

Orthodox Cosmology and Cosmography: The iconographic mandorla as *Imago Mundi*¹

Cosmología y Cosmografía ortodoxas: La mandorla iconográfica como *Imago Mundi*

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Abstract: Orthodox iconography is focused on the idea of representing the cosmos, the essence of God's *creatio ex nihilo*, thus serving as a visual cosmology and thence - as a cosmography of all being. Icons depict the image of the archetypal world in its integrity, unachievable for the limited human abilities, and are ontologically inseparable from this archetype. Therefore, iconography has been always related with the idea of representing the world through symbolic images. In this context, it becomes a visual cosmology, and hence - a kind of cosmography of all being. Although not identical to cartography, Orthodox iconography creates symbolic images that can be interpreted as an image of the whole world – *oikoumene*. One particular example in this respect relates with the semantics and usage of *mandorla* symbol. In the Orthodox iconography, the mandorla has its function as a *vision of Divine*. It can be called even *Imago Dei*, expressing the invisible to the eyes and incomprehensible to the mind essence of God. However, in a number of iconographic scenes the image of God is related theologically and artistically with the cosmological perceptions of Christianity about the theocentricity of cosmos. Thus, mandorla as *Imago Dei* often plays the role of a symbolic *Imago Mundi*.

Key Words: Byzantine Art, Iconography, Cosmology, Cartography, Mandorla

Resumen: La iconografía ortodoxa se centra en la idea de representar el cosmos, la esencia de la *creatio ex nihilo* por parte de Dios, sirviendo así como una cosmología visual y, por ende, como la cosmografía de todo ser. Los iconos representan la imagen del mundo arquetípico en su integridad, inalcanzable para las limitadas capacidades humanas, y son ontológicamente inseparables de este arquetipo. Por eso, la iconografía ha sido siempre relacionada con la idea de representar el mundo mediante imágenes simbólicas. En ese contexto, se convierte en una cosmología visual, y, por ende, en una especie de cosmografía de todo ser. Aunque no es idéntica a la cartografía, la iconografía ortodoxa crea imágenes simbólicas que pueden ser interpretadas como una imagen de todo el mundo –*oikoumene*. Un ejemplo concreto en este sentido se relaciona con la semántica y el uso del símbolo de la *mandorla*. En la iconografía ortodoxa, la mandorla tiene como función una *visión de lo Divino*. Se la puede llamar incluso *Imago Dei*, por cuanto expresa la esencia de Dios, invisible a los ojos e incomprensible a la mente. Sin embargo, en una serie de

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escenas iconográficas la imagen de Dios se relaciona teológicamente y artísticamente con las percepciones cosmológicas del cristianismo acerca de la concepción teocéntrica del cosmos. Así, la mandorla como *Imago Dei* desempeña a menudo el papel de una simbólica *Imago Mundi*.

Palabras Clave: Arte bizantino, iconografía, cosmología, cartografía, mandorla

Contents: 1. Iconography and Cosmography. 2. Byzantine Cosmology. 3. The mandorla in Christian iconography. 4. Iconographic mandorla as *Imago Mundi*. 5. Hesychastic mandorla and medieval *mappaemundi*. 6. Conclusions.

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1. Iconography and Cosmography

Iconography as a symbolic expression of the truths of faith is an inseparable part of the Orthodox Christian tradition. Serving as “theology in images”³ equal to the theology in words, according to St. Basil the Great⁴, it reveals the religious doctrine of Orthodoxy in its fullness. Dogmatic and liturgical character of iconography does not consist only of visual representation of sacred images and events. Orthodox icons are themselves a depicted eschatology –a glimpse to the future perfect world that is to come, according to the eschatological words of St. Apostle Paul (I Cor. 13:12)— and as such, they express Orthodox understanding of the world in its entirety.⁵

Orthodox iconography is focused on the idea of representing the cosmos, the essence of God’s *creatio ex nihilo*, thus serving as a visual cosmology and thence as a cosmography of all being. Icons depict image of the archetypal world in its integrity, unachievable for the limited humans’ abilities, and are ontologically inseparable from this archetype.⁶ Therefore, although not identical at all with cartography, iconography has been always related with the idea of representing the world through symbolic images, cartographic symbols, and topographic elements.⁷

2. Byzantine Cosmology

Very often Byzantine cosmology has been considered as primitive because of two main reasons –its theocentricism and its identification with the treatise of Cosma Indicopleustes *Christian topography*, written in 6th century.⁸ However, Cosma’s perception of the world had not been a part of the official doctrine of the

³ Leonid OUSPENSKY, *Theology of the Icon*, Crestwood, 1992, p. 6.

