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MANDORLA AND HALO ON THE FRESCOES FROM THE VISOKI DEČANI MONASTERY: FORM, CONTEXT, AND MEANING¹

Abstract: *The paper discusses the forms of the halo and the mandorla in the fresco paintings at the Monastery of Visoki Dečani, focusing on the connection between their shape and the meanings they acquire in different contexts. Both symbols appeared early in Christian art and evolved over time, with new forms and meanings emerging. In the Visoki Dečani Monastery, various forms of the halo and mandorla coexist. Such variations raise the question of whether they stem from theological considerations or different artistic prototypes. Preliminary observations suggest that these differences are deliberate, reflecting subtle depictions of varying degrees of Divine revelation to humankind. In this way, the Dečani frescoes are connected to the theological debates of the period, particularly the Hesychast controversy.*

Keywords: *Halo, mandorla, Hesychasm, light, Divine glory, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Genesis*

In the extensive corpus of extant frescoes in the Catholicon of the Visoki Dečani Monastery,² painted in the mid-14th century, themes and motifs wherein divine light is symbolically represented occupy a prominent place. In this paper, I will consider the different forms of the halo and the mandorla, focusing on the connection between their form and the meanings they acquire in different contexts. The painters of the Dečani frescoes simultaneously employed different forms of halo and mandorla, with both minor and major variations. This raises question of whether these variations stem from theological reasons or are the product of using different templates.

The halo and the mandorla are visual devices that signify the appearance of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints in divine glory, often manifested and depicted as a radiating light surrounding them.³ Both symbols have roots in pre-Christian art, appearing relatively early in

¹ This study was supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (Contract No. 451-03-136/2025-03/200184).

² Visoki Dečani is one of the most significant Serbian mediaeval monuments, established as the endowment of King Stefan Uroš III Dečanski (r. 1322–1331) and his son King, later Emperor Dušan (r. 1331–1355), who took care of the construction after the death of Stefan Dečanski. Archbishop Danilo II (c. 1270–1337) had a significant advisory role during the construction and decoration of the church. The construction of the church, dedicated to the Ascension of Christ, lasted from 1327 to 1334/35. A few years later, most likely between 1337 and 1348, the fresco decoration of the Dečani Catholicon was completed. On the monastery and its history, see: Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 13–32, with cited references; on the wall painting, see: Ђурић 1995; for complete bibliography, see: Ђурић 2008.

³ On the history of the symbol, see: Brendel 1944, 5–24; Лидов 2015, 127–130; Loerke 1981, 15; Тешић

Christian visual culture, while their meanings remained consistent over time, with the appearance of new forms. The earliest examples of the halo in a Christian context date back to the mid-fourth century, where they encircle the head of Jesus Christ to emphasise His divine nature. Over time, halos began to appear around the heads of various holy figures, with certain variations when it comes to representations of Christ and the Holy Trinity.⁴



Figure 1. Transfiguration of Christ, Saint Catherine's Monastery Sinai, Egypt. 6th c.
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The appearance of the mandorla is more specific, serving as a visual symbol of God's glory and marking moments in the biblical narrative when God revealed His divinity, visible presence, and energy to mankind.⁵ A mandorla can take on a circular, oval, or angular shape – an aura of light that surrounds the entire figure of Christ, sometimes the Virgin Mary, the Holy Trinity, and, less commonly, other holy figures. In some cases, the mandorla is transparent, even three-dimensionally modelled, while in others, it consists of concentric circles, often intersected by light rays. It represents a visual means of displaying God's glory, that is, the bright light that accompanies theophany.⁶ The mandorla has pre-Christian roots, as a symbol of the light in which various gods reside and emanate. The origin of the form is linked, inter alia, to Buddhist iconography, Zoroastrianism, and Roman art, while conceptually, it can be connected to the Mesopotamian *melammu*, taking into account the Old Testament's ties to the Mesopotamian culture.⁷ The appearance of the mandorla in Christian visual culture in the mid-4th century is associated with the Christology Debate, i.e. placed in the service of representing Christ's divinity.⁸

The earliest examples of the mandorla have a pattern of concentric circles intersected by rays, emphasising the emanation of divine light from the centre, usually Christ, and suggests

Радовановић 2024, 95–100, with cited references; Georgieva Todorova 2011, 54–55. References to light in philosophical and theological works are abundant, as is the consideration of various aspects of light in iconography and art in general. Therefore, only those references directly related to the topic will be mentioned in the paper.

⁴ Тешић Радовановић 2024, 98–99.

⁵ Georgieva Todorova 2011, 47.

⁶ Andreopoulos 2005, 98; Тешић Радовановић 2024, 95–96; Todorova 2020, 121–123.

⁷ Jensen 2000, 112; Todorova 2020, 124–125; Zelig Aster 2015, 10–21; Eljajade 191, 268; Emelianov 2010, 1109–1119.

⁸ Jensen 2000, 112.

the interaction between divine light and the material world.⁹ As early as the 6th century, round and oval types of mandorla were distinguished.¹⁰ Some scholars believe that these different forms held distinct meanings from the very beginning, reflecting the concept of *kabowd*, which in the Old Testament denotes the glory of God.¹¹ Kabod represents a theophany, an immediate manifestation of divine power, but in Hebrew, the word has dual meanings: the literal, associated with physical phenomena such as weight and solidity, and the abstract, reflecting notions of glory, honour, and abundance. This dual essence of the kabod – the ‘glory of God’ – results in a division into two elements or meanings: *shekinah*, which denotes the permanent presence of God, and *yekara*, which evokes the sensory experience of brightness, where the divine light is understood as a visual sign of God’s energies.¹²



Figure 2. Transfiguration of Christ, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS gr. 1242, fol. 92v. Ca.1370–1375. According to Drpić, ‘Art, Hesychasm’, p. 226.

