

Cosmological symbolism in the decorative cycles of mid- Byzantine churches

Dr Valerie Shrimplin
July 2013

Overview

- Links between theology and astronomy are widely reflected in the Judaeo-Christian tradition (Byzantium)
- *Genesis* to *Revelation* – cosmological concepts: the mysteries of the beginning and end of the universe, and the cycle of birth and death of individuals
- Scriptures reinforced by writers: Cosmas Indicopleustes, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (for the ordering of God's universe)
- Reflected in art and architecture – especially in Byzantine era (post iconoclasm 726-843) mid-Byzantine (843-1204) representation of the heavens in art and architecture
- Individual images reflective of the heavens; also entire cycles of architecture and decoration of mid-Byzantine cross-in-square church

Chronology and key monuments

- Reflected in art and architecture:
 - Byzantine 313 - 726;
 - images prohibited 726 – 843;
 - mid Byzantine 843 - 1204
 - late Byzantine 1204 – 1453
- Manuscripts, icons and complete schemes - symbolic of the universe
- Hosios Lukas and Daphni (11th cent). Cross-in-square churches as symbolic of the universe.
- Pantocrator in dome, Mary in apse as 'bridge', zones and hierarchies rigorously adhered to. Hierarchical schemes (from celestial domes to lower earthly zones – Christ apostles, saints). Individual features.
- View of the universe demonstrates seemingly modern concepts – ie cosmological symbolism, abstract approach

Sea, skies – light and colour
The heavens, the horizon, celestial bodies, surrounding
cosmos and dome of heaven



Full moon Pelion, 13 August 2011
18h03



Monastery of Daphni, Athens,
September 2011

Familiar astronomical Biblical references

- Genesis I – *the greater light to rule the day, the lesser to rule the night ...and the stars also*
- Isaiah 40:22 - *the Lord stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in (cf 42:5 44:24)*
- Ezekiel 5:5 -*Jerusalem .. in the midst* (centre of universe)
- Exodus 25:9 – Holy tabernacle the same shape as the cosmos (rectangle twice as long as wide)
- Ps 102:25 – laid the foundations of the earth ... heavens work of thy hands (also Heb 1:10)

Byzantine Cosmology

(different approach even prior to 1054 split)

- Emphasis on 'other worldly', spiritual and inspirational (for monastic communities, not stories for laity)
- [Western view of Byzantine art: 'crude, stiff and mediocre', Vasari]
- Ecclesiastical architecture as symbol of universe (cycles/circles not directional to altar as in the West)
- Flat earth cosmology (up for heaven/down for hell); individual features (stars, sun, moon, sky)
- Influence on art and architecture - heavenly myths shaping religion and hence society and identity
- 'Art belongs to the artists but disposition of it is the prerogative of the Holy fathers' (7th Ecumenical Synod/2nd Nicaea 787 restored images)

