul: Scala Publishers, 2002, 103-109.

²² Idem., “The Virgin of the Chora: An Image and its Contexts”, 96-104.

²³ Pentcheva, Bissera, “Rhetorical Images of the Virgin: The Icon of the “usual miracle” at the Blachernai”. *RES*, 38, (2000): 34-55.

²⁴ Underwood, Paul, *The Kariye Djami.*, vol. I, 282-283.

earlier appearance, the earliest surviving iconographic cycles of the Akathist suggest that it was depicted in wall paintings, icons and miniatures only during the Palaeologan era. The earliest preserved cycles date from ca. 1300 – a period of a heightened veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary when of several new Mariological iconographic themes were introduced.²⁵

J. Lafontaine-Dosogne believes that the historical circumstances after the re-conquest of Constantinople in 1261 formed a favorable climate for the creation of illustrations for the Akathist. She flatly states that the origin of the cycle is Constantinopolitan, because it is closely connected with the history of Constantinople and the cult of several miraculous icons of the Blessed Virgin kept there. The evidence in this regard she finds in the placement of the image of the Virgin Blachernitissa on the coins of Michael VIII Palaeologus, who re-conquered the capital from the Latins, as well as on those of his son Andronicus II Palaeologus (1282-1328).²⁶ According to A. Pätzold, the iconography of the second part of the Akathist was directly influenced by the Hesychasm. In addition, she sees in the Akathist illustrations a political meaning, foreshadowing a victory over the impending Islamic threat. Pätzold finds the source of the iconographic models in Hesychastic monasteries outside the capital, in particular on Mount Athos, pointing out that the earliest surviving Akathist cycles appeared in Thessaloniki, because it was the first city outside Mount Athos to host Hesychasm debates.²⁷ However, the adequacy of her conclusions is compromised by the fact that she formulates them only on the basis of samples of the monumental painting, ignoring the iconography and miniature painting. E. Constantinides searches for the roots of the Akathist iconographic cycle in the period 1285-1295, indicating the place of its origin of either Constantinople or Mount Athos, after the Unionists of that time were defeated by the Hesychasts.²⁸ Spatharakis criticizes Pätzold for the one-sidedness of her conclusions, pointing out that there is no hard evidence that the Akathist cycle was created in the Hesychastic centers and that the Hesychasm held a monopoly on this type of iconography. He gives examples with the opinions of researchers who, based on the analysis of certain patterns, believe that images inspired by the Akathist existed ca. 1200 or even from the middle of the twelfth century. Spatharakis is right in his conclusion that in reality there is no evidence that the entire Akathist cycle of 24 related images existed in Byzantine iconography before the Palaeologan era.²⁹

4. The hymnographic content of the image and its Akathist character

Without going into more detail regarding the establishment of the iconographic cycle of the Akathist, we will return to the hypothesis of the hymnographic content in the composition of the fresco from the *Tomb E* in the Chora church and we will try to prove its Akathist character. The first argument for a hymnographic interpretation of the fresco comes from the fact that the images of St. Cosmas of Maiuma and St. John of Damascus flank the image of the Virgin Mary. The second argument can be found in the iconographic similarities between this composition and some of the images of the Virgin Mary in the Akathist cycle. The third argument comes from the texts on the scrolls held by the two saints.

St. Cosmas of Maiuma is said to be the author of the hymn “More honorable than the cherubim”, which is one of the fourteen works attributed to him.³⁰ St. Cosmas and his teacher St. John of Damascus are considered the best representatives of late Greek classical hymnology, whose most distinctive works are the liturgical canons. The hymns of St. Cosmas of Maiuma were written for the needs of liturgical practice in the Jerusalem diocese, but quickly became popular in Constantinople, and through its influence they became universal Orthodox chants. It is uncertain whether all the works attributed to St. Cosmas of Maiuma are really his, especially considering the fact that his teacher was practically the most famous Byzantine hymnographer.³¹ It is believed that St. John of Damascus composed the *stichera* in the *Octoechos* of the Sixth mode, which became the basis of the “Axion Estin” hymn or at least he borrowed it from the fathers of the Council of Ephesus, which predetermines such type of glorification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. From the tenth century in Constantinople the hymn became part of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.³² Thus, the presence of the two saints around the image of the Virgin with the Infant Christ, depicted in glory and surrounded by four seraphim, creates a hymnographic context specifically related to the “Axion Estin” hymn.