According to some researchers, the oval or angular shape is more closely associated with the element of the term *kabowd*, which encompasses a spatial capacity embodied in the presence of God – *shekinah*. The circular form is closer to the *yekara* element, which pertains to sensory capacity and is strongly connected with the expression of divine light as a visual sign of divine energies.¹³ As a visual tool, the mandorla simultaneously signifies both the manifestation of divine glory, that is, its spatial presence, and the radiance it emanates. Some authors suggest that in late medieval art, influenced by Hesychasm, the symbolic focus of the mandorla shifted towards light, shine, radiance, and fire, marked by the emergence of a new angular variant.¹⁴ In this light, Todorova concludes:

‘It can be presumed, that “shekhinah” blazed its way into Byzantine Iconography through the exegetical tradition of authors as Philo of Alexandria or St. Gregory of

⁹ The earliest examples are the mosaic depiction of Jesus Christ in majesty from the Catacomb of Saint Domitilla and the mosaic panels in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, Georgieva Todorova 2011, 54; Hunt 2009, 61–62, 96.

¹⁰ Some of the representative examples are the mosaic in the monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai and St. Apollinaris in Classe at Ravenna, Тешић Радовановић 2024, 97–98; Georgieva Todorova 2011, 57.

¹¹ Лидов 2015, 130–133.

¹² Loerke 1981, 15; Tănase 2017, 329–331; Todorova 2020, 129–130.

¹³ Andreopoulos 2005, 88–90.

¹⁴ Hunt 2009, 68–69; Todorova 2020, 128–130; Мако 1990, 41.

Nissa and Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite, while “yekara” was dominant for the Hesychastic tradition. As it has been mentioned above, this binary meaning of “kabowd” did not transit separately into the Greek “δόξα” and into the Latin “gloria”. Therefore, both notions of luminosity and spatial presence of God’s “Glory” mixed in verbs, has been divided in the Christian iconography by usage of two different types of mandorla [...] in Christian art nimbus is usually conceived as light, whereas mandorla denotes the enveloping, protective cloud of God’s presence and divine power. Differences in meaning of both artistic devices had been clear enough until the moment, when Hesychasm raised. The Hesychastic mainstream has faded semantic distinctions between the nimbus as a symbol of the holiness and mandorla as a “meeting-point” of the material and the outer space, and in late Palaiologan art mandorla became a visual sign of the uncreated Thaboric light, equal in meaning with the halo.¹⁵

In an extensive study on the concept of the Glory of God in late Byzantine art, Todorova notes that the evolution of this symbol is connected with theological discussions on the problem of knowing God, singling out Hesychasm as the most significant such period.¹⁶ Addressing the controversial issue of Hesychasm’s influence on late Byzantine art,¹⁷ Todorova concludes that certain characteristics in the development of late Byzantine iconography indicate the influence of hesychastic mysticism in interpreting iconographic subjects related to the representation of the uncreated light of God’s glory, as a manifestation of God’s presence and action. She identifies the appearance of a new type of mandorla as a confirmation of this interpretation.¹⁸ Todorova cites a mosaic from the Church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki, dated around 1312, as the earliest known example of a ‘hesychastic’ mandorla.¹⁹

Starting from the generally accepted understanding, that the miniature of the Transfiguration in the manuscript of the theological works by Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (r. 1347–1354), *Parisinus Graecus 1242*,²⁰ is ‘the paradigmatic visualization of the hesychast ideas about the divine light’, Ivan Drpić analyses the treatment of pictorial elements placed in the function of articulating the hesychastic interpretation of the biblical narrative.²¹ (Fig. 2) Although he accepts the notion that one cannot strictly speak of a hesychastic recension of the subject, he believes that learned patrons and painters could underline hesychastic ideas by emphasising certain elements of the standard iconography, and analyses the miniature in relation to the concept termed the ‘horizon of expectations’.²² This concept, understood as a broad framework comprising collective thought, common visual experience, and iconographic conventions, opens up the possibility of reading traditional iconography in a new way, specifically, in accordance

¹⁵ Georgieva Todorova 2011, 49–50.

¹⁶ Тодорова-Енчева 2020, with cited references. The bibliography on Hesychasm is extensive, see for example: Meyendorff 1974.

¹⁷ For an overview of the most important views on the influence of Hesychasm on late Byzantine art, see: Drpić 2008, 218; Strezova 2014; Тодорова-Енчева 2020, 52–57.

¹⁸ Тодорова-Енчева 2020, 15–16.

¹⁹ Georgieva Todorova 2011, 57. The geometric forms of the mandorla and halo appeared in the last decade of the 13th century. In the painting of the Perivlepta Church in Ohrid, a combination of a rhomboid halo and an oval mandorla appear in several episodes: Wisdom, Assumption, Anastasis, emphasizing the divine nature of the resurrected Christ and the source of divine wisdom, Drpić 2008, 229; Мако 1990, 41–59; Томић Ђурић 2017, 291, 511.

²⁰ Paris, BnF, MS gr. 1242, completed in Constantinople in 1375; Drpić 2008, 220.

²¹ Drpić 2008, 219, 225–226.