⁴ ST. BASIL THE GREAT, *A Homily of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, in *Patrologia Graeca* (J.P. MIGNE, ed.), Paris, 1857-1866, 31, 509A.

⁵ Rostislava TODOROVA, *Ikonnata perspektiva*, V. Turnovo, 2009, pp. 9-10.

⁶ Victor BYCHKOV, *The Aesthetic Face of Being: Art in the Theology of Pavel Florensky*, Crestwood, 1993, pp. 81-83.

⁷ Veronica DELLA DORA, “Windows on Heavev (and Earth): The Poetics and Politics of Post-Byzantine ‘Cartographic Icons’”, *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 2012, 38 (1), p. 84.

⁸ Charles JONES, “The Flat Earth”, *Thought*, 1934, 9, pp. 296-307.

Orthodox Church, and what is more, it even had not been considered as scientific.⁹ The earliest sufficient evidence about this fact is that in 8th century, when St. John Damascene writes his treatise *Fountain of Knowledge*, considered as the first known *summa theologiae*, he completely ignores Cosma's ideas in his cosmological arguments. A century later St. Photius I, Patriarch of Constantinople, in his *Library* describes Cosma's perceptions as "fables", defines him as "unreliable" source and estimates his style as "poor and the arrangement hardly up to the ordinary standard".¹⁰

Despite, at prima facie, the long-lasting popularity of Cosma's concept¹¹, ancient knowledge and ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy and Plotinus on the structure of cosmos, sphericity of Earth, and arrangement of continents on it has been the central axe in the writings of the most famous Church writers of that time: Michael Psellus, Symeon Seth and Eustratius from Nicaea. This scientific tradition has not been interrupted during the next centuries, and Ptolemaic cosmology has been standing in the center of a number of works of such scholars and writers, as Patriarch John X Kamaterus, Gregory Choniades, Theodore Metochites, Theodore of Millet, and George Pachymeres.

Advanced and scientific based, Byzantine cosmology inherits the rich cartographic tradition of Rome, as evidenced by the map of emperor Theodosius (beginning of 5th century) and *Ravenna Cosmography* (beginning of 8th century). However, religious core of Byzantine cosmology and cartography leads to the creation of special symbolic cartographic images that express theocentricity of the world. The earliest extant examples in this regard are the maps of Cosma Indicopleustes and two contemporary mosaic floor images –from the Basilica of St. Demetrius at Nikopolis, Epirus (550-575), and from the Church of St. George at Madaba, Jordan (6th century).

In the Cosma's *Christian topography*, the cosmos is presented as a rectangular vaulted box, divided in upper and lower parts by the firmament. The lower part illustrates the visible world of men and angels, while the upper part represents the invisible world where God dwells. Cosma's idea of the cosmos includes also the concept of the flat, rectangle earth.¹² Nevertheless, his perceptions are a mixture of classical and Hellenistic knowledge, and biblical teaching, showing that the Greco-Roman idea of spherical world was never forgotten.¹³

The idea for arrangement of symbolic cartographical images on the church floor relates with the Christian notion that Church is a model of the Universe and its floor is the base of the cosmos; therefore the images on it represent the whole world

⁹ Edmond POGNON, "Cosmology and Cartography", *Arctic*, 1984, 37 (4), pp. 334-340.

¹⁰ PHOTIUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *The Library of Photius*, (J. H.FREESE, trans.), London: 1920, 36: 31-32.

¹¹ David WOODWARD, "Reality, Symbolism, Time and Space in Medieval World Maps", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 1985, 75 (4), p. 517.

¹² Oswald A. W. DILKE, "Cartography in the Byzantine Empire", in *The History of Cartography*, Vol. 1, Chicago, 1987, pp. 258-265.