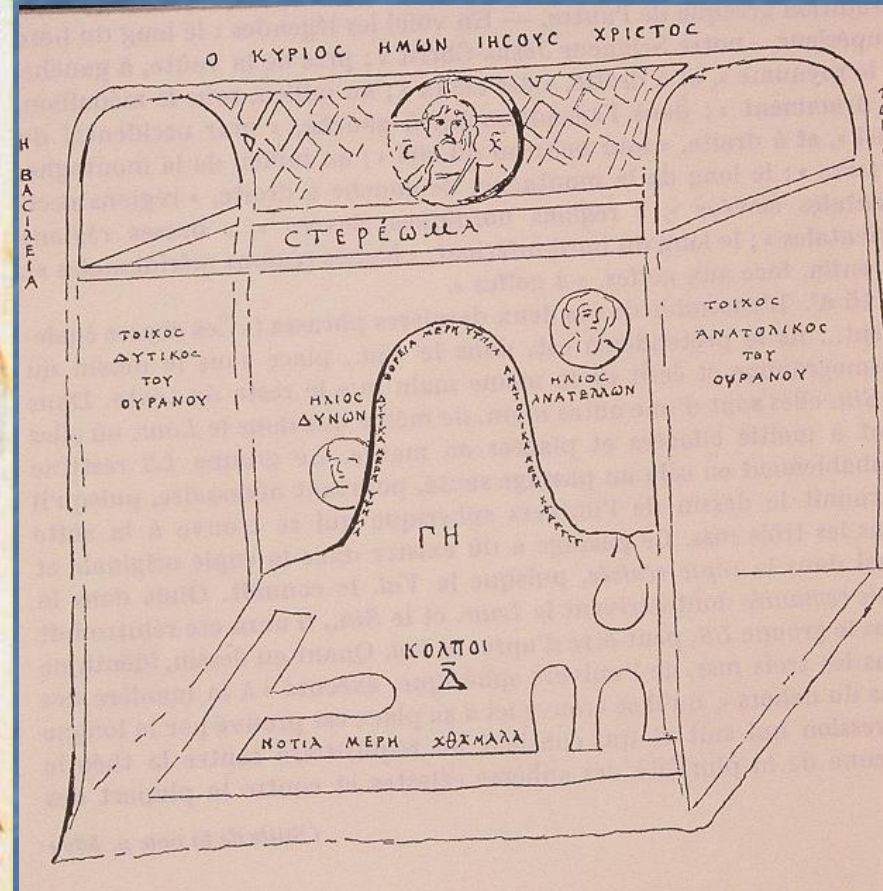
The Byzantine Empire



476



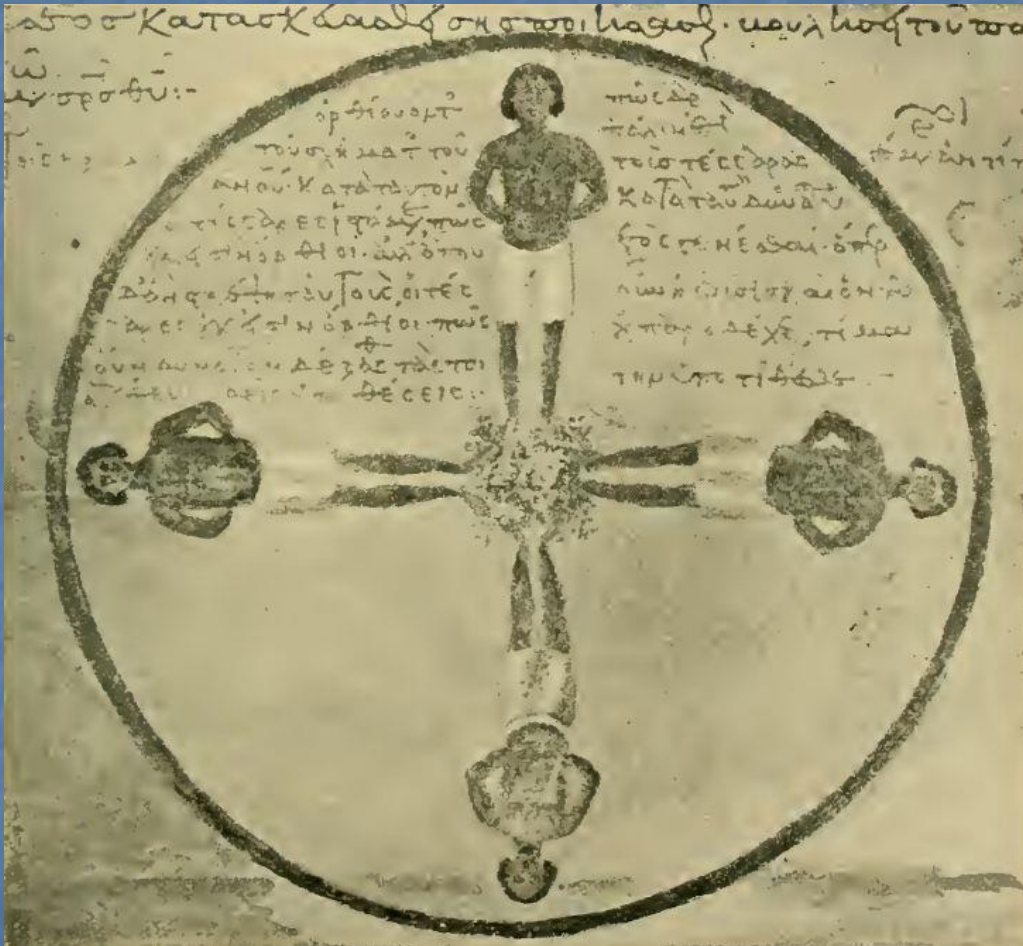
Byzantine view of the cosmos/earth



Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Universe* 6th cent

Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Earth* 6th cent

Cosmas' view of the earth/planet

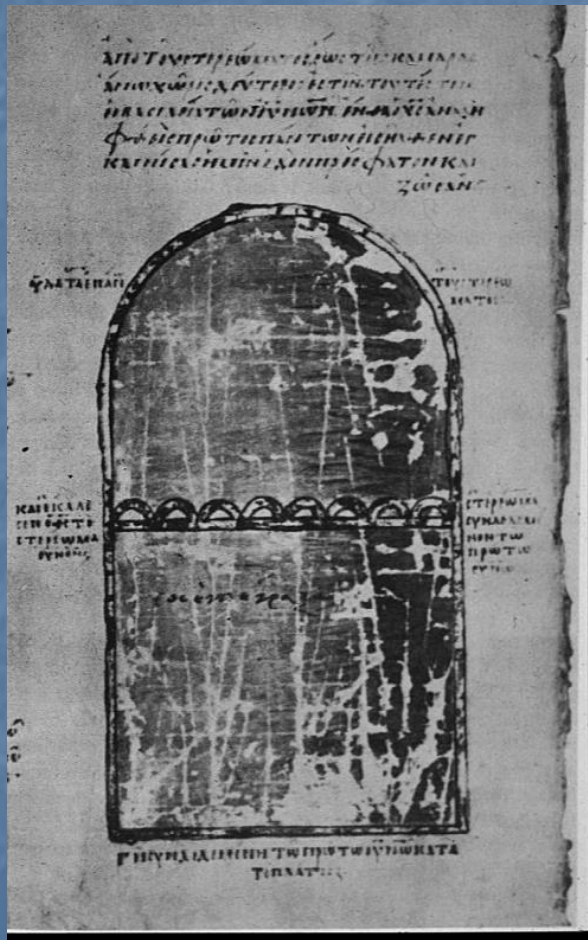


Cosmas: impossible to explain how rain should fall, how the earth could have become covered at the time of the flood. Not possible to conceive of ascent to heaven (*Christian Topography*).