²² Drpić 2008, 229–230.

with the ideas of a particular epoch. Dealing with the problem of Hesychasm and art,²³ Anita Strezova observes that the most illustrative example of the vision of divine uncreated light, a central theme of hesychastic theology, is the representation of the Transfiguration of the Lord, which shares theological foundations with the representation of the Resurrection. As she concludes further, 'both are a true expression of the divine nature of Christ and manifestation of the phenomenon of the supernatural light of glory'.²⁴ Strezova also notices that the transformation of the iconography of Anastasis in the 14th century, when 'the main emphasis was on the saving and transforming role of the Saviour's energy of light', connects this iconography with Hesychasm. As an important means by which new ideas are realised, she recognises 'mandorla surrounding Christ acquiring a sharp-angled shape reminiscent of a rising star'.²⁵ Priscila Hunt argues that:

'Iconographers from the mid-fifth and sixth century read Dionysius' circle and its radii as a model of the theophanic action of Light that gives knowledge of the Creator. They surrounded Christ with concentric circles of Light, often with rays (radii), and placed Seers on the edges of the outer circles. They placed their compositions in architectural settings such as the semisphere of the dome or the quarter-sphere of the apse that allude to inner relationships within the sphere.'²⁶



Figure 3. Transfiguration of Christ, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
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Hunt argues that this (circle) iconography of light embodies the first stage of an evolving Light symbolism, with the second and third stages being protostar and star, respectively. According to her, the first stage was used to reveal the Creator as the Logos-Wisdom, the manifestation of the Father's Oneness in the creation. The second stage, involving the protostar, emerged in the late 13th century. It has the form of a rhombus composed of two triangles, which Hunt relates to the teachings of Patriarch Gregory of Cyprus (ca. 1241–1290), regarding the dyadic relationship of the Son and Spirit to repudiate the western *filioque* doctrine,

²³ Strezova 2014, 63–75.

²⁴ Strezova 2014, 131.

²⁵ Strezova 2014, 74–75, 138–139.

²⁶ Hunt 2009, 61.

but also with the fact that Hesychasm became the focus of Orthodox mysticism at that time.²⁷ Hunt considers that Pseudo Dionysius' (ca. late 5th – early 6th c.) concept of Wisdom was central to the hesychast vision and inspired the third phase: the appearance of the Wisdom star, which includes the second horizontal rhombus.²⁸ She concludes that:

„By modelling divine self-identity, the star served the hesychast agenda of signifying how the creation and time participate in the divine transcendence and in the wholeness of Christ's Divine-humanity. The star also served as a symbol of the hesychast mental ascent through prayer since it implies [...] the direct intercommunion (perichoresis) of Seer and Seen. The Wisdom star was a dominant metaphor for the action of Light in key iconographies for the hesychast agenda such as the Transfiguration, Wisdom Builds her House, Christ in Glory and the Trinity'.²⁹

By examining the halo and mandorla in Dečani wall painting, I will identify the various forms of symbols and compositions in which they appear, and try to determine, relying on the aforementioned interpretations, whether a connection exists between form and context or meaning, and whether new forms emerge under the influence of Hesychasm. Despite extensive research on Dečani painting,³⁰ the appearance of different forms of the halo and mandorla remains unresolved. Janko Radovanović, Vladimir Mako, and Rostislava Todorova have devoted considerable attention to this issue. Radovanović, in his analysis of the Dečani Genesis, discussed the halo and the mandorla, noting variations of the form in the different episodes of the Genesis cycle. However, he exclusively interpreted them as symbols of the dual nature of Christ and the Holy Trinity, emphasising the participation of all three faces of God in creation, with the Son as the creative force, hence depicting Christ as the Logos God.³¹ Mako explored the geometric shapes of the halo and mandorla, connecting them with New Testament symbolism and the symbolism of numbers. He observed parallels between the Transfiguration and the Harrowing of Hell with the creation of Adam and Eve in Dečani. In the appearance of unusual types of halo and mandorla, Mako assumes a reflection on the hypostases of divine energy and uncreated light, which corresponds to the spirit of the times. He noted a visual antithesis between Old Testament and New Testament events connected by the appearance of a complex mandorla, but did not further elaborate on this idea.³² In the previously mentioned study, Todorova analysed the shape of the mandorla in the Transfiguration, the Creation of Eve, and the Harrowing of Hell in Dečani, recognising the influence of hesychastic mysticism in interpreting iconographic subjects related to the uncreated light of God's Glory. Todorova also identified a new form of the iconographic symbol, the star shaped mandorla, in different episodes in Dečani's painting, as a means of visualising this Glory at the time. Martina Horn considered some elements of the Dečani Genesis and assessed that hesychastic theories about luminosity influenced the articulation of visual subjects, suggesting that the cycle demonstrates a possible image strategy for depicting the presence of the transcendent creator god in the protological paradise.³³

²⁷ Hunt 2009, 62, 97, 104. For a somewhat different interpretation, see: Mako 1990, 45.

²⁸ Hunt 2009, 104–105; Hunt 2003, 10–11; Mako 1990, 46.

²⁹ Hunt 2009, 104–105. The forms of rhombus and cissoïd represent the actions of light in the sphere, that is, the shape that occurs when a plane intersects a sphere or a circle.

³⁰ On the wall painting, see: Ђурић 1995; Петковић and Бошковић 1941; Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, with cited references.

³¹ Радовановић 1988, 128, 134–135.

³² Мако 1990, 41–58, especially pp. 46–50.

³³ Horn 2020, 196, 213.