¹³ David WOODWARD, "Medieval Mappaemundi", in *The History of Cartography*, Vol. 1, Chicago, 1987, pp. 286-370.

surrounded by the ocean: *oikoumene*.¹⁴ The general function of these mosaic maps was the same as the medieval *mappaemundi* – to instruct the faithful by presenting the allegories of biblical lore.¹⁵ The Nikopolis mosaic map could represent the earth as it is, but it could also represent the earth before the creation of man, when it was a paradise.¹⁶ The Madaba map –probably the best-known Byzantine cartographic image– was clearly intended to instruct the faithful. Its place faces the laity part of the church, and its parts are full with Old and New Testaments remarks.¹⁷

3. The mandorla in Christian Iconography

The Byzantine tradition that forms the core of Orthodoxy is extremely visual in its character, and its primary mean of expression has always been the language of symbols. Symbolic images have their place not only in Byzantine cartography, but also play a significant role in the development of Byzantine iconography.¹⁸

One of the most intriguing iconographical symbols is the mandorla, which has found its place in the Christian image tradition as a visual sign of the indescribable phenomenon of the “glory of God”. The mandorla is an oval, oval-pointed or round device, which in particular iconographical scenes circumscribes the figure of Christ, the Holy Trinity, the Virgin, or, in rare cases, different saints.

Depiction of the “glory of God” concerns those rare cases in the Old and New Testaments, when God decided to reveal Himself in front of the humans’ eyes.¹⁹ The origins and semantics of the mandorla as a visual device are still a matter of scholarly discussions. Its meaning is complicated and corresponds with the multifaceted manifestations of God’s nature, but, most often, it has been defined as a metaphysical area, a “meeting point” of the material and the spiritual space, where sacred events take place. (Fig. 1) The mandorla is a visual symbol of the uncreated light in its capacity of a manifestation of the divine energies, through which God reveals Himself to people, remaining unknowable in His essence,²⁰ and at the same time it denotes a *locus sanctus* of His presence.²¹

¹⁴ Fabio BARRY, “Walking on Water: Cosmic Floors in Antiquity and the Middle Ages”, *The Art Bulletin*, 2007, 89 (4), pp. 627-656.

¹⁵ Oswald A. W. DILKE, *Op. cit.*, p. 263.

¹⁶ Ernst KITZINGER, “Studies on Late Antiquity and Early Byzantine Floor Mosaics. I. Mosaics at Nikopolis”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 1951, 6, p. 100.

¹⁷ Ryan T. O'CALLAGHAN, “Madaba (Carte de)”, in *Dictionnaire de la Bible: Supplement*, (L. PIROT and A. ROBERT, ed.), Paris, 1928-, vol. 5 (1957), p. 627-704

¹⁸ Boris USPENSKY, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, Lisse, 1976, pp. 14-18.

¹⁹ “Glory of God”, in *The International Standart Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, Exeter, 1979, pp. 477-483; 750-751.

²⁰ Ambrosios GIAKALIS, *Images of the Divine: The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Revised edition*, Leiden, 2005, p. 51.

²¹ Rostislava TODOROVA, “New Religion – New Symbolism: Adoption of Mandorla in the Christian iconography”, in *Collection of Scientific Works NIS AND BYZANTIUM, IX- Towards the celebration of the Edict of Milan anniversary*, Nis, 2011, pp. 47-64.



Fig. 1. *Transfiguration of Christ*, 550-565, apse mosaic,
St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai (photo *Pinterest*)

4. Iconographic Mandorla as *Imago Mundi*

In Orthodox iconography, the mandorla has its function as a *vision of Divine*. It can be called even *Imago Dei*, expressing the invisible to the eyes and incomprehensible for the mind essence of God.²² However, in a number of iconographic scenes the image of God is related theologically and artistically with the cosmological perceptions of Christianity about the theocentricity of the cosmos. Thus, mandorla as *Imago Dei* often plays the role of a symbolic *Imago Mundi*.

The mandorla is frequently perceived as a symbol of cosmos, according to the interpretations of St. Maximus the Confessor on the cosmological dimensions of the Transfiguration of Christ.²³ Its inner concentric circles are considered as an image of all spheres of the created Universe.²⁴ Such kind of interpretation is linked to the Neoplatonic philosophy²⁵ as well as to the notion of the celestial hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.²⁶ Although the mandorla is not always

²² Rostislava TODOROVA, "Visualizing the Divine: Mandorla as a Vision of God in Byzantine Iconography", *IKON*, 2013, 6, pp. 287-298.