The creation and popularization of the iconographic cycle of the Akathist in the Palaeologan Art not only shows the increased interest in hymnographic sources during that era, but also provides opportunities for drawing artistic parallels between the Virgin iconography in Akathist scenes and that in other images of hymnographic origin. In the case of the fresco from *Tomb E*, the most distinctive element in the composition is the star-shaped mandorla around the Mother of God. A di-

²⁵ Spatharakis, Ioannis, *The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin*, Leiden: Alexandros Press, 2005, 3-4.

²⁶ Lafontaine-Dosogne, Jacqueline, “L’illustration de la première partie de l’Hymne Akathiste et sa relation avec les mosaïques de l’Enfance de la Kariye Djami”. *Byzantion*, vol. 54, No. 2 (1984): 651-652, 698-699.

²⁷ Pätzold, Alexandra, *Der Akathistos-Hymnos: Die Bilderzyklen In Der Byzantinischen Wandmalerei Des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989, 91-99, 103.

²⁸ Constantinides, Efthalia, C., *The wall paintings of the Panagia Olympiotissa at Elasson in northern Thessaly*, vol. 1, Athens: Canadian Archaeological Institute at Athens, 1992, 176.

²⁹ Spatharakis, Ioannis, *The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin*, 5-6.

³⁰ Tsai, Kathryn, *A Timeline of Eastern Church History*, Point Reyes Station, CA: Divine Ascent Press, 2004, 144.

³¹ Krumbacher, Karl, *Geschichte der byzantinischen litteratur von Justinian bis zum ende des Oströmischen reiches (527-1453)*, München: C.H. Beck., 1897, 674-676.

³² Епископ Порфирий (Успенский), *История Афона. В 2 домах*, Том 1, Москва: Даръ, 2007, 435-438.

rect iconographic parallel with other images of the Blessed Virgin depicted in a similar mandorla can be made with the scenes illustrating *Oikos 21*: “We behold the holy Virgin as a light-bearing beacon shining on those in darkness; for by kindling the immaterial light she guides all to divine knowledge, illuminating the mind with radiance”.³³ In the images of this stanza the Virgin is depicted in two main ways – more narrative and more abstract. The more narrative visualization presents her with a candle, which is either placed in her hands or depicted above her nimbus. The more abstract one depicts her in an oval mandorla, which can be a classic blue oval, a cusped oval, with added triangular rays or fiery red oval shape with added rays.



Fig. 2. *Oikos 21: The Shining Lamp*, miniature, ca. 1360, MS. *Synodal gr. 429*, Historical Museum, Moscow. (After: Spatharakis, Ioannis, *The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin.*, fig. 169)

Spatarakis gives an example with the miniature of *Oikos 21* by the Moscow Akathist (MS. *Synodal gr. 429*), from the collection of the Moscow Historical Museum, dated ca. 1360 (Fig. 2), where the Mother of God is depicted in a triple mandorla. The innermost part of the mandorla has a narrow oval-pointed shape, a blue border and a dark core, the middle one is cusped like the Chora pattern, but painted red, and behind it one can see another cusped dark blue shape. The Virgin points to the candle standing outside the mandorla. The same composition with a similar mandorla is present in the eponymous miniature from the Akathist codex of Madrid, and a similar mandorla around the figure of the Lord Jesus Christ is used in the miniature to *Oikos 16* of the same codex (*Madrid, Escorial, codex R.I. 19*), dated ca. 1400, but in the case of the Son of God, it is also decorated with thin golden rays. Spatarakis interprets the red edges

of the mandorla of the Virgin Mary as a visualization of her epithet “light-bearing candle”, which according to the second part of the text of the oikos, with a gesture ignites the uncreated flame of Christ and leads all to Him. In the Tomić Psalter (*State Historical Museum Muz. 2752*) from ca. 1360, the Virgin in *Oikos 21* is represented in a wide oval blue mandorla with thin golden rays scattering in it, while in the icon “Akathist and Dormition of the Mother of God” of the Virgin Zoodochos Pigi church in Livadi, Skopelos, dated from the first half of the fifteenth century, the oikos depicts the Virgin in a wide oval blue mandorla, holding a candle in whose red blazing flame the Lord Jesus Christ is linearly depicted.³⁴