Figure 4. Creation of Adam, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
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Marka Tomić highlights the complex forms that the mandorla of divine glory acquired in mid-14th century.³⁴ She suggests that the complexity of iconography in the late Byzantine period indicates the inclusion of patristic works focusing on Christological issues as narrative sources. Tomić concludes that during this period, the hesychastic interest in expressing the doctrine of the Holy Trinity through the mystery of light contributed to both literature and iconography.³⁵ Of particular importance was the hesychastic synthesis of the tradition of spiritual asceticism and the teaching of deification developed by the Cappadocian Fathers, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662), as well as the distinction between divine essence and divine energies based on apophatic Cappadocian theology.³⁶ In the context of the Dečani wall painting, especially the Genesis, Gregory Palamas' (ca. 1296–1359) interest in Adam's glory, as well as his comments on the Hexameron are noteworthy.³⁷ Manifestations of light symbolism in Dečani may be linked to compilations that included current hesychastic texts, but also excerpts from patristic writings often cited in hesychastic polemics.³⁸ Slavic apocrypha, i.e. the *Slavic Paleae* have been mentioned as possible literary sources for the Dečani paintings.³⁹

The frescoes of the Dečani Catholicon, with their abundance of preserved cycles, scenes, and individual figures, represent a treasure trove of themes and iconography of late Byzantine painting.⁴⁰ Relying on the iconographic models established in King Milutin's (r. 1282–1321) endowments, they enriched the decades-old practice with numerous innovations. In this way, a unique artistic entity was created that was never repeated. The monumental work that lasted for an entire decade was carried out by several artists and artistic groups, whose work varied in quality, though they relied on the classicism of the first decades of the 14th century, which arose in Constantinople and Thessaloniki. Hence, it is assumed that the painters were of Greek origin, likely born in one of the major Byzantine art centres.⁴¹ The pictorial programme

³⁴ Томић Ђурић 2017, 511–512; See also: Мако 1990, 41–58; Дрпић 2008, 229.

³⁵ Томић Ђурић 2017, 292.

³⁶ Тодорова-Енчева 2020, 63.

³⁷ Palamas, *Capita* 150; On Palamas, see: Кнежевић 2013.

³⁸ Such compilations were common in the mid-14th century, see e.g. Дрпић 2008, 228; Милосављевић 2008, 97.

³⁹ Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 342, 346; Марковић and Марковић 1995, 334–338. Regarding the sources for Genesis cycles in post-Byzantine painting, see: Kuyumdzhieva 2015, 233–247.

⁴⁰ Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 502.

⁴¹ Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 502–511.

was carefully planned and adapted, albeit with some difficulty, to the basilical form of the church. Archbishop Danilo II served as the theological advisor during the construction of the temple. There is no doubt about his role when it comes to the architectural programme, and it is reasonable to assume that his ideas also played a role in the creation of the painted programme of the church, whose arrangement of themes was drawn up at the very beginning of the painting process.⁴² The encyclopaedic character of the frescoes has often been highlighted, reflecting not only a learned environment but also the knowledge of the painters.⁴³ Although we cannot determine the role of Danilo II in conceiving the painted programme, realised after his death, it should be noted that most researchers believe he belonged to the hesychastic tradition and that he mediated the spread of this practice within the Serbian environment, aided by his connections to Mount Athos.⁴⁴

Strezova draws attention to the undertaking of translating important philosophical and theological texts, initiated by King Milutin. Notably, she singles out the fact that influential hesychastic works were also translated. In her view, this allowed hesychastic ideas to influence iconography already during King Milutin's era, which would continue through a series of monuments, including Visoki Dečani.⁴⁵ The medieval Serbian library contained works by prominent hesychasts and forerunners of Hesychasm. The manuscripts of John Climacus (ca. 579–649), the teachings of Isaac the Syrian (ca. 613–700), and the works of Gregory Palama, dated to the 14th century, have been preserved in Dečani.⁴⁶ All of this leaves room for consideration of how hesychastic ideas may have been articulated in the church's pictorial programme. Some themes and cycles, such as the *Story of Wisdom* and the *Akathistos Hymn*, are considered to have been influenced by the writings of leading hesychasts, and there is almost no doubt that the peculiar forms of the mandorla in the *Transfiguration* and *Anastasis* can be attributed to the same influence.⁴⁷



Figure 5. Anastasis, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
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⁴² Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 266, 330–331..

⁴³ Ђурић 2008, 6; Ђурић 1995, 56–57; Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 335.

⁴⁴ Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 268; Калезић 1991, 117–129; Milosavljević 2008, 97.

⁴⁵ Strezova 2014, 157, 158. For more about this subject, see: Milosavljević 2008, 79–102; Кнежевић 2013, 501–573.

⁴⁶ Цветковић 2023, 602–603; Milosavljević 2008, 79–102. See also: <https://www.decani.org/en/library/books/handwritten-books-14th-18th-centuries> [accessed 20 August 2024]

⁴⁷ Дрпић 2008, 218; Hunt 2009, 105, 107; Strezova 2014, 68–70; Тодорова-Енчева 2020, 123, 145.

