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The Admired Mountain
The Sinai Theophany as a Visual Paradigm of Sacred Space in Late Byzantine Ohrid

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Abstract This study examines the earliest known Byzantine mural depicting Moses' encounter with the burning bush on Mount Sinai as a typological vision of the Virgin Mary. Painted by the Astrapas workshop at the Peribleptos church in Ohrid (ca. 1294-95), the fresco adapts an older schema articulated as a titular image of the ancient Sinai monastery. The Peribleptos murals, however, detach this theme from its initial localism and integrate it into a narrative program structured around the spatial mirroring of Old and New Testament scenes. The locus of the holy mountain, therefore, becomes a visual paradigm of sacred space as the material site of God's manifestation.

Keywords Late Byzantine murals. Astrapas. Theotokos. The burning bush. Painting and rhetoric.

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1 Introduction

In the late thirteenth-century church of the Mother of God Peribleptos (the Admired) in Ohrid, North Macedonia, the tympanum surmounting the doorway on the west wall of the narthex bears an elaborate depiction of Moses' theophanies on Mount Sinai **[fig. 1a-b]**.[1] The composition belongs to a sophisticated mural program painted in ca. 1294-95 by the workshop of Michael Astrapas and Eutychios from Thessalonike.[2] Their patron, Progonos Sgouros, was a high-ranking Byzantine military commander of Albanian origins, closely associated with Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (r. 1282-1328).[3] The Sgouroi, or Skuraj, seem to have been involved in the tensions between the Palaiologoi and King Charles I of Anjou (r. 1266-85) during the latter's campaign in Albania.[4] Progonos may have exercised political influence in the region surrounding Ohrid (Byzantine Achris) and possibly held land there, although the extent of his possessions remains uncertain. Yet, his presence in this region must have been

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1 Hamann-Mac Lean, Hallensleben 1963, 68-75; Miljković-Pepek 1967, 50.

2 On the painters, who inscribed their names and initials in several spots within the naos, see Miljković-Pepek 1967, especially 43-51; Todić 1999, 227-62; Marković 2010; Drpić 2013; Vapheiades 2019; Kostić 2023. The church's iconographic program and its Greek inscriptions are inventoried by Marković 2011. Schroeder 2012 provides a more focused analysis of the narthex frescoes, while Rossi 2024, 256-70 reassesses the narrative imagery within the naos, centering on the cycle of Christ's miracles.

3 The Peribleptos mural program emphasizes Sgouros' Albanian background and his connection with ancient Dyrrachion (Durrës) by including the figure of the local martyr Asteios in the diaconicon; see Grozdanov 2001, 85-6; Christidou 2014, 166. On the magnate's ancestry and relationship with Andronikos II, see Zarov 2007, 51-3.

4 Zarov 2007, 53-6; see Fine 1987, 170, 184-94, and Abulafia 1997, 62-6 for the context of the Neapolitan Angevin expansion into the Balkans.

under King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (r. 1282-1321).[5] The construction of the Peribleptos church embodies Sgouros' authority and prestige within Ohrid. Serving as the *katholikon* of an urban monastery, the building was designed as a domed structure with a cross-in-square naos, a tripartite sanctuary at the east end, and a narthex toward the west **[fig. 2]**.[6] This narrow vestibule comprises three bays, whose vaults and tympana provide an architectural framework for the fresco program devised by Michael and Eutychios, perhaps in collaboration with the monastery's clergy.[7]

Situated in the chamber's central compartment, which is distinctively covered by a domical vault, the Sinai fresco occupies a key position within the economy of the sacred space. Its iconography synthesizes the biblical episodes of Moses' encounter with the burning bush and the transmission of the Law recounted in Exodus 3 and 24-33, respectively. The two episodes are identified by Greek inscriptions written in elegant majuscules: "The flaming bush (*batos*)" and "The Prophet Moses receiving the God-written tablets".[8] The Old Testament story is visualized as a continuous narrative winding clockwise around an arched window, whose sill marks the painting's ground level as a horizontal axis. This imaginary line divides the composition's terrain into two superimposed compartments deployed as topographical containers of the Moses scenes. The episodes' sequence unravels along a stony path ascending from the valley beneath the holy mountain onto its summit.

In the lower part of the tympanum, at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses appears before the shrub that burns with flaming fire without being consumed.[9] Clad in a purple-gray himation, the prophet is shown twice. First, in the far-right corner, Moses' standing figure heeds the divine voice calling him from the bush depicted across the valley, on the left side of the window. The prophet raises his hands in a gesture of awe, while directing his gaze toward the still distant shrub.[10] In his second

5 On Byzantine-Serbian relations in the late thirteenth century, see Fine 1987, 219-20.

6 Ćurčić 2010, 571-2.

7 Ćurčić 2010, 571-2. In its present form, showcased by the ground plan included in this study **[fig. 2]**, the original naos-narthex compound is framed by a mid-fourteenth-century U-shaped ambulatory.

8 In original: ἡ κατάφλεκτο(ς) βάτο(ς) and ὁ προφ(ή)τ(η)ς μουσῆς δεχόμενος τ(ὰς) θεογράφ(ους) πλάκας. Marković 2011 omits these *tituli*. Unless otherwise mentioned, all transcriptions and translations are mine.

9 καὶ ὁρᾷ ὅτι ὁ βάτος καίεται πυρί, ὁ δὲ βάτος οὐ κατεκαίετο (and he saw that the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not burning up). All quotes from the Old Testament follow the Septuagint edition of Rahlfs [1935] 1971 and the translation of Pietersma, Wright 2009 sometimes with minimal contextual adjustments.

10 On the role of Moses' gesture to call attention to the wondrous sight before him, see Crostini 2026, 9-11.

narrative iteration, Moses draws closer to the bush but ultimately stops as if hearing God's admonition: "Do not come near here! Loose the sandal from your feet! For the place (*topos*) on which you are standing is holy ground (*gē hagia*)!" (Ex 3,5).[11] The once towering prophet is now crouching in fear beneath the window's frame. With a careful movement, he unties his leather footwear. His eyes are fully absorbed by this action as if avoiding the astounding sight that unfolds before him.

The painters placed the miraculous thornbush just a few steps ahead, granting it gargantuan dimensions. The oversized shrub rises in an impressive upward sweep, which mirrors Mount Sinai's conical silhouette almost like a vegetal double. Set ablaze with rippling tongues of fire, the bush's dense foliage follows the lunette's curve, leaning toward Moses to reveal its mystery. In accordance with the Exodus narrative, an "angel of the Lord" emerges from the incandescent branches, his hand stretched toward the prophet in the customary gesture of speech.[12] In the biblical story, the messenger announces God's coming on earth for the liberation of the enslaved people of Israel.[13] The Ohrid fresco, however, departs from a literal visualization of the scriptures, leaning into typology.[14] More precisely, the composition portrays the angel not only as a divine mouthpiece foretelling the historical deliverance of the elect nation, but also as a mediator of a higher vision announcing the salvation of the entire human race through the future advent of Christ. Beneath the celestial messenger, the bush's leaves enshrine an image of the Virgin Mary. Though already used on twelfth- and thirteenth-century painted panels from Mount Sinai and the Holy Land, this iconographic

11 Μὴ ἐγγίσῃς ὧδε· λῦσαι τὸ ὑπόδημα ἐκ τῶν ποδῶν σου· ὁ γὰρ τόπος, ἐν ᾧ σὺ ἕστηκας, γῆ ἁγία ἐστίν.

12 ὤφθη δὲ αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐν φλογὶ πυρὸς ἐκ τοῦ βάτου (Now an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a fire of flame; Ex 3,2). On hand gestures as pictorial speech acts, see Barasch 1987, 15-39; Betancourt 2021, 39.

13 εἶπεν δὲ κύριος πρὸς Μωυσῆν Ἰδὼν εἶδον τὴν κάκωσιν τοῦ λαοῦ μου τοῦ ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ τῆς κραυγῆς αὐτῶν ἀκήκοα ἀπὸ τῶν ἐργοδιωκτῶν· οἶδα γὰρ τὴν ὀδύνην αὐτῶν καὶ κατέβην ἐξελέσθαι αὐτοὺς ἐκ χειρὸς Αἰγυπτίων καὶ ἐξαγαγεῖν αὐτοὺς ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἐκείνης καὶ εἰσαγαγεῖν αὐτοὺς εἰς γῆν ἀγαθὴν καὶ πολλήν, εἰς γῆν ῥέουσαν γάλα καὶ μέλι (The Lord said to Moses, 'When I looked, I saw the affliction of my people in Egypt and I heard their cry on account of the taskmasters. For I know their pain. And I came down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey; Ex 3,7-8). The Old Testament text does not make a clear distinction between the Lord and the messenger acting as his voice. On the ambiguous identity of the "angel of the Lord", see Barker 1992.

14 Though only coined in nineteenth-century scholarship, the conventional term 'typology' describes a much older Christian exegetical strategy, which identifies persons, objects, and events from the Old Testament as *typoi* (imprints) or *figurae* of the New Testament; see Young 1997, 186-214; Bucur 2019, 260-75 with references to previous literature.

formula has no known precedents in the earlier repertoire of wall paintings from the Byzantine Empire.[15]

Mary's insert as an anachronic object of Moses' vision lends pictorial substance to an older exegetical tradition. Late antique and Byzantine theologians saw the Sinai shrub as a foreshadowing of the Virgin's role in the Incarnation.[16] Like wooden branches burning without being consumed, her human womb contained the spiritual fire of the Logos, the co-eternal Word of God, without being harmed by his power.[17] Moreover, just as the bush sustained the heavenly flames but suffered no material alteration, Mary conceived and gave birth to the incarnate Lord without breaking the bodily seals of her virginity. The notions of God's paradoxical containment and corporeal revelation receive special emphasis in the Peribleptos mural **[fig. 3]**. Wearing the golden vestment of celestial majesty, a diminished figure of the infant Christ nestles within his mother's dark purple maphorion. Like a ray of light shining through a tree's leafage, the divine-human child extends his radiant arm from her bosom toward Moses. The Savior's small hand performs a conventional gesture of blessing and speech, providing a literal rendition of the Logos, God's utterance addressing the prophet from the bush. The image's aural dimension becomes even more conspicuous as Moses looks downward, averting his gaze from the luminous sight, while angling his uncovered ear to hear the Lord's voice.

As the narrative circles back to the right side of the window, Christ's outreaching gesture within the shrub finds a visual parallel in the synthetic depiction of God's manifestation on the mountain's summit **[fig. 4]**. In the upper register of the tympanum, the Lord's mighty hand stretches down from an arc of heaven, offering Moses the stone tablets inscribed with a pseudo-Hebrew text. The prophet appears in a third narrative instantiation, standing on the craggy peak of Sinai, his hands ritually covered in the himation. In contrast to the burning bush, the tablets display no Marian figure. Nevertheless, an imaginary diagonal unites them with the Virgin's

15 Der Nersessian 1975, 336-7. The episode's earlier Byzantine renditions offer a more literal illustration of Moses' scriptural interaction with the bush and the angel. A double vignette from an eleventh-century *Octateuch* likely produced in Constantinople (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat.gr.746, pt. 1, f. 157r) provides an eloquent comparison in this respect; see Weitzmann, Bernabò 1999, 1: 148-9; 2: fig. 613; a digital facsimile is available at `https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.746.pt.1`. The miniature simply shows Moses encountering the burning bush and then untying his sandals while an angel voices God's plan for the liberation of the enslaved Israelites. Though employing a similar narrative sequence in a condensed form, the Peribleptos composition does not stick to the historical surface of the Exodus tale and links it to the New Testament.

16 Grillmeier 1995, 39-40. A more detailed analysis of this exegetical tradition is provided below.

17 Dennis 2023, 132-9.

apparition within the shrub, suggesting a typological connection. Moreover, the tablets' materiality, which indexes the emblematic red granite of Mount Sinai, actualizes the typological metaphor of Mary's flesh inscribed with the divine Logos by the Holy Spirit – the Father's finger **[fig. 5]**.[18]

In fact, the joint representations of the burning bush epiphany and the reception of the Law are integrated into a broader cycle of prophetic visions.[19] Building on patristic exegesis, these compositions depict Old Testament epiphanies as *typoi* or proleptic imprints of Mary's role as the vessel of Christ's divinity and the instrument of his Incarnation.[20] Apart from the Moses composition above the entrance, six other scenes, comprehensively examined in previous scholarship, are featured on the tympana that crown the walls of the narthex's lateral bays **[figs 6-7]**.[21] Their selection echoes the Old Testament pericopes read at the vespers of great festivals of the Theotokos.[22] The left-hand-side compartment displays Jacob's dream of the ladder and his fight with the angel (west),[23] alongside King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the stone cut from a mountain, which crushes the idol personifying his empire (north),[24] and a depiction of Moses and Aaron at the Tabernacle (east).[25] The right-hand bay comprises King Solomon's bed surrounded by 60 armed warriors (west),[26] the allegorical image of Wisdom's banquet before her newly built house (south),[27] and a composite representation of the Heavenly Temple featuring Ezekiel before the sealed door and Isaiah receiving the blazing coal from the seraphim (east).[28] In all these murals, the objects, buildings, and landscape elements foreshadowing the Incarnation bear medallions enclosing the Virgin's bust effigy. Despite its spatial prominence and iconographic complexity, little attention has been paid to the portrayal of Moses' two theophanies at Sinai. At

18 On the connection between Moses' tablets, the red Sinai granite, and the Virgin, as it was imagined in the late medieval Holy Land, see Rachman-Schrire 2015.

19 Marković 2011, 131.

20 On the theological and poetic background of this interpretive stance, see Cunningham 2004; 2021, especially 141-75.

21 For an overview of Marian *typoi* in Palaiologan painting, see Studer Karlen 2018.

22 Todić 1999, 106. Engberg 1967 argues this in the case of the early fourteenth-century Old Testament cycle at the Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii) in Constantinople.

23 Gen 28,10-15 and 32,24-30; see Miljković-Pepek 1967, 51.

24 Dan 2,31-3; see Grozdanov 2012.

25 Miljković-Pepek 1967, 51.

26 Song of Songs 3,7; see Der Nersessian 1963, 80-1; Xyngopoulos 1963.

27 Prov. 9,1; see Meyendorff 1959, especially 270-2, fig. 7; 1987, especially 394. Radojčić 1975, Willson 2020, and Brzozowska 2024 discuss the theme's later Palaiologan and Post-Byzantine iterations.

28 Ezek 44 and Isa 6,6-7; see Babić 1968, Negrău 2024.

an immediate level, my paper seeks to fill this lacuna. More broadly, however, it demonstrates the image's pivotal role within the mural program of the Peribleptos church and relates it to wider modes of conceptualizing sacred space that emerged from a dialogue between Palaiologan Byzantium and the Eastern Mediterranean *loca sancta*.

The scene's symbolic prominence is hinted at by its placement within the central bay of the narthex, in an area reserved for the dedicatory inscription.[29] On the door's lintel, beneath the Moses composition, an elaborate Greek text commemorates the church's foundation by Progonos Sgouros. The inscription runs as follows:

> This divine and all-revered temple of our Most Pure (*panyperagnou*) Queen Bearer of God (*Theotokou*) the Admired (*Peribleptou*) was raised with the effort and expense of Lord Progonos Sgouros, the great hetaeriach, and [with those] of his spouse, and of the son-in-law (*gambrou*) [most likely still referring to Progonos] of our mightiest and holy sole-ruling emperor (*autokratoros basileōs*), Lady Eudokia, during the reign of the Most Pious Emperor and Sole-ruler of the Romans Andronikos Palaiologos and of Eirene, the Most Pious *Augousta*, during the tenure of Makarios, the most holy archbishop of Justiniana Prima [i.e., Ohrid] and of all Bulgaria in the year [of the world] 6803 [i.e., AD 1294/95], in the indiction 8.[30]

It is plain that through the juxtaposition with this votive epigraph, the program's designers tried to incorporate the representation of the Sinai theophanies into a symbolic rhetoric of the foundation act. What has to be clarified, though, are the reasons that motivated this iconographic choice. Why would a late thirteenth-century Balkan program interweave the story of the prophet's encounters with God on the holy mountain into the symbolic narrative of the church's foundation? And more importantly, to what effects? The answers I shall advance here lie in the broader use of the Sinai narrative in

29 On the position, structure, and function of such epigraphs in Palaiologan foundations, see Adashinskaya 2018, 317-62; especially 334 on the example quoted here.

30 ἀνηγέρθη ὁ θεῖος καὶ πάνσεπτος ναὸς οὗτος πανυπεράγνου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν θεοτόκου τῆς περιβλέπτου διὰ συνδρομῆς καὶ ἐξόδου κῦρ Προγόνου τοῦ Σγουροῦ μεγάλου ἑταιρειάρχου καὶ τῆς συζύγου αὐτοῦ κυρᾶς Εὐδοκίας καί γαμβροῦ τοῦ κρατίστου καὶ ἁγίου ἡμῶν αὐτοκράτορος βασιλέως ἐπὶ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ εὐσεβεστάτου βασιλέως καὶ αὐτοκράτορος Ρωμαίων Ἀνδόνικου τοῦ Παλαιολόγου καὶ Εἰρήνης τῆς εὐσεβεστάτης αὐγούστης ἀρχιερατεύοντος δὲ Μακαρίου τοῦ παναγιοτάτου ἀρχιεπισκόπου τῆς πρώτης Ἰουστινιανῆς καὶ πάσης Βουλγαρίας ἐτους ,ϛωγ, ἰνδ. η′. The inscription was published by several scholars, among whom Hamann-Mac Lean, Hallensleben 1963, 23. Marković 2011, 133 amends their transcription and provides a survey of the epigraph's bibliography. Zarov 2007, 49-50; 2024 comments on the historical background of Sgouros' relationship with the emperor and analyzes the inscription's discovery and reception by modern scholars.

shaping a Christian notion of sacred space as a ritually demarcated precinct where God makes himself present in the material realm.

