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**NEW RELIGION – NEW SYMBOLISM:
ADOPTION OF MANDORLA IN THE CHRISTIAN
ICONOGRAPHY**

Symbolic diversity, which is built in the religious doctrine and orderly philosophical system of Christianity, is huge. The meaning of some of the Christian symbols such as the Holy Cross or the Sign of the Cross is perfectly clear and has not been changed during the long Church tradition. However, another kind of Christian symbols exists - symbols that for many reasons have been shelved and do not have such clearness – whose interpretation of meaning is still under dispute. Such difficulties are especially inherent in symbols, which originated in the pre-Christian pagan beliefs, philosophical systems, and cultures. One of these visual symbols is so-called *mandorla*. It has found its usage in the Christian Image tradition as a representation of the “*Glory of God*”; in other words, it points to those rare cases in the Old and the New Testaments when God decided to reveal His essence in front of humans¹. Usually *mandorla* is an oval, oval-pointed or round device, which in particular iconographical scenes circumscribed Christ’s figure, the Holy Trinity, the Virgin², or, in very rare instances - different saints. Its usage in the Early Christian art without any exaggeration can be called a precedent derived from the religious changes and corresponding rethinking of conceptions, during the first centuries AD. Growing of Christianity from the very heart of Judaism, as well as the gradual changes in its status after the moment of its legalization with the Edict of Milan, imposed a rapid formation of a new set of visual symbols suitable to depict the new religious content.

The *mandorla* has appeared very soon in the Early Christian art because of the urgent necessity of finding a visual sign for the abstract phenomenon of the “*Glory of God*”, described in the Scriptures with the Hebrew word “*kabowd*” (translated by “*gloria*” in the Vulgate and “*δόξα*” in the Septuagint)³. All of

¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Vol. II, Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1979, 477-483; 750-751

² A. Grabar, *Virgin in a Mandorla of Light*. In: *Late Classical and Medieval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.* (ed. K. Weitzmann), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955, 305-311

³ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 395

these terms represent the supreme and unachievable sacred event of the God's *theophany* - direct manifestation of the Divine Dynamics of God.⁴ Greek translation of "kabowd" with "δόξα" is a frequently discussed matter, because the Hebrew word literally means some physical characteristics such as heaviness, solidity, weightiness (rooted in "kabad"⁵) and its second, more abstract meaning is connected with the notion of glory, honor, richness and affluence.⁶ Exactly this shade of meaning of the word became dominant in the Vulgate's "gloria" and in the Septuagint's "δόξα", mainly in their significance as divine splendor and God's presence "in the cloud" /"Ex. 16:10"/. Reasons for such translation may be seen firstly in the fact, that Hellenic culture tradition had a different notion of divinity⁷, and secondly – in the very close connection of "kabowd" with Hebrew word "shekhinah"⁸. It is very important to underline this binary essence of the term "kabowd": "The Targumists will divide the two elements of *kabod* into two new words: *shekinah* (from *shakan*, "to dwell"⁹) will refer to the abiding presence of God's majesty, while *yekara* will be reserved for the sensory splendour of light".¹⁰

The differentiation of "shekhinah" and "yekara" as the two main elements of meaning of the term "kabowd" is crucial for the proper investigation of *mandorla* as a visual device. "Shekhinah" refers to the abiding presence of God's majesty¹¹, while "yekara" refers to the manifestation of God's glory through light, luminosity, shiningness, radiance, beams, fire. Despite all different interpretations of "shekhinah" in Hebrew texts, it had been viewed as a

⁴ W. C. Loerke, *Observations on the representation of Doxa in the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore, Rome, and St. Catherine's, Sinai*. Gesta, Vol. 20, No. 1, Essays in Honor of Harry Bober (1981), 15-16

⁵ Brown, Driver, Briggs and Gesenius, *The Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon*. Harvard: Houghton Mifflin, 1906. In: Brown, Driver, Briggs and Gesenius. „Hebrew Lexicon entry for Kabad“. <http://www.searchgodsword.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=3513>

⁶ *Ibid.*; „Hebrew Lexicon entry for Kabowd“. <http://www.searchgodsword.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=3519>

⁷ W.C. Loerke, *op. cit.*, 15

⁸ Usage of "kabowd" is associated with expression of the sacred "glory" of the permanent divine presence of God ("shekhinah" – place of presence, residence; "shakan" – to be settled, to take shelter, to dwell, tabernacle) as it is written in /"Ex. 29:43-45"/; /"Ex. 14:19"/; /"Numb. 14:14"/; /"Deut. 1:33"/; /"I King. 4:22"/, etc. Altogether Greek word for "glory" – "δόξα" renders a total of 25 different Hebrew words, of which "kabowd" is the chief, occurring 181 times, 8 times renders "hod" (meaning sublimeness, majesty, splendor, magnificence), 8 times – "hadar" (meaning sacred ornamentation), 14 times – "tip'eret" and "tip'ara" (embellishment, pomp, honor, renown), "yekar" (preciousness, glorious appearance, splendor), and others.; See more in: H.U. Balthazar, von. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Vol. 6: *Theology: The Old Covenant*. Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1991, 52.; See also: A.M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*. London: Longman, Green&Co., 1967, pp. 9-28.; O. Brendel, *Origin and meaning of the Mandorla*. Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 25 (1944), 5-24, see esp. pp. 20-22

⁹ Brown, Driver, Briggs and Gesenius, *op. cit.*, „Hebrew Lexicon entry for Shakan“. <http://www.searchgodsword.org/lex/heb/view.cgi?number=7931>