Several types of halos appear in the Dečani frescoes: a simple round halo, a round halo with an inscribed cross that appears around the head of Christ, rhomboid halo, a six-pointed star-shaped halo, and a halo in the form of a reduced mandorla. Since the halo appears in numerous scenes, I will, for now, draw attention only to its more unusual forms, such as those in the scene *Wisdom Builds her House* or in the episodes of the *Creation of the World*, where the halos are used to further emphasise the divine nature of the depicted figures.⁴⁸ The specific form of the halo around the head of the personification of Wisdom has close parallels in late Byzantine art. Its meaning is related to the Mother of God, but also to Christological themes, especially the idea of Wisdom as the iconographic form of the second hypostasis of the Holy Trinity.⁴⁹ The star-shaped halo and the halo in the form of a reduced mandorla in the episodes of the *Creation of the World*, do not have exact parallels but show some similarities with the scene of the *Creation of Adam* from the Serbian Munich Psalter.⁵⁰ As previously mentioned, Radovanović connects it with the interpretation that all hypostases of God participate in the creation of the world, with the Son as the creative force, depicted as the Logos.⁵¹ The shape of two crossed triangles or overlapping rhombuses can be recognised in these halos. Hunt believes that the halo surrounded by two crossed triangles symbolises the equality of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Holy Trinity and signifies the Light that manifests the Trinity in the Church.⁵² According to some interpretations, the rhomboid shape around Christ's nimbus is a reflection of the currents of the epoch and serves as an artistic element that emphasises Christ's divine nature and the trans-temporal nature of the theophany, as well as the fully present Divine-humanity and the idea of Christ as the Wisdom of God's Word.⁵³



Figure 6. *Wisdom Builds her House*, detail, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
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⁴⁸ Мако 1990, 42; Zarras 2006–2007, 99.

⁴⁹ Strezova 2014, 68; For example *The Virgin of Perivlepta* in Ohrid, Marko's Monastery, chapel in Hrelja's Tower, see: Томић Ђурић 2017, 291, 511; Милорадовић 2022, 340. Zarras 2006–2007, 99; Hunt 2009, 102–115; Hunt 2003, 1–19; Meyendorff 1987, 391–401; About Dečani scene, see: Милановић 1995, 213–242.

⁵⁰ Serbian Psalter (end of 14th c.), Munich, BS, MS Cod. Slav. 4, fol. 157^r, <https://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/0010/bsb00106322/images/index.html?id=00106322&groesser=&fip=193.174.98.30&no=&seite=3> [accessed 23 August 2024].

On the connections with Dečani painting, see: Милорадовић 2022, 18, 62, 71, 158, especially p. 341.

⁵¹ Radovanović touches on the problem of the halo and the mandorla in the text *Christ the Logos as the creator of the world*, Радовановић 1988, 126–135.

⁵² Hunt 2009, 82, 104, 109; Zarras 2006–2007, 99; Томић Ђурић 2017, 290–291.

⁵³ Hunt 2009, 85; Zarras 2006–2007, 99; Милорадовић 2022, 341.

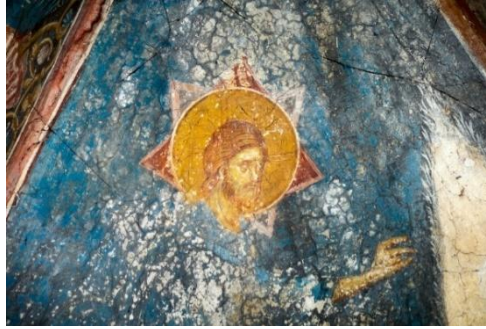


Figure 7. Creation of Light, detail, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
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Regarding the mandorla, the situation is somewhat different, as explained previously. In various episodes, depending on the context, an oval, circular, or star shaped mandorla, or a segment of the sky conceptually coinciding with the mandorla, appears. As a sign of theophany or, in exceptional cases, the dwelling of holy figures in the divine domain, the mandorla is shown enveloping the figures of Christ, the Virgin, Saint John the Forerunner, and choirs of angels in the Deesis. The cross, the sign of the Son of Man and the announcement of the Second Coming, is depicted within an extremely complex mandorla, surrounded by angelic ranks. Theophanies of light also accompany the appearance of the Holy Spirit. In Dečani, the mandorla, as a symbol of divine light, presence, energy, and action, is illustrated in episodes depicting the Last Judgment, the Tree of Jesse, scenes from the life of the Mother of God, the Great Feasts, depictions of the Akathistos Hymn and the Acts of the Apostles, as well as the Book of Genesis.⁵⁴



Figure 8a. Transfiguration, detail, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
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⁵⁴ Mandorla appears in episodes: *Second Coming*: Christ in the Mandorla Carried by Two Angels, *The Lifegiving and Honourable Cross*, *Deesis*; *The Tree of Jesse*: Christ Emmanuel in a radial oval mandorla – the Star of Jacob; *The Life of the Virgin*: The Conception; *The Great feasts*: *Annunciation to the Most Holy Mother of God*, *Nativity of Christ*, *Baptism of Christ*, *Transfiguration*, *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, *Anastasis*, *Dormition of the Virgin*; *The Assumption*; *Akathistos Hymn* – several episodes, for example: The fifteenth strophe (VIII oikos); *Acts of the Apostles*: The Conversion of Paul and the Entry into Damascus; *Genesis* – nine episodes, etc. Photos available at: https://www.blagofund.org/Archives/Decani/Church/Pictures/Fresco_Collections/ [accessed 25 August 2024].



Figure 8b. Anastasis, detail, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
Photo courtesy of the Blago Fund, Inc.



Figure 8c. Ascension, detail, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
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Among the examples mentioned, the Transfiguration, Resurrection (Anastasis/Harrowing of Hell), Ascension, and the Last Judgment stand out in particular.⁵⁵ (Fig. 3, 5, 8a, 8b, 8c, 9) The variation in the shape of the mandorla does not appear to be random. In the Transfiguration, the mandorla symbolises Christ in full glory, revealing his divine energy to which the apostles are not immune. Like Moses on Sinai, they seek shelter in the rocks.⁵⁶ This interaction is depicted by a circular mandorla, formed by concentric circles, with a star centre made of five unequal triangles, and two-tone rays emanating from Christ at the centre. In the Anastasis, Christ is depicted within an oval mandorla with a pointed top, composed of concentric ovals of different shades, behind which the rays of a rhombus – the wisdom star – appear. This kind of mandorla contains both spatial and sensory dimensions, illustrating the intense flash that accompanies Christ's entry into Hades, along with the presence of divine energy and interaction with those present, further manifested by the binding of defeated Satan and the hand Christ

⁵⁵ For a detailed analysis of the scenes and program, see: Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 336–456; Марковић 1995, 107–120; Давидов Темерински 1995, 191–210.