In Exodus 3,5, the Lord's thundering voice declares the mountainous site of the Sinai shrub as a "holy ground" separated from profane existence by a set of ritual restrictions. To step on it, Moses must untie the sandals from his feet. Since the patristic age, Christian exegetes have understood these leather-made items as symbols of impure matter, sin, and mortality, all of which had to be removed in God's presence.[31] The prophet's action is conspicuously displayed in the Ohrid fresco.[32] His crooked figure surmounts both the founder's inscription and the physical threshold that marks an ontological rupture between the consecrated ground and the outside world.[33] The ceremonial removal of the prophet's footwear sets the symbolic boundaries of the place or *topos* where the Lord reveals himself on earth.[34] Veronica Della Dora notes that, in biblical and patristic language, the term *topos* designates the material or conceptual locus where divinity renders itself perceptible and allows humans to encounter it.[35] In the Ohrid mural, this concept bodies forth in the typological depiction of the Mother of God within the burning bush.[36] It is her figure that physically envelops the radiant image of Christ, presenting it both to Moses' prophetic gaze and to the viewers standing before the tympanum.

Within the foundation rhetoric prompted by the prominent pairing of the Sinai scenes with the dedicatory inscription, the visualization of Mary as a human container of divinity provides an iconic paradigm for the church's status as a receptacle of Christ's salvific presence. In this logic, the holy mountain of Sinai, the burning bush, and the church

31 Dulaey 1992; Boulnois 2015.

32 Late antique depictions of the Sinai scene assign a secondary position to the bush itself, focusing on Moses' ritual gesture; see Dulaey 1992, 99.

33 My analysis takes inspiration from Eliade's classical conception of sacred space; see Eliade 1959, 20-9. Although this model has been criticized for its universalizing and insufficiently historicized character (e.g., Smith 1987), Eliade 1959, 20 takes direct inspiration from Moses' encounter with the burning bush. While remaining cautious about applying his framework indiscriminately to different historical periods and cultural contexts, I find it a useful heuristic instrument for approaching the Late Byzantine reception of the burning bush. For a more historically grounded account of Christian attitudes toward holy places, see Markus 1994, 257-71. On thresholds, liminality, and Byzantine and Western medieval sacred spaces, see Gerstel 2006; Doležalová, Foletti 2019.

34 Eliade 1959, 20.

35 Della Dora 2016, especially 33-60 on the concept of *topos*, and 147-75 on its inflection in the form of holy mountains. Pentcheva 2024 provides an analysis of Della Dora's ideas in the context of eleventh-century mosaics of the Hosios Loukas Monastery in Steiris, Greece.

36 On the Incarnation as the process through which divinity inhabits the earthly realm, that is, 'takes place', see Della Dora 2016, 48-9.

itself are concomitantly portrayed as providential sites that actualize the mystery of the Savior's coming in flesh. My paper unpacks the typological use of the burning bush and Mount Sinai as a means to transform the Virgin's figure into a corporeal model of containing divine presence. This schema, I contend, had a paradigmatic value for the symbolic articulation of sacred space. Sgouros' foundation in Ohrid showcases the earliest known Byzantine mural depicting Mary within the Sinai theophany.[37] Although this theme had a rapid dissemination across the early fourteenth-century Balkans, the pictorial configuration it engendered at the Peribleptos remains unique.[38] Accordingly, my analysis focuses on this example, leaving the theme's subsequent development for future research. However, to account for the image's function within the Ohrid program, it is necessary to uncover the circumstances of its formation and adoption into the Palaiologan repertoire. The history of this pictorial theme, which has not been written in a systematic manner so far, leads us beyond the empire's borders.[39] Its development points to a series of largely uncharted connections between the Late Byzantine Empire and the eastern regions of the Mediterranean basin, where Greek, Arabic, Latin, and Armenian Christians cohabited within the orbit of the so-called crusader states.[40]

This study picks up the trail of the Marian iconography of the burning bush along the Levantine coast, aiming to reach a better understanding of its assimilation and reinterpretation in the

37 At this point, a terminological clarification is required. I am using a narrow definition of 'Byzantine' to designate visual artifacts engendered by workshop traditions and spiritual trends from Constantinople, Thessalonike, and other Greek-speaking centers within the territories of the Eastern Roman polity.

38 Throughout the first decades of the fourteenth century, the Marian rendition of the burning bush entered the customary repertoire of wall paintings associated both with the workshop of Michael Astrapas and Eutychios and with other contemporaneous elite artisans. In Thessalonike, where the Ohrid masters hailed from, the scene is featured within the south compartments of the ambulatories at Dodeka Apostoloi (ca. 1310-14 or 1320s) and Hagios Nikolaos Orphanos (ca. 1310-20); see Tsigaridas 2021, 305, 386-7; Tsigaridas, Loverdou-Tsigarida 2023, 151-5; Tsitouridou 1986, 157-9; and Todić 1999, 106, 349. During the same period, the theme was also assimilated into the sanctuary program of the Protaton church in Karyes, Mount Athos (ca. 1300), and the chapel attached to the south of the bema in the *katholikon* of Gračanica Monastery in Kosovo (ca. 1320-21); see Studer Karlen 2018, 124; Tsigaridas 2003, 32-3; Todić 1999, 106, 152, 254, 334. Other fresco ensembles display it in funerary spaces, such as the *parekklesion* at the Chora Monastery in Constantinople (Istanbul) and the arcosolium of Archbishop Danilo II (in office 1324-37) in the Hodegetria church at the Peć Patriarchate, Kosovo; see Der Nersessian 1975, 336-7; Fogliadini 2022.

39 Tzvetkova-Ivanova 2000, especially 15-19; Collins 2006, 95-118 provide preliminary surveys of this theme in Byzantine and Orthodox iconography more broadly. On the use of analogous images in the late medieval and early modern West, see Harris 1938.

40 On the notion of 'crusader' states, its limitations, and use in historiography, see Buck 2020 with an evaluation of previous scholarship.

Palaiologan context. My investigation begins amidst the rocky peaks believed to have witnessed Moses' theophanies in biblical times. Its first section addresses the image's emergence within the milieu of the monastery at Mount Sinai in present-day northern Egypt, an ancient shrine originally dedicated to the Mother of God and later to St. Catherine of Alexandria. Then, it formulates a tentative scenario regarding the theme's Mediterranean dissemination through icons and manuscripts produced in the late twelfth- and thirteenth-century crusader milieu. Although this essay adopts a periegetic layout, its purpose is not to produce an exhaustive survey of Marian representations of the burning bush scene. Rather, it attempts to draw a trans-regional constellation of key examples reflecting the image's initial articulation within the Eastern Christian milieu and its subsequent crusader and Byzantine use.

The depiction of the Virgin within the miraculous shrub appeared within a broader category of painted images distilling the topography and epiphanic aura of the sacred mountain. Kurt Weitzmann, Robin Cormack, Kristen M. Collins, Jas' Elsner, Gerhard Wolf, and Bissera V. Pentcheva have extensively discussed the importance of such site-inspired images for building Sinai's identity as a *locus sanctus*.[41] However, the precise role of Marian iconography as part of this visual phenomenon demands further exploration. Expanding on previous studies, particularly that of Collins, I show that the Virgin's portrayal within the *batos* was articulated as a titular image of the Sinai Monastery, foregrounding the site's centrality within the history of salvation.[42] Despite its initial embeddedness into the Sinaitic landscape, the image of Mary within the burning bush, as well as the spatial model of the theophanic mountain, acquired a more universal function, being adopted into wall paintings from the Palaiologan Empire.

This line of thought will bring me once again to the Ohrid mural, whose designers reshaped the *locus sanctus* model in accordance with their site's specificities and spiritual expectations. The second and third sections, therefore, show how the Peribleptos program turns the mountain of theophany into a conceptual pattern underlying the selection and spatial arrangement of narrative scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The painters Michael and Eutychios, likely directed by their commissioners and the monastery's clergy, inserted the Sinai composition into a broader network of images visualizing biblical episodes believed to have occurred on sacred summits. Thus, the notion of holy mountain becomes a principle of iconographic association, being abstracted into what Jérôme

41 Weitzmann 1982; Cormack 2000; Collins 2006; Elsner, Wolf 2010; Pentcheva 2014-15.

42 Collins 2006, 99, 106-12.

Baschet defines as a 'hypertheme' and Alexei Lidov as an 'image-paradigm'.[43] While approaching such systems of pictorial linkages from different theoretical standpoints, both scholars emphasize the overarching patterns that tie together images traditionally regarded as independent.[44] In the Peribleptos frescoes, the mountain *topos* generates such an associative node prompting a complex pictorial reflection on God's manifestation in space and time.

From the west tympanum of the narthex, the twofold Moses scene mirrors across the architectural space the joint depictions of the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the Dormition (*Koimēsis*) of the Mother of God, displayed on the equivalent spot within the naos.[45] Medieval tradition placed both these events, which conclude the Byzantine cycle of great festivals, on a Mount Sion in Jerusalem. The Ohrid program, I argue, exploits this topographical underpinning of Pentecost and the Virgin's Dormition to build a typological parallel between Sinai and Sion as landmarks of the historical unfolding of God's plan. Thus, the representation of the burning bush as a proleptic vision of the Savior's Incarnation participates in a spatialized mechanism of depicting and interpreting the concatenation of biblical events. The two holy mountains appear as sites where human history takes major turns toward the divine, first through the establishment of the Mosaic Covenant and later, through the foundation of the Christian Church. Consequently, from a localized model of circumscribing divine presence in space, the notion of holy mountain is sublimated into a general device for conceptualizing the Lord's manifestation in time. Michael and Eutychios picture this development by inserting the Sinai and Sion scenes into a system of spatial correspondences that emphasizes their pivotal position within the redemption narrative. The episodes mirror each other in pairs, within a complex geometrical structure that eschews any expectation for a linear sequence. The images' spatial association follows a chiastic schema inspired by Ancient Greek poetry and rhetorical thought. This crosswise arrangement, I suggest, offers an almost diagrammatic means of visualizing the working of providence, rendering perceptible the

43 Baschet 2008, 274-9; Lidov 2009a, 291-345; 2009b with a synthetic view of his previous studies.

44 I have investigated the articulation of such relational networks in the monumental programs of several thirteenth- through late fifteenth-century monastic churches from Southeastern Europe; see Dumitrescu 2022; 2025. My work aligns itself with other recent studies: Pentcheva 2024; 2027 discusses an analogous phenomenon in the eleventh-century *katholikon* of Hosios Loukas, focusing on the role of chanted hymns as an interpretive binder of mosaic compositions; Gerstel 2019 and Schroeder 2026 propose cognate directions for understanding the décor of Late Byzantine churches.

45 Hamann-Mac Lean, Hallensleben 1963, 69-75; Miljković-Pepek 1967, 48-9.

hidden correspondences through which the divine mind orders the economy of salvation.

2 Emplaced Sacredness: From *Locus Sanctus* to the *Locus* of the Incarnation

The depiction of Moses witnessing the anachronic apparition of the Mother of God within the burning bush emerged about a hundred years before Michael Astrapas and Eutychios painted the west tympanum in the Peribleptos narthex.[46] Its origins point to the environment of the Virgin's Monastery on Mount Sinai. Since late antiquity, this shrine had housed the miraculous shrub from which Moses heard the Lord's calling.[47] Though it only acquired a figural form during the later Middle Ages, the typological link between the burning bush and the Mother of God had a major role in shaping the perception of the holy mountain as a site of theophany and a material container of divine presence. In what follows, I show how this idea took shape within the exegetical thought of the Greek Church Fathers and was subsequently embedded into the sacral layout of the Sinai landscape. The overlaying of such theological views onto the site's topography would eventually give rise to an image of Moses' vision of the Mother of God within the burning bush. This emblematic representation not only encapsulated Mount Sinai's scriptural aura prompted by its connection with the Exodus narrative but also emphasized the mountain's pivotal position within a broader Christian narrative of human redemption.

To understand this process, one must start with a closer look into the Marian interpretation of the Sinai topography and its patristic background. In his mid-sixth-century account of imperial building campaigns, Procopius of Caesarea mentions that Justinian I (r. 527-65) built an imposing monastery of the Theotokos at the foot of Mount Sinai, on whose pinnacle Moses had received the divine Law.[48] Procopius does not explicitly connect the shrine's location with the epiphany of the burning bush. However, his text likely assumes a topographical link as self-evident. Late antique pilgrim accounts, such as the fourth-century Latin *Itinerary* of Egeria, confirm this subsistent interpretation. In the winter of 383-84, Egeria and her companions found the vegetal relic of the burning bush "at the head of the valley" beneath the "mountain of God".[49] The shrub grew

46 Tzvetkova-Ivanova 2000, 15-19; Collins 2006, 95-118.

47 For a diachronic approach to the monastery's spiritual significance, see Nelson 2006.

48 Proc. *Aed*. V. 8, ed. Dewing, Downey 1954.

49 *Itinerarium Egeriae* II.1, IV.6-8, ed. Prinz 1960. The translation follows Wilkinson 1999.

near an older monastic complex, which included a church, cells, and a garden. Within its precinct, the pilgrims read "the appropriate passage from the Book of Moses", that is, Exodus 3, seeking to map the scriptural events onto the surrounding terrain.[50]

It was this narrativized topography that Justinian's new foundation sought to exploit by placing the Virgin's monastery on the site where pilgrims desired to relive the Moses story. His endeavor goes beyond the textual commemoration of scripture, using ecclesiastical architecture and Marian devotion as a way to project Christian exegesis onto the Old Testament landscape. The monastery's dedication to the Mother of God speaks to an established theological tradition identifying the burning bush as a foreshadowing of the Incarnation. Beginning with Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394), in his fourth-century allegorical *Life of Moses* (BHG 2278), Christian commentators interpreted this theophanic episode as a prefiguration of Mary's virginal motherhood: "From this, [Gregory writes,] we learn also the mystery of the Virgin: the light of divinity which, through birth, shone from her into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth".[51]

This reading gained further doctrinal weight in the fifth-century Christological debates elicited by Mary's veneration under the epithet Theotokos or 'Bearer of God'.[52] The Virgin's Old Testament *typoi* were intensely mobilized by theologians who sought to counteract the term's opponents, namely, Archbishop Nestorius of Constantinople (in office 428-31) and his Antiochian acolytes. Like Gregory before him, Proclus of Constantinople (in office 434-46) evokes the thornbush that burned without being physically consumed as a symbol of the Virgin's paradoxical motherhood.[53] In the same period, Cyril of Alexandria (in office 412-44) expanded this metaphor's dogmatic scope, connecting it with the union of the Savior's divine and human natures in Mary's womb. In his treatise *On the Unity of Christ*, Cyril writes that God revealed his capacity to assume "the limitation of humanity" by "depicting [or painting] (*zōgraphōn*) the manner of his Incarnation in types".[54] The Lord descended onto the bush in the form of fire. Yet, despite wood's highly ignitable nature, the celestial

50 *Itinerarium Egeriae* IV.6-8, V.8-10, ed. Prinz 1960.

51 Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Moysii* II.21, ed. Daniélou 1955. For an English translation, see Malherbe, Ferguson 1978. Whenever possible, hagiographical works are accompanied by the numbers assigned by *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* (BHG); see Halkin 1957.

52 Grillmeier 1995, 39-40.

53 Proclus of Constantinople, *Homilia in Nativitatem Domini* 16-17, ed. Martin 1941; and *Laudatio de genitricis Mariae* VI.6, ed. Leroy 1967.

54 Cyril of Alexandria, *Quod unus sit Christus* 737, ed. De Durand 1964; transl. by McGuckin 1995.

flames did not consume the shrub's branches, thus, showing "how the divine nature of the Logos supported the limitations of humanity".[55] As a logical consequence of Cyril's demonstration, the instrument of the Incarnation – that is, the Virgin – became a sanctified receptacle that brought incompatible ontologies – fire and wood, divinity and humanity – into a mutually unaltering junction. It is noteworthy that, through the Greek verb *zōgrapheō*, Cyril presents the process through which God revealed this salvific miracle to Moses in terms of painting or pictorial representation. The analogy between prophetic vision and image-making played a decisive role in the later understanding of the burning bush *typos*.

After Nestorius' condemnation at the Council of Ephesus (431) and the subsequent Christological development at Chalcedon (451), the Marian reading of the Moses epiphany became a canonical reference in Byzantine homilies and hymnography.[56] Moreover, the Justinianic construction of the Virgin's Monastery at Sinai physically enshrined it into the biblical landscape. Despite this, Mary's typological association with the burning bush did not elicit a substantial figural tradition for many centuries to come.[57] The conceptual groundwork for this pictorial development, I believe, was laid during the eighth- and ninth-century debate around images. It was in this period that Greek-speaking writers from Syro-Palestine spearheaded the defense of figural imagery against its imperial detractors in Constantinople. One of these authors, John of Damascus (d. mid-eighth century), referred to the charismatic aura of the Sinai *locus sanctus* to ground the doctrine on icons.[58] This connection was all the more necessary since the main scriptural argument mobilized by the iconoclast party was the second commandment given to Moses on the holy mountain: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything" (Ex 20,4).[59] John composed ample treatises showing that the Mosaic interdiction did not apply to Christian images, whose

55 Cyril of Alexandria, *Quod unus sit Christus* 737, ed. De Durand 1964.

56 Tzvetkova-Ivanova 2000, 11-15 offers a selection of key examples.

57 Der Nersessian 1975, 336. References to the Marian exegesis of the burning bush were sometimes featured in earlier medieval visual culture. For example, a seventh- or eighth-century mural at the Deir al-Surian monastery in the Nitrian Desert, Egypt, portrays the Virgin's Annunciation amid four prophets, including Moses. The latter holds a scroll inscribed with the Coptic translation of Ex 3,2; see Innemée 1995; Kessler 2023, 22. Yet, such cases are rather exceptional and generally coming from outside the Byzantine environment. There is no compelling evidence of a coherent iconographic tradition going back earlier than the twelfth century.