¹⁰ H. U. Balthazar, von., *op. cit.*, 53

¹¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion.*, 629-630

spatial-temporal event, when God “sanctifies a place, an object, an individual, or a whole people – a revelation of the holy in the midst of profane”¹². It can be presumed, that “*shekhinah*” blazed its way into Byzantine Iconography through the exegetical tradition of authors as Philo of Alexandria or St. Gregory of Nissa and Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite, while “*yekara*” was dominant for the Hesychastic tradition.¹³ As it has been mentioned above, this binary meaning of “*kabowd*” did not transit separately into the Greek “*δόξα*” and into the Latin “*gloria*”. Therefore, both notions of luminosity¹⁴ and spatial presence¹⁵ of God’s “*Glory*” mixed in verbs, has been divided in the Christian iconography by usage of two different types of *mandorla*.

Term “*mandorla*” derives from the Italian word for “*almond*” because of its almond-like shape.¹⁶ Several conceptions about the origins of the Christian *mandorla* are popular among scholars. One of the most prevalent is that the *mandorla* descends from the *nimbus* as a visual sign of holiness and divinity.¹⁷ From that point of view *mandorla* can be seen as a successor of the Zoroastrian idea of “*glory*” as a manifestation of gods. In the religious doctrine of Zoroastrianism words “*hvarna*” or “*farnah*” render material manifestation of the divine blessing and divine inspiration of the supreme god Ahura Mazda.¹⁸ Symbolized by the sunrays, lightning, and flames, the “*glory of god*” leads humans up to the spiritual insight “*chishta*”.¹⁹ Against this background, it should be underlined that in Christian art *nimbus* is usually conceived as light²⁰, whereas *mandorla* denotes the enveloping, protective cloud of God’s presence and divine power -

¹² *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. 3th ed. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd., 1974. Vol. 14, coll. 1349-1354 s.v. “*Shekhinah*”; *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005 (second ed.), 8312-8316

¹³ S. Makseliene, *The Glory of God and its Byzantine Iconography*. M.A. Thesis in Medieval Studies. Budapest: Central European University, 1998, 5-6

¹⁴ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 421, 707

¹⁵ *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987, 980-981

¹⁶ G. Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, 148; See also: A. Böck, *Mandorla*. In: *Das Reallexicon zur byzantinischen Kunst*. Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1997, 1-17. Τζ. Κούπερ, *Λεξικό Παραδοσιακών Σύμβουλων*. Αθήνα: ΠΥΡΙΝΟΣ ΚΟΣΜΟΣ, 1992, 41-42; 311

¹⁷ A. N. Didron, *Christian Iconography: The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1965. Vol. I, 22-24, 107-110; See also: B. S. Ridgway, *Birds, “Meniskoi”, and Head Attributes in Archaic Greece*. *American Journal of Archeology*, Vol. 94 (1990), 583-612; R. M. Cook, *A Supplementary Note on Meniskoi*. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 96 (1976), 153-154; O. Brendel, *Origin and meaning of the Mandorla*, 12-14

¹⁸ E. H. Ramsden, *The Halo: A Further Enquiry into its Origin*. *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 78, No. 457 (Apr., 1941), 123-131

¹⁹ G. Santillana, de H. Dechend, von., *Hamlet’s Mill: an Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time*. Boston: Godina, 1977, 40-41

²⁰ *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 1487; See also: M. Collinet-Guérin, G. Le Bras, *Histoire du nimbe des origines aux temps modernes*. Paris: Nouvelles Éditions latines, 1961, 273-436



Fig. 1: Roman sarcophagus with flying Victories, carrying a portrait medallion. II-III c. AD, Pushkin Museum, Moscow

“δόξα”²¹. Differences in meaning of both artistic devices had been clear enough until the moment, when Hesychasm raised. The Hesychastic mainstream has faded semantic distinctions between the *nimbus* as a symbol of the holiness and *mandorla* as a “meeting-point” of the material and the outer space²², and in late Palaiologan art *mandorla* became a visual sign of the uncreated Thaboric light, equal in meaning with the *hallo*.

According to another conception the *mandorla* descends from the representations of the rising Sun²³ or from the images of Victory supporting a shield upon the Roman sarcophagi, which had been so popular in antique art.²⁴ (Fig. 1) Antecedent of this depiction can be seen in the multiplication of Victories in the balustrade of the temple of Nike at Athens and in general outlines the transition from “the *imago clipeata* of a deceased person, to the angel... who raises the *imago clipeata* of a deceased and risen Christ was easy and natural, especially since the type of the angel in Christian art developed out of the pagan Victory appearing first in the fourth century...”.²⁵ This theory could be able to explain some of the cases when the round *mandorla* was used in Early Christian art, nevertheless it not appreciate properly the fact, that the medallion and the *mandorla* have different meaning in Christian art. What is more, it is indisputable that the prevailing form of the early Christian *mandorla* is the oval one.