⁵⁶ The composition is adapted to the wall's surface, so it is possible that the apostles were therefore repositioned in relation to the figure of Christ.

extends to the resurrected Adam. In the Ascension, scene, Christ appears in a simple circular mandorla formed of concentric circles in different shades of greyish blue. It appears that this form also emphasises the solemnity of the moment as angels carry Christ up to heaven. A parallel can be drawn with the scene of the Last Judgment, i.e. the Second Coming of Christ, where Christ, seated on the throne borne by angels, is depicted within a similar, slightly oval mandorla. This corresponds to the announcement in the Acts of the Apostles (1:11), stating that Christ's second coming will resemble his Ascension: 'This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven'.⁵⁷



Figure 9. Life-giving Holy Cross, detail, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
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While Christ in the episode of the Second Coming is depicted within a simple mandorla, the representation of the Life-giving Holy Cross contains a more complex mandorla. At its centre, concentric circles are shown in shades of grey, from which golden rays emanate. Behind the circular core are two crossed rhombuses, one with concave sides; while above them is a segment of the sky from which two strong rays emanate. This extraordinary scene, known as 'the sign of the Son of Man in heaven' is based on Matthew's Gospel (24:30). Davidov connects it with the Sermon of St. Ephraim of Syria (ca. 306–373) on the Second Coming of Christ,⁵⁸ as well as a passage from John Chrysostom's (ca. 347–407) homilies on Matthew's Gospel mentioning the sign of the Son of Man in Heaven, that is, the cross shining brighter than the sun.⁵⁹ Below the Holy Cross is a representation of the Deesis, accompanied by the inscription 'The Last Judgment'.⁶⁰ Christ is depicted seated on the throne, surrounded by a multitude of angels, and flanked by the Virgin and Saint John interceding on behalf of humanity. In the background, a semicircular segment of a mandorla is visible, over which three triangular rays extend. The mandorla segment does not circumscribe the figure of Christ, but is located behind the depicted angels, encompassing the entire composition.

⁵⁷ Давидов Темерински 1995, 193.

⁵⁸ Considered the basic textual source for illustrating this topic, Давидов 2010, 318.

⁵⁹ Давидов Темерински 1995, 197; Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel*, 76, 3.

⁶⁰ On the deviation from the conventional rendering see: Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 452; Давидов 2010, 318; On the connection between the vision of the heavenly temple and the heavenly liturgy, emphasized in the Dečan painting, see: Golitzin 2003, 302.



Figure 10. Deesis, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
© Photo courtesy of the Blago Fund, Inc.

As already mentioned, some researchers have suggested the influence of Hesychasm on the forms of the mandorla in Dečani painting, created precisely during the hesychastic controversy.⁶¹ It has been observed that the mandorla painted in the scene of the Transfiguration, in its pictorial language, resembles the one shown in Kantakouzin's manuscript, but elements of the 'hesychastic mandorla' are also recognised in other episodes, most notably in the scene of the Harrowing of Hell.⁶² The question arises what are the reasons for the variations in the form of the mandorla and whether these variations underline the different degrees of Divine revelation, that is, the knowledge of the Godhead. Three variations of the mandorla appear in the episodes of the Last Judgment, whereas in Dečani, the emphasis is placed on the Second Coming of Christ, more than on the judgment itself.⁶³ These variations include the 'standard' slightly oval mandorla that surrounds the beardless Christ seated on the throne, high above in Heaven, and the complex mandorla surrounding the Cross that announces Parousia, shown in the lower zone. Just below is the mandorla from Deesis, presented as a segment of the sky that surrounds the depicted figures, but hypothetically can be extended to the blessed, to whom Christ addresses with an open book: 'Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world' (Mt 25:34).⁶⁴ Without losing sight of the eschatological and liturgical dimensions of the Dečani painting programme, here attention should also be drawn to the patristic commentaries, revived in hesychastic thought, which assert that the light of Tabor, given to the chosen disciples, is an announcement of the light of the Parousia, when Christ will appear in his divine glory and grant eternal illumination to the righteous.⁶⁵ In Dečani, from the vision of the Second Coming, through the sign of the son of man to Deesis, the different forms of the mandorla seem to reveal the degrees of eternal illumination granted to the righteous.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Zarras 2006–2007, 99; Петковић and Бошковић 1941, 61; Тодорова-Енчева 2020, 110–111, 123.

⁶² Тодорова-Енчева 2020, 110, 126.

⁶³ Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 448–449.

⁶⁴ This can be connected with the understanding that 'the God imparts himself to his creatures in his uncreated glory', contained in the icon 'by virtue of the icon's hypostatic identity with its prototype', Tănase 2017, 334–335.

⁶⁵ Gregory Palamas, *Triads*, 1.3.43, calls it "a prelude to the glory of Christ in his Second Coming", Drpić 2008, 228.

⁶⁶ On the apocalyptic dimension and interiorization of the spiritual ascent towards the vision of glory, see: Golitzin 2003, 296.