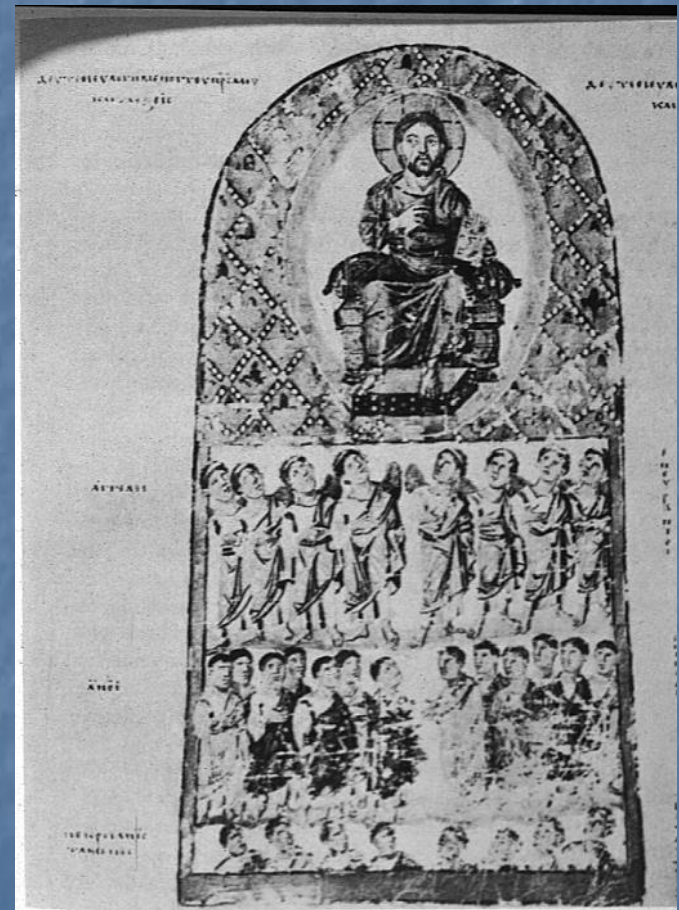
Plato: Seeing that the whole is spherical, the assertion that it has one region 'above' and one region 'below' does not become a man of sense *Timaeus* 63B

Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Earth, Antipodes* 6th cent

Cosmology as foundation for concepts in art

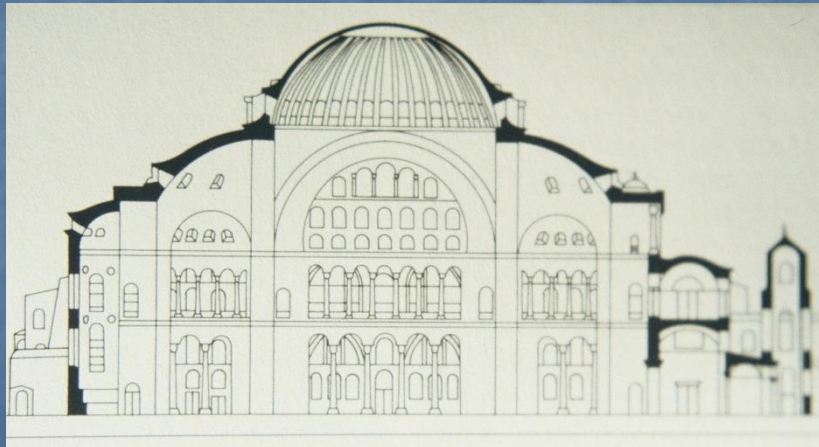


Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Universe* 6th cent



Last Judgment 6th century (VatGr699)