An image of the Blessed Virgin in an orans pose is present in the fresco to *Oikos 21* in the Panagia Olympiotissa monastery at Elasson, where the Akathist cycle is dated between ca. 1296 and 1345. A similar composition, dated ca. 1356-1360, can be seen in the Matejce Monastery, Northern Macedonia – the Virgin is standing on a pedestal in a classical orans pose, as in the first example. In both frescoes there are traces showing that the candle should be depicted above the Mother of God. Such composition is used in the St. Demetrios church in Markov Monastery, Northern Macedonia, dated ca. 1376-1381, however, here the Virgin holds Christ Emmanuel in her arms, flanked by the Holy Apostles. The figure of the Virgin Mary is depicted in the same way in a fresco in the Decani Monastery, as well as in a fresco from the St. Fanourios church in the Varsamonero Monastery in Vorizia, Crete, dated ca. 1430, where she is flanked by two angels – a detail not found elsewhere. The Mother of God with the Infant Christ in her arms, circumscribed in a pointed oval mandorla and looking at the Holy Apostles sitting in a cave, is depicted in the fresco for *Oikos 21* in the Virgin Peribleptos church in Ohrid, from ca. 1365, but unfortunately it is almost invisible nowadays. The same composition is used in the fresco from the Virgin Mary church in Roustika, Crete, dated 1390-1391, but here the Virgin with Christ Emmanuel in her arms is depicted in a unique narrow oval-pointed red mandorla, from which emanate eight triple bundles of red triangular rays, emphasizing the theme of the uncreated fire.³⁵ The reason for the presence of the mandorla in the scenes for *Oikos 21* can be found in the instructions from the *Hermeneia* of Dionysius of Fourna, which state that “The Most Holy Theotokos stands in a cloud and holds (on her breast) the Lord as an Infant. Great light shines around her and rays stream to the ground. There, in a dark cave, people kneel and stare at the Most Holy Theotokos.”³⁶ The symbol of mandorla serves as a visualization of the cloud, fully in the spirit of the Taboric understanding of the cloud of the glory

³³ „Φωτοδόχον λαμπάδα, τοῖς ἐν σκότει φανεῖσαν, ὁρῶμεν τὴν ἁγίαν Παρθένον· τὸ γὰρ ἄβλον ἄπτουσα φῶς, ὁδηγεῖ πρὸς γνῶσιν θεϊκὴν ἅπαντας, ἀγῆ τὸν νοῦν φωτίζουσα“. Translation from Трупанис, С. А., *Fourteen Early Byzantine Cantica. The Akathistos Hymn*, Wien, Graz, Köln: Böhlau in Kommission, 1968, 38, made in Чиликов, Стоян, „Христологическата теотокология на богородичния акаτισт“. *CRKVENE STUDIJE*, 12 (2015): 180.

³⁴ Spatharakis, Ioannis, *The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin.*, 150-151, fig. 169, 185, 190, 212, 251.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151, fig. 71, 108, 131, 320, 57, 670, 21

³⁶ Епископ Порфирий (Успенский) (ред.), *Ерминия или наставление в живописном искусстве, составленное иеромонахом и живописцем Дионисием Фурноаграфом*, По изданию Киевопечерской Лавры, 1868 г., http://nesusvet.narod.ru/ico/books/erminiya.htm#h3_6_21 (Accessed on 9.04.2022).

of God, which became the basis for the adoption of the mandorla in the Transfiguration iconography.



Fig. 3. *Oikos 15: The Double nature of Christ, fresco, ca. 1315, St. Nicolas Orphanos, Thessaloniki.*
(After: Spatharakis, Ioannis, *The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin.*, fig. 86)