²³ MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Ambigua* 10, 17. PG 91, 1125D-1128D.

²⁴ Paul EVDOKIMOV, *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, Redondo Beach, 1990, p. 305.

²⁵ PLOTINUS, *Ennead*, IV, 3, 17 and *Ennead*, VI, 4, 7.

²⁶ PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, *Celestial Hierarchy* 1, 2 (121ab) and *Divine Names* 1, 4 (592c).

considered as an image of the whole Universe²⁷, it always has spatial characteristics and in some cases bears visible signs demonstrating its cosmic character.



Fig. 2. *Traditio clavium*, mid. 4th century, apse mosaic,
Santa Costanza, Rome (photo Gettyimages)

The earliest extant depiction of mandorla that symbolizes the entire Universe is the apse mosaic of the basilica Santa Costanza at Rome from the middle of 4th century (Fig. 2). Here Christ is sitting on a globe mandorla in accordance with the biblical verse “Heaven is My throne, and earth My footstool” (Is. 66:1; Acts 7:49, as well as Ps. 11:4, and Mat. 5:34-35). This type of depictions in Early Christian art are borrowed from the classical models²⁸ and are popular between 4th and 8th centuries in Italy, where a few more examples are preserved: the fresco in the catacomb of Domitilla (ca. 366-384) depicts Christ sitting on a globe between St. Peter and St. Paul;²⁹ the apse mosaic in the church of Santa Agata dei Goti (460-468) shows Christ sitting on a globe amidst the standing apostles;³⁰ the mosaic in the basilica of San Vitale at Ravenna (547) depicts Christ Savior sitting on a blue globe mandorla; the mosaic in the basilica San Lorenzo fuori le Mura at Rome (570-590) depicts Christ King of the Universe sitting on a blue globe mandorla with three colour layers (Fig. 3); the mosaic in the basilica San Teodoro at Rome (583-590) depicts Christ King of the Universe in the same way, but here mandorla is filled with golden stars. In a modified variant in the baptistery of San Giovanni at

²⁷ Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, “The Mosaic of the Transfiguration in St. Catherine’s Monastery on Mount Sinai: A Discussion of its Origins”, *Byzantion*, 2002, LXXII (1), p. 29.

²⁸ Walter COOK, “The Earliest Painted Pannels of Catalonia (II)”, *The Art Bulletin*, 1923, 6 (2), p. 38.

²⁹ Thomas F. MATHEWS, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Princeton, pp. 117-118, 122

³⁰ Jean-Michel SPIESER, “The Representation of Christ in the Apses of Early Christian Churches”, *GESTA*, 1998, 37 (1), pp. 63-63, 71.

Naples (second half of 4th century), we can see a depiction of *Traditio legis* where Christ stands on a blue globe mandorla.³¹



Fig. 3. *Christ the King of the Universe*, 570-590, mosaic, San Lorenzo fuori le Mura, Rome (photo Flickr)

There are also a number of extant patterns of independent representations of cosmic mandorla. Good examples can be seen in the depiction of the Holy Cross in the dome of the baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte at Naples (the late 4th century)³²; the allegorical representation of the Transfiguration of Christ in the basilica of San Apollinare in Classe at Ravenna (6th century)³³; and the apse mosaic in the basilica of Santa Agnese fuori le Mura at Rome (7th century)³⁴. Depiction of stars inside the mandorla has become one of the common ways for denoting its cosmic character and can be seen very often during centuries, as in the Sinaitic icon

³¹ Walter COOK, *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

³² Robin JENSEN, *Living Water: Images, Symbols and Settings of Early Christian Baptism (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae: Early Christian Life and Language)*, Leiden, 2010, pp. 191-194.

³³ Davide LONGHI, "The Cosmic Cross as Logos' Theophany: First Version of Sant' Apollinare in Classe's Apse Mosaic and Jerusalem's Staurophany of AD 351", *IKON*, 2013, 6, pp. 275-286.

³⁴ Lyn RODLEY, *Byzantine Art and Architecture: An Introduction*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 122-123, fig. 92.

of the Ancient of Days (7th century)³⁵ and the fresco of the Resurrection of Christ in the pareclession of Chora Monastery (1315-1321)³⁶.



