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The Phiale as a Spatial Icon

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Abstract

This paper examines phialae as spatial icons by focusing on their micro-architecture and related spiritual and sacramental meanings. Similar in architectural form and meaning to ablution and baptismal fonts, phialae were distinct installations for holy water fonts, which were used for ceremonies related to the blessing of holy water but would also invoke references to the cleansing of sins and the sacrament of baptism.

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Сборник материалов симпозиума впервые в мировой науке посвящен проблематике воды как важнейшего средства в создании сакральных пространств, преимущественно в византийско-древнерусской традиции, рассматриваемой в широком историческом и географическом контексте, что позволит понять как специфику византийского подхода, так и христианской традиции в целом. Симпозиум носит междисциплинарный характер. При этом внимание сосредоточено на сакрально-символических аспектах использования воды и на методологии историко-культурных исследований.

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Jelena Bogdanović
The Phiale as a Spatial Icon

Елена Богданович
Фиал как пространственная икона

This paper examines phialae as spatial icons by focusing on their micro-architecture and related spiritual and sacramental meanings. Similar in architectural form and meaning to ablution and baptismal fonts, phialae were distinct installations for holy water fonts, which were used for ceremonies related to the blessing of holy water but would also invoke references to the cleansing of sins and the sacrament of baptism. The Great Blessing of Holy Water is performed during the ceremony of Epiphany (Theophany) on January 6th, commemorating the Baptism of Christ. Because Christ was sinless, his baptism made water and all creation holy, and in that context water can become both the instrument and the sign of its original biblical meaning--the source of life. This pervasive concept of holy water is also related to lesser ceremonies such as on Bright Friday (Friday in Easter Week or Bright Week) – which in the Orthodox Christian tradition became associated with the feast of the Theotokos and her epithet the “Life-giving Spring” – and on the feast of Mid-Pentecost. A ritual that includes prayers and sprinkling with holy water is also used for the ceremony of the consecration of a church. In addition, holy water in phialae is used for ritual cleansing before entering the church, for the blessings of believers’ homes, and for the blessing of the sick and the needy. By drawing from biblical and liturgical sources and several scarcely preserved references to phialae from Byzantine culture, the emphasis in this paper is placed on the form and meaning of the phialae fonts and their architectural framing.

A phiale font is often shallow, made of stone or metal, and takes a circular, trefoil or quatrefoil shape similar to the baptismal fonts and the chalices used for the Eucharist – as suggested by the description of the now lost quatrefoil phiale at the Mangana in Constantinople – thus emphasizing the notion that these are the containers of incorruptible substances, i.e. the belief that holy water does not change its qualities

throughout the year. The holy water in the phiale helps to create a chain of sacramental presence and works of God from baptism to the Eucharist. It prefigures the miracles of Christ, starting with the Wedding in Cana when Christ changed water into wine and announced the new covenant between God and believers as well as the transformation of wine into the blood of Christ during the Eucharist in the church, thus highlighting the interconnectedness of all church sacraments. Moreover, Byzantine monk and intellectual Michael Psellus writes about the charitable distribution of bread behind the phiale in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in the eleventh century, thus providing a subtle, performative reference to the Eucharistic mystery performed within the church. Located in the southern portion of the atrium just before the entrance to the church or within the southwestern portions of the church -- in a narthex or in a separate, southwestern chapel -- phialae sometimes contained a fount of streaming (“live”) water or could be merely the vessel for the holy water itself within these subsidiary church spaces. Perhaps because phialae would often be placed in the atrium, they also could have been occasionally identified with the atrium itself as Michael of Thessaloniki suggested in his twelfth-century description of the phiale (here termed *louter*) in Constantinopolitan Hagia Sophia. Furthermore, in the tenth-century Byzantine *Book of Ceremonies* there are references to the demes’ fountain-courts used in imperial ceremonies. This invaluable source on both architecture and life in Byzantine Constantinople also provides information about the private fountain-court (*mystike phiale*) of the Triconch of the Imperial Palace, which was used in winter due to inclement weather and which was potentially an entire building or located inside the building. This reference from the *Book of Ceremonies* about the alternate location of the phiale also potentially reveals reasons for their alternate locations within the church proper – in the narthex or in the chapel. A still surviving example of a medieval phiale in the late twelfth-century Serbian monastery of Studenica, additionally enlightens the discussion about locations and rituals associated with phiale. In this case, a massive stone phiale was originally in the southwest section of the monastery, just in front of the katholikon, yet already during the first

half of the thirteenth century, it was enveloped by a massive narthex, most likely due to harsh winter conditions in the Balkans.

By focusing on phialae built as micro-architectural, canopied structures, they can be related to the architecture and the meaning of the church. Phialae covered by an open canopy with the domical roof, often sheathed in lead in the exterior – as Russian travelers recorded in their descriptions of Constantinopolitan architecture and further supported by the still-standing post-Byzantine phialae in the monasteries on Mt. Athos – further reveal the essential and generic architectonic elements of a typical Byzantine church with a dome, which was covered with a metal roof in the case of the highest quality churches in Constantinople and other major centers of Byzantine architecture. In the interior, the dome of a phiale was decorated with images of Christ, Baptism, the Living Cross, or the Mother of God. The subtle incorporation of water and light in the architectural design of a phiale reveals how Byzantines created them as spatial icons defined by Alexei Lidov as “iconic imagery presented as spatial vision(s).” The hierotopical dynamics of phialae are replete with the concepts of framing the formless matter – holy water. The blessing of holy water during the services for Epiphany (Theophany) at a phiale lit by candles in the early winter morning highlights the creation of sacred space that incorporates basic architectural elements (water, light, sound, stone, metal, wood) and reveals the most powerful messages of the vision of God and His infinite transcendence (cf. related actions, prayers and readings from Isaiah, 1 Corinthians, Gospel of Mark during the rite). Moreover, when not used during Epiphany (Theophany) and during lesser ceremonies, the reflection of light from the metal roofs of phialae and from the holy water they protected, literally and symbolically highlighted how a phiale was a miniature model and pre-figuration of the church. Simultaneously, the canopied cover prevented images other than the ones depicted in the interior of the canopy dome (such as the Cross, the Mother of God, Jesus Christ, or Baptism) to be reflected as in a mirror in the shallow font of the holy water below the open canopy. Thus, the formless matter of the living holy water receives its shape and meaning of creation and life through the orchestrated use of the architectural

installation, while the phiale itself becomes a spatial icon of the mystery of the living church itself. The palindrome inscription in Greek, which reads in both directions “wash your sin, not only your face” recorded on the now-lost phiale in the Constantinopolitan cathedral Hagia Sophia further reminded the believers of the role of such a “spatial icon” that opened the realm beyond the material and the visible (face) and highlighted the deeper references to the human condition before entering the church. In this context, this paper argues that a phiale truly becomes a spatial icon of the church in front of which it stands.