Another assumption exists, that the *mandorla* has been made as a step forward more abstract illustration of God’s Dynamics instead of the earlier manner for depicting them through the clouds and God’s hand. Thus, in contrast to the

²¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium.*, 1281-1282; G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*. 10th Ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, 380-382

²² Б. В. Раушенбах, *Пространственные построения в живописи*, Москва 1980, 154-159

²³ A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, 117; See also: J. Miziolek, *Transfiguratio Domini in the Apse at Mount Sinai and the Symbolism of Light*. Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, Vol. 53 (1990), 42-60

²⁴ G. W. Elderkin, *Shield and Mandorla*. American Journal of Archeology, Vol. 42, No 2, 1938, 227-236; See also: O. Brendel, *Classical “Ariels”*. In: *Studies in Honor of Frederick W. Shipley*. Washington: Washington University Press, 1968, 75-94

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 228; 233



Fig. 2: *Alkmene*. Greek red-figure vase painting. Python. Later IV c. BC, British Museum, London



Fig. 3: *Alkmene and Hyades*. Greek red-figure vase painting. C. 360-340 BC, British Museum, London

cloud, the *mandorla* visualizes the uncreated light of God's presence²⁶ and divine actions as God's speech for example²⁷. However, it happens only in a few iconographical patterns and cannot be accepted as a general idea.

The origins of *mandorla* as a visual symbol could be seen in the manner of representing the Pantheon of gods and their activities in the ancient Hellenistic art.²⁸ The Zoroastrian notion of the light luminous clouds, which envelopes bodies of gods as a visual sign of their divinity had been transited into the Hellenistic art (gods lived and acted among people, but they derived from cosmic powers and remained bound by cosmic necessity "*anangke*", as Virgil described it in the *Aeneid*)²⁹ from which it was adopted into the early Christian art. It is important to note that this "cloud of divinity" in the ancient Greek images (*Fig. 2 and 3*) had light character but in certain cases it had protective functions too – gods used it for self-protection and for protection of their favorite humans³⁰.

²⁶ W.C. Loerke, *op. cit.*, 16

²⁷ A. Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*. Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2005, 174-177; See also: K. Weitzmann, *A Metamorphosis Icon or Miniature on Mount Sinai*. *Starinar*, 20, (1969), (Milanges Djurdje Boskovic), 417

²⁸ O. Brendel, *Origin and meaning of the Mandorla.*, 19-20

²⁹ L.W. C. Loerke, *op. cit.*, 15-16; 18

³⁰ O. Brendel, *Origin and meaning of the Mandorla.*, 17-19; See also: Pease, S. *Some*

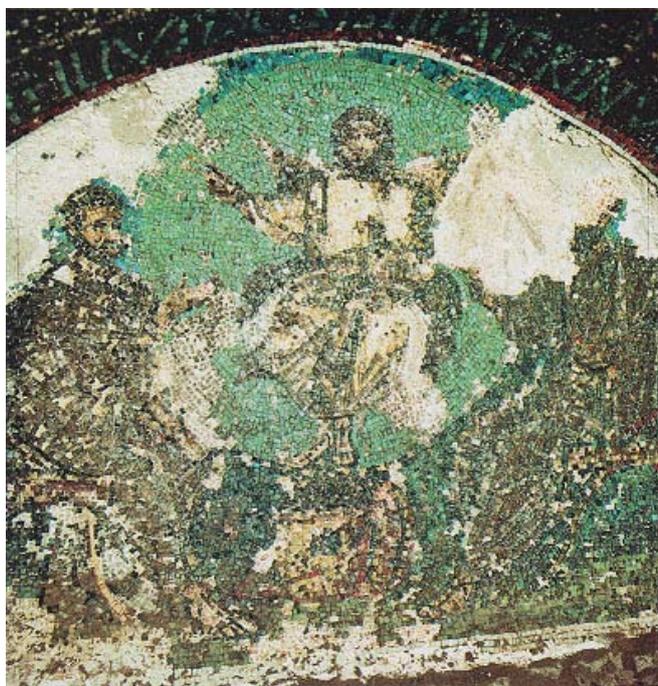


Fig. 4: *Christ in Aureole of Light, between Peter and Paul.* Mosaic, Catacomb of Saint Domitilla, Rome, c. 366-384

An interesting link in the formation of the precise form of the Christian *mandorla* as a visual sign can be seen in the Pythagorean idea of *vesica piscis*.³¹ It can be assumed that this geometrical vertically-pointed oval form was adopted by Christian art as a visual symbol of the Divine *glory of God*. This adoption was made because of the philosophical background of the symbol³² in the same manner the adoptions of many other notions from pagan Platonism and Neo-Platonism were made by Christianity (the notion of Logos as a most common example).

Literally *vesica piscis* means “bladder of a fish” and represents one of the ancient sacred geometric figures. Five centuries BC Pythagoreans used it as a perfect sign of the harmony and the entirety of the being, with its inherent opposites. *Vesica piscis* symbolized all ten couples of opposites formulated by Pythagoras and especially the entire Cosmos as a unity between material and

Aspects of Invisibility. Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, Vol. 53, (1942), 1-36; A. S. Murray, *The Alkmene Vase Formerly in Castle Howard*. The Journal of Hellenic Studies, Vol. 11 (1890), 225-230; A.B. Cook, *Zeus: a Study in ancient Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914-1940, Vol. III, 510-520; R.L. Lee, *The Rainbow Bridge: Rainbows in Art, Myth and Science*. Bellingham: The Pennsylvania State University Press 2001, 16-21

³¹ B.G. Walker, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988, 16; Κούπερ, Τζ. *Λεξικό Παραδοσιακών Σύμβολων*, 311

³² E.A. Pearson, *Revealing and Concealing: The Persistence of Vaginal Iconography in Medieval Imagery: the Mandorla, the “Vesica Piscis”, the Rose, Sheela-na-gigs and the Double-Tile Mermaid*. PhD Dissertation in Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 2002, 80-82



Fig. 5: *Christ Enthroned among His Apostles*. Apse mosaic, Santa Prudenziana, Rome, c. 415

sacred space. This esoteric symbol rapidly became very popular in the ancient art and its egg-like shape had been used for depicting the Cosmos and the birth of life, the feminine archetype of being³³, etc. From Christian point of view *vesica piscis* represents together terrestrial and celestial³⁴, humanity and divinity, which are inseparably bound together after the Christ Resurrection. First usage of this symbol among the early Christians can be seen in the fish shape “Ιχθύς” – the hidden pictogram of Christianity, used during the first centuries AD³⁵. In the end of the fourth century and in the beginning of the fifth century AD the *mandorla* has found its usage in the Early Christian art as an artistic device, circumscribing Christ’s figure.