A similar star-shaped mandorla as the model in the fresco from *Tomb E* in the Chora church is used in the image of Christ Emmanuel of *Oikos 15* from the Akathist cycle in the St. Nicholas Orphanos church in Thessaloniki, dated ca. 1315 (Fig. 3).³⁷ Unfortunately, the illustrations after the *Oikos 16* are not preserved, which does not allow us to compare *Oikos 21* in the iconographic programs of both churches, which apparently have many common features. Additional arguments for the reason of the presence of the star-shaped mandorla around the figure of the Virgin in the fresco from *Tomb E* can be found following A. Semoglu's reflections on two aspects of the Mother of God in Byzantine art – as the Mother of Light and as a place for rest. The author traces how these two aspects are expressed through iconographic elements and color,³⁸ which transform the images into their visual commentaries. The understanding of the Holy Mother of God as a bearer of Light is deeply rooted in the Orthodox tradition. The sermons written by the Church fathers in her honor often describe her as the Source and Mother of Light (πηγή τοῦ φωτός),³⁹ and the hymnographic sources very often describe the Virgin Mary as light or sunny sky, or “heaven that gave birth to the Sun of Righteousness” (οὐρανὸν ἀνέτειλας τὸν ἥλιον τῆς δικαιοσύνης). The roots of this typology

of the Mother of God can be seen as an inspiration from the words of /Malachi 4: 2/: “...the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays”.⁴⁰

The third argument for the hymnographic meaning of the fresco from *Tomb E* comes from the texts written on the scrolls in the hands of the two saints. This is not the only hymnographic image of the Virgin Mary in the Chora church. In the dome of the western bay in the parecclesion the Virgin is depicted with the Infant Christ and attendant angels, and the images of four hymnographers in the pendentives below. St. John of Damascus (northeastern pendentive), St. Cosmas of Maiuma (southeastern pendentive), St. Joseph the Hymnographer (southwestern pendentive), and St. Theophanes (southeastern pendentive) are portrayed in the act of composition, strongly resembling the seated portraits of the Four Evangelists, which are frequently found in the pendentives around domes. The saints are arranged according to their relationship and this is especially evident in the way St. John of Damascus and St. Cosmas of Maiuma are looking at each other as teacher and pupil. The Athonite *Hermeneia* of Dionysius of Fournia recommends that one of the domes in the narthex of the church should be decorated with a medallion of the Virgin and Child, carried by angels and surrounded by prophets, and the pendentives of the dome should consist images of hymnographers with appropriate words on their books or scrolls.⁴¹ But as early as the twelfth century, portraits of hymnographers appeared next to the images of the Blessed Virgin or to scenes from her life, such as the Dormition of the Mother of God in Bachkovo and Boyana.

The texts held by three of the hymnographers in the pendentives have a double meaning – those of St. John of Damascus and St. Theophanes are of a funeral nature, related to the function of the parecclesion as a funeral chapel, St. Joseph the Hymnographer holds a scroll with a phrase from the fourth ode of his “Canon for the Akathist Hymn”: “Propitiation of the world, hail, spotless Virgin...” and thus relates to the cycle of the Old Testament scenes allegorically prefiguring of the Virgin, which fills the iconographic program surrounding the dome. The text of St. Theophanes, which also has a funeral character, makes explicit reference to the scene “The Jacob’s Ladder” situated immediately to the right of his portrait, thus typifying the function of the Blessed Virgin as “the Ladder to Heaven”.⁴² The significance of this group of images is directly related to the general idea of the iconographic program of the parecclesion to depict God’s promise for the salvation of mankind. The idea of redemption, developed in the eastern bay, is also

³⁷ Ζευγλόπουλος, Ανδρέας, *Οι τοιχογραφίες του Αγίου Νικολάου Ορφανού Θεσσαλονίκης*, Αθήνα: Ταμείο Αρχαιολογικών Πόρων, 1964, 17-18, εικ. 104; Spatharakis, Ioannis, *The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin.*, 47-49.

³⁸ Semoglou, Athanasios, “La Vierge Mère de la Lumière, la Vierge lieu de Rafrâichissement: deux aspects de la Mère de Dieu dans l’art Byzantin”. *ICONOGRAPHICA*, XIII (2014): 67-81.

³⁹ Παρστανίου, Ηλένη, *Recherche iconographique dans l’art byzantin et occidental du XIe au XVIe siècle. L’Annonciation*, Venise Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini di Venezia, 2007, 78, n. 7.

⁴⁰ Semoglou, Athanasios, “La Vierge Mère de la Lumière, la Vierge lieu de Rafrâichissement..”, 68, notes 8-11.

⁴¹ Епископ Порфирій (Успенскій) (ред.), *Ерминія или наставление в живописном искусстве, составленное иеромонахом и живописцем Дионисием Фурнографом*, По изданию Киевопечерской Лавры, 1868 г., http://nesusvet.narod.ru/ico/books/ermyniya.htm#h4_2 (Accessed on 9.04.2022).