Orientations, dome of heaven



Hosios David, Thessaloniki (5th Cent)

S Sophia Constantinople (dedicated 360)
'a hanging architecture'

Mid Byzantine era: 843 – 1204: Hosios Lukas and Daphni as visualisation of the Christian Cosmos



Hosios Loukas, Phocis, early 11th cent

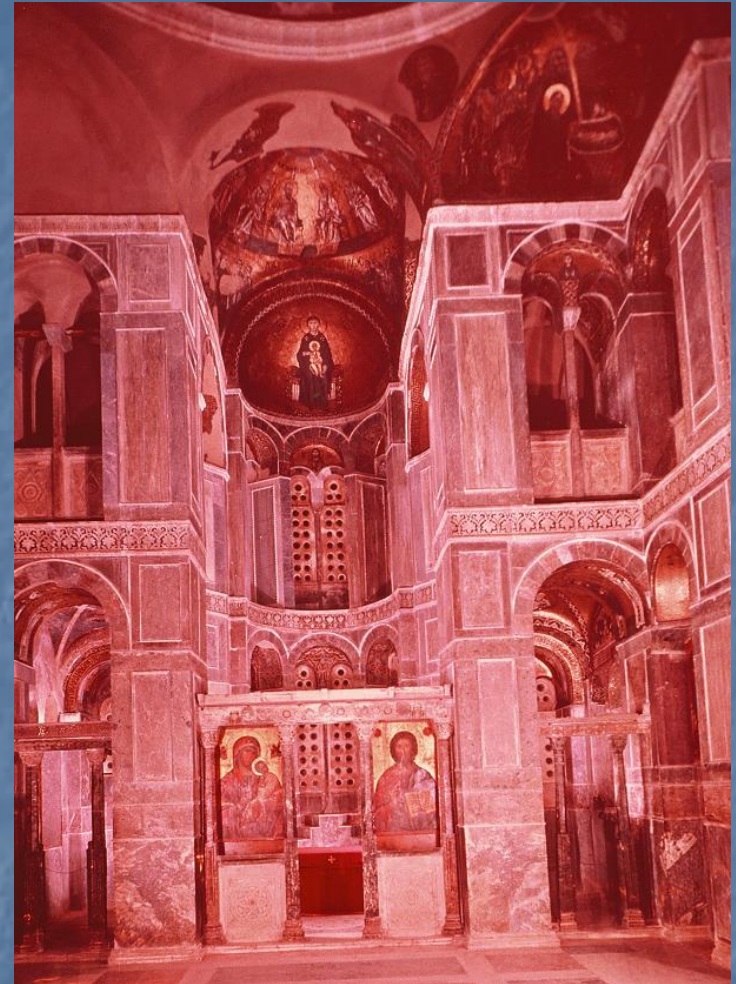


Daphni, near Athens (late 11th cent)

Church interpreted symbolically

- Image of the cosmos and the liturgical cycle
- The meaning of the icon – relation with beholder
- Architectural space divided into zones (descending)
 - **Central domes:** Pantocrator, Descent of Holy Ghost (events taking place in Heaven)
 - **Apse:** Virgin as bridge between heaven and earth
 - **Squinches, pendentives:** evangelists, festival cycle
 - **Lower walls:** minor saints, monks, the earthly world
 - (Hell not depicted – Judas only ever in profile)
- Reflect discourses of Cosmas, Lactantius, Pseudo-Dionysius based on the view of the heavens above the earth (ascent to heaven, circular motion round centre)