Finding an answer of the question in which pagan symbol originates Christian *mandorla* is very important not only taken alone, but it has a key role for understanding of the real meaning of *mandorla* as a visual sign. Usage of *mandorla* in all cases deals with the problem for depiction of God in Heaven. This artistic device isolates the supernatural from the rest of the image.³⁶ However, the proper question about the meaning of Christian *mandorla* is, if it depicts light- or space-phenomenon as an expression of the Divine Energies.

³³ A.A. Hagstrom, *The Symbol of the Mandorla in Christian Art: Recovery of a Feminine Archetype*. Arts: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies, Vol. 10 (2), (Sept., 1998), 25-29

³⁴ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971 (second ed.), 203-204

³⁵ A.N. Didron, , *op. cit.*, 344-360

³⁶ A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins.*, 116

The first two extant Christian images, in which *mandorla* visualizes the *Glory of God* are from the second half of the fourth century and from the beginning of the fifth century AD. The earliest one is a depiction of Jesus Christ in majesty from the *Catacomb of Saint Domitilla*³⁷ (Fig. 4) and the second one is the marvelous mosaic from the apse of the *Church of Santa Prudenziana*.³⁸ (Fig. 5) Although, in both cases *mandorla* is used only as a sign of divinity and does not have specific role related with the context of the plot.

First extant cases when *mandorla* is used as an independent artistic device are two small-scaled mosaic panels in *Santa Maria Maggiore* in Rome.³⁹ Both of them represent Old Testament scenes: the first one (Fig. 6) portrays the *Hospitality of Abraham* /Genesis 18:1-16/ and the second one (Fig. 7) portrays the *Stoning of Moses* /Numbers 14:10/⁴⁰. In both cases, *mandorla* represents the *glory of God* (*Kabod*) as a phenomenon mentioned in the corresponding texts of the Scriptures. However, both oval sacred spaces have different properties. *Mandorla*, circumscribing God the Father, emphasizes on the phenomenon of the *Theophany*, and represents the divine luminance in which God is moving, while *mandorla* in the scene with Moses has strong protective character, and represents God's *glory* as power and activity in the metaphysical space. What is more intriguing in the second *mandorla* is the fact that Moses and his companions entered inside it, and the stones thrown at them just rebound from its borders. The motivation about the artistic programs of mosaics should derive from patristic commentaries and Midrashic texts⁴¹. However, resemblance with the protective function of the divine cloud, enveloping bodies of ancient Greek gods, cannot be missed.

One century later, Christian art have already developed two basic types of *mandorla*, whose archetypes had been set a hundred years ago - the primary one is oval or vertically-pointed oval, and the secondary one is round. Both of them are usually depicted with several color layers within them, with or without rays (which can be thought as a loan from some Roman images of the Victory's shields). Against this background, I would suggest that these two types have

³⁷ Matthews, Th. *The Clash of Gods: A reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*. New Jersey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 14, 118, 122; See also: V.F. Nicolai, F. Bisconti, D. Mazzoleni, *The Cristian Catacombs of Rome: History, Decoration, Inscriptions*. Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2002, pl. 78

³⁸ R. Cormack, M. Vassilaki, *Byzantium: 330 – 1453*. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008, pl. 14; See also: Fr. W. Schlatter, *The Text in the Mosaic of Santa Prudenziana*. *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Jun., 1989), 155-165; S. Makseliene, *op. cit.*, p. 12

³⁹ W.C. Loerke, *op. cit.*, p. 19-20; See also: B. Brenk, *Die Fruhchristlichen Mosaiken in Santa Maria Maggiore zu Rom*. Wiesbaden, 1975, 35-49; S. Spain, *The Program of the Fifth Century Mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore*. PhD Diss., New York: New York University, 1968, 169-207; S. Spain, *The Promised Blessing: The Iconography of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore*. *Art Bulletin*, 61, 1979, 518-540.

⁴⁰ A. Grabar, *Byzantium from the death of Theodosius to the rise of the Islam*. London: Thamen & Hudson, 1966, pl. 159; See also: Brendel, O. *Origin and meaning of the Mandorla.*, pp. 13-16; S. Makseliene, *op. cit.*, 11-12

⁴¹ W. C. Loerke, *op. cit.*, 20; See also: C.O. Nordstrom, *Rabbinica in fruhchristlichen und byzantinischen Illustrationen zum 4. Buch Mose*. *Figura*, 1, 1960, 24-47; B. Brenk, *op. cit.*, 93

Fig. 6: *Hospitality of Abraham*. Nave mosaic, detail, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, c. 432-440