⁴² Underwood, Paul, *The Kariye Djami.*, vol. I, 213-216, 217-219.

implicit in the decoration of the western bay, which is entirely devoted to the Holy Mother of God. Because the salvation comes to mankind through the Incarnation, whose “instrument” is the Virgin, her pre-eminent role in the Redemption – the “new Eve” erasing the sin of the “old Eve” – is a recurring theme in this iconographic program. It is no coincidence that this particular text is written on the scroll of St. Joseph the Hymnographer, pointing to the Virgin Mary as a means of reconciliation of mankind with God.⁴³

The character of the texts on the scrolls of St. John of Damascus and St. Cosmas of Maiuma in the fresco from *Tomb E* in the outer narthex is also funeral. On the one hand, this fact refers to the tomb function of the place, but on the other hand, it is more deeply connected with the Byzantine traditions of commemorative rituals for the deceased, in which the hymns and specifically the Akathist of the Mother of God occupy a central place. Unfortunately, the *typikon* of the Chora monastery has not come down to us, and the preserved *typika* of other monasteries show great diversity, which does not allow certain conclusions to be drawn. In any case, the practice of holding a memorial service at the grave of the deceased on certain days and anniversaries of his death has been an integral part of the ritual tradition. Certainly, this happened in front of the tombs in the Chora on particular days devoted to the commemoration of the dead, as well as probably during the Marian feasts, present in the iconographic program of the church. In addition, it is known that the monastery’s practice included a special memorial service for the deceased held on the eleventh hour (the last monastic hour of the day) on Friday nights. During the Holy Liturgy for the eleventh hour the Akathist was sung in honor of the Virgin.

The most important Byzantine hymn to the Virgin has been used on various occasions, as well as for private devotional purposes throughout the year. Preserved testimonies from St. Simeon of Thessalonica show that since the early fifteenth century, the Akathist has been sung in monasteries by monks every Friday night. More importantly, from the twelfth century onwards, especially in Constantinople, this monastic vigil was united with Friday evening commemorations in front of the tombs, and the Akathist continued to be canted to commemorate the dead. With this fact E. Akyürek explains the specific inscription on the scroll of St. Joseph the Hymnographer in the southwestern pendentive of the dome in the parecclesion cited above. The author considers it reasonable to suppose that the Akathist was sung in the parecclesion, probably during commemorative services for those deceased buried in the church, as well as for others. On this basis, he concludes that given the close connection of Byzantine monumental painting with the ceremonies performed inside the buildings, especially in the middle and late Byzantine period, the *prothesis* ritual before the burial and commemorative rituals for the

dead were performed in the parecclesion of the Chora under the dome on the western bay, where the authors of these services are depicted on the pendentives with certain “quotes” from their hymns, presumably sung during the rituals in question.⁴⁴

5. Conclusion

Based on this conclusion, we can assume that in the case of the fresco in *Tomb E* there is a hymnographic image of the Virgin Mary derived from the hymn “Axion Estin”, which was performed to commemorate Irene Raoulaina Palaeologina buried here. Moreover, from an iconographic point of view we can hypothesize that this subject should be designated as “Theotokos Axion Estin” because of the peculiarities of the pictorial scheme: the Virgin in the orans pose without mandorla around the image of the Infant Christ, but with a large mandorla common to both figures; four seraphim around the mandorla; the authors of the hymn “Axion Estin” flank the central image. Regarding the mandorla itself and its atypical star-shape, a parallel can be drawn with the hymnographic images of the Akathist *oikoi*, and in particular with the images of the Virgin of *Oikos 21* mentioned above.

The answer to the question of the choice of the subject, which arises as soon as we assume that it is exactly “Theotokos Axion Estin” that adorns the tomb of Irene Raoulaina Palaeologina, is related to its applicability to the theme of salvation of the soul, the anticipation of the future resurrection and the life of the righteous in the kingdom of heaven. The first clue in this direction are the texts on the scrolls of St. John of Damascus and St. Cosmas of Maiuma, which are phrases from the burial service of monks. Based on the details of the preserved secular portraits on the wall under the cornice of the tomb, Underwood proves that Irene Raoulaina Palaeologina is buried here. She was the daughter of Theodora Palaeologina and Protovestiarius John Raoul and the wife of the third son of Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus, Constantine Palaeologus Porphyrogenites, who died probably in the period 1325-1330, as suggested by the construction and decoration of the tomb. The presence of the verses from the monastic burial service is explained by the two partially preserved additional portraits of a monk and a nun, whose inscriptions indicate that here lies “the servant of God Athanasia, the nun”, and probably the remains of the monk Athanasius – the name Irina’s husband Constantine received when he became a monk.⁴⁵ In this context, the verses on the hymnographers’ scrolls confirm the monastic end of the buried person’s life and indicate the necessary way to commemorate her after death.