Fig. 4. *God Cosmocrator*, 1180s, Byzantine mosaic, Monreale Cathedral, Sicily (photo Web Gallery of Art)

The mandorla as an image of the Universe takes part also in the iconographical scene of the Creation of the World. The iconography of God Κοσμοκράτωρ has developed three main types. The first of them represents the biblical story of Gen. 1-2 as a cycle of single depictions of the seven days of Creation. Here the mandorla is depicted not only as a throne of God, but also represents the separation of the waters and the creation of the heavenly bodies (Fig. 4). The second iconographical type shows God in mandorla holding the globe of the world, and the third consists in portraying only the most important moment of the whole Creation process – the creation of Adam and Eve (Fig. 5).³⁷

³⁵ Kurt WEITZMANN, *The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai: The Icons, I*, Princeton, 1976, pp. 41-42 and pl. XVIII.

³⁶ Robert OUSTERHOUT, *The Art of the Kariye Camii*, London, 2002, p.78, pl. 90.

³⁷ Irene GONZÁLEZ HERNANDO, “Creation of the World and Creation of Adam and Eve”, In: <http://www.ucm.es/centros/cont/descargas/documento21342.pdf>

Often the cosmic nature of the mandorla as *Imago Mundi* is stressed by adding of other iconographic symbols such as rainbow, and images of Sun and Moon. The rainbow is a frequent iconographical element of the Ascension of Christ and Christ in Majesty. It has been considered as a common feature of the Palestinian and Byzantine iconographical type of Christ's Ascension³⁸, as well as of the East iconographical type of mandorla in Christ in Majesty scenes.³⁹



Fig. 5. *The Creation of the World*, first quarter of 18th century,
Tempera on wood, Russia (photo Wikipedia)

The representation of a rainbow portrays the throne of God as described in Rev. 4:3, and Ez. 1:28 in two ways: symbolically and naturalistically.⁴⁰ One of the earliest known depictions of the mandorla with rainbow is the apse mosaic of Christ in Majesty in the church of Hosios David, Thessaloniki (end of 5th or beginning of 6th century)⁴¹. In many cases, the mandorla is combined with two rainbows as a visual reference of the already described notion about heaven as throne of God and earth as His footstool. Some particular iconographical scenes, such as the Covenant

³⁸ Ernest DEWALD, "The iconography of the Ascension", *American Journal of Archeology*, 1915, 19 (3), pp. 282-284, 291-294.

³⁹ Walter COOK, *Op. cit.*, p. 40-47

⁴⁰ Liz JAMES, "Colour and the Byzantine Rainbow", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 1991, 15, pp. 71-72.

⁴¹ Charles A. STEWART, *Domes of Heaven: The Domed Basilicas of Cyprus*, PhD Dissertation Thesis, Indiana University, 2008, p. 175.

with Noah (Fig. 6), combine naturalistic representation of the rainbow with images of stars, Sun and Moon, thus creating a symbolic picture of the Universe.⁴²



Fig. 6. *The Covenant with Noah*, ca. 1150, miniature, Ms.G.I.8, Topkapı Sarayı Library, Istanbul (photo John LOWDEN)

In addition, solar and lunar depictions are inseparable elements of the iconography of the Crucifixion (Fig. 7) and often take part in the other scenes related to the Holy Cross, as the Exaltation of the Cross or the iconography of St. Helen and St. Constantine the Great.⁴³ Sometimes the mandorla is missing in the Crucifixion scenes, but even then, portraying of the heavenly powers in combination of stars, Sun and Moon demonstrate the cosmic character of the sacred event of Christ's Crucifixion, which lies in the very base of Christianity, and thus in the foundation of the Orthodox theocentric model of the cosmos. During the first four centuries AD, the Crucifixion scene is rare and has predominantly symbolic character, but after the V c. AD, its iconographical interpretation has been rapidly developed. The presence of solar and lunar images is a typical feature of the Byzantine iconography of the scene, although sometimes they are replaced by a symbolic representation of angels.⁴⁴

⁴² Liz JAMES, *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁴³ Christopher WALTER, *The iconography of Constantine the Great: Emperor and Saint*, Leiden, 2006.