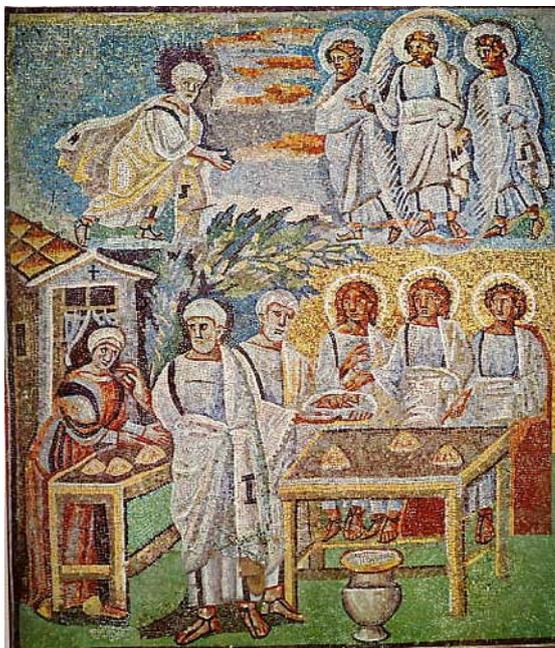


Fig. 7: *Stoning of Moses and his companions*. Nave mosaic, detail, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, c. 432-440

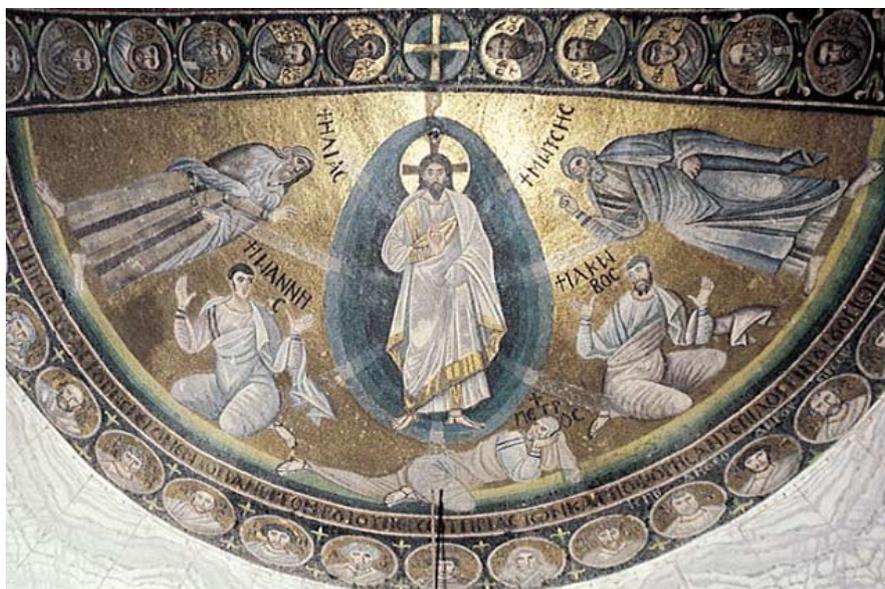


Fig. 8: *Transfiguration*. Apse mosaic, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, c. 550-565

different meanings from the very beginning. The oval one is more spatial and expresses the full significance of the Hebrew word *Kabod*, whose root meaning is 'weight, heaviness, richness' and unfolds the spatial manifestation of God's *presence*. The round one is more common to the second meaning of *Kabod* as 'glory, honor, and eminence'; in addition it is strongly related to the expression of the Divine Light as a visual sign of God's Energies.

Most magnificent pattern from the sixth century AD is the *Transfiguration* mosaic in *St. Catherine's Monastery* on Mount Sinai⁴² (Fig. 8). It shows completely glorified Christ and introduces the luminous vertically-pointed oval *mandorla* - a symbol that does not really correspond with the luminous cloud of the Gospel narrative⁴³ and with the common understanding of *halo* and *mandorla* as luminous shapes⁴⁴. It rather symbolizes the *glory* of God in its spatial meaning, showing the metaphysical space in which the *Theophany* takes place. For depicting of this unprecedented manifestation of God's *glory*, the artist needed a visual symbol, which can express theological core of the phenomenon, and by this reason, he chose something that had already existed in the ancient art tradi-

⁴² G. Forsyth, K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Church and the Fortress of Justinian*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1973, 11; See also: G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*. London: Lund Humphries Publishers Limited, 1971, Vol. 1, 147-149

⁴³ A. Andreopoulos, *op. cit.*, 127-144; See also: W.C Loerke., *op. cit.*, 20-21

⁴⁴ J. Miziołek, *Transfiguratio Domini in the Apse at Mount Sinai and the Symbolism of Light.*,

tion as a sign of the presence, and activity of the pagan gods⁴⁵. Therefore, in this theologically well based example, the *mandorla*'s type is relevant to the ancient Hellenistic *vesica piscis* symbol⁴⁶.

Round type of *mandorla* we can see in the Transfiguration scene in the *Rabbula Gospel*⁴⁷ and in the Transfiguration mosaic in *St. Apollinaris in Classe* at Ravenna⁴⁸, both from almost the same time. Mentioned before distinction between the two types of *mandorla* in *St. Maria Maggiore*'s mosaics, can be seen here and obviously one can admit that there had already been created tradition in usage of oval and round *mandorla* as expressions of what the *glory of God* and the radiance around the body of Christ mean in two different ways – spatial and luminous (depicting the uncreated light of God's energies).