Hosios Lukas – upper domes

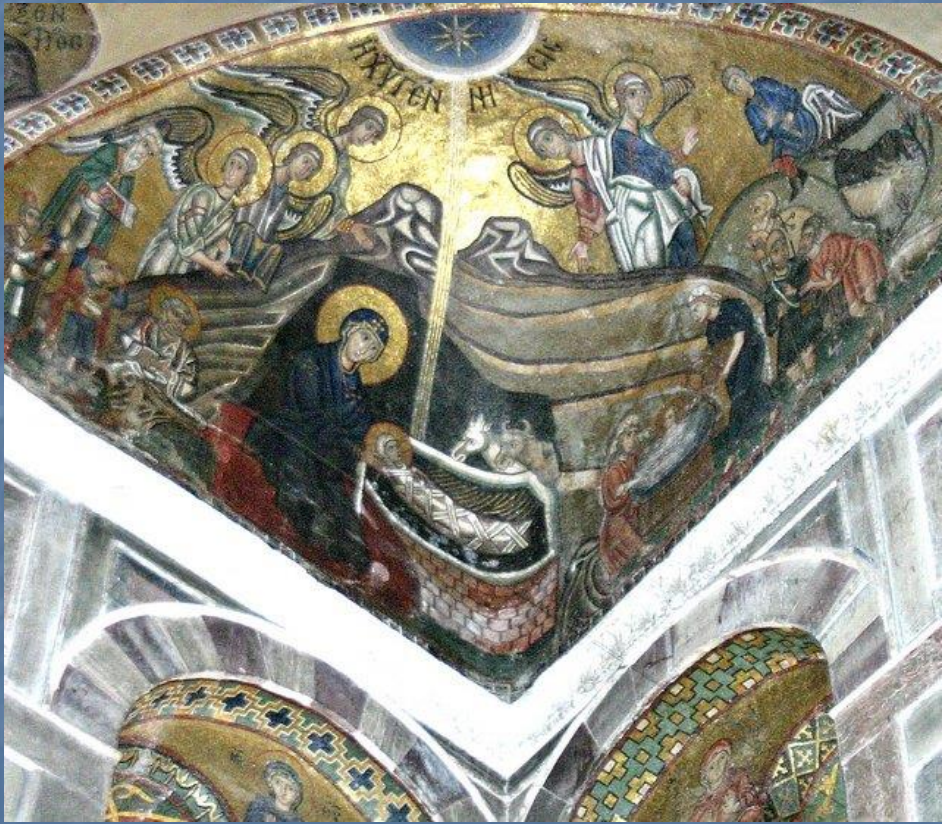


Church as reflexion of the ordering of God's universe: not realistic depiction of the natural world but symbolic interpretation of the divine/celestial world