58 Without explicitly linking these writings to Sinai, Pentcheva 2014-15 emphasizes the site's role in formulating a particular definition of Christian icons.

59 Barber 2002, 54-9; Louth 2002, 200-1. On the negotiation of this Mosaic prohibition in Byzantine image-making, see Kessler 2000. Elsner, Wolf 2010, 62; Pentcheva 2014-15, 201-2 examine its implications for the Sinai shrine.

legitimacy stemmed from the mystery of the Incarnation and thus surpassed the Hebrew Law.[60] Unfortunately, even a brief review of his full conception would go beyond the limits of this paper.[61] Suffice it to say that, among other arguments, John emphasizes that Sinai was a holy place not because of its association with the ban on material imagery, but precisely because it had harbored God's visual manifestation within the burning bush. The theologian believed that the *batos* itself was or contained an image, and that the biblical site derived its sanctity from this image's capacity to catalyze the sacred and imprint it into space.

Thus, in his *Second Apology against Those Who Attack the Divine Icons*, John amasses scriptural evidence showing that the Lord himself has always operated through images. God created man "in his own image" and expressed his salvific plan through images, which took shape in the prophets' visions almost as immaterial depictions.[62] This idea had already been embraced in the writings of earlier Church Fathers, such as the above-quoted Christological treatise by Cyril of Alexandria. Yet, for Cyril, the equivalence between prophetic visions and (painted) images was primarily rhetorical, serving as a compelling simile for his understanding of biblical typology. John turns this analogy into a self-standing theological argument. His demonstration invokes the burning bush not only as a symbolic foreshadowing of the Incarnation, but as "an image (*eikōn*) of God's Mother" – in a sense, her original icon.[63] The epiphanic shrub, John maintains, concentrated the Lord's presence into a visible form, anticipating the Savior's revelation in flesh and by extension, in material icons. Thus, he argues, the image-bearing bush must have possessed an inherent sacredness, which manifested itself spatially. The surrounding site, that is, absorbed the vision's aura, becoming a *locus sanctus*. To demonstrate this idea, John emphasizes that God himself called holy the ground where the epiphanic image of his future Incarnation was revealed to Moses. By recognizing the holiness of the site housing the image, the Lord implicitly sanctioned the latter's status as a source of sanctity. The theologian sums up the argument with a rhetorical question: "If the ground on which the image of the Theotokos appeared to Moses is holy, how much holier will it be the image itself? For it is not merely holy, but I dare say, the Holy of

60 John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2.7-10, ed. Kotter 1975; translated by Anderson 1980. For further context, see Barber 2002, 70-2.

61 Barber 2002, 70-6; Louth 2002, 193-221 provide an analysis of his ideas and works.

62 John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2.20, ed. Kotter 1975, with comments by Louth 2002, 206-7.

63 John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2.20, ed. Kotter 1975.

Holies".[64] John emphasizes the image's ability to generate emplaced sacrality. Moses' iconicized vision of the Virgin turns Mount Sinai into "holy ground", a consecrated area similar to the later Temple in Jerusalem. In this spatial container of visual revelation, Mary's proleptic figure functions as an epicenter of sacredness, that is, the Holy of Holies. Therefore, one should not be surprised that the subsequent figural tradition turned this visionary depiction of Theotokos into a driving principle of the site's aura as a *locus sanctus*.

The interdependence between the Virgin's epiphanic image and the mountain's divinely proclaimed status as "holy ground" constituted, in my view, the main theological impetus for articulating the Marian iconography of the burning bush. As far as the surviving material leads us, this figural step was only taken in the crusader period. Collins has convincingly shown that the earliest preserved panels depicting Mary within the *batos* were made toward the end of the twelfth century and at the beginning of the thirteenth, which is to say, in the decades around the 1187 reconquest of Jerusalem by the Ayyubid Sultan Salah ad-Din (r. 1174-93).[65] Their emergence testifies to a spiritual and artistic network connecting Mount Sinai with other centers of the Holy Land, such as Jerusalem and Acre. At a conceptual level, however, these representations bespeak a broader desire to distill the sanctity of the holy mountain into a visually graspable form.[66] Such aspirations had long been nurtured by local monks and pilgrims.[67] Yet, it was only in the late twelfth century that the site's biblical charisma was decisively poured into the Virgin's figure. In doing so, these novel images did not necessarily illustrate John of Damascus' writings. Rather, they advanced a similar theological reasoning in a pictorial fashion. While John strove to ground the icon's sacredness into the indisputable charisma of a biblical site, our panels used the Virgin's likeness to affirm the mountain's status as a *locus sanctus* connected with the history of salvation. To understand why this happened, it is necessary to have a closer look into the extant visual evidence.

Among the oldest examples of Mary's portrayal within the Sinai shrub, there is a late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century icon preserved in the collection of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in

64 Ἡ βάτος εἰκὼν ἦν τῆς θεομήτορος, καὶ μέλλοντι τῷ Μωσῇ ταύτῃ προσιέναι εἶπεν ὁ θεός· «Ὑπόλυσαι τὸ ὑπόδημα τῶν ποδῶν σου· ἡ γὰρ γῆ, ἐν ᾗ ἕστηκας, γῆ ἁγία ἐστίν.» Εἰ οὖν ἡ γῆ, ἐν ᾗ εἰκὼν τῆς θεοτόκου ὤφθη τῷ Μωσῇ, γῆ ἁγία ἐστί, πόσῳ μᾶλλον αὐτὴ ἡ εἰκών; Οὐ μόνον γὰρ ἁγία, ἀλλά, τολμῶ λέγειν, καὶ ἁγίων ἁγία (John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2.20, ed. Kotter 1975).

65 Collins 2006, 106-8.

66 Pentcheva 2014-15, 196, 203-7 attributes a similar function to the light effects produced by the burnished gold haloes and 'whirling' discs on eleventh- and twelfth-century Sinai icons; for a specific example, see below.

67 Weitzmann 1974, especially 52-4; 1982, 21.

Jerusalem **[fig. 8]**.[68] The panel shows the Sinai shrub within a rocky valley, flanked by two peaks. Its dark branches seem to grow along the Virgin's bust-length figure. In the background, a gigantic flame bursts from the ground, encasing Mary's body in a mandorla-like shape. A gleaming red effigy of the infant Christ floats before his mother's chest, as if the supernatural fire had permeated her flesh being molded into iconic representation. Like in the later Ohrid fresco, "the angel of the Lord" calls Moses' attention to the vision. This time, however, he does not speak from the bush but flies into the composition from the left side. Collins interprets this alteration of the expected narrative setting as an allusion to the Virgin's Annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel.[69] The Gospel scene is also referred to by what seems to be a wool skein depicted in Mary's right hand.[70] Upon witnessing this foreshadowing of Christ's Incarnation, Moses removes his sandals and then, in a second narrative iteration, approaches the shrub barefoot.

Apart from the novel typological iconography, the panel exhibits an uncommon attentiveness to the topography of Mount Sinai. As mentioned above, the Marian shrub stands in a rocky hollow between two mountains of different heights. This configuration mimics the real location of the Burning Bush Monastery, which is situated between two major peaks. Commonly known under the Arabic name Jebel Musa (i.e., Mount Moses), the lower one was believed to be the place where the prophet received the tablets of the Law.[71] The higher summit, however, had elicited a different narrative tradition by that time. According to legend, the beheaded body of the martyr Catherine of Alexandria was miraculously transported by angels onto the highest peak of Mount Sinai, which was thereby called Jebel Katrina (i.e., Mount St. Catherine). Her relics were later discovered by monks and brought to the monastery for veneration.[72] In the period when the Jerusalem panel was painted, Jebel Musa and Jebel Katrina were widely recognized as the major landmarks of the Sinai Monastery.[73] Their incorporation into the spatial setting of the burning bush scene allows us to include the icon into the larger

68 Collins 2006, 108. The chronological sequence of this panel and the examples discussed below can only be relative, since their dating is exclusively based on formal and iconographic examination.

69 Collins 2006, 108.

70 Collins 2006, 108. The current situation in the Middle East has prevented me from inspecting this panel directly. Moreover, all available photographs, including the picture published by Collins, are of a mediocre quality. Therefore, the identification and analysis of such minute details should be subject to further analysis.

71 Jacoby 2006, 79-80.

72 On St. Catherine's cult at Sinai, see Ševčenko 2006.

73 See Drandaki 2006, 493-4 for a comprehensive discussion of pilgrim accounts.

category of *loca sancta* images previously discussed by Weitzmann.[74] This group of representations produced within or for the Holy Land is characterized by a great investment in "very specific topographical details" meant to assist or simulate the experience of pilgrimage.[75] Therefore, it is safe to assume, in line with Weitzmann's reflections, that the panel's iconography spoke to a tradition from the shrine's spiritual, if not geographical sphere.

Further evidence in this sense is adduced by the ample corpus of icons currently in the collection of St. Catherine's Monastery.[76] Due to the lack of documents, the exact dating and provenance of these panels remain famously insecure. However, whether they were made at Sinai, brought by pilgrims, or sent as donations from abroad is a secondary matter to my argument. What is important to acknowledge is that their impressively coherent iconography reflects a broader elevation of the Virgin's image as the central expression of the site's sanctity, continuing John of Damascus' line of thought.[77] Compared to the Jerusalem example, these icons take a different approach to the Marian iconography of the burning bush. Instead of depicting a fully fleshed-out narrative scene, they provide an iconic synthesis of the Old Testament story.

Though it only reached its complete development around 1200, this formula was already outlined on a panel generally dated to the late eleventh- or the early twelfth century. The icon displays the enthroned Mother of God within an elaborate frame composed of twelve rectangular compartments **[fig. 9]**.[78] These marginal vignettes are mainly inhabited by prophets holding unfolded scrolls inscribed with Greek texts referring to the Virgin's scriptural *typoi*. Amidst them, on Mary's right-hand side, Moses stands before a depiction of the burning bush, which rises atop a minute rendition of the holy mountain. His scroll quotes Exodus 3,3: "When I pass by (*parelthōn*), I will look at this great sight (*to horama to mega touto*)".[79] Although the flaming shrub does not contain a Marian effigy, Moses' gaze moves past it – in keeping with the sense of the Greek verb *parerchomai* – and

74 Weitzmann 1974; 1982.

75 Weitzmann 1982, 21.

76 Collins 2006, 100-4.

77 Elsner, Wolf 2010 foreground the strong iconographic localism of the Sinai panels, which undergirds their formal diversity.

78 Mouriki 1990, 105; Belting 1994, 290; Weyl Carr 1994; Collins 2006, 108.

79 παρελθὼν ὄψομαι τὸ ὅραμα τὸ μέγα τοῦτο; the inscription was published by Mouriki 1990, 385 fn. 27 alongside the texts written on the scrolls of the other characters.

rests upon the central portrayal of the Mother of God.[80] The *batos*, therefore, is not looked at but looked through. It serves as a visionary channel through which the prophet contemplates the great *horama*, that is, the comparatively gigantic Virgin holding the incarnate God. While no sources attest to the panel's place of origin and makers, who may have been linked to Constantinople, Doula Mouriki and Annemarie Weyl Carr suggest that it was commissioned for the Sinai community.[81] Pentcheva brings further arguments in this sense, proposing that the characters' burnished haloes captured the incandescent appearance of the rocks that witnessed the Lord's manifestation before Moses.[82]

Several thirteenth-century Sinai panels expand on the prophet's pairing with the Virgin within a pictorial setting alluding to the Exodus 3 episode. On them, Mary's figure and the burning bush are not only juxtaposed, but conflated, similar to the abovementioned Jerusalem depiction and the later Ohrid mural. One of these icons, for instance, shows the Theotokos carrying Christ alongside the martyr Catherine **[fig. 10]**. The incandescent branches of the bush creep like ivy upon the Virgin's body. At her feet, Moses' reduplicated figure appears in the customary iconographic schema associated with Exodus 3.[83] While this example maintains a series of narrative attributes, the vast majority of coeval Sinai icons limit themselves to a laconic depiction of Mary with no further elements save the divine child before her chest.

Nonetheless, as we can see on another early thirteenth-century panel depicting the Theotokos among saintly hermits, this otherwise generic representation is pinned to the spiritual landscape of Mount Sinai through the highly idiosyncratic *titulus M*(*ētē*)*r Th*(*eo*)*u <tēs> Batou* (The Mother of God of the <Burning> Bush) **[fig. 11]**.[84] The Sinaitic background of the bystanding saints – from left to right, Georgios, Neilos, Anastasios, and John Klimakos – strengthens the image's localism. By flanking the Virgin of the Burning Bush, the four Sinai hermits tie Moses' experience of contemplating the Lord's visible form to the spiritual practices of thirteenth-century

80 Belting 1994, 290 remarks that the dynamics of gazes is particularly important on this panel: for instance, the Virgin looks down toward the elder Symeon, recalling the narrative schema of Christ's Presentation in the Temple; see also Weyl Carr 1994, 247-8.

81 Mouriki 1990, 385 fn. 28; Weyl Carr 1994, 248. Belting 1994, 290 regards it as a Constantinopolitan product without elaborating on the original purpose of its commission. It is not unlikely that the panel was a Byzantine gift for the Sinai monastery; Drandaki 2006, 498-9; and Pentcheva 2014-15, 207-10 elaborate on the eleventh- and twelfth-century connections between the imperial capital and the holy mountain.

82 Pentcheva 2014-15, 204.

83 Nelson, Collins 2006, cat. no. 56.

84 Collins 2006, 101.

local monks. The icon's visionary dimension becomes particularly evident in the case of St. Anastasios, who stands on Mary's left side. Unlike the other fathers, whose poses are rigidly frontal, Anastasios turns his gaze to the small figure of Christ held by his mother. This discreet move might not have been haphazard. As a leader of the Sinai community in the seventh and early eighth centuries, Anastasios composed a homily on the Lord's Transfiguration or *Metamorphōsis* (August 6; BHG 1999), in which he presented the holy mountain as an ideal site of spiritual contemplation (*theōria*) directed at the visionary encounter with God.[85] Our panel alludes to this Sinaitic tradition presenting Anastasios as an exemplary portrayal of contemplative practices. However, in this new figural context, the monastery's ancient ideal of *theōria* was rearticulated around Mary, whose figure had become Sinai's spiritual core. It is her image that serves as the framework and medium for the vision of the Lord, which local ascetics sought to attain by emulating Moses.[86]

Elsner and Wolf connect the rise of the Virgin *tēs Batou* theme with a contemporaneous reconfiguration of the monastery's identity as a *locus sanctus* and a pilgrimage center.[87] In the early thirteenth century, the devotional emphasis of the Sinai shrine shifted from the sites of biblical events to the cult of St. Catherine. Her miracle-working body had been transferred to the sanctuary area of the main church sometime before 1214, when Abbot Symeon wrote a liturgical *typikon* attesting to its presence within the monastery's precinct.[88] The veneration of the virgin martyr spurred an immense popularity in the crusader period, particularly among Latin Christians.[89] The Virgin of the Burning Bush was likely meant to preserve and enhance the monastery's association with Moses' visionary experiences alongside the veneration of the martyr's bodily relics. The typological representation of Mary within the shrub provided a corporeal counterpart to St. Catherine's physical presence, accentuating the major role that Sinai played in the history of human salvation.[90] This refashioning responded to a growing importance of the devotion to

85 Anastasios of Sinai, Λόγος εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν μεταμόρφωσιν, ed. Guillou 1955; for an English translation, see Daley 2013, 163-78.

86 Cf. Kessler 2019, 81-4 for a discussion of the Virgin as a medium in Western medieval thought.

87 Elsner, Wolf 2010.

88 Ševčenko 2004; 2006, 2; Safran 2023, 85-9.

89 Safran 2023.

90 Elsner, Wolf 2010, 69.

the Mother of God, which characterized both the Eastern and Western sides of Mediterranean Christendom during the later Middle Ages.[91]

One cannot help but wonder whether this incarnational turn in local imagery could have been facilitated by the late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century political context of the Holy Land. In the period when the images of the Mother of God *tēs Batou* were created around Sinai, Christian control of major locales of Jesus' earthly life, such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth, had become increasingly precarious due to the restored Islamic rule.[92] Under such circumstances, it is not unlikely that the Sinai shrine tried to absorb part of the New Testament charisma of Palestine by presenting the burning bush episode as a major step toward the accomplishment of God's salvific plan. In other words, the material *locus sanctus* originally linked to Mosaic theophanies was now turned, by means of Marian imagery, into a mystical *locus* of the Incarnation. The locally assimilated image of the Virgin endowed Sinai with a charismatic aura comparable to Palestinian shrines such as Joseph's house in Nazareth or the Nativity cave in the Bethlehem Basilica.[93] This typological restyling catered to both Greek and Latin Christians.[94] Moreover, it had significant echoes across the Levant as the depiction of the Virgin within the burning bush was disseminated through the monastery's outposts or *metochia* within the crusader states.[95]

Sinai stood at the center of an impressive network that benefitted from the protection and support of the Latin ecclesiastical hierarchy and secular overlords.[96] A document from the chancery of Pope Honorius III (in office 1216-27) provides a comprehensive picture of the community's Eastern Mediterranean satellites.[97] On August 6, 1217, on the feast of the Lord's Transfiguration, the pontiff confirmed the properties and privileges of St. Mary's Monastery on Mount Sinai. The text lists countless houses and subordinate priories that the shrine possessed in Egypt, the Holy Land, and across the Levant. Among them, Honorius' scribes mention "the hospital and the dependency of St. Moses (*obedientiam Sancti Moysi*), houses and an oven" in Jerusalem, "houses and lands" in Jaffa, "St. Catherine's dependency (*obedientiam Sanctae Catherinae*)" in Acre, "the church

91 Rubin 2009, 177 describes a "creeping 'marianization' of religious culture" in twelfth-century Europe, which continued in the subsequent period.

92 Folda 2008, 84-5.

93 On the significance of the Bethlehem shrine in the crusader period, see Bacci 2017, 113-219.

94 Drandaki 2006, 495-6; Collins 2006.

95 Folda 2008, 84; Corrie 2010.

96 Lafontaine-Dosogne 1996, 116-17.

97 Tăutu 1950, no. 17, 35-7.

of St. George" in Damascus, "two confraternities" at the Monastery of St. George in Mangana, Constantinople (at that time, under Latin rule), as well as outposts on the islands of Crete and Cyprus.[98] These establishments must have acted as hubs for the circulation of images, texts, objects, and religious ideas from and toward Mount Sinai.[99]

At least two icons from the monastery's collection, attributed to painters active in the mid-thirteenth-century Levant, bear witness to this phenomenon.[100] A strong case was made that these panels were produced in Acre, the center of the shrinking Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem.[101] Their dating and attribution draw on the striking formal resemblance to deluxe illuminated manuscripts produced at Saint-Jean d'Acre, such as a missal from the San Lorenzo Cathedral in Perugia (Museo Capitolare, MS 6) and the Arsenal Bible (Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5211) commissioned by King Louis IX of France (r. 1226-70).[102] The panels' iconography, style, and technique combine the Byzantine tradition with Frankish features, providing the best example of images designed around the *loca sancta*, which could appeal to both Eastern and Western audiences.[103]

The first one is a small devotional panel portraying the Mother of God *tēs Batou* between Moses, Elijah, and the saintly bishop Gregory of Nazianzos, whose surprising presence may relate to a personal devotion of an unknown patron **[fig. 12]**.[104] With gentle hands, Mary touches her infant's shoulder and thigh, without actually supporting him.[105] Rather, Christ seems to float in front of his mother's bosom in a manner more akin to a vision than a solid presence. The panel exhibits no inscription linking the Mother of God with the burning bush and does not visualize any painted branches growing on her body. Yet, both the Virgin and the three bystanding saints are surrounded by spiraling acanthus-like vines. These interlacing scrolls were meticulously modelled in pastiglia and then coated in what appears to be silver leaf with some gold accents.[106] This ornamental device

98 Tăutu 1950, no. 17, 35-6.

99 Drandaki 2006, 495.

100 Weitzmann 1963, 192-4, 199-200; 1982, 291-324.

101 Weitzmann 1963, 200-2; Folda 2005, 327-34; Corrie 2010, especially 429, 435; cf. Cormack 2008, 80-2.

102 Folda 2005, 324; Cormack 2008, 71, 74. A digital facsimile of the Arsenal Bible is available at `https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b550071673/f13.item`.

103 Cormack 2008, 74.

104 Weitzmann 1963, 199-200; Folda 2005, 328-9.

105 Folda 2005, 328.

106 Its exact metal components can only be determined through scientific investigations which I have not been able to conduct at this stage.

had a broader use in panels attributed to the crusader environment.[107] It also occurs, for example, on a contemporaneous icon representing St. George on horseback, now at the British Museum in London.[108] However, this relief background acquired a special meaning in relation to the Virgin's figure. The vegetal motifs, I suspect, served as an evocation of the bush's branches from the Moses story.[109] Due to the highly reflective properties of metal leaf, in the medieval context of reception, the molded tendrils would have been set ablaze by the fire of candles and natural light. Through this optical activation, the panel's silver background would have provided an animated actualization of Mary's epiphanic image within the shrub's foliage.[110]

For a beholder familiarized with the thirteenth-century Sinai shrine, the glittering relief vines would probably have recalled the setting of the ancient Burning Bush chapel, erected at the eastern end of the Justinianic basilica on the site traditionally associated with Moses' encounter with God. Though most of its medieval furnishings went missing, the chapel's appearance during the crusader period was described by Thietmar, a German pilgrim who visited the monastery in 1217.[111] Thietmar reports that the bush itself no longer existed, its branches having been cut and distributed as relics.[112] The site was instead marked by a material representation:

> In its likeness, however, a golden bush was made from sheets of gold, with a golden image of the Lord above the bush and a golden image of Moses standing to the right of the bush, taking off his sandals. Another golden image of Moses stands on the left side of the bush, as though already barefoot.[113]

107 Folda 2005, 328; Corrie 2010, 435-6.

108 Cormack, Mihalarias 1984; Cormack 2002; 2008; Folda 2005, 329-30; for a digital reproduction, see `https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1984-0601-1_1`.

109 Kessler 2024, 109 highlights similar uses of acanthus vines in Western European art, including a twelfth-century depiction of the burning bush (without the Virgin's figure) at S. Maria Immacolata in Ceri near Rome; cf. Zchomelidse 2003.

110 On the phenomenal activation of gold relief icons, see Pentcheva 2010, especially 121-54.

111 *Magistri Thietmari Peregrinatio* XVIII, ed. Laurent 1857, comprehensively discussed by Pringle 1998, 52-3; Drandaki 2006, 495-501.

112 *Magistri Thietmari Peregrinatio* XVIII, ed. Laurent 1857.

113 *[…] ad instar autem illius rubi factus est aureus rubus ex laminis aureis, et ymago Domini aurea super rubum, et ymago Moysi aurea stans ad dexteram rubi, discalcians se. Stat et alia ymago Moysi aurea in sinistra parte rubi tamquam discalciata et nudis pedibus*. *Magistri Thietmari Peregrinatio* XVIII, ed. Laurent 1857; the translation follows Pringle 1998, 52 with minor changes.

As Anastasia Drandaki points out, Thietmar likely saw a now-lost relief image – a panel or perhaps self-standing silhouettes – depicting Moses' encounter with the bush as a vision of the pre-incarnate Logos.[114] This metal image marked the holiest area of the monastic precinct. According to Thietmar, the chapel attracted all kinds of Christians, as well as Muslims. All of them, from bishops and monks to the great sultan of Babylon (i.e., Cairo), who had also come as a pilgrim, were required to remove their footwear at the entrance, in imitation of Moses' gesture in Exodus 3.[115] It is therefore plausible that a thirteenth-century panel invested in Sinai's status as a *locus sanctus* would incorporate visual allusions to the shrine's epicenter of sanctity. By enveloping the figure of the Mother of God *tēs Batou* in a web of silver-coated *pastiglia* vines, the icon may have evoked the memory of the metal relief seen by devotees such as Thietmar within the Burning Bush chapel, thereby linking the Virgin's body to Sinai's most sacred place.

Perhaps more explicitly than the silvered scrollwork background, the Virgin's epiphanic dimension is foregrounded by her association with Moses and Elijah. The two prophets direct their gazes and right hands toward the Savior, in the customary gesture of theophanic scenes. Indeed, their pairing around the figure of Christ evokes the traditional schema of the Transfiguration on Mount Thabor.[116] This image had a particular significance for the Sinai Monastery, as it constituted the iconographic core of the well-known mid-sixth-century mosaic program commissioned by Emperor Justinian **[fig. 13]**.[117] By depicting the infant Christ between the two prophets, our crusader icon yields further symbolic depth to the Marian image of the burning bush. Within this intervisual configuration, the representation of the Virgin acts not only as a retrospective reference to the Sinai shrub, but also as a corporeal actualization of the holy mountain – be it Sinai or Thabor – as a *locus* of divine manifestation.[118] This metaphorical extrapolation is also marked by the inscription on Moses' open scroll, which quotes God's calling onto the mountaintop in Exodus 24,12:

114 Drandaki 2006, 495-7. Christ's image within the burning bush constitutes a distinct iconographic tradition, whose history is beyond the scope of this paper; see Zchomelidse 2003.

115 *Magistri Thietmari Peregrinatio* XVIII, ed. Laurent 1857.

116 Matt 17,1-8; Mark 9,2-8; Luke 9,28-36.

117 Weitzmann 1982, 5-18; Elsner 1994.

118 Elsner 1994, 94 observes that the sixth-century apse mosaic overlays the visionary topographies of the two mountains; see also Voordeckers 1988, 177-8.

"The Lord said to Moses: 'Ascend toward me [on the mountain]'".[119] Yet in contrast to the ancient Transfiguration mosaic, the crusader icon moves the emphasis from the overt epiphany of Christ's divine majesty to its concealed revelation in the humble form of a babe.

The second Acre panel testifies to this metonymic expansion of Mary's visionary image, using her not only as an iconic reference to the burning bush, but also as representation of the theophanic mountain as a site of visions **[fig. 14]**. As usual, the composition centers on the standing figure of the Mother of God.[120] This time, however, the Virgin appears in the *Hodēgētria* formula. Elevated on a rectangular pedestal, Mary carries Christ in her left hand and points to him with the right in a gesture of revelation and intercession. The Apostles Peter and Paul flank her, accompanied by the saintly hermits Antony the Great and Euthymios, the champions of late antique asceticism in Egypt and Palestine.[121]

Above them, a stylized depiction of Mount Sinai stretches like a stony canopy. This quasi-architectural framing is reminiscent of tenth- and eleventh-century Constantinopolitan ivories, which often enshrine depictions of the *Deēsis*, as well as biblical episodes, in ciborium-like structures. On the icon, however, the canopy's extrados accommodates two abbreviated narrative scenes, which occupy the panel's spandrel-like corners. On the left side, an elderly Moses raises his covered hands waiting to receive the divine tablets. Before him,

119 Written in black majuscules, the original text on Moses' *rotulus* reads: + ὴπεν κ(υριο)ς προς μωσην ανα<βηθι>. At an unknown later date, this inscription was overwritten in red letters. The second layer preserves a longer portion of the same verse: + ὴπεν κ(υριο)ς προς μωσης αναβι προσ με κ(υριο)ς πη...εε. Weitzmann 1963, 199 identifies the passage but does not provide a transcription. The Septuagint text of Exodus 24,12 reads: καὶ εἶπεν κύριος πρὸς Μωυσῆν Ἀνάβηθι πρός με εἰς τὸ ὄρος καὶ ἴσθι ἐκεῖ. In addition to rewriting the scriptural quote, the later hand retraced the scroll's contour and altered its layout by distributing the text over a greater number of lines. The script is less accomplished than that of the mid-thirteenth-century original. Elijah's *rotulus* follows the same palimpsest pattern. Its original black inscription, later retraced in red, refers to the emblematic oath formula marking the prophet's entrance into the biblical narrative: ζη κ(υριο)ς και ζη υ ψυχη μου η εστην ηετος (The Lord lives, and my soul lives, if there shall be rain). The text reproduces 1 Kings 17,1 in an abbreviated form, likely quoted from memory and perhaps mediated through a liturgical source; cf. the Septuagint version: ζῇ κύριος ὁ θεὸς τῶν δυνάμεων ὁ θεὸς Ισραηλ, ᾧ παρέστην ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, εἰ ἔσται τὰ ἔτη ταῦτα δρόσος καὶ ὑετὸς ὅτι εἰ μὴ διὰ στόματος λόγου μου (The Lord lives, the God of powers, the God of Israel, before whom I stand, if there shall be dew and rain these years, except by the word of my mouth). The icon's inscriptions display pronounced signs of iotacism, a common feature of medieval Greek epigraphs. As Agapitos 2018, 90 observes, this phenomenon should not be regarded as corruption or provincialism, but rather as evidence of the inscriptions' oral dimension.

120 Folda 2005, 333-4.

121 Weitzmann 1963, 192-4.

there is a small bush. [122] Yet, his gaze passes over it, fixating the mountain's summit, which rises as the canopy's apex. On the other slope, Elijah is seated within a crevice, turning his eyes toward the same peak, while a raven brings him a circular loaf. This scene conflates several episodes from the prophet's scriptural story in a typical formula of Sinaitic visual culture.[123] It uses Elijah's sojourn in the Judean desert, when the Lord nourished him through ravens (1 Kings 17,4-6), as an iconographic matrix. However, it also alludes to the prophet's journey to Sinai. Elijah took shelter in a cave on Mount Horeb, from where he witnessed God's manifestation in a gentle breeze (1 Kings 19,9-13). This local reference activates Elijah's visionary dimension, which is additionally enhanced by his coupling with Moses on the slopes of the theophanic mountain.

By inserting her figure into this elaborate topographical framing, the panel portrays the Virgin as a corporeal equivalent of the holy mountain. The Mother of God *Hodēgētria* and the theophanic summit are aligned along the composition's central axis. Even so, beyond their functional overlap as receptacles of divine presence, Mary's figure and the depiction of Mount Sinai differ in a major aspect. While the Virgin holds the incarnate manifestation of God, the Sinai landscape is rendered as completely barren. Although the two prophets gaze intently at its rocky peak, in a formula evoking the Transfiguration, their eyes do not encounter any palpable vestige of the Lord's presence. This omission could not have been accidental, especially since Moses raises his hands in expectation of the God-written tablets. However, no celestial hand descends to offer them. Nor is there a divine flame to kindle the withered bush before him.

By contrast, the Virgin's hand gesture guides the viewers to the infant Christ. Her image, therefore, fulfills and supersedes the role of the actual mountain as a site of theophanic encounter. Metaphorically speaking, the icon of the Theotokos absorbs the blaze of the Old Testament theophany, leaving the shrub extinguished and the rocky summit empty. The panel proclaims Mary's immaculate body, inscribed in painting, as the true mountain of God, which in the words of Psalm 68,15, is a fertile mountain, "rich" and "curdled like cheese". It is on this corporeal site of vitality and abundance that Christians can mystically experience the Lord's revelation in flesh. Notably, the Virgin's rendition as the mountain of theophany is accompanied by the leaders of the apostles, the main witnesses of the Savior's coming on earth and the pillars of his Church. Their testimonial role

122 Weitzmann 1963, 192; Folda 2005, 334.

123 On the depiction of Elijah in the wilderness and its implications for Eastern monasticism, see Voordeckers 1988, 177-82; cf. Rigo 2023, especially 215-31; Dumitrescu 2025, 275-82.

is complemented by Antony and Euthymios. As exemplary hermits, the two saints connect the visionary models of Moses and Elijah with the Christian monasticism flourishing on Mount Sinai.[124] However, their juxtaposition with the Mother of God indicates that it was through her mediation that local ascetics could attain the most direct encounter with the Lord.

Whilst attributed to a workshop from Acre, the two panels examined above exhibit an exceptional familiarity with both the visual culture and devotional atmosphere of Mount Sinai. It is very likely that these icons were intended as gifts for the Burning Bush shrine and perhaps even made, as Jaroslav Folda suggests, at the house in Acre.[125] If this hypothesis is correct, the Sinai *metochion* in the crusader capital must have constituted one of the main channels through which the *locus sanctus* iconography of Mary was transmitted across the Levant.

A slightly later miniature from an Armenian lectionary commissioned by Prince Hethum II, the future king of Cilicia (r. 1289-1307), lends further support to this idea.[126] Produced in 1286, this lavishly illuminated manuscript (Yerevan, Matenadaran, MS 979) contains two marginal representations of Mary within the burning bush.[127] The first accompanies the passage from Exodus 3,2-5 on f. 94v **[fig. 15a]**.[128] The shrub's lush branches wind around the holy mountain, enfolding Moses, who appears in the customary pose untying his sandals. The prophet directs his gaze toward the summit, where the Virgin's bust emerges from the foliage with her hands raised in prayer and the Christ Child wrapped in her maphorion. Mary's rounded visage, slightly turned posture, and half-length format, together with the shrub's elongated outline, are remarkably akin to the later Ohrid mural. In the Hethum manuscript, however, the bush's fleshy leaves curve around her nimbus, forming a symmetrical structure reminiscent of an acanthus-shaped acroterion. At its summit blooms a small, multi-petaled flower touched by the rays emanating from a golden orb, which hovers in the air. The shining medallion bears an effigy of the "Ancient of Days" (Dan. 7,9-10), the manifestation of the Logos as the Father's image.[129] In a typical formula of Byzantine and Eastern Christian iconography, this image acts as a pre-incarnational counterpart to the depiction of the

124 Weitzmann 1963, 193-4; Folda 2005, 334.

125 Folda 2005, 329; Corrie 2010, 425-9 proposes additional arguments. On Sinai's Acre outpost, see Pringle 2009, no. 400, 73.

126 On Hethum II, see Stewart 2001, 65-183.

127 Der Nersessian 1993, 1: 120-1; Rapti 2008, 122-3, 140.

128 Der Nersessian 1993, 1: 120.

129 On this theme, see Grabar 1968; Bucur 2019, 208-46.

infant held by his mother.[130] The radiance surrounding the elderly God seems to imbue the holy mountain with vitality and kindles its expansive vegetation with immaterial fire.[131] Thus, the composition depicts the Logos as a luminous source of life that permeates creation and becomes manifest in the human form of an infant.

An analogous incarnational symbolism is articulated in the second miniature **[fig. 15b]**. Located on f. 228r, the scene is appended to a liturgical reading from the New Testament, namely Acts 7,30-4.[132] The pericope consists of St. Stephen's speech before the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, in which the protomartyr recalls Moses' encounter with the Sinai shrub as a prefiguration of the salvific mystery enacted through Jesus Christ. The Virgin is depicted as a standing figure poised upon the shrub's flaming foliage. Here too, her hands are lifted in the orant pose, while a medallion containing the bust of Christ appears before her chest.

Although iconographically distinct, the Hethum miniatures exhibit a certain formal affinity with the Acre icons. In the second image in particular, the Virgin's physiognomic features and the treatment of her vestments are particularly similar to the panel depicting the Mother of God *tēs Batou* between Moses and Elijah. Since Armenian Cilicia fostered strong connections with the neighboring Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, one might assume that the illuminators of the Hethum codex adapted an earlier Sinaitic model filtered through the crusader milieu.[133] The inflection of the *Batos* iconography in the Cilician manuscript was merely a symptom of a much broader reception across the Eastern Mediterranean.

3 Mirroring Mountains: Sinai and Sion as Topographical Poles of Sacred History

Already in the 1286 Hethum lectionary, the Marian image of the burning bush had been detached from any overt form of Sinaitic localism. What was originally meant as a titular representation of the monastery had now been transformed into a typological image of salvation conveying a more universal message activated in the performative framework of liturgical lections. This tendency gained further traction in late thirteenth-century Byzantium. Less than a decade after the Cilician manuscript, the Ohrid rendition of Moses

130 Dumitrescu 2025, 273-4, 286-7.

131 Cf. Baschet, Bonne, Dittmar 2012, 43-95; Kessler 2024.

132 Der Nersessian 1993, 1: 120, where the miniature is erroneously listed on f. 229r.

133 On the relationship between the thirteenth-century Cilician Kingdom and the crusader states, see Ghazarian 2015; Chookaszian 2021.

before the burning bush proves how the Sinai rhetoric of the holy mountain as a *locus* of God's salvific presence could be symbolically replicated beyond the physical *loca sancta*.[134] Put differently, a representation originally meant to explicate the soteriological meaning of an individual place sanctified by a divine manifestation in a distant past could provide a model of sacred space: that is, a symbolically demarcated precinct framing the encounter with God in the ever-renewed present of liturgical time.

The precise channels through which the Sinaitic iconography of the Virgin within the burning bush entered the Palaiologan repertoire cannot be determined with certainty. Nevertheless, the circulation of painters and visual traditions connected with the Levantine environment is attested in thirteenth-century Southeastern Europe. Made sometime between 1222 and 1227, the frescoes of Mileševa Monastery in Serbia showcase conspicuous affinities with contemporaneous crusader icons from Mount Sinai.[135] Likewise, a mid-thirteenth-century master trained in the same tradition as the Acre workshop painted a mural cycle of St. Francis of Assisi at the church of the Virgin Kyriotissa (Kalenderhane Camii) in Constantinople.[136] In addition, monks, prelates, and noblemen from the Late Byzantine Empire and the Southern Slavic Kingdoms traveled to Mount Sinai and the Holy Land, facilitating the transmission of images, religious texts, and ideas.[137]

This last aspect is particularly important for understanding the Ohrid depiction of the Virgin within the burning bush. While resembling some features of the first miniature in the Hethum lectionary, the fresco does not seem to reproduce a pre-existing model. Rather, it reinvents the theme and adapts its conceptual premises to the broader iconographic and theological program of the Peribleptos church. As posited above, the monumental composition on the west wall of the narthex offers a paradigmatic scenario of circumscribing the space of the Lord's epiphany. The designers of the Ohrid wall paintings drew a parallel between the biblical site of the burning bush and the sacred precinct of the church, mobilizing the archetypal logic of the ritual delimitation between the sacred and profane spaces.[138] Once again, this interpretation is reminiscent of John of Damascus' iconophile oration. The text regards the *locus* of Moses' vision as a temple-like

134 This pattern of translocation finds a slightly later parallel in Latin Christendom: Safran 2023, 113-16 identifies an attempt at replicating the architecture of the Sinai basilica at the late fourteenth-century church of S. Caterina in Galatina, Southern Italy.

135 Živković 2021.

136 Striker, Kuban 1997, 128-42, pl. 155-70; Folda 2005, 299-336; Corrie 2010, 416.

137 Dragojlović 1987; Tarnanidis 1987; Rigo 2002.

138 Eliade 1959.

structure, where the "image of the Mother of God" stands for the most sacred chamber, the Holy of Holies.[139]

In the Ohrid example, the symbolic equivalence between the epiphanic mountain and the sacred building was suggested by the latter's position on a flat hill overlooking the medieval city and the nearby lake **[fig. 16]**. From this conspicuous spot, the church seems to embody the Greek epithet *peribleptos*, literally translated as 'the one to be looked at from all sides', hence 'admired'.[140] More significantly, however, the building's place within the Ohrid terrain facilitates a synergy between the iconography of its painted interior and the characteristics of its natural surroundings. Upon noticing the semantic centrality of the Sinai composition, the community of medieval monks and believers were likely encouraged to identify the site of the Peribleptos monastery as a holy mountain. Within the church's walls, God manifested his presence as he had done before both in the shrub that Moses encountered on the slopes of the mountain, and on the latter's peak.[141] Through the symbolic conflation with the biblical site, the building becomes an architectural counterpart to the Mother of God herself, whose sanctified body acted as a *locus* of the Incarnation.[142]

The cycle of Old Testament *typoi* painted on the narthex walls enhances this nexus of analogies. On the north tympanum, Nebuchadnezzar sees the Virgin's prefiguration as a stony mountain imprinted with her *imago clipeata* **[fig. 6]**. Similarly, on the south side, the divine Logos appears in the angelic guise of Sophia, God's Wisdom, who "built herself a house and supported it with seven pillars" (Prov. 9,1). The edifice rises in the background as a temple whose pediment bears Mary's sculpted bust, alluding to her role as Christ's corporeal abode **[fig. 7]**. These two compositions face each other across the chamber, framing the burning bush scene spatially and strengthening the functional equivalence between the Virgin's

139 John of Damascus, *Orationes de imaginibus tres*, 2.20, ed. Kotter 1975.

140 On the term's meaning, see the entry in Liddell, Scott 1996; Zarov 2007, 58. The monastery's dedication to the Mother of God Peribleptos references a major Constantinopolitan monastery founded by Romanos III (r. 1028-34) and restored by Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1259-82) after the 1261 reconquest of the Byzantine capital; see Mango 1992; Dark 1999. Marian churches bearing the same title are attested in Thessalonike and Mystras. The rules of other Greek monasteries of the Virgin include *peribleptos* as a secondary epithet. The late thirteenth-century *typikon* of S. Maria in Grottaferrata near Rome provides such an example: the document mentions Abbot Blasios τῆς περιβλέπτου μονῆς τῆς ὑπεραγίας θ(εοτό)κου τῆς ἐπονομαζομένης τῆς κρυπτοφέρρης (of the admired monastery of the Most Holy Bearer of God, which is called of Grottaferrata); see Grottaferrata, Biblioteca del Monumento Nazionale, Γ.α.1 = gr.210, f. 1r.

141 Della Dora 2016, 147-75.

142 Cf. Pentcheva 2004.

body, the *topos* of the holy mountain, and the temple's – or the church's – sacred building.

While being explicitly thematized within the narthex murals, the topographic symbolism developed around Moses' theophanies on Sinai provides a more general structural principle for the church's fresco program. This conceptual pattern reverberates into the selection and spatial arrangement of narrative scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin painted in the upper zones of the cross-in-square naos. Within the church's main compartment, the west tympanum and wall display the superimposed depictions of the Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and Mary's Dormition and Assumption or Transferal (*Metastasis*) into heaven **[fig. 17]**. In his seminal essay on Middle Byzantine mosaic programs, Otto Demus emphasizes the capacity of narrative programs to evoke the major locales of the Gospel history in a visual actualization of the Holy Land.[143] Drawing on Demus' observation, I suggest that the Pentecost-*Koimēsis* nucleus appears as a topographical counterpart to the narthex images of the Sinai theophanies.

Christian tradition claims that both the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin's death took place on a sacred height, namely, Mount Sion outside the walls of Jerusalem. [144] Pilgrim accounts, such as the late twelfth-century *Ekphrasis* traditionally attributed to John Phokas, situate these events even within the same architectural complex.[145] According to John, the Holy Sion was "a church of great size with vaulted roof" rising within a castle on the right-hand side of Jerusalem. Within its precinct, there is "the house of St. John the Evangelist, where the thrice-blessed Virgin dwelt after the Resurrection, and where she fell asleep". An "iron railing" marked the spot where Mary "yielded up her soul to her Son and God". In the same church, on the right-hand side of the altar, "a stair of 61 steps" led to "an upper chamber (*hyperōon*)".[146] There, on the left side, John saw "where the Lord's Supper took place". Moreover, he mentions that the apse (in fact, "the sanctuary conch") harbored the descent (*kathodos*) of the Holy Spirit.[147] Latin sources, such as

143 Demus 1955, 6-7.

144 On the topography of Mount Sion in medieval Jerusalem, see Pringle 2007, cat. no. 336.

145 John Phokas, Ἔκφρασις ἐν συνόψει τῶν ἀπ' Ἀντιοχείας μέχρις Ἱεροσολύμων κάστρων καὶ χωρῶν XIV, ed. Troickij 1889; for an English translation, see Stewart 1889. Messis 2011 provides a detailed literary analysis and proposes the identification of John Phokas with the Great Hetaeriach John Doukas from the time of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143-80).

146 Cf. Acts 1,13.

147 John Phokas, Ἔκφρασις ἐν συνόψει τῶν ἀπ' Ἀντιοχείας μέχρις Ἱεροσολύμων κάστρων καὶ χωρῶν XIV, ed. Troickij 1889.

the Description of the Holy Land composed by Burchard of Mount Sion shortly before the 1291 fall of Acre, also emphasize the spatial connection between the Virgin's abode after Christ's Ascension and the building where the apostles received the Spirit.[148] Of course, one cannot determine if the designers of the Peribleptos program could rely on such travel reports. Nonetheless, the topographical connection between Dormition and Pentecost could be inferred from liturgical homilies. These texts had a broad circulation across the Byzantine environment and provided the main reference point for church iconography.

In a highly influential *Homily on the Holy and Most Glorified Dormition and Transferal of Our Lady the Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary* (BHG 1097), John of Damascus reminds his audience that the Mother of God gave her last breath on Mount Sion, where the culminating moments of Christ's salvific work, including Pentecost, had also taken place. Composed in eighth-century Jerusalem, this text was well-known to the Late Byzantine milieu, being frequently read for the celebration of the Dormition feast on August 15.[149] John conjures up an image of Mary's body reclining in her house on Sion.[150] In a typical ekphrastic move inspired by late antique handbooks of rhetoric, the site was meant to appear vividly before the audience's eyes, turning listeners into spectators.[151] Intriguingly, within this imaginative evocation, the Virgin's abode on the holy mountain does not take shape through an architectural description. Rather, John renders visible the Sion *topos* by recapitulating the major New Testament events that had occurred there, from the Last Supper to the Descent of Holy Spirit. One could say, in the logic of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary chronotope, that the building on the holy mountain coalesces from the temporal sequence of sacred history:[152]

> For I can see in my mind (*dokō gar moi*) this woman holier than all things holy, sacred and venerable above all others – the sweet vessel of manna or rather its true source – lying on a pallet in the celebrated Holy City of David: on Sion, that prominent (*perioptō*)

148 Burchard of Mount Sion, *Descriptio Terrae Sanctae* 80, ed. Bartlett 2019.

149 This sermon survives in *panegyrika*, that is, collections of hagiographical works and festal homilies meant to be read as part of liturgy; the *Pinakes* database lists over 50 witnesses dating between the ninth and the late fifteenth century, as well as over 20 from the Post-Byzantine period, going up to the 1800s; for a complete list, see the entry for "Jean Damascène, *In Dormitionem Deiparae 2*" at `https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/recherche.html`.

150 John of Damascus, *Oratio secunda in dormitionem Beateae Mariae Virginis*, ed. Kotter 1988; translated by Daley 1998.

151 Webb 2009.

152 Bakhtin 1981, 84-258.

> and most glorious (*perikleestatē*) mountain, where the law of letter was fulfilled and the law of the Spirit proclaimed; […] where the God of the Old and the New Covenant gave us the true Pascha; where 'the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world' [John 1,29], initiated his disciples into the mystical banquet […]; where Christ was seen by the [a]postles when he rose from the dead […]. This [i.e., Sion] is the acropolis of the Churches, she is the refuge of the disciples. Here the All-Holy Spirit was poured forth on the [a]postles in the form of fire, making a great sound and communicating in many tongues. Here John the Theologian received the Mother of God into his care and ministered to her needs. It was this [i.e., Sion], the mother of the world's churches, which played home to the Mother of God, after her son's return from the dead. In her, then, the Blessed Virgin lay on a bed one can only call thrice blessed.[153]

To understand its implications for the Ohrid program, it is worth juxtaposing this passage to John's above-quoted oration on the divine images, where he discusses the burning bush scene. Not unlike his previous reading of the Sinai epiphany, the Dormition sermon turns Mount Sion into an archetypal rendition of sacred space catalyzed around Mary's corporeal presence. However, while on Sinai, the Virgin's body only appeared in an image, Sion bore it physically. As such, the former is treated as an Old Testament Temple, where Moses' vision serves as the sanctuary, whereas the latter appears as a mother and implicitly, a symbolic matrix of all Christian churches. The designers of the Ohrid program might have thought in a similar manner when they created a spatial correspondence between the

153 Δοκῶ γάρ μοι ταύτην τὴν ἁγίων ἁγιωτέραν καὶ ἱερῶν ἱερωτέραν καὶ ὁσίων ὁσιωτέραν, τὴν γλυκεῖαν τοῦ μάννα στάμνον, πηγὴν δὲ μᾶλλον εἰπεῖν ἀληθέστερον, ἀνακεκλίσθαι ἐπί τινος σκίμποδος ἐν τῇ θείᾳ καὶ περιωνύμῳ πόλει Δαυίδ, Σιών φημι τῇ περιόπτῳ καὶ περικλεεστάτῃ, ἐν ᾗ πεπλήρωται μὲν ὁ νόμος τοῦ γράμματος, ὑπηγόρευται δὲ ὁ νόμος τοῦ πνεύματος· ἐν ᾗ τὸ πάσχα τὸ τυπικὸν ὁ νομοδότης Χριστὸς ἐκτετέλεκε καὶ πάσχα τὸ ἀληθὲς ὁ παλαιᾶς καὶ νέας διαθήκης θεὸς παραδέδωκεν· ἐν ᾗ τὸ δεῖπνον τὸ μυστικὸν τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ μαθηταῖς «ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου» μεμυσταγώγηκε καὶ τούτοις ἑαυτὸν οἷα μόσχον σιτευτὸν τέθυκε καὶ τῆς ἀληθινῆς ἀμπέλου τὸν βότρυν ἐληνοβάτησεν· ἐν ᾗ Χριστὸς τοῖς ἀποστόλοις ὀπτάνεται ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀνιστάμενος καὶ Θωμᾶν πιστοῦται καὶ διὰ τούτου τὰ πέρατα, ὡς εἴη θεός τε καὶ κύριος δύο φύσεις φέρων ἐν ἑαυτῷ καὶ μετὰ τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναβίωσιν, καὶ ταύταις καταλλήλους δύο τὰς ἐνεργείας αὐτεξούσιά τε θελήματα εἰς αἰῶνα τὸν ἄπειρον αἰωνίζοντα. Αὕτη τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν ἡ ἀκρόπολις, αὕτη τὸ τῶν μαθητῶν καταγώγιον· ἐν ταύτῃ τοῦ παναγίου πνεύματος ἡ πολύηχος καὶ πολύγλωσσος καὶ πυρίμορφος ἐπιφοίτησις τοῖς ἀποστόλοις ἐκκέχυται. Ἐν ταύτῃ ὁ θεολόγος τὴν θεοτόκον παρειληφὼς ἐλειτούργει τὰ δέοντα. Αὕτη ἡ μήτηρ τῶν ἀνὰ πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐκκλησιῶν τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ μητρὸς ἐνδιαίτημα πέφηνε μετά γε τὴν τοῦ υἱοῦ ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναφοίτησιν. Ἐν ταύτῃ τοίνυν ἡ μακαρία παρθένος ἐπί τινος τρισολβίου κλίνης κατέκειτο. John of Damascus, *Oratio secunda in dormitionem Beateae Mariae Virginis* 4, ed. Kotter 1988; the translation follows Daley 1998 with some adjustments.

Mosaic theophanies on Mount Sinai and the New Testament events on Sion. Although the conventional means of depicting mountains are omitted from the Pentecost and *Koimēsis* compositions, whose background only comprises elaborate architecture, the terrain of their biblical locale is alluded to by the shape of the wall crowned by a tympanum. This architectural framework situates the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin's Dormition in a subtle conversation with the figurally explicit depiction of Mount Sinai on the narthex west lunette. The two holy mountains are, therefore, presented as mirroring sites of theophany.

The use of analogous compositional strategies, aptly maneuvered by the painters Michael and Eutychios, facilitates this link. First, the double-tier configuration of the Sion complex bears striking resemblance to the twofold organization of the Sinai terrain on the narthex lunette. There, Moses encounters the burning bush in the valley beneath the mountain and later receives the tables on its rocky pinnacle. Second, much like the narthex fresco, the joint scenes of Pentecost and Dormition take shape around an arched window piercing the west tympanum of the naos. In the upper zone, the opening provides a compositional axis to the Descent of the Holy Spirit. The twelve apostles led by Peter and an anachronically inserted Paul appear seated on two curved benches, whose circular disposition echoes the tympanum's architectural outline **[fig. 18]**. Above them, the Paraclete descends as tongues of fire along diaphanous rays of light emerging from an open arc of heaven. Below, the inner margins of the circular benches enclose a dark chasm, where the allegorical personifications of the gentile "tongues" and "tribes" – the future members of the Christian Church – stand on each side of the window's frame. During the day, sunlight enters the building through this physical opening, enacting a literal illumination of the painted nations.[154] Thus, echoing John of Damascus' praise of Sion as the "the mother of the world's churches", the shadowy container within the fresco functions almost as a womb that prepares the gentiles to be reborn through the light of baptism.

The tympanum's rhythm of concentric circles is replicated in the lower zone by the *Koimēsis* scene. Once again, the apostles appear in a circular configuration. This time, drop-shaped clouds carry them to Mount Sion, where the Virgin is about to depart from earthly life. The hovering disciples hedge the architectural setting of the Dormition episode, which unfolds against another celestial arc. Imagined as a gigantic sphere of light descending from above, this segment of heaven functions as a diaphragm between the visible and invisible realms, framing the open gates of heaven. Echoing

154 On natural light in medieval churches, see Ivanovici, Sullivan 2023.

the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a dense crowd of angels issues therefrom, escorting Christ into Mary's house. The Savior appears in his celestial majesty, within a radiant globe of light. He bends over his mother's body, collecting her soul under the sorrowful, yet amazed gazes of apostles, hierarchs, and pious women. Christ's portrayal in golden vestments rhymes with the depiction of his pre-incarnational majesty within the burning bush. However, the characters' roles are reversed. While in the Moses scene, the Virgin's purple maphorion enwraps the gold-clad infant, in the Dormition, Christ's resplendent vestment enfolds the winged babe symbolizing his mother's unstained soul **[fig. 19]**.[155] This relationship of reciprocal embracing generates another iconographic analogy between the theophanic events on Sinai and Sion.[156]

Constructed through an elaborate system of architectural and pictorial linkages, the spatial correlation between the two sacred summits would have been conceptually strengthened by the viewers' familiarity with the exegetical traditions encapsulated by liturgical poetry and hagiography. The typological parallel between Sinai and Sion constitutes a major theme in the representation of the enactment of God's salvific plan. From a historical perspective, the two mountains mark the topographic poles of the scriptural narrative of Israel's liberation from Pharaoh's yoke and conquest of the promised land. However, at a spiritual level, these *loca sancta* frame the history of human redemption. It was on Mount Sinai that Moses witnessed the chief foreshadowing of Christ's Incarnation within the burning bush and later on, fifty days after the crossing of the Red Sea, received the tablets of the Law. Similarly, fifty days after passing from death to life, Christ poured the grace of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples gathered on Mount Sion. Festal hymnography imagines the Spirit's Descent as the transmission of a New Law that replaced the one delivered on Sinai.

This idea is prominently featured in the eighth-century Iambic *Kanon* of Pentecost composed by John Arklas, a Greek-language Syro-Palestinian poet piously (though fictitiously) identified with John of Damascus.[157] The *kanon* is a multi-stanzaic poem chanted during the Byzantine morning service (*orthros*). Its emergence goes back to the seventh and eighth centuries, within the cathedral rite of Jerusalem

155 Xyngopoulos 1972; Semoglou 2003, 89-93 investigate the portrayal of Mary's soul as a winged infant.

156 Maguire 1981, 59-68 notes a similar antithetical correspondence between other Dormition compositions on the west wall of the naos and the apse image of the Virgin holding the Christ Child.

157 The conflation of the two Johns was already questioned, on stylistic grounds, by the twelfth-century commentator Eustathios of Thessalonike; see Ronchey 2001.

and the monastic environment of Palestine.[158] Usually consisting of eight or nine odes, the *kanon* is a palimpsest composition. Its strophes (*troparia*) are written in response to nine biblical canticles and used to be intercalated between their verses. In Arklas' work, the introductory stanza (*heirmos*) of the fifth ode alludes to the eschatological revelation of the Lord's holy mountain in Isaias 2,1-3. The Old Testament prophet emphasizes the universal vocation of the God of Israel, summoning all nations to Sion, his mountainous dwelling place, where the Law is proclaimed. Arklas' *kanon* responds to this scriptural passage through an address to the Church. Her children are called to the illumination of baptism founded on the New Law established by the Holy Spirit on Mount Sion:

> As a [baptismal] font, as purification of faults,
> receive the Spirit's fire-breathing dew,
> o light-formed children of the Church!
> for now, the Law has issued forth from Sion,
> the grace of the Spirit shaped as tongues of fire.[159]

Both Isaias 2 and its poetic re-elaboration in the Pentecostal *Kanon* present Sion as an eschatological counterpart to Sinai. The holy mountain, thus, becomes less of a physical place and turns into a conceptual framework for a specific understanding of salvation. On Mount Sion, God manifests his law-giving authority by sealing a renewed covenant. Unlike the Sinai episode, where the latter is only meant for the sons of Israel, here, the alliance comprises humanity in its entirety. The Peribleptos mural conveys the universal dimension of the Spirit's Law by synecdochally showing all human races beneath the apostles, still being gestated in darkness but ready to be formed anew by the light of the Gospel.

This typological comparison is further expanded within the narrative of the Virgin's Dormition. Mount Sion witnessed Christ's apparition at the hour of his mother's death. The elaborate *Life of the Virgin* (BHG 1102g-h) by John Geometres, a tenth-century Constantinopolitan writer, links this theophanic moment to God's manifestation on Sinai.[160] Geometres uses the narrative of Exodus 19

158 On the *kanon* as a genre, see Wellesz 1949, 168-215, and more recently, Giannouli 2019.

159 Λουτήριον κάθαρσιν ἀμπλακημάτων | Πυρίπνοον δέξασθε Πνεύματος δρόσον, | Ὦ τέκνα φωτόμορφα τῆς Ἐκκλησίας· | Νῦν ἐκ Σιὼν γὰρ ἐξελήλυθε νόμος, | Ἡ γλωσσοπυρσόμορφος Πνεύματος χάρις. John Arklas, *Canon iambicum pentecostale*, ode 5, heirmos, ed. Cesaretti, Ronchey 2014.

160 John Geometres, Ἐξόδιος ἢ προπεμπτήριος εἰς τὴν κοίμησιν τῆς ὑπερενδόξου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου 103-4, ed. Constas, Simelidis 2023, including an English translation.

as a typological hypotext for an imaginative description of Christ's advent at the end of his mother's terrestrial life. He recounts that "God was going to descend once again upon the *conspicuous and overshadowed mountain*, which is *admired* (*periblepton*) by all, richly adorned with virtues".[161] The intertextual allusions to the Old Testament mountain *topos* are ambiguously deployed to designate both Sion, the physical locale of the Dormition scene, and the Virgin herself. Perhaps referencing the compound adjectives *perioptos* (prominent) and *perikleestatē* (most glorious) employed by John of Damascus, Geometres eulogizes the holy mountain as *peribleptos*, that is, "admired". In fact, the Damascene himself uses this epithet when describing the apostles as "kings who bring precious gifts from the Lord's temple of the admired (*peribleptou*) Sion" to Mary, "the living city of the Lord God of Hosts".[162] Due to its established association with the *topos* of the Virgin's Dormition, the term *peribleptos* likely had a special resonance for the designers of the Ohrid fresco, accentuating the church's perception as a sacred mountain. John the Evangelist, Geometres continues, "became a new Moses. He entered the cloud and received the tablets of the Virgin's testament" identified as the "secrets of the miraculous things that had taken place".[163] Like the Old Testament prophet, the *vita* suggests, the Savior's beloved apostle was initiated into the supreme mystery of Mary's glorious transferal into her son's kingdom.

The Peribleptos fresco incorporates Geometres' mystical analogy with Moses' experience on Sinai by picturing John as a direct witness to two key moments of the Dormition narrative: the departure of the Virgin's soul and the Assumption of her resurrected body. In the composition's foreground, the evangelist stands at Mary's head, as Christ descends in a cloud-like conglomeration of heavenly powers. John appears again in the mural's upper right corner, this time, in the literal cloud that carries him to Mount Sion. Though taking place

161 My emphasis. Ἔμελλε γὰρ καὶ πάλιν ὁ Θεὸς καταβαίνειν ἐπὶ τὸ ὄρος τὸ ἐμφανὲς καὶ κατάσκιον, εἴτ'οὖν περίβλεπτον καὶ ἀρεταῖς κατάκομον. John Geometres, Ἐξόδιος ἢ προπεμπτήριος εἰς τὴν κοίμησιν τῆς ὑπερενδόξου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου 104: Constas, Simelidis 2023; cf. John of Damascus, *Oratio secunda in dormitionem Beateae Mariae Virginis* 4, ed. Kotter 1988.

162 Ἡ γὰρ ζῶσα πόλις κυρίου θεοῦ τῶν δυνάμεων μετάρσιος αἴρεται καὶ βασιλεῖς ἀπὸ ναοῦ κυρίου τῆς περιβλέπτου Σιὼν ἐπὶ τὴν ἄνω Ἱερουσαλὴμ τὴν ἐλευθέραν τὴν ἑαυτῶν μητέρα δῶρον προσάγουσι τιμαλφέστατον, οἱ πρὸς Χριστοῦ πάσης τῆς γῆς καταστάντες ἄρχοντες, τοὺς ἀποστόλους φημί, τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ μητέρα τὴν ἀειπάρθενον. John of Damascus, *Oratio secunda in dormitionem Beateae Mariae Virginis* 3, ed. Kotter 1988.

163 Τοιγαροῦν καὶ Μωσῆς πάλιν Ἰωάννης ἦν, ὁ μετὰ τὸν φύσει υἱὸν υἱός· ὁ καὶ τῆς νεφέλης εἴσω χωρῶν καὶ δεχόμενος πλάκας τῆς παρθένου τὰς διαθήκας, ᾧ κἀκεῖνος μὲν ἀπιὼν τὴν παρθένον, ἡ δὲ παρθένος αὖθις πρὸς ἐκεῖνον ἐπαπιοῦσα τὰ μυστικώτερα τῶν θαυμάτων προσανατίθεται. John Geometres, Ἐξόδιος ἢ προπεμπτήριος εἰς τὴν κοίμησιν τῆς ὑπερενδόξου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου 104, ed. Constas, Simelidis 2023.

before Mary's death and funeral, John's miraculous translocation intersects a scene happening afterwards, namely, the Virgin's transferal into heaven **[fig. 20]**.

The Ohrid program abounds in iconographic novelties. Just as the narthex frescoes contain the earliest Byzantine depiction of the Theotokos within the burning bush, the naos displays the first known Dormition image expanding the main composition through a series of apocryphal episodes **[fig. 21]**.[164] Thus, the *Koimēsis* scene stands at the center of an almost cinematic frieze whose continuous narrative takes up the middle register of the west wall of the naos. On the left side, the main Dormition scene is prefaced by the announcement of the Virgin's death by the Archangel Gabriel, her prayer on the Mount of Olives, where nature bows to her in reverence, and the farewell that Mary bids to her female companions from Jerusalem. On the right side, the composition of Mary's death blends into the funerary procession that carries her body from Mount Sion to the tomb in the Garden of Getsemani.[165]

The amplified Dormition narrative reaches its apex with a highly idiosyncratic rendition of Mary's Christ-like resurrection and ascension into heaven.[166] In the thirteenth century, this scene had received a new iconographic rendition, which took shape simultaneously in Byzantine and Latin visual cultures.[167] Its emergence and dissemination, which I shall comprehensively discuss in a future monograph, are tightly linked to the milieu of Andronikos II Palaiologos and the workshop of Michael Astrapas and Eutychios.[168] In the Peribleptos naos, the Assumption episode is artfully concealed within the dense pictorial fabric of the central *Koimēsis* scene. It is almost as if the painters sought to test the viewers' attention and surprise them with unexpected narrative turns and iconographic details.[169] Only a keen eye can discern the diminutive figure of the Theotokos, who has just risen from the dead and is taken aloft

164 Numerous studies deal with the development of the Dormition narrative in late antique and early medieval textual sources, see e.g., Jugie 1944; Wenger 1955; Shoemaker 2002; Mimouni 2011.

165 On the emergence of such cycles in Late Byzantine murals, see Hamann-Mac Lean, Hallensleben 1963, 68-75; Miljković-Pepek 1967, 111-19; Davidov-Temerinski 1995; Tsigaridas 2000, 131.

166 Todić 1999, 114, 121.

167 On the theme's western versions, see Van Os 1969, 149-56; Schmitt 2005.

168 This pictorial theme stands at the core of my doctoral dissertation titled *Painting the Mystery: The Invention of the Virgin's Assumption in Early Palaiologan Murals*, which I am currently writing at Stanford University.

169 Arasse 1992, 7-8 makes similar remarks about late medieval and early modern Italian masters. In Western painting, such carefully hidden elements often encapsulated crucial theological statements; see Acres 2006.

by an angel within a cloud. The Virgin stretches her hand outside of the celestial vehicle, offering her holy belt (*hagia zōnē*) to St. Thomas.[170] Legends claim that the apostle's arrival was delayed by divine providence in order for him to receive this material proof of Mary's bodily transferal into heaven.[171] Due to its position in the scene's upper right corner, this hardly noticeable, but tremendously important vignette intersects the arc of the other apostles' clouds in the most anachronic way possible. Thus, the depiction of the assumed Virgin handing her belt to Thomas hovers alongside John the Evangelist. This overlap of diegetic planes might seem accidental.[172] However, from what I have presented so far, it is clear that Michael and Eutychios possessed an outstanding ability to deploy visual storytelling and iconographic exegesis to the most minute details. The meticulous nature of their pictorial craft and their program's general erudition makes such an explanation rather unlikely.

In fact, Geometres' typological comparison between Moses and John provides the necessary background to show that the abovementioned chronological inconsistency was programmatic and served a higher symbolic purpose. The three drop-shape clouds form a triangular structure emphasizing the figures' interaction. This underlying geometrical schema places the evangelist in an analogy with Thomas. Both apostles extend their right hands toward the Mother of God. Thomas receives the belt that ascertains her corporeal departure from the terrestrial world. John, in turn, is granted a vision of the Virgin's resurrection and ascension. In a posture reminiscent of Thomas, but also of the typical depiction of prophets, the evangelist looks straight to Mary and directs his wide-open palm toward her in a gesture of astonishment. This intercrossing of narrative planes resonates with the scene described in Geometres' *vita*, in which the evangelist receives the 'secrets' of the 'miraculous things' that happened at the Virgin's departure from this world. The author does not clarify what these secrets consisted of, but simply presents them as the 'the tablets of the Virgin's testament' received by John as a 'New Moses' within the epiphanic cloud.[173]

170 Miljković-Pepek 1967, 112-15.

171 The delayed apostle is a common motif in Byzantine Dormition narratives; see Shoemaker 2002, 67-71. However, Thomas' encounter with the resurrected Virgin and the transmission of the belt are attested only in the Latin tradition; see *Transitus Mariae A* 18, ed. Tischendorf 1866, discussed by De Giorgi 2016, 80-5. How and why this tale came to inform Palaiologan iconography is a question to which I will return elsewhere.

172 Betancourt 2016, 179, 188-96 identifies such temporal conflations in Middle and Late Byzantine Last Judgement compositions.

173 John Geometres, Ἐξόδιος ἢ προπεμπτήριος εἰς τὴν κοίμησιν τῆς ὑπερενδόξου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου 104, ed. Constas, Simelidis 2023.

The ambiguity of these terms, which were primarily meant to build an intertextual link between the evangelist and Moses, would have left enough room for the painters and their learned advisers to identify the Virgin's 'testament' as a mystical vision of her impending departure into heaven. John hears the 'secret' of Mary's coming resurrection at her deathbed. Then, the intersection between his cloud and that of the Virgin visually suggests a sort of access to the mystery of her corporeal *Metastasis*. The aerial meeting between John and Virgin was likely not meant as a historical event, but as a symbolic representation of the evangelist's visionary role, which turned him into a 'New Moses'. This interpretation finds further support in the vignette's spatial parallel to the actual scene of the prophet receiving the Law at Sinai. Situated on the mountain's summit, this episode occupies the corresponding spot in the upper right corner of the narthex lunette. Through their mirroring locations, the two murals compare the divine act of handing the stone tablets to the prophet with Mary's gesture of transmitting her belt to Thomas and the 'secret' vision of her transferal into heaven to John. Educated medieval beholders, probably monks immersed in hagiographical lore and hymnography, must have been able to trace such finely tuned symmetries and, one could imagine, took great pleasure in doing so. Within the program's global design, these accumulating correspondences ultimately strengthen the larger typological parallel between the epiphanic events taking place on the holy mountains of Sinai and Sion.

4 Chiastic Paths: The Reversed Spatial Narrative of the Holy Mountains

The sheer number of correspondences between narrative details can only become meaningful when viewed within an overarching mechanism of spatial mirroring. Such a macro-structure, which governs the trans-historical relationship between Sinai and Sion, emerges from the arrangement of the two pairs of the scenes within their architectural compartments. The topographical connections between the west wall of the narthex and its naos counterpart facilitate an abstraction of the notion of holy mountain. In the final section of this study, I demonstrate how the Ohrid program turns the figural evocation of theophanic landscape into a geometric device for visualizing the unfolding of God's plan throughout history. The mountain *topos* thus becomes increasingly detached from the portrayal of physical geography, assuming an almost diagrammatic character. Faith Wallis regards medieval diagrams as graphic schemata accompanied by inscriptions, which "represent the relationship between entities or concepts" and can serve as a form

of "visual exegesis".[174] To be sure, the Peribleptos program cannot be literally equated with a diagram. Yet, I argue that the pictorial evocation of the two holy mountains develops a diagrammatic dimension, acting as a visual instrument for mapping out the major axes that link the human and divine realms. At first glance, these imaginary vectors function as spatial representations. However, the Peribleptos program turns them into an underlying structure for imagining the temporal progression of events according to the divine plan. This pictorial schematization of the Sinai-Sion parallel reveals an exceptional synergy between image-making, poetry, and rhetoric.[175]

The episodes containing the physical presence of Mary, namely, the epiphany of the burning bush and the *Koimēsis*, are situated at the foot of the sacred mountains, which corresponds to the lower register. This link is enhanced by the visual parallel between the flaming *batos* and the gold vessel with burning incense inserted on a small pedestal before the Virgin's deathbed **[fig. 22]**. Both motifs allude to Mary's role as the material vessel containing the fire of Christ's divinity.[176] Conversely, the reception of the tablets by Moses and the Descent of the Holy Spirit, construed as the parallel transmission of God's Old and New Laws, appear in the lunettes. This spatial configuration prompts a paired reading of the four images, allowing the separating wall between the narthex and the naos to be perceived as exegetically translucent.[177] Nevertheless, a correlative interpretation of these scenes seems to hinder the chronological reading of the narrative program. The typological matches between the burning bush and the Dormition, the reception of the Law and Pentecost might seem to impose a bottom-up reading of both walls. In this scenario, the beholders would be forced to place the *Koimēsis* before Pentecost, thus altering the sequence of the salvific history and the liturgical cycle of great feasts.

174 Wallis 2015, 3. Hamburger 2020 discusses diagrams as visual devices of medieval relational thought, thereby providing a useful framework for how pictorial forms could function as conceptual schemata; cf. Hamburger, Roxburgh, Safran 2022; D'Agostini 2026 for an expansion of this line of inquiry into Byzantium and the Eastern Mediterranean.

175 The premises of this broader cultural phenomenon are examined by Maguire 1981; 1988. His analysis shows that the collocation of scenes in eleventh- and twelfth-century church interiors conforms to the principles of Greco-Roman rhetorical composition. Middle Byzantine programs, according to Maguire, formulate comparisons (*synkriseis*), hyperboles, and antitheses between different episodes from the lives of Christ and Mary. Though extremely insightful, his observations are largely confined to the figures described in the *progymnasmata*, that is, the elementary exercises of Byzantine students. My study extends this interpretive line by exploring the relationship between painting and more complex modes of rhetorical composition.

176 Cf. Dennis 2023, 132-9.

177 On iconographic transparencies in mural programs, see Vasiliu 1994.

Even so, a closer assessment of the visual logic elaborated by the painters Michael and Eutychios reveals a more complex system drawing on their plausible familiarity with rhetorical devices. I suggest that the viewers are not meant to adopt the same direction of reading for both iconographic clusters. On the contrary, the program's inherent chronology encourages them to move their eyes across the two tympana from opposite starting points: bottom-up on the west wall of the narthex (which is to say, from the burning bush to the transmission of the Law) and top-down in the naos (from Pentecost to the *Koimēsis*). This reversed, yet corresponding sense of reading also stems from the basic narrative moves embodied by the Sinai and Sion episodes. The narthex tympanum shows Moses ascending from the valley where he converses with the epiphanic shrub to the mountain's pinnacle. By contrast, the images on the west wall of the naos follow a general pattern of descent, illustrating the Greek notion of *kath-odos* (literally 'downward path'): the Spirit's tongues of fire fall upon the heads of the seated apostles; the latter descend on clouds for Mary's funeral; the angelic hosts enter the earthly plane as a cascade pouring down from the heavenly gates; and finally, Christ comes to his mother's house and bends his glory over her deathbed. While putting together the typological pairs (namely, burning bush-Dormition and reception of the Law-Pentecost), based on memorized knowledge of hymns and hagiography, one notices that the scenes' exegetical entwinement does not follow a linear logic, but represents a spatialized chiastic schema.

Also known as *antimetabolē*, the so-called *schēma chiaston* or simply chiasm is a figure of speech termed as such and theorized in the Pseudo-Hermogenic tradition.[178] This device belonged to the usual arsenal of Byzantine teachers and literati, which they derived from ancient rhetorical manuals. For example, an anonymous treatise *On Invention*, widely attributed to the famous second-century teacher Hermogenes of Tarsus, defines chiasm as the inverted construction of a fourfold period. This figure, according to Pseudo-Hermogenes, consists of the repetition of two elements in reversed order, following an ABB'A' pattern.[179] Thus, chiasm appears as a reconfiguration of natural syntax, which tends to adopt a more linear sequence, such as ABA'B'. The schema can apply to words or phrases within a sentence whose morphological characteristics and number of syllables resemble each other symmetrically. Pseudo-Hermogenes uses this device to explain the artful reordering of four single clauses or cola, which harmonize with one another crosswise. Their mirroring effect

178 Welch 1981; Isar 2005 examine the broader use of this schema in Ancient Greek thought.

179 Ps.-Hermog. *Inv.* IV.3: Kennedy 2005.

is consequently imagined as a verbal intercrossing assimilated to the cross-shaped Greek letter X/*Chi*. Though they only acquired a formalized definition in later rhetorical theory, chiastic structures had long been used in Archaic and Classical Greek literature both at a syntactic level and in structuring broader narratives and speeches.[180] In his *Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle comments on the aesthetic and cognitive effects of such mirroring syntax in the formulation of 'witty sayings' (*asteia*). The latter find their best vehicle in the tense balance of antithetical elements, which pleases the audience and encapsulates knowledge (*mathēma*) most effectively.[181] The philosopher's reflections do not strictly refer to what later authors define as chiasm. Nonetheless, the use of this device strives to achieve, indeed amplify the expressive power of mirroring constructions.[182]

Interpreted in the order described above, the four-scene sequence on the west walls of the Ohrid narthex and naos conforms, through its reversed direction of reading, to the standard structure of a chiasm, that is to say, ABB'A' or in our case, down-top-top-down. This elaborate configuration shows that the ingenuity of rhetorical invention (*heuresis*) could be translated into cleverly wrought painted programs. When the Peribleptos murals were made, the spatialization of chiasm had already accumulated a long history in Byzantine visual culture. Pentcheva has shown how, in the sixth century, this geometrical pattern structured the architectural setting, aniconic mosaics, and liturgical chant of Justinian's Great Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.[183] By recalling the letter X/*Chi*, this device constituted an implicit invocation of Christ's sacred name. The use of chiastic signs within mosaic *clipei* typified the Spirit's mystical descent into the material *locus* generated by the magical intersection of the two oblique axes.[184] Pentcheva maintains that, at Hagia Sophia, this figure likely acquired a theurgic function, actualizing the mystery of the Incarnation. Though belonging to a distant epoch and a different cultural environment, the Great Church provides an important formal precedent for the Peribleptos program, with its strong incarnational emphasis. Even so, the geometric construction of the Sinai-Sion parallel reveals a different aspect of the intercrossing schema, whose implications in narrative iconography have not been

180 Welch 1981, 250-68; Isar 2005; Douglas 2007.

181 Aristot. *Rhet*. III.1412b, ed. Freese 1926, translation included.

182 On the cognitive function of chiasm, see Isar 2005.

183 Pentcheva 2017, 11, 85-93; 2023a; more recently, the scholar has expanded this framework to the Benedictine church and liturgy of St. Foy in Conques; see Pentcheva 2023b. These studies, together with Prof. Pentcheva's seminars on Christ's image in Byzantine domes and Hagia Sophia, sharpened my awareness of such patterns.

184 Pentcheva 2017, 88-9; 2023a, 137, 146-9.

sufficiently investigated.[185] Rather than fulfilling a mystical function, in the Ohrid frescoes, the inverted mirroring remained closer to the rhetorical employment of the *schēma chiaston*. As will become apparent, chiasm serves as an instrument of visual exegesis and a virtuous mode of creating dramatic narrative turns by balancing antithetical elements and compelling the audience to reconstruct their sequence in reverse order.[186]

Just as the narrative minutiae generate unexpected correspondences between the Sion and Sinai compositions, their chiastic sequencing surprises cultivated beholders and synthesizes the holy mountains' role as spatiotemporal nodes of sacred history. The question that arises now is how exactly Michael and Eutychios integrated this rhetorical figure among their compositional devices and why they chose to use it as an underlying structure of the mirroring theophanic summits. The Pseudo-Hermogenic corpus, including the treatise *On Invention*, had an enormous popularity among Byzantine elites, serving as a fundamental tool of rhetorical training.[187] Throughout the centuries, Greek intellectuals produced numerous commentaries and paraphrases of these works.[188] For example, in the eleventh century, Michael Psellos (1018-ca. 1078) composed a versified synopsis dedicated to Emperor Michael VII Doukas (r. 1071-78). Among other things, Psellos remarks that "a period takes chiasm too and it is inverted in some way".[189] There is compelling evidence that the later milieu to which the Peribleptos painters belonged fostered an intense dialogue between high-profile artisans and scholars who, similar to Psellos, had extensive knowledge of rhetorical theory and its employment.

The two masters belonged to an elite family of craftsmen from Thessalonike, whose members practiced both the art of painting and that of manuscript illumination.[190] These artisans also seem to have nurtured their own intellectual inclinations. In the early fourteenth century, the painter Ioannes Astrapas, probably Michael's kinsman, collaborated with Demetrios Triklinios, a scholar based in Thessalonike, for a treatise on the surface of the moon and its optical

185 Thomas 2013, 75-80 interprets the inverted parallel arrangement of the narrative reliefs on the early fourth-century Arch of Constantine in Rome as a spatial chiasm.

186 Cf. Isar 2005, who stresses the cognitive aspect of the *schēma chiaston* in Ancient Greek literature.

187 Pizzone 2026a. The so-called *Corpus Hermogenianum* consists of the five treatises Περὶ στάσεων, Περὶ εὑρέσεως, Περὶ ἰδεῶν λόγων, and Περὶ μεθόδου δεινότητος, usually accompanied by Aphthonius' *Progymnasmata*; see Pizzone 2026b, 1.

188 Pizzone 2026a provides the most substantial assessment of this tradition with a particular focus on its use in the twelfth century.

189 Walker 2001.

190 Lovino 2016.

perception from earth.[191] Astrapas did not simply illustrate Triklinios' work, but acted as a partner in the latter's scientific enquiries. This collaboration sheds light on a possible channel through which the Peribleptos painters could have become acquainted with other aspects of Byzantine scholarship, such as rhetorical composition and the formal interpretation of Ancient Greek texts.

Roughly at the same time when he was studying the moon with Ioannes, between 1316 and 1319, Triklinios also produced a copy of Hesiod's *Shield* (*Aspis*) *of Heracles*, *Works and Days*, and *Theogony*. The manuscript later belonged to the fifteenth-century Greek Cardinal Bessarion (1403-1472) and is now housed at the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice (Marc.gr. Z 464 = coll. 762).[192] Triklinios supplemented the poems with an ample exegetical apparatus spanning from Proclus (fl. fifth century) to John Tzetzes (ca. 1110-ca. 1180), John Pediasmos (ca. 1250-ca. 1310), and Manuel Moschopoulos (fl. late thirteenth-fourteenth century).[193] These scholia exhibit a keen interest in tracing the geometrical patterns underlying ancient poetry, which are graphically illustrated with marginal schemata. Such is the case of two lines from the invocation of the Muses opening *Works and Days* (f. 20r):

> Muses from Pieria, glorifying in songs,
> Come here, tell in hymns of your father Zeus,
> Through whom mortal men are unfamed (*aphatoi*) and famed (*phatoi*) alike,

191 Manolova 2021; Peers 2024, 200-40. Bianconi 2005, 91-188 offers a broader contextualization of Triklinios' work.

192 Furlan 1981, 25-8; Mioni 1985, 248-51, who notices that the codex was made in two distinct phases: the first section was completed on August 20, 1316; the second on November 16, 1319.

193 Mioni 1985, 248-51 provides the full *pinax*: Hes. *Sc.* (ff. 2r-13r) with interlinear scholia by John Pediasmos and another set of marginal *Scholia in scutum*; John Pediasmos, *Technologia in Scutum* (ff. 14r-19v); Hes. *Op.* (ff. 20r-46r) with interlinear and marginal scholia likely by Manuel Moschopoulos; Moschopoulos, *Scholia ad Hesiodi Opera et Dies* (ff. 46v-78r); John Protospatharios, *Commentarius in Hesiodi Opera et Dies* (ff. 78v-84r); John Tzetzes, *Scholia in Hesiodi Opera et Dies* (ff. 84v-116r); Proclus, *Ex* scholiis in *Hesiodi Opera et Dies* (ff. 116v-143v); Hes. *Th.* (ff. 145-169) with a set of ancient scholia and another one by Triklinios himself (ff. 145r-169r); *Scholia antiqua in Hesiodi Theogoniam* (ff. 170-184v); John Galenos the Deacon, *Allegoriae in Hesiodi Theogoniam* (ff. 185r-218r); John Galenos the Deacon, *Allegoria in Homeri Iliadem Δ 1-4* (ff. 218v-220r); Michael Psellos, *Allegoria de Tantalo* (ff. 220v-221r), *Allegoria de Sphinge* (ff. 221r-223r), *Allegoria de Tantalo* (ff. 223r-224v); *Mythologica varia* (ff. 225r). On Pediasmos' Late Byzantine scholia, see Panegyres 2021; Juan-López 2024, who argues that the scholia by John Protospatharios and John Galenos the Deacon belong, in fact, to Pediasmos, whom Triklinios styles with different titles. Cardin, Pontani 2017 investigate Hesiod's broader reception in Byzantium.

> And named (*rhētoi*) and unnamed (*arrhētoi*) alike by the will of great Zeus.[194]

Along the lines of Aristotle's later observations, Hesiod employs chiasm to enhance the expressive effect of two antithetical pairs. This mirroring structure marks a highly dramatic moment when the Muses are summoned to convey the intricacies of Zeus' all-governing volition. On the page's right margin, a scholium attributed to Moschopoulos signposts this device as a *schēma chiaston* **[fig. 23]**. Beneath this comment, the scribe drew a *Chi*-shaped figure showing the crosswise matching of the reversed pairs *aphatoi-phatoi* and *rhētoi-arrhētoi*.[195] It is highly probable that, through their familiarity with scholars like Triklinios, Ioannes Astrapas and his relatives, including Michael, were initiated in such technical devices of Greek literature. In fact, the Venice codex, in which the chiastic schema is preserved, showcases a special affinity with image-makers. The poems that the scholar copy have a strong ekphrastic dimension, describing the visual program on Herakles' imaginary *Aspis*, as well as various tools and techniques associated with agriculture. The latter are also illustrated by two miniatures, which are relatively rare in Byzantine editions of ancient texts. Juxtaposed on ff. 33v and 34r, the images portray two husbandmen operating a mortar and a plow, alongside a panoply of farming tools duly accompanied by their Ancient Greek names from Hesiod **[fig. 24]**.[196]

Certainly, the manuscript was made more than two decades after the completion of the Peribleptos frescoes. Nevertheless, its emphasis on craft – be it verbal, mechanical, or agrarian – substantiates an atmosphere of intellectual permeability, which must have characterized Palaiologan Thessalonike more broadly. Erudite scholars like Triklinios moved in the same circles as elite painters, such as Ioannes Astrapas and perhaps Michael or the unknown illuminator of the Marciana Hesiod. These masters not only contributed to projects of secular learning but also assimilated certain scholarly skills and conceptual devices, putting them to work in their predominantly religious visual craft. In fact, the Peribleptos frescoes showcase a strong investment in the writerly dimension of painting. As Ivan Drpić notes, Michael and Eutychios

194 Μοῦσαι Πιερίηθεν ἀοιδῇσι κλείουσαι, | δεῦτε Δί' ἔννέπετε, σφέτερον πατέρ' ὑμνείουσαι. | ὃν τε διὰ βροτοὶ ἄνδρες ὁμῶς ἄφατοί τε φατοί τε, | ῥητοί τ' ἄρρητοί τε Διὸς μεγάλοιο ἔκητι. Hes., *Op.* 1-4: Most 2006, translation included.

195 On chiastic diagrams as an instrument for visualizing antithetic relationships between ideas and terms, see D'Agostini 2026, 104-7.

196 Furlan 1981, 26-7; Bryer 1986, 63, 66-80. A full digital facsimile is available at https://www.internetculturale.it/jmms/iccuviewer/iccu.jsp?id=oai%3A193.206.197.121%3A18%3AVE0049%3ACSTOR.240.10174.

emulated contemporaneous scribal practices by including signatures formulated as metrical epigrams similar to those left by copyists in their manuscripts.[197] However, their engagement with literary culture seems to have extended beyond the reinterpretation of scribal markers. Their work, I suggest, proposes a functional equivalence between the design of monumental programs and the processes of rhetorical invention.[198]

The spatialized chiasm at the Ohrid church is far from being singular among the murals made by Michael, Eutychios, and their associates. One notices an even more conspicuous example at the cathedral of the Mother of God Ljeviška in Prizren, present-day Kosovo. The church underwent an extensive renovation at the beginning of the fourteenth century under the patronage of the Serbian King Stefan Milutin, who, by that time, had also become the son-in-law of Emperor Andronikos II.[199] Like Sgouros, Milutin hired the Astrapas workshop, which was now led by Michael himself or another master Astrapas.[200] Dating to the eleventh century, the building was originally designed as a three-aisled basilica serving as the city's cathedral. However, Milutin turned its nave into a domed naos of the cross-in-square type.[201] Astrapas used the four masonry piers supporting the main dome as an architectural framework for another spatial chiasm **[fig. 25]**.