It was generally believed that *mandorla*'s oval type was preferred from the sixth century until the moment of the iconoclastic controversy. The round *mandorla* type was almost exclusively favored between the ninth and the eleventh century AD, while the oval *mandorla* virtually replaced it until the fourteenth century, when a new type emerged. This statement is to some extent questionable, as far as both basic types of *mandorla* were developed simultaneously in the Byzantine image tradition, and their meanings remained unchanged until the fourteenth century AD. Nevertheless, after the iconoclasm, when icons were accepted as significant as words, iconography had to assert itself in a more sophisticated way. Religious culture in Byzantium became much monastic, icons obtained a certain degree of freedom from the Bible narrative, and became themselves a visual theological commentary on the represented events.⁴⁹ Further theological development of the iconographical subjects in which *mandorla*



Fig. 9: *Transfiguration*. Mosaic, detail, Holly Apostles Church, Thessaloniki, c. 1312

⁴⁵ S. Makseliene, *op. cit.*, 11-12

⁴⁶ E.A. Pearson, *op. cit.*, 82-106

⁴⁷ A., Andreopoulos, *op. cit.*, 108-111; *See also*: S. Makseliene, *op. cit.*, 13

⁴⁸ A. Andreopoulos, *op. cit.*, 117-125; *See also*: Th. Matthews, *op. cit.*, 149-150

⁴⁹ H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 265; Cf. H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium*. Princeton University Press, 1981; H. Maguire, *The Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and their Images in Byzantium*. Princeton University Press, 1996



Fig. 10: *Transfiguration*. Illumination from a manuscript with the theological works of John VI Kantakouzenos, 1370-1375 AD, National Library, Paris

participates has imposed a new form and understanding of this visual symbol.

In the fourteenth century AD, when Hesychasm became a theological mainstream in the East, *mandorla*, which had not been changed for almost a thousand years, suddenly appeared in a quite different way. Since then, its round type has begun to consist of two superimposed concave squares - actually a square and a rhombus inside the circle. This enriched visual device expressed the theological thought of the time and was strongly connected to the hesychastic practices of silence and contemplative prayer⁵⁰, and quickly became the only way of the visual representation of the resplendent *Divine light* of God's *glory*. The first extant patterns of the '*hesychastic mandorla*'⁵¹ are a mosaic of *Transfiguration* in the Church of Holly Apostles in Thessaloniki, c. 1312⁵² (Fig.9) and a fresco

of *Transfiguration* in the Church of Perivleptos, Mistra (c. 1350)⁵³. The most elaborated example of the new *mandorla* is an illumination from the manuscript of the John VI Kantakouzenos, dated between 1370 and 1375 AD⁵⁴ (Fig. 10). A

⁵⁰ About the essence of hesychasm: J. Meyendorf, *Saint Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*. Crestwood, New York: SVS Press, 1997; J. Meyendorf, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*. Crestwood, New York: SVS Press, 1998; and G. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*. Crestwood, New York: SVS Press, 2001

⁵¹ This name was given to this particular type of mandorla by certain art historians: J. Patterson, *Hesychastic Thought as revealed in Byzantine, Greek and Romanian Church Frescoes: A Theory of Origin and Diffusion*. *Révue des Etudes Sud-Est Européennes*, 16, (1978), 663-670

⁵² Χρ. Μαυροπούλου-Τσιόμη, *Βυζαντινή Θεσσαλονίκη*. Θεσσαλονίκη: ΠΕΚΟΣ, 7^η έκδοση, 1996, σ. 130-132; Βελένης, Γ., *Οι Άγιοι Απόστολοι Θεσσαλονίκης και η σχολή της Κωνσταντινούπολης*. In: *Akten des XVI. Intern. Byzantinistenkongresses*, vol. II/4, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32/4, 1981, 457-467;

⁵³ S. Makseliene,., *op. cit.*, 63

⁵⁴ H.A. Omont, *Miniatures des plus anciens manuscrits grecs de la Bibliothèque Nationale du Vie au XIVe siècle*. Paris: H. Champion, 1929, 58-59, pl. 126; H. Buchtal, *Toward a History of Paleologian Illumination*. In: Weitzmann, K. Loerke, W. C. Kitzinger, E.,

short intermediate stage can be discerned in so-called *Macedonian* iconography school (the Transfiguration of Manuel Panselinos for example), where an angular shape was added inside the *mandorla* behind the body of Christ.

The new enriched *mandorla* quickly became the dominant type for a couple of centuries (although the older types were never completely forsaken), apparently following the spread of Hesychasm⁵⁵. We find it in the fourteenth- and in the fifteenth-century icons and wall paintings on Mount Athos, and then in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania at the time hesychastic theology was spreading north of Greece. Finally, this tradition was introduced in Russia by the hesychast monk Theophanus the Greek in the early fifteenth century.⁵⁶ Since that time, the conception of the spatial character of the *mandorla* has begun to fade away, not only in Byzantium but also in the iconography outside Byzantium borders, and it represented the *glory of God* only in its meaning as a source of God's Energies. It is very interesting that even from the first illuminations of the round '*hesychastic mandorla*' Christ's feet are depicted outside it, stepped on the summit of the mountain. Colors of *mandorla* began to correspond with the hesychastic understanding of how the *uncreated light* looks like, and became extremely dark.