As Strezova notes, the Transfiguration ‘is the chief illustrative example of any vision of the uncreated light of the Godhead, which was the basis of hesychast theology. All the issues associated with the Transfiguration were, therefore, important for the hesychasts, such as the transfiguration of the body (by the divine light) equalling that of the Resurrection.’⁶⁷ While the Transfiguration fulfills the Theophany on Mount Sinai and anticipates the Parousia, the Anastasis anticipates the Parousia and expresses the doctrine of *theosis*: the mysterious relationship between God and his creatures according to energy or grace.⁶⁸ Through this interweaving of meaning and symbolism, the scenes in which the hesychastic mandorla appears in Dečani painting – the Second Coming, Transfiguration, and Anastasis – are connected. In line with the aforementioned, the mandorla, as a sign of uncreated light in the Transfiguration and Anastasis, anticipates the coming of the King of Glory, confirmed by the inscription *ο βασιλεύς της δόξης* on the life-giving cross. This connects the present and the eschatological future, that is, as Drpić states:

‘The proleptic nature of the Transfiguration is of paramount importance for hesychast spirituality. If the Taboric light is, indeed, the very reality of eternal illumination that will be granted to the righteous in the future, then the hesychast mystic who has acquired the vision of this light through prayer and contemplation partakes of the eschatological reality in the present time.’⁶⁹

Thus, the round mandorla in the Transfiguration prefigures the vision of uncreated light and its transformative power granted to the chosen.⁷⁰ On the other hand, the mandorla in the Anastasis, with two rays (or sides of a rhombus), evokes the flash that accompanies Christ’s descent into Hades, but also the mediation of energy between God and His creatures, that is, the transmission of powerful, life-creating, and transforming divine power.⁷¹ The apostles witness the announcement of the grace of restored humankind, while the Anastasis enables that restoration. The Second Coming, shown through the stages of spiritual ascent, marks the moment when the righteous will participate in this grace.



Figure 11. Creation of the Heaven and the Earth, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348. © Photo courtesy of the Blago Fund, Inc.

⁶⁷ Strezova 2014, 131.

⁶⁸ Drpić 2008, 242; Strezova 2014, 131.

⁶⁹ Drpić 2008, 242.

⁷⁰ Thus, in the episode of the Conversion of St. Paul, Christ Emmanuel is depicted in a mandorla similar to the one in the Transfiguration, from which six rays emerge, of which the one that interacts with the saint is specially emphasized, Mako 1990, 52–53.

⁷¹ Horn 2020, 201. This connection is revealed even more by the similarity between this mandorla and the one that appears in the scenes of the creation of Adam and Eve, which will be discussed later.

The Genesis cycle, the sole example within Serbian monumental painting, has also been preserved in the Dečani monastery. This cycle illustrates the Book of Genesis in 46 episodes, depicting themes of the Creation of the World, Original Sin, and scenes from the lives of Cain and Abel, Lamech, Noah, ending with the construction of the Tower of Babel.⁷² Initially considered a Western influence, as posited by Vladimir Petković,⁷³ today it is considered a continuation of the Byzantine tradition, which can be traced through manuscripts such as the *Cotton* and *Vienna Genesis* from the 6th century,⁷⁴ through the *Byzantine Octateuchs*,⁷⁵ to monumental mosaic wall cycles in Palermo – Palatina (ca. 1160), Monreale (ca. 1189), as well as Saint Mark in Venice (13th c.), among the others, all of which are believed to be based on Byzantine models.⁷⁶ While the cycle is well documented and studied in an exemplary manner, due to the lack of analogies, some questions remain unresolved, including the literary template.⁷⁷

The creation of the world, depicting the origin and history of human kind, celebrates the power of God the Creator. As such, it has been a subject of interest to Christian theologians since the earliest times. Commentaries on the Hexameron were written by, among others, Origen (ca. 185–253), Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376–444), Basil the Great (ca. 329–379), Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–394), John Chrysostom, Augustine (354–430), Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339–397),⁷⁸ but also Gregory Palamas, who in his discussions with Barlaam (ca. 1290–1348) addressed, among other things, the limits of human knowledge of the transcendent, as well as the Creation of the World by God who alone is: ‘true being, eternal being and immutable being, that he neither received being out of non-being nor returns to non-being, and that he is trihypostatic and omnipotent. In six days he brought forth beings from non-being by a word, or rather, as Moses says, he established everything at once.’⁷⁹

In the context of showing the glory of God, the scenes illustrating the Creation of the World, the Original Sin, and the Expulsion from Paradise are especially interesting, as well as the appearances or absences of the halo and mandorla in the continuation of the Genesis cycle. The depiction of Creation begins in the western bay of the northern aisle.⁸⁰ It should be emphasised that researchers, as already mentioned, have noticed variations in the shapes of the mandorla and halo, but have not identified a consistent pattern when it comes to the cycle as a whole.⁸¹

⁷² More about it: Марковић and Марковић 1995, 323–352; Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 342–350.

⁷³ Петковић and Бошковић 1941, 67–68.

⁷⁴ Lowden 1992, 40–53.

⁷⁵ Rome, BAV, MS Vat. gr. 747 (11th c. or most probably 13th c.); Rome, BAV, MS Vat. Gr. 746; Smyrne, ESL, MS cod. A.1; Istanbul, TS, MS cod. 8 (12th c.); Mt. Athos, VM, MS cod. 60; Florence, BML, MS cod. Plut. 5.38 (13th century); Lassus 1979, 86; Anderson 1982, 83; Lowden 1982, 116; With more than 500 miniatures, the surviving manuscripts reflect the text of the Septuagint, accompanied by exegetical interpretations and catenae in the margins, which include excerpts from Greek and Jewish writers, offering both textual and visual exegesis. Laderman 2013, 61–64; Lowden 2010, 109–111.

