

Abstract

The Wisdom Iconography of Light: The Genesis, Meaning and Iconographic Realization of a Symbol

By Priscilla Hunt

A star of eight points appears in Byzantino-Slavic iconography in the fourteenth century (Plate 12). Comprised of two overlapping rhombi at quarter angles within a circle or circles of light, it typically occurs around the head or body of Christ.¹ Prior to this, at the end of the thirteenth century, a simpler image consisting of a single rhombus in the same circle(s) of light appears in analogous iconographic contexts (Plate 5).² The circles of light around Christ, usually transected by rays occur from the beginning of Christian iconography in the fifth and sixth centuries (Plate 3). Although scholars have identified the star as a symbol of Wisdom, theophany and divinity, no one has adequately explained its meaning, where it came from or why it emerged into the tradition in the early fourteenth century.³ This study will show that the star and the single rhombus (proto-star) are

¹ See T. Vel'man, "Le rôle de l'hésychasme dans la peinture murale Byzantine du XIV^e et XV^e siècles," in Ritual and Art: Byzantine Essays for Christopher Walter, London: Pindar Press, 2006, 218-219. These circles could also be stylized as oval, or egg shaped. A. Andreopoulos in Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2005, esp. 228-242 analyzes the various forms this circle can take, and explains them in a cross-cultural Jungian perspective.

² This rhombus also could be stylized in various ways with curvatures on the sides and emphasis on the two interior triangles. L. F. Zhegin, Iazyk zhivopisnogo proizvedeniia, Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1970, 59, 66 relates these deformations to the non-Euclidean, "elliptical" or "spherical" organization of space relative to an internal central viewpoint.

³ See Der Nersessian, S., "Notes sur quelques images se rattachant au thème du Christ-Ange, in Études Byzantines et Arméniennes, Louvain, 1973, Imp. Orientaliste, 43-47, and D. Fiene, "What is the Appearance of Divine Sophia," Slavic Review, vol. 48, no. 3 (Fall, 1989), 449-477, esp. 473-475, figures 3,4,6,10,11 and 12.

interrelated expressions of the hidden symbolic meanings of the circles of light in which they appear. All three iconographic motifs, the circle of light, the proto-star and the eight-pointed star are consecutive stages (1-3) of realization of the esoteric meaning of a numerical-geometrical symbol in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite—a circle with expanding radii. The first part of this study investigates the Neo-Platonic and Neo-Pythagorean basis of Dionysius’ symbol and reconstructs its esoteric meaning as a hidden sphere of Light that signifies the multiplication of the One. This investigation suggests that each stage of the Wisdom iconography of Light models the action of the spherical continuum, specifically, of the cone, with increasing fullness and richness of implication..The second part of this study analyzes the iconographic contexts in which this Light symbolism occurs. We first examine four mid-fifth and sixth century compositions that exhibit stage 1, concentric circles of Light with rays. We then turn to four related iconographic subjects in the iconography of the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries that each exhibit an evolution from stage 2 to stage 3, from the protostar to the star. The similarities in the use of each respective stage of the iconography of Light suggest that 1) iconographers had a common perception of the meaning of each stage and 2) that they were inspired by a common agenda.. This analysis demonstrates that iconographers established their iconography of Wisdom-Light at a time when the esoteric traditions that informed Dionysius’ work and Dionysius himself were alive, in the mid-fifth and especially the sixth century.⁴ They developed it further from the late thirteenth century as part of the Church’s defense of its mystical theology against the inroads of humanism.⁵ The evolution of Light symbolism reflected the widespread tendency of the time to make theological premises more explicit and to find new ways to symbolize the hidden depth of Wisdom. The evolution of Light symbolism from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries testifies to a living but unwritten esoteric tradition about the sphere that was maintained throughout the ages. When cultural conditions called

⁴In The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, p. 161 Louth places Dionysius in the late-fifth to sixth century. Dionysius’ hidden meanings drew on earlier tradition. St. Augustine in the fourth century made reference to the traditions. See Eco, Art and Beauty, 43.

⁵ See also J. Meyendorff, J. A Study of Gregory Palamas, London: the Faith Press, 1964, 42-62.

for renewed interpretations of the Light, new representations of the hidden sphere emerged. Finally, an understanding of all three stages of the Wisdom iconography of Light in iconographic context elucidates the concept of theophany that informs Byzantino-Slavic iconography.