After the sack of Constantinople by the Turks, the hesychastic model of *mandorla* was gradually abandoned and the oval type has been favored in Greece, the Balkans, Romania, and Russia again. However, its significance was not equal to the meaning of the oval *mandorla* in the early Byzantine art, whose spatial meaning never returned. The decline of Orthodox theology and iconography, and the strong Western influence affected its shape and significance. What is most interesting again is the variety of *mandorla's* colors. After the Theophanes the Greek's silver-gray *mandorlas*⁵⁷ and Rublev's dark-green ex-

and Buchtal, H. *The Place of Book Illumination in Byzantine Art*. Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 165; D. Talbot Rice, *Art of the Byzantine Era*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1993, 245-246

⁵⁵ S. Makseliene, *op. cit.*, 64-65

⁵⁶ A. Andreopoulos, *op. cit.*, 230; Andreopoulos assumes that the new unusual shape of the *mandorla* was imported from the general type of *mandala* images. He supposes that it had become necessary because of the urgent need for expressing the new, more complicated understanding of the Glory of God. The author makes such a connection because of "the similarity of the spirituality of the mandala with the hesychastic view of the light" (p. 233), and because of "the relationship between the axis mundi (as it is shown in mandalas)... and God in Platonist, Hebrew and Christian tradition" (p. 234). Even if we admit some similarities between the general ideas, it has not become clear from which images the Orthodox Iconography imported the shape of the "hesychastic *mandorla*". Therefore, Andreopoulos suggests a relation with the medieval mappamundi (p. 235-242). Although there can be seen some similarities between the maps and atlases images, it is impossible to prove such an import. And also, there are no theological evidences that Hesychastic thought has ever assumed the *mandorla* with Christ in its center as a "map of the Universe".

⁵⁷ S. Maslennitsyn, *Art of Old Pereslavl*. Leningrad: Aurora Art Publisher, 1975, 66-68, ill. 34

amples⁵⁸, in Russia⁵⁹, and in the other Orthodox countries⁶⁰, differently colored *mandorlas* can be seen: Novgorod and Pereslavl – dark blue, dark green⁶¹ and multicolored⁶², Pskov – completely black with golden core⁶³, Moscow – dark and even black⁶⁴, Tryavna in Bulgaria – extremely red⁶⁵. Christ's feet still are outside the *mandorla*, stepped on the mountain, and the *mandorla* is dematerialized to such extent, that the mountain and the figures of Moses and Elijah overlap it.

Since roughly the seventeenth century, *mandorla* has begun to consist of oval outline, enclosing what seem to be a combination of an upward vector behind Christ and the emanation of powerful rays from His entire body⁶⁶. This new combination of forms can be seen as an attempt for accurate depiction⁶⁷ of the revelation of the *Thaboric Divine Light* to the apostles, but it lacks the subtlety, the theological depth, and the expressiveness of all previous examples. The significance of *mandorla* as a precise visual 'translation' of the full meaning of *Kabod* has been cut of use, and the initial ideas of the early iconographers and their reasons for choosing the model of pagan *vesica piscis* for it, have also been lost. Therefore, in the last couple of decades, the problem with *mandorla* has been standing out of the researchers interest, but among the people it has become popular like "the representation of Christ in a space shuttle" (because of

⁵⁸ Н.В. Лазарев, *Московская школа иконописи*. Москва: Искусство, 1980, 51, ил. 29; В.Н. Лазарев, *Феофан Грек и его школа*. Москва: Искусство, 1961

⁵⁹ М.В. Alpatov, *Early Russian Icon Painting*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1974, 303; М.В. Alpatov, *Treasures of Russian Art in the 11th-16th Centuries (Painting)*. Leningrad: Avrora Art Publisher, 1971; К. Onash, *Icons*. London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1963, ill. 12, 23-24, 31-33, 38-39, 42, 48-49, 52, 57-59, 73, 103, 116

⁶⁰ К. Weitzmann, *A Treasury of Icons – Sixth to Seventeenth Centuries*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966, ill. 153, 175, 183, 184

⁶¹ В.Н. Лазарев, *Новгородская иконопись*. Москва: Искусство, 1969, 42; S. Maslenitsyn, *op. cit.*, ill. 37-38, 49

⁶² Yi. Piatnitsky, O. Baddeley, E. Brunner, M. M Mango, *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia: Orthodox Art from the 6th to the 12th Century*. London: St. Catherine Foundation, 2000, 267-268

⁶³ Grabar, *Die Malerschule des alten Pskow*. „Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst“, Jg. 63, 1929/1930, Hf. 1, s. 3-9; Н.В. Лазарев, *Русская иконопись от истоков до начала XVI века*. Москва: Искусство, 2000; И.А. Шалина, *Псковские иконы „Сошествие во ад“*. О литургической интерпретации иконографических особенностей. Во: Восточнохристианский храм. Литургия и искусство. Санкт-Петербург, 1994, с. 230-269

⁶⁴ Н.В. Лазарев, *Московская школа иконописи*.; Н.В. Лазарев, *Русская иконопись от истоков до начала XVI века*.;

⁶⁵ К. Paskaleva, *Icons from Bulgaria*. Sofia: Sofia Press, 1987 (Icons from the National Art Gallery, № 67, 92, 179-х, 221, 293); Л. Цанева, *Тревненска иконопис*. Варна: Славена, 2003, с. 7; Л. Койнова-Арнаудова, *Икони от Мелнишкия край*. София: Септември, 1980, фиг. 13, 15, 16, 23, 28, 81, 85; Т. Matakeva-Lilkova, *Christian Art in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Borina, 2001 (Icons from the National Historical Museum, № 2905, 29030, 29032, 29040)

⁶⁶ К. Paskaleva, *Bulgarian Icons through the Centuries IX – XIX*. Sofia: Svyat Publishers, 1987, ill. 76; Е. Флорева, *Средновековни стенописи Вуково/ 1598. Църквата „Св. Петка“*. София: Български художник, 1987; Койнова- Л. Арнаудова, *Икони от Мелнишкия край*, ил. 73; Т. Matakeva-Lilkova, *Christian Art in Bulgaria*, № 29030

⁶⁷ S. Makseliene, ..., *op. cit.*, 65

Fig. 11:
Transfiguration.
 Fresco, St. Theodor
 Tiron and St. Theodor
 Stratilat Church,
 Dobarsko, c. 1614



the laic interpretations of the wall paintings from the *St. Theodor Tiron and St. Theodor Stratilat* Church in Dobarsko (*Fig. 11*), made in 1614 AD)⁶⁸. Such kind of paintings can be seen in a few Bulgarian churches from the same time, but the question about their precise scientific investigation is still open.