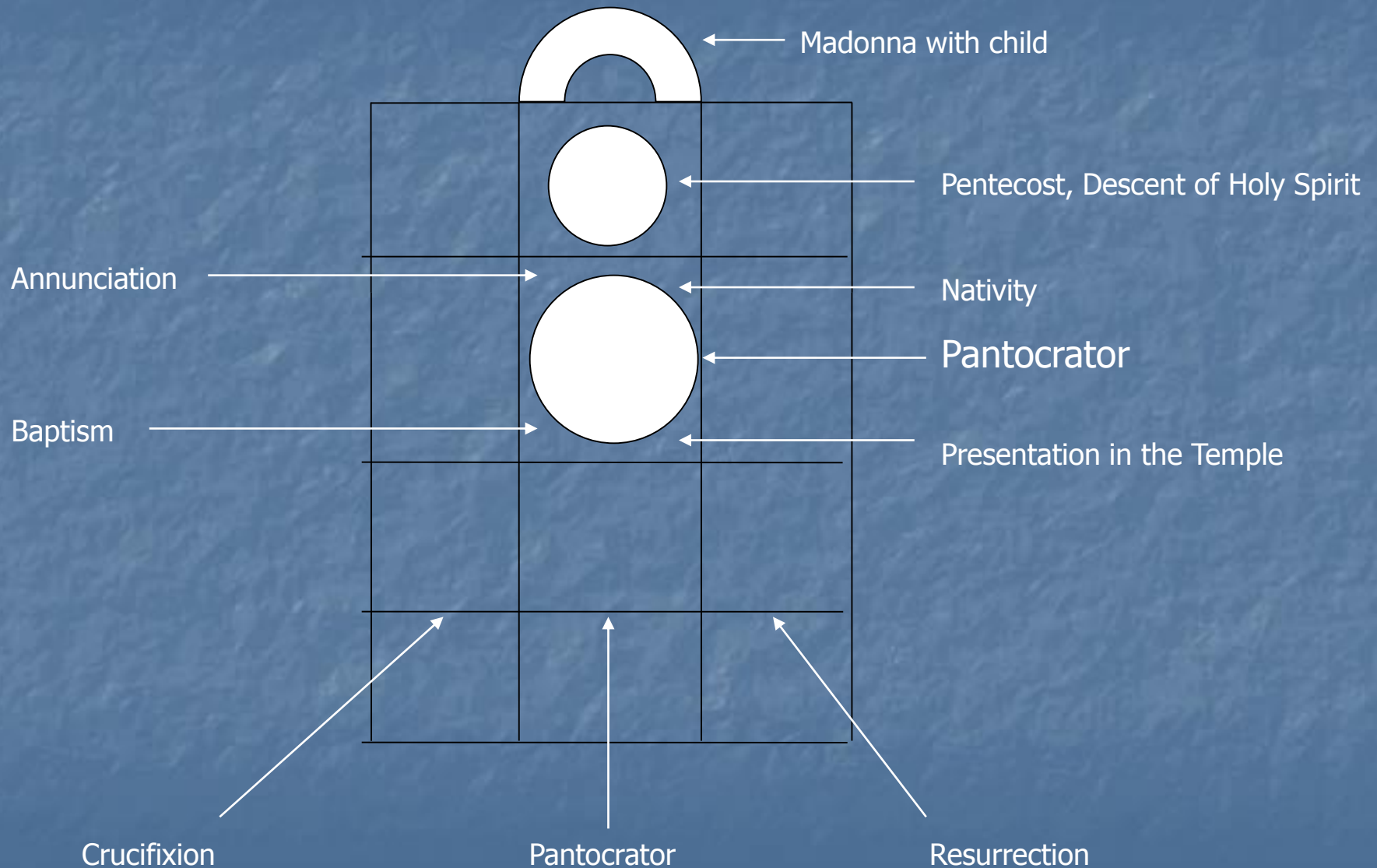
Hosios Lukas: Panagia, Pentecost



Hosios Lukas: Nativity, Baptism



Schema of Festival cycle (based on Hosios Lukas)



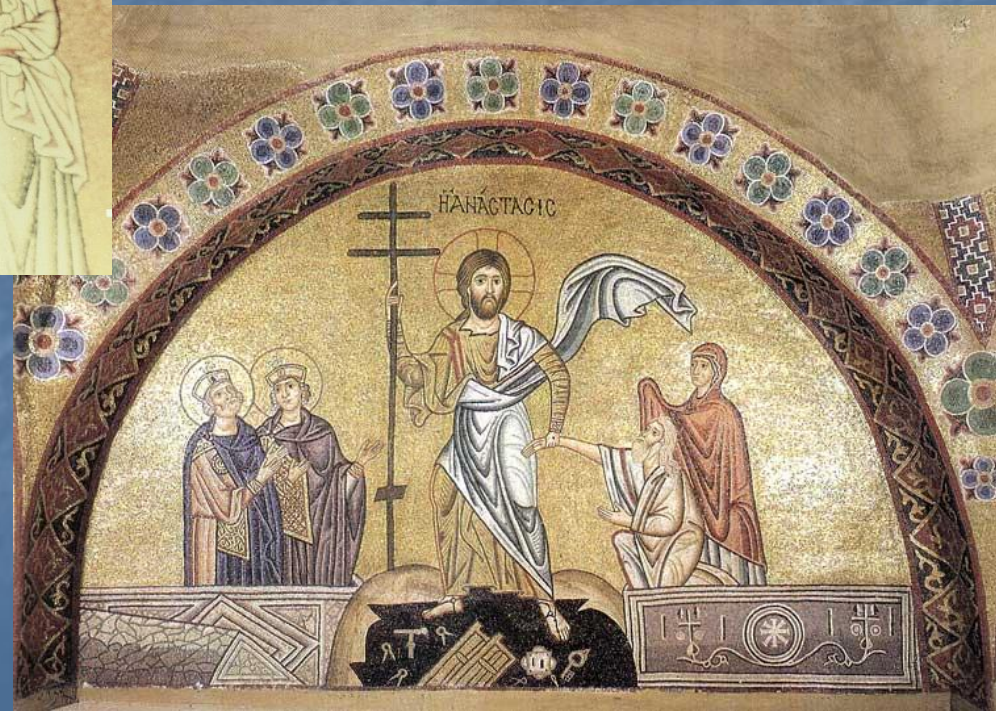
Festival cycle (12): dates

- 6 January – *Baptism*
- 2 February - *Presentation in the Temple*
- 25 March – *Annunciation*
- Full moon after spring Equinox – *Crucifixion*
- + 40 days – *Ascension*
- + 50 days – *Pentecost*
- 6 August – *Transfiguration*
- 25 December – *Nativity* (winter solstice)
- A recurring circle reflecting the eternal motions of the heavens. Proof of the existence of the heavenly realm
- Not aiming at narrative (*Baptism* precedes *Annunciation*)
- Not illusion of space but using physical space