⁴⁴ Michael QUENOT, *The Resurrection and the Icon*, Crestwood, 1997, pp. 166-173.



Fig. 7. *The Crucifixion*, 13th century, fresco, Church of St. Nicholas in Molingkates, Kythera (photo Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens)

5. Hesychastic mandorla and medieval *mappaemundi*

In the end of 13th and the beginning of 14th century, the iconographical symbol of the mandorla has been gradually changed because of the Hesychastic theological mainstream of the time. Its oval or round form has begun to include two superimposed rectangular shapes⁴⁵ (Fig. 8). Among other theories about the origins of the new shape, one connects it with the tradition of cartography.⁴⁶ Being rather a summary of the contemporary cosmology, semantics of the medieval *mappaemundi* actually approaches more closely religious cosmography than practical travel maps.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Rostislava TODOROVA, “New Religion – New Symbolism”, pp. 58-59.

⁴⁶ Veronica DELLA DORA, *Op. cit.*

⁴⁷ David WOODWARD, *Reality, Symbolism, Time and Space in Medieval World Maps*, pp. 512-515.



Fig. 8. Andrei Rublev, *Transfiguration of Christ*, ca. 1405, Kremlin, Moscow (photo *Artlibrary.ru*)

The sacral cartographic character of the Hesychastic mandorla has been explained in two ways: through the religious symbolism of geometric figures and through its visual resemblance with medieval maps and compass rosettes⁴⁸ (Fig. 9). From the patristic exegetical point of view, the Hesychastic mandorla portrays the Holy Trinity: the circle symbolizes God the Father and the other two geometrical forms symbolize Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the eight beams of the inscribed geometric forms can be interpreted from the eschatological point of view as a symbol of Ogdoad, the new world after the Second Coming.⁵⁰ In some post-Byzantine icons, the Hesychastic mandorla has been additionally changed⁵¹ in order to enhance the symbolic representation of the Universe as *oikoumene* of cosmos, Sun and stars.

⁴⁸ Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, Crestwood, 2005, pp. 235-242.

⁴⁹ Simona MAKSELIENE, *The Glory of God and its Byzantine Iconography*, M.A. Thesis in Medieval Studies, CEU, Budapest, 1998, pp. 68-69.

⁵⁰ Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-148.

⁵¹ Michail ALPATOV, *Early Russian Icon Painting*, Moscow, 1974, p. 303.