Despite of the diversity of opinion among scholars what concerns the origins and significance of the *mandorla* in Orthodox Iconography, its ancient spatial meaning has not disappeared and Christian *mandorla* remains the only possible way for depicting the sacred events, which run across the material and the outer world. The uncreated light of God's Energies, so opaque for human beings that even looks for them like unbearable darkness certainly causes the 'hesychastic' change of colors and explains dark and even black *mandorlas* sometimes combined with dark rays of light. Nevertheless, spatial meaning of the *mandorla* in many patterns is demonstrated not only through contours and different colors, but through other artistic means like uninterrupted line of angels, bordering mystical space inside the *mandorla*. They are monochromatic, painted in color so close to the main color of the sacred space, which makes them "invisible" and underlines their unworldly origins. In those cases, when angels come in the material space, their monochromacy disappears and they look like other characters in the icon. Spatial essence of the *mandorla* is underlined also with stepping of the figures inside and outside it. This spatial meaning does not enter into a collision with the necessity for depicting the *uncreated light* of God's presence. The true *mandorla* appears only on that place, where the Prime source of the energies, the Source of the Thaboric light, the Master of every

⁶⁸ Е. Флорева, *Старата църква в Добърско*. София: Български художник, 1981

creation is depicted. This is the reason why in those rare cases, when *mandorla* is drawn around saints, it misses the rays of the *uncreated light*, because the glorified human being is illuminated for his/her spiritual feats from the God's Grace, but is not able to be a source of that Grace.⁶⁹

Ростислава Георгиева Тодорова
НОВА РЕЛИГИЈА – НОВА СИМБОЛИКА: ПРИХВАТАЊЕ МАНДОРЛЕ
У ХРИШЋАНСКОЈ ИКОНОГРАФИЈИ

Симболичка разноврсност, уграђена у верску доктрину и истанчан филозофски систем хришћанства, је огромна. Значење неких од хришћанских симбола као што су св. Крст и крстни знак на пример, јасно је дефинисано и никада се није мењало током двадесетједновековне црквене традиције. Међутим, постоје и хришћански симболи који из низа разлога остају у „задњем плану“ и немају исту јасноћу, зато што за њих недостаје недвосмислено тумачење њиховог значења. Сличне потешкоће нарочито инхерентне код симбола, који имају своје порекло у предхришћанском језичком веровању, филозофским системима и култури. Један од тих симбола, који је нашао своју употребу у православној иконографији као израз „славе Божије“ – карактеристичан Божји израз, како у старозаветним тако и у новозаветним временима, Бог у намери да разоткрије суштину пред људима, је тако названу „мандорла“ – овалне форме, овално заоштрене или округле форме, која је у одређеним иконографским тематским текстовима описана око фигуре Господа Исуса Христа, св. Тројства, свете Богородице и у веома ретким случајевима око фигура неких светаца.

Израстање хришћанства у срж јудеизма, као и постепена промена статуса од забране до званичне државне религије током IV в. сл. Р. Хр., налажу и промену у систему визуелних знакова које користи. Коришћење мандорле у ранохришћанској уметности се без преувеличавања може назвати преседаном, који је у директној вези са променом у религијском поимању света и одговарајућим преосмишљавањем концептуалне средине током првих векова сл. Р. Хр. Нова уметничка тенденција испуњује се новим садржајем и преузима у употребу антички знак за представљање јединства између духовног и материјалног - „vesica piscis“, тако што је трансформише у хришћанску мандорлу.

У раду се истражује формирање два основна типа хришћанске мандорле (кружне и овалне) и њихова употреба у византијском и поствизантијском традиционалном приказу. Пажња је усмерена не само на тражење језичких корена овог визуелног знака, већ и на његово контекстуално значење.

Да би се пронашло правилно тумачење овог јерархијско семантичког централног елемента у хришћанској иконографији, поставља се питање да ли је мандорла ликовни знак светлосног или просторног феномена, уско повезан са изражавањем суштине „славе Божије“. Акцент се ставља на развој и промењивост семантичке тежине два типа мандорле кроз векове, започињући од првих сачуваних образаца из IV-V в. сл. Р. Хр. у Санта Марија Мађоре у Риму, до настанка „исихастке мандорле“ током XIV в. у Византији и њеним поствизантијским варијантама у пре појединачно пронађеним православним иконографским традицијама.

Упркос њеном настојећем и приоритетном прихватању као вида нимба, или као јерархијског самосталног визуелног израза превасходно Божанских енергија (дело-

⁶⁹ Acknowledgements: Sincere thanks are due to the Bulgarian National Science Fund for funding of research project № ДПОСТДОК 02-1/11.01.2010

вања), проучавање проблема доводи до закључка (извода), да мандорла у православној иконографији задржава, до великог степена своје древно значење једино могућег метода паралелног представљања сакралних догађаја, који прожимају једновремено и материјални и духовни свет.