The second clue is found in the very choice of the Mother of God as the protector of the buried person. As

⁴³ Der Nersessian, Sirarpie, “Program and Iconography of the Frescoes of the Parecclesion” in Underwood, Paul, *The Kariye Djami: Studies in the Art of the Kariye Djami and Its Intellectual Background*. Vol. 4, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, 309-310.

⁴⁴ Akyürek, Engin, “Funeral Ritual in the Parecclesion of the Chora Church” in Necipoğlu, Nevra (ed.), *Byzantine Constantinople: Monuments, Topography and Everyday Life*, Leiden: Brill, 2001, 100-103.

⁴⁵ Underwood, Paul, *The Kariye Djami*, vol. I, 283-288.

already mentioned, researchers of the iconographic program of the parecclesion believe that it is dedicated to the Virgin Mary as a “Ladder to Heaven”, as a means of fulfilling God’s promise of salvation and eternal life and as the most powerful protector and an intercessor before God for the forgiveness of the sins of those who pray to her. The choice of the dedication of the fresco of *Tomb E* was made in the same context and is based on the understanding that the person of the Holy Mother of God is the beginning of the salvation of the mankind.⁴⁶ In the last centuries of Byzantium, the veneration of the Virgin reached unprecedented heights, so Bishop Theophanes of Nicaea (d. 1381) wrote that: “whatever is said of Him, may also be said of Her, for She received from Him the characteristics of His Godhead”. Constantinople was considered the city of the Virgin, the place where she dwells and which she will always protect. The Akathist of the Mother of God was used as the hymn of the city, which was sung in gratitude after each victory provided by the heavenly protector. The Virgin was revered as the supreme intercessor between God and mankind because she was “holier than the saints, higher than the heavens, more glorious than the cherubim, more venerable than all the creatures”. Her intercession is especially important for the deceased, who are no longer able to do anything to improve their position before God. That is, the cult of the Virgin was adopted in response to the personal and collective needs of the people of Constantinople and became an extremely important element in

their earthly life and afterlife. The power of the Virgin’s prayer and the need to emphasize her as a faithful way for salvation of the sinners is noted even in the iconographic instructions in the *Hermeneia*.⁴⁷

The confidence that the deceased have in the Virgin and her significant role in the funeral cult during the last centuries of the Empire is reflected in the iconographic program of the parecclesion of the Chora, not only through the Old Testament prefiguration images of the Virgin, but also at a liturgical level through the use of hymnographic images. They are skillfully woven into the visual account of the patronage of the Mother of God over all those who have already taken the path to the final *theosis*, coming out of the material world and continuing their lives in the spiritual reality.⁴⁸ Several years later, the author of the decoration of *Tomb E* has observed the spirit of the iconographic program of the parecclesion, crowning the composition with a hymnographic image of the “Theotokos Axion Estin”. The hypothetical reason for this choice can be found in the liturgical use of the hymn “Axion Estin”, which is primarily used in the Eucharistic Canon of the Holy Liturgy, and also ends the singing of the canon of morning and evening services. Very often the singing of the hymn is combined with bows to the ground or prostration, and in this context its visualization in the fresco in question can be read as a permanent kneeling prayer, begging the intercession of the Blessed Virgin before God for the souls of the sinners buried under her image.

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⁴⁶ Bishop Jovan (Purić), “The Mystery of Theotokos in Byzantine Hymnography: Theotokology in Hymnography of St. John of Damascus”. *ТЕОЛОГИКОН*, 6 (1), 2017: 11, 14-15, 22-24.

⁴⁷ Akyürek, Engin, “The Marian iconography of the west bay in the parecclesion of Kariye”. *Sanat Tarihi Yıllığı*, XV, (2002): 3-4.

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