⁷⁶ Марковић and Марковић 1995, 323–324; Радовановић 1988, 126; With the remark that the Western approach interprets the subject as cosmological and illustrative, whereas the Eastern approach views it as liturgical, see: Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 348.

⁷⁷ Петковић and Бошковић 1941, 46–50; Радовановић 1988, 126–144; Марковић and Марковић 1995, 323–352; Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 342–350. In detail about the sources of iconography: Марковић and Марковић 1995, 346–349.

⁷⁸ Радовановић 1988, 127.

⁷⁹ Palamas, *Capita* 150, 21.

⁸⁰ The scenes follow the text of the Book of Genesis, but also include scenes that have a different origin, possibly apocryphal. It was also assumed that the painter possessed templates created on the basis of palea, see: Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 342, 346; Марковић and Марковић 1995, 334–338. On the textual bases of Genesis in Byzantine painting, see: Kuyumdzhieva 2015, 233–247.

⁸¹ Радовановић 1988, 128; Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 342.

The cycle begins with the first scene of the first day of Creation, in which God the Creator, embodied as Jesus Christ – the Logos - unfolds the firmament.⁸² Christ has a circular halo, in ochre or old gold, with an inscribed cross, framed by two overlapped triangles or rhombuses, which transform the halo into a star-like shape. Radovanović suggests that this form of the halo may be connected with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, that is, the understanding that all three divine hypostases participate in creation.⁸³ This has a parallel in the teaching of Gregory Palamas, but also corresponds to my assumption that the halo and mandorla in Dečani communicate more complex ideas than a mere symbolic representation of the Divine Light. In this case, they emphasise Christ's dual nature and the unity of the Divine hypostases.⁸⁴

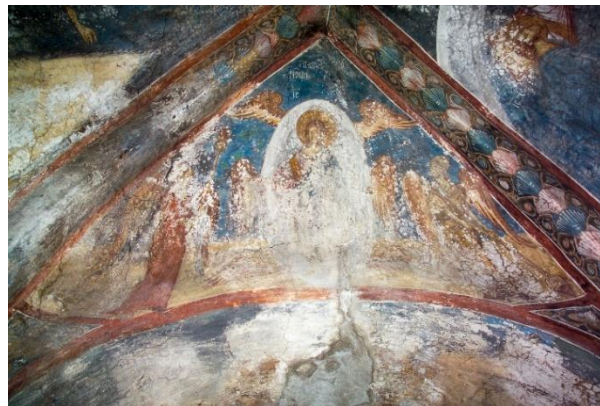


Figure 12. The Separation of the Light from the Darkness, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348. © Photo courtesy of the Blago Fund, Inc.

The second scene of the first day depicts the Creation of Light. Christ, adorned with the same halo as in the previous scene, holds a scroll in his left hand, while a powerful ray of light emanates in front of him. The third and final scene of the first day is the Separation of Light from Darkness. Christ is depicted frontally at the centre of the composition, with a circular halo inscribed with a cross. His figure is surrounded by an oval mandorla in pale blue tones, from which three pairs of wings emerge. Christ physically divides day and night, personified by female figures holding torches. In the Octateuch from Florence,⁸⁵ in the scene of the creation of light, Christ the Ancient of Days is shown seated on the throne with a golden halo around his head, surrounded by a blue oval mandorla with angels. In the manuscript from Smyrna,⁸⁶ God the Creator also appears in the form of the Ancient of Days, bearing a halo with an inscribed cross, surrounded by a circular mandorla made up of concentric circles of different shades.⁸⁷ In other scenes and preserved Octateuchs, the creator is represented by a hand within a segment of the mandorla, as in the Vienna Genesis. In Cotton's Genesis, in some episodes the Creator appears in the form of a young Christ with a cross-inscribed halo.⁸⁸ On the mosaics in Palermo and Venice, the Logos in the image of Christ is depicted as an active creative force, just as in

⁸² Марковић and Марковић 1995, 324–325; Радовановић 1988, 127–128; Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 342.

⁸³ Радовановић 1988, 128–129.

⁸⁴ More on this topic: Cvetković 2017, 304–315.

⁸⁵ Florence, BML, cod. Plut. 5.38, fol.

⁸⁶ Smyrna, ESL, cod. A.1 (now destroyed).

⁸⁷ Lassus 1979, 96–97; Радовановић 1988, 128–129; Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 342.

⁸⁸ Weitzmann and Kessler 1986, 260.

Dečani. In the Palatine Chapel and St. Mark's, he is depicted with a circular halo with an inscribed cross, while in the Monreale mosaics, the cross is omitted.⁸⁹

Radovanović suggests that the first three days of creation symbolise the Holy Trinity and Christ's three days in the grave. In addition, the depiction includes a typological interpretation of Christ the Light, which once again links late Byzantine theology with patristic interpretations, and through the Gospel of John, with Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE–50 CE) and Hellenistic Platonism.⁹⁰ Neoplatonist influences are reflected in the teachings of the Cappadocians, who were indebted to Neoplatonism, but also in the influences of Pseudo Dionysius,⁹¹ as seen in the specific details of the Dečani Genesis. The very appearance of wings around the mandorla evokes the vision of Isaiah (6:1–3) and the Trishagion, but it also suggests the influence of Pseudo Dionysius' teachings on heavenly hierarchies.⁹² According to this teaching, the uppermost hierarchy is illuminated, receiving divine knowