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# Micro-architecture as a Spatial and Conceptual Frame in Byzantium: Canopies in the Monastery of Hosios Loukas

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# Micro-architecture as a Spatial and Conceptual Frame in Byzantium: Canopies in the Monastery of Hosios Loukas

## **Abstract**

The use of architecture as a visual and conceptual frame is well attested in medieval art. For example, in medieval illuminations, architectural frames are often used to separate images from the accompanying texts. Such architectural frames signify potent transparent boundaries between the space of the beholder and the space of that which is seen and, therefore, define perceptible liminal spaces. Actual architectural frames and their role in defining sacred space, however, have been studied far less.

## **Disciplines**

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Architectural History and Criticism | Architecture | Near Eastern Languages and Societies

**Micro-architecture as a Spatial and Conceptual Frame in  
Byzantium:  
Canopies in the Monastery of Hosios Loukas**

Jelena Bogdanović (Iowa State University)

The use of architecture as a visual and conceptual frame is well attested in medieval art. For example, in medieval illuminations, architectural frames are often used to separate images from the accompanying texts. Such architectural

frames signify potent transparent boundaries between the space of the beholder and the space of that which is seen and, therefore, define perceptible liminal spaces. Actual architectural frames and their role in defining sacred space, however, have been studied far less.

This paper examines architectural and conceptual frames in Byzantium by going beyond the Kantian notion of frame as pure embellishment (*parergon*) and by re-examining Derrida's concept of frame as an integral part of the content that in fact negates the separation of the two different realms — within and outside of the frame. Architectural canopies provide an elucidating means of exploring this issue. In particular, I discuss examples from the monastery of Hosios Loukas in Boeotia, Greece: the altar canopy, the tomb-shrine canopy, and the canopy that signifies the Temple in the scene of the *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* depicted in one of the squinches of the massive domed core of the *katholikon* – also a canopy.

These canopies of different origins, sizes, materials and locations within the monastery's *katholikon*, framed and combined different and independent though not necessarily mutually exclusive “glorious spaces,” as they were recurrently described in primary sources. Such spaces were perceived by the monks, pilgrims, and churchgoers as characteristic of the divine. Images and canopies associated with Hosios Loukas reveal different experiential and material frames within the church and polyvalent relations between the sacred space and the human body (of the beholders and of the holy beings).

The Kantian construct of the frame as a purely decorative feature is not applicable in the Byzantine cultural sphere, while Derrida's framing when applied to Byzantine architecture transgresses the boundaries dividing the divine and human realms. John of Damascus writes about the framing of the universe, imbuing aspects of the divine and

earthly in overlapping spaces, each within the other, and yet also distinct. Using the Damascene's thought as a basis, the Byzantine understanding of framing is examined as a way to signify meaning through the specific examples of different canopies at Hosios Loukas. This analysis demonstrates that canopies were perceived as architectural and conceptual frames that provided both divine and earthly entities with their appropriate properties, while preserving their true natures as divine or earthly, even if occasionally seemingly overlapping within the liminal space of the frame and the framed. By combining philosophical, textual, visual and architectural evidence, this paper ultimately suggests that micro-architectural forms functioned as "spatial icons" that aided the believers in their spiritual quests while never fully dissolving the strongly perceived distinction between the earthly and heavenly realms.

### **Imperial Bodies and Sacred Space? Imperial Images between Monumental Decoration and Space Definition**

Maria Cristina Carile (Università di Bologna, Italy)

Since the first edition of André Grabar's *L'empereur dans l'art Byzantine* (Paris, 1936), scholarly literature has devoted much attention to representations of the emperor – and, in more recent years, of the empress – in a wide range of media (from mosaics to coins, weights and manuscript illumination). Much has also been written about monumental images of the imperial couple and family, which appear to have proliferated from the age of Basil I (867-886) onwards and become a *leitmotiv* in the territories of Byzantine tradition outside Constantinople at a later period. However, monumental images of the imperial couple and family were not exceptional even in Late Antiquity. At that time, just as in Byzantium, they were used