Here, the schema is no longer employed to organize narrative scenes. Instead, it establishes a reversed mirroring relationship between two repeated pairs of Christ and the Virgin distributed across the naos, similar to a quadruple period described by Pseudo-Hermogenes **[fig. 26]**. Upon entering the naos from the west side, viewers saw the juxtaposed images of the Savior and his mother on the east faces of the west pair of pilasters under the cupola.[202] Then, as they moved eastward, beneath the dome, they would have encountered the same iconic couple on the next two piers. Intriguingly, the repeated figures of Christ and Mary are arranged in a crisscross pattern along the imaginary diagonals of the square defined by the four dome-supporting piers. The first time, the Virgin is shown on the northwest pilaster and her son on the southwest one. The second time, however, they switch positions: the Savior is

197 Drpić 2013, 341-7.

198 Cf. Maguire 1981.

199 Panić, Babić 1975; Davidov-Temerinski 2017, 23-39; Jevtić 2021-22.

200 Kostić 2023, 63 questions the identity between the Ohrid and the Prizren Astrapades.

201 Davidov-Temerinski 2017, 23-39; Jevtić 2021-22, 139-45.

202 Davidov-Temerinski 2017, 57 records the repetition of Christ's and the Virgin's figures but does not notice their underlying geometry.

painted on the northeast pier, while his mother would have appeared on the southeast one, which unfortunately lost its decoration. Even so, given that the repetition of the Christ-Virgin pair was a common feature of Late Byzantine murals, it is reasonable to infer that a second image of the Mother of God originally accompanied Christ on the southeast pier, at the threshold of the sanctuary.[203] What distinguishes the Ljeviška program is that the spatial disposition of this reduplicated couple follows an ABBA pattern, producing a monumental *X*/*Chi* traced along the diagonals connecting the four dome-supporting piers.[204]

While the Prizren example represents a fairly literal application of chiasm, its earlier use in Ohrid showcases a much more sophisticated spatiotemporal thought. By placing the poles of sacred history – Mounts Sinai and Sion – in a relationship of crosswise mirroring, Michael and Eutychios crafted more than a pictorial analogue to an ancient rhetorical figure. Their narrative program employs underlying geometries to render visible the paradoxical convergence of opposites in the unfolding of the divine plan. Hesiod uses chiasm to express the ungraspable wits of Zeus' mind, which makes men "unfamed and famed", "named and unnamed", in a passage meant to channel divine knowledge through the Muses.[205] Similarly, Michael and Eutychios use the chiastic construction of the holy mountains to reveal the mystery of God's providence, which begins with the burning bush and culminates with the Virgin's transferal into heaven. Their pictorial narrative centers the theme of divine-human reciprocity materialized in the mirroring topographies of the sacred mountains. On Sinai, God descends within the burning bush to reveal himself to Moses. Then, the prophet ascends onto the summit to meet God. Likewise, on Sion, the Holy Spirit comes down on the apostles and Christ descends to take his mother's soul. Finally, Mary rises from the dead and ascends into her son's glory as the perfected human being. Taken together, these reciprocal descents and ascents transform the Sinai-Sion parallel into a diagrammatic representation of salvation history, in which the holy mountains frame symmetrical exchanges between the human and the divine.

203 Kalopissi-Verti 2006, 118-31. At Prizren, Mary's standing figure is repeated both alongside Christ and independently several times across the naos; see Davidov-Temerinski 2017, 57.

204 Cf. Pentcheva 2017, 41, 85-92; 2023a, who discusses the crossed axes enclosed by a circle within the spatial poetics of Hagia Sophia.

205 Without postulating a direct connection with the Peribleptos murals, it is worth noting that in Marc.gr. Z 464, John Galenos' (in fact, Pediasmos') commentary on the *Theogony* interprets Zeus as an allegorical rendition of the Christian God; see Pontani 2015, 376.

The chiastic arrangement of the Sinai and Sion compositions not only captures the providential design of history but also visualizes the retrospective manner in which its hidden logic is disclosed to humanity. From a typological perspective, the meaning of Old Testament episodes, such as Moses' encounters with God, can only be discerned through their correspondence with the events set in motion by Christ's Incarnation. The Ohrid program translates this hermeneutic hindsight through the reading pattern imposed by the inverted mirroring of the holy mountain scenes. In the Prizren naos, the chiastic disposition of the reduplicated figures of the Savior and his mother leads the beholders eastward, drawing their gazes toward the sanctuary. At the Peribleptos, however, the Sion-Sinai sequence accompanies its audience as they walk away from the altar, heading toward the exit.

The frescoes' intended beholders, probably late thirteenth-century monks, could only encounter this fourfold concatenation of biblical episodes in reverse chronological order. One can imagine how, having left the cross-in-square naos, the members of the monastic community first saw the image of the Virgin's Dormition in St. John's house on Mount Sion. Then, they would have raised their eyes toward the tympanum depicting the *hyperōon* where the Spirit descended on the apostles. Upon passing into the narthex, before stepping out of the church, these unknown monks beheld the representation of Moses receiving the Law on Sinai's peak and witnessing a proleptic vision of the Lord's Incarnation through Mary within the burning bush. Thus, as viewers moved toward the exit, sacred history unfolded before their eyes in reverse order, from fulfilment to prefiguration, in the typical retrospective layout of typological exegesis.

The inverted, chiastic sequence of the Sion-Sinai images would have allowed beholders to leave the church's precinct with a vivid sense of the holy mountain as a spatial catalyst of God's intervention in history. Having passed through the building's west door, medieval viewers would have immersed themselves in the exterior landscape and become aware once again that the monastery stood on a height above the city of Ohrid. Positioned along the route of departure, the Sion-Sinai scenes likely encouraged beholders to project the figural *topos* of the holy mountain onto the church itself and its surroundings, thus completing the interpretive circle traced throughout this essay. At the Peribleptos, the Marian interpretation of Moses' theophanies, which had initially encapsulated Sinai's charisma as a *locus sanctus*, became an iconographic pivot through which the spatial paradigm of the holy mountain was reconfigured within a new geographical, devotional, and intellectual setting.

Figures





Figure 1a-b Moses before the Burning Bush and the Reception of the Law on Mount Sinai above the Dedicatory Inscription, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, narthex, central bay, west tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photos: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo

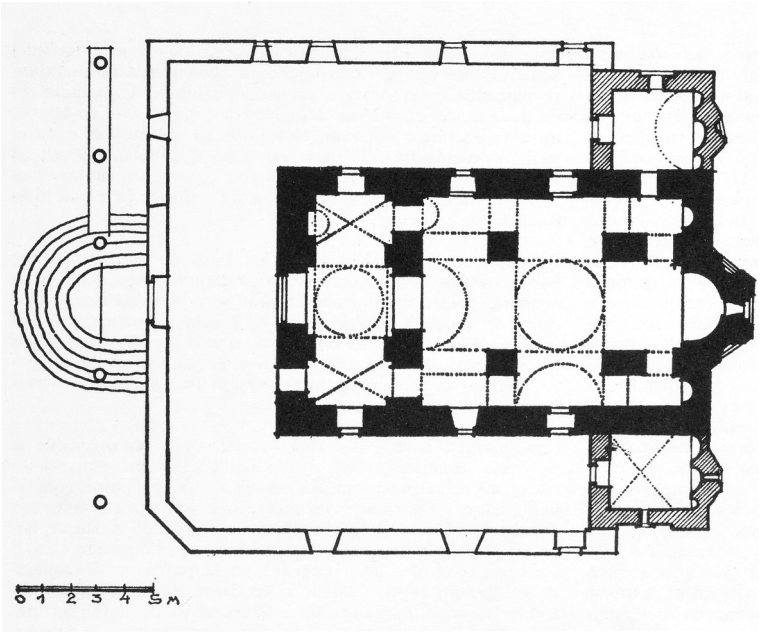


Figure 2 Ground Plan of the Virgin Peribleptos Church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, ante 1294-95 with a mid-fourteenth-century U-shaped ambulatory. Source: Grozdanov, C. (1980). *Ohridskoto zidno slikarstvo od XIV vek*. Ohrid: Zavod za zaštita na spomenicite na kulturata i Narodei Muzej, 122



Figure 3 Moses before the Burning Bush (Detail: The Mother of God), fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, narthex, central bay, west tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 4 The Reception of the Law on Mount Sinai, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, narthex, central bay, west tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 5 View of Mount Sinai at Dawn (August 31, 2006). Photo: Einsamer Schütze, Wikimedia Commons



Figure 6 King Nebuchadnezzar's Dream Interpreted by the Prophet Daniel, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, narthex, north tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 7 "Wisdom Built Herself a House", fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, narthex, south tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo

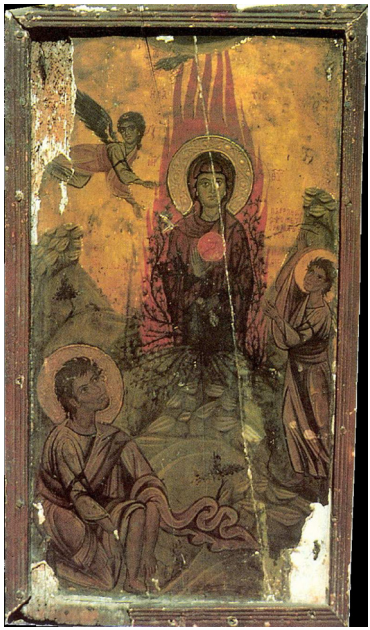


Figure 8
Moses before the Burning Bush, icon, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, Jerusalem, late twelfth-early thirteenth century. Source: Public domain



Figure 9
The Mother of God among Ancestors, Prophets, and Apostles, icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, late eleventh-early twelfth century. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai

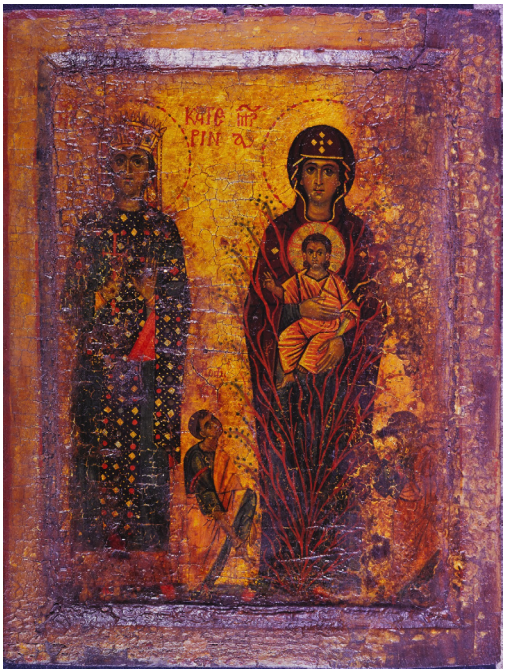


Figure 10
St. Catherine and the Virgin of the Burning Bush, icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, thirteenth century. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai



Figure 11
The Virgin of the Burning Bush Flanked by Sinai Saints, icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, thirteenth century. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai



Figure 12 The Virgin of the Burning Bush flanked by Moses, Elijah, and St. Gregory of Nazianzos, icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, mid-thirteenth century. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai



Figure 13 The Transfiguration of Christ, mosaic, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, *katholikon*, apse conch, post 548. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai



Figure 14
The Virgin as the Holy Mountain Flanked by SS Peter, Paul, Antony, and Euthymios, and Surmounted by Moses and Elijah, icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, mid-thirteenth century. Photo: © St. Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai

Figure 15
a) Moses before the Burning Bush, Gospels of Hethum II, Yerevan, Matenadaran 979, f. 94v, 1286; **b)** Moses before the Burning Bush, Gospels of Hethum II, Yerevan, Matenadaran 979, f. 228r, 1286. © Matenadaran – Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan







Figure 16 View of the Monastery of the Virgin Peribleptos and its Surroundings (early August 2025), Ohrid, North Macedonia. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu



Figure 17
The Descent of the Holy Spirit and the Dormition and Assumption of the Mother of God, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west wall, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 18 The Descent of the Holy Spirit, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west tympanum, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 19 The Dormition and Assumption of the Mother of God (Detail: Christ Embracing Mary's Winged Soul), fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west wall, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo



Figure 20 The Dormition and Assumption of the Mother of God (Detail: The Virgin's Transferal into Heaven), fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west wall, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo

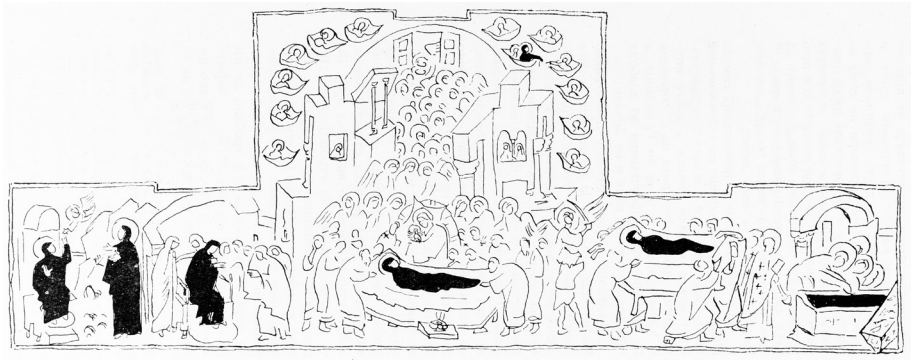


Figure 21 Narrative Cycle of the Virgin's Last Days on Earth, Dormition, and Assumption into Heaven, fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west wall, ca. 1294-95. Source: Miljković-Pepek, P. (1967). *Deloto na zografite Mihailo i Evtihii*. Skopje: Patrimoine culturel et historique de la R.S. de Macedoine, 112



Figure 22 The Dormition and Assumption of the Mother of God (Detail: Brazier with Incense), fresco, Michael Astrapas and Eutychios, the Virgin Peribleptos church, Ohrid, North Macedonia, naos, west wall, ca. 1294-95. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Debar and Kičevo

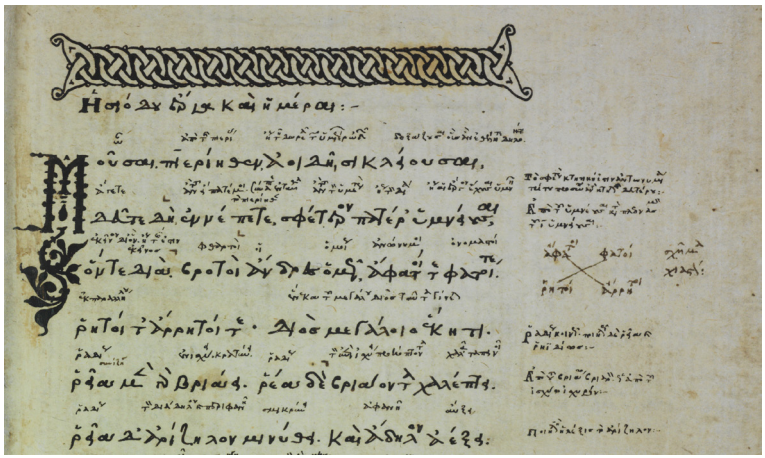


Figure 23 Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Marc.gr. Z 464 (= coll. 762), f. 20r, Copy of Hesiod's *Works and Days* by Demetrios Triklinios, 1316-19. © Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice



Figure 24 Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Marc.gr. Z 464 (= coll. 762), f. 34r, Miniature Attached to Hesiod's *Works and Days*, 1316-19. © Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice

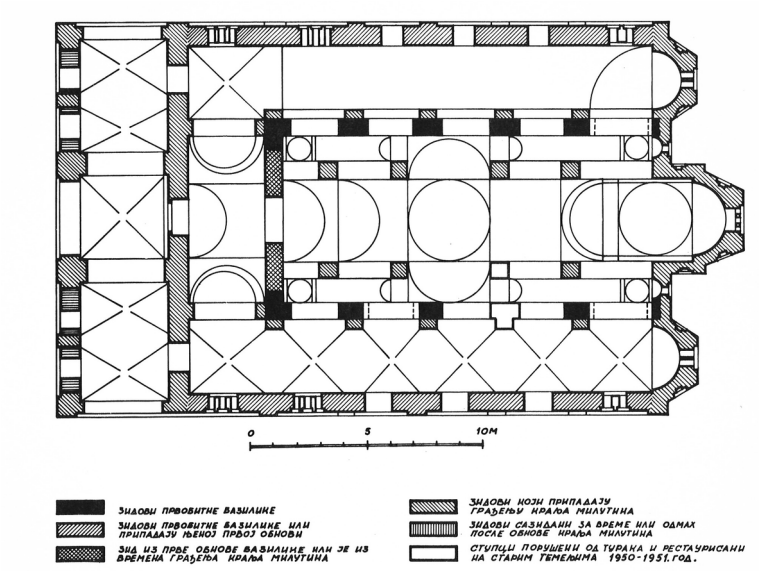


Figure 25 Ground plan of the Bogorodica Ljeviška church, Prizren, Kosovo, ca. 1306-09. Source: Panić, D.; Babić, G. (1975). *Bogorodica Ljeviška*. Belgrade: Utmenički Spomenici Jugoslavije, 34, fig. 2



Figure 26 The Reduplicated Virgin-Christ Pair Forming a Spatial Chiasm under the Dome, frescoes, Astrapas workshop, Bogorodica Ljeviška church, Prizren, Kosovo, naos, central bay, ca. 1307-13. Photo: © Andrei Dumitrescu, with the permission of the Orthodox Eparchy of Raška and Prizren

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