Hosios Lukas: Crucifixion, Descent to Hell

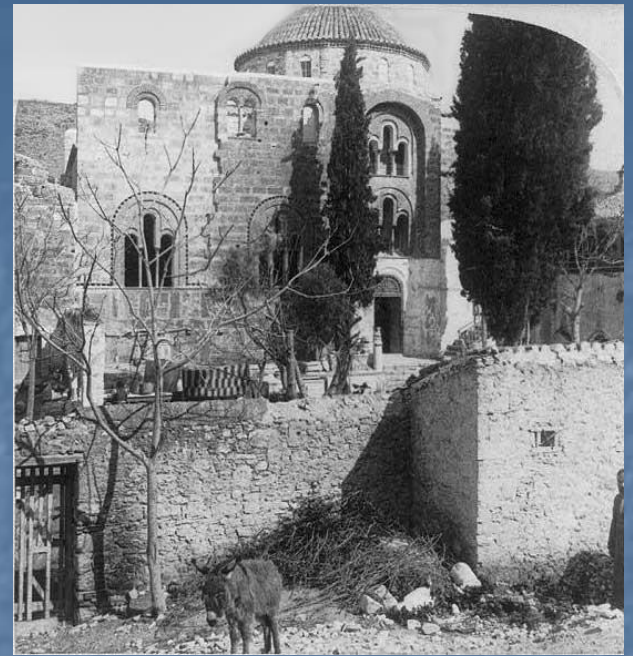


← Sun and moon



Descent to Hell (below the dome)

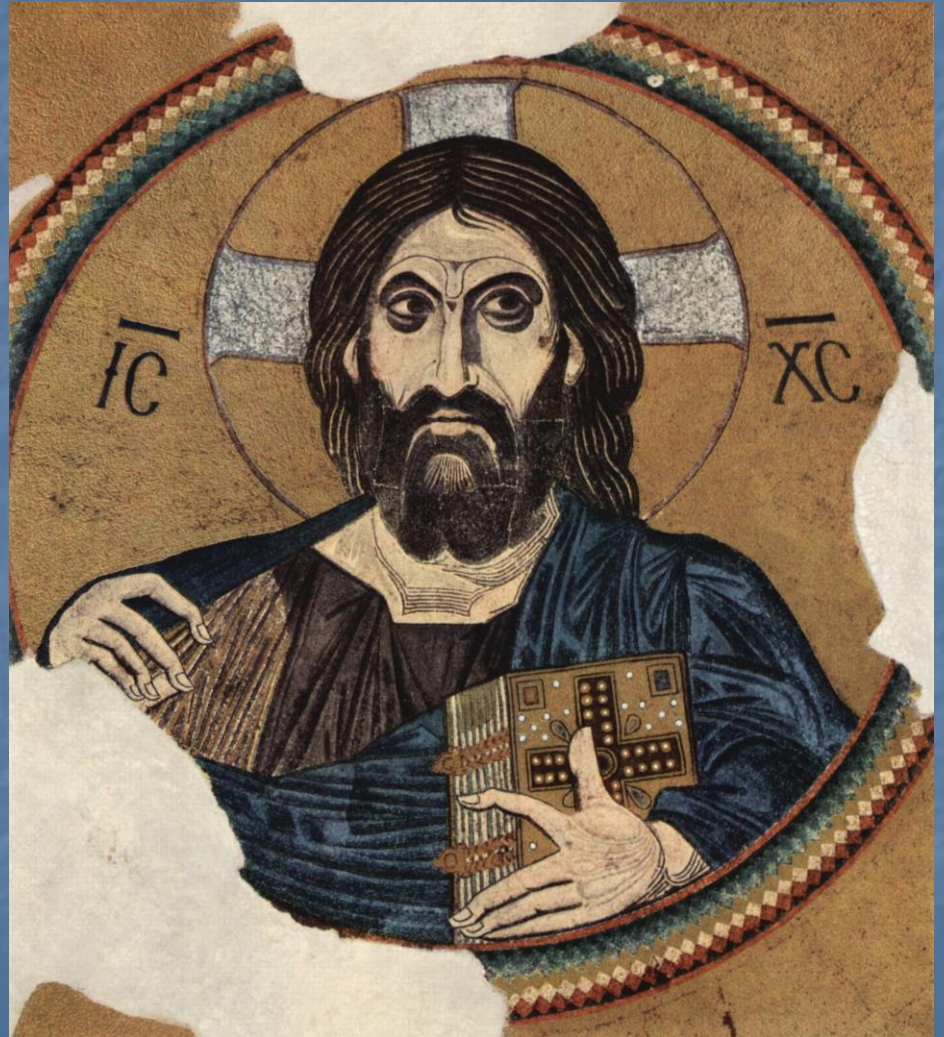
Daphni (near Athens)