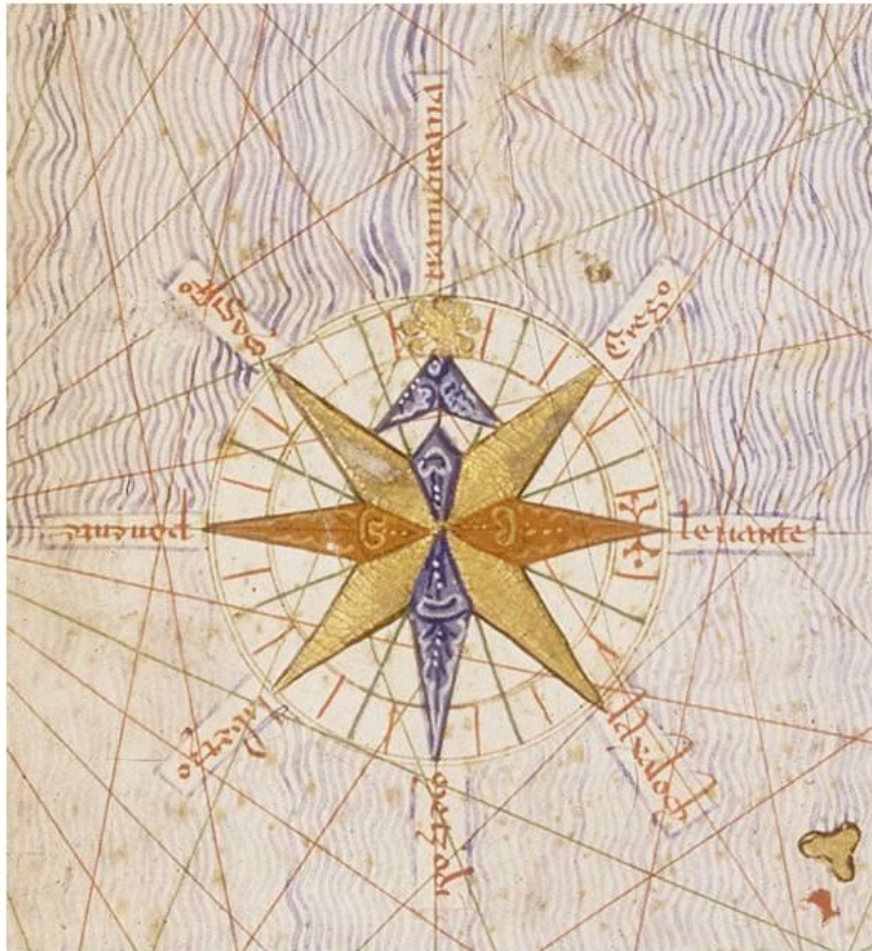


Fig. 9. *First Compass Rosette, Catalan Atlas, 1375*
(photo *Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris*)

The visual resemblance of the Hesychastic mandorla with the manner of depicting the geographical space in the medieval Western European⁵² and Islamic tradition⁵³ also cannot be missed. A particular similarity could be found with the compass rosette of the Catalan atlas of the world⁵⁴ created in the same epoch (1375 AD).⁵⁵ Thus, the Hesychastic mandorla can be interpreted as a sacred cartographic representation of the theocentric world, showing the four cardinal and the four intermediate geographical directions emanating from the figure of Christ as the *axis mundi*.⁵⁶

⁵² John B. HARLEY and David WOODWARD, *The History of Cartography*, vol. 1, Chicago, 1987, p. 381.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2a, p. 191.

⁵⁴ Leo BAGROW, *History of Cartography*, New Brunswick, 2009, p. 66.

⁵⁵ Heinrich WINTER, "Catalan Portolan Maps and Their Place in the Total View of Cartographic Development", *Imago Mundi*, 1954, 11, pp. 1-12.

⁵⁶ Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, *Metamorphosis: the Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and iconography*, p. 235.

6. Conclusions

Regardless of how close or how far the Orthodox icons are standing from our personal understanding of the maps of the world, their universal cosmographical character cannot be denied.



Fig. 10. Guntherus Ziner, T-O map, 1472, *Etymologiae of Isidorus*
(photo Texas Collections)

Besides their liturgical function, the Orthodox icons have always played the role of means that help men to overcome the objective limitations of human nature, and to see the world in its entirety, unachievable for the eyes. One of the most direct visual evidences for the relevance of such reading of the sacred images is the iconography of God as the Ancient of Days, based on the prophetic visions.⁵⁷ The iconographic conception of this type of representations always has cosmological character and their composition closely reminds the structure of the medieval T and O maps⁵⁸ (Fig. 10).

⁵⁷ Steven BIGHAM, *The Image of God the Father in Orthodox Theology and Iconography and Other Studies*, Torrance, 1995, pp. 57-60.

⁵⁸ Edmond POGNON, *Op. cit.*, pp. 339-340.



Fig. 11. *Ancient of Days*, second half of 17th century,
Tempera on wood, Crete (photo *Snite Museum of Art*, Indiana).

A Cretan icon from the second half of 17th century (Fig. 11), portrays a Divine Liturgy around the Holy Trinity. The throne of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, together with the heavenly powers in Their feet, imitate the T-form representation of the Mediterranean, Nile and Tanais. The mandorla-like shape of heavens circumscribing the Holy Trinity has strong resemblance with the O-representation of the River Ocean around Europe, Asia and Africa in the *Beatus* maps.



Fig. 12. *The Holy Trinity*, XIX c., the Great Monastery of Vatopedi, Mount Athos, fresco (photo P. VASILIADES)

Such type of images is not rare in the post-Byzantine period of development of the Orthodox iconography. Sometimes the symbolic depiction of the theocentric cosmos is so literal that iconographic scenes include direct cartographic representations, always connected with the visual symbol of the mandorla (Fig. 12). Thus, the semantically complicated sign of Christian mandorla reveals its multifold meaning as *Imago Dei* and *orbis terrarum* in the same time: a metaphysical symbol of the “glory of God” that penetrates the entire Creation.

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