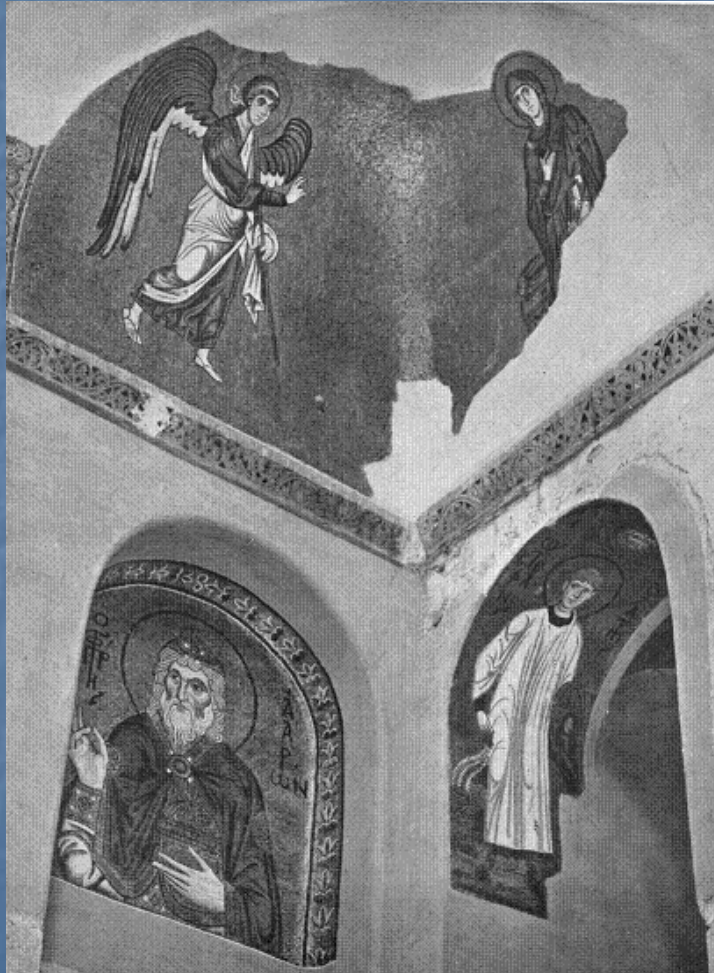
Daphni: Pantocrator main dome



Daphne Pantocrator



Daphni, Annunciation



Daphni: Nativity, Baptism



Dome cycles: Hosios Lukas and Daphni



Nea Moni, Chios (11th cent)



Same format: heavenly realms – infinity, eternity

11th century

St Saviour in Chora, Constantinople



St Saviour in Chora, Constantinople

And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

Revelation 6:14

All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; Isaiah 34:4

The heavens will disappear with a roar; 2 Peter 3:10



[now Kariye Djami Constantinople

Building 11th cent – frescoes c1315]

Influence – Italo Byzantine in Ravenna



Galla Placidia, 425



St Vitale, Ravenna, 1st quarter 6th century

Astronomy and Christian iconography



Monreale, 1175

St Mark's Venice, Creation, 11th cent

Established traditions and formats



→
Last Judgment, Icon
c 1100 (Mt Sinai)



Pantocrator,
S Sophia,
London 1882



Last Judgment, Icon 14-15c (Kanellopoulos)

Conclusions

- Views of cosmology and astronomy fundamental to Byzantine Art – about hierarchies not saving individuals
- Abstract theology rather than popular piety/narratives – as in the West (narrative, moral, ethical, didactic)
- Not created as independent pictures – relation to each other (in curved space), to architectural framework and to beholder
- Abolishes distinction between real and celestial worlds
- Attempts to understand cosmology and world view
- Modern, cosmic, abstract–expressionist approach

Some references

Demus, Otto (1944), *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*

Lehmann, Karl (1945), 'The dome of heaven,' *Art Bulletin*, 28, 1-27

Talbot Rice, David (1964), *Byzantine Art*

Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. late 5th/early 6th cent) *On the Celestial Hierarchy*

Shrimplin, Valerie (2000), *Sun-symbolism and Cosmology in Michelangelo's Last Judgment*

Wikimedia Commons (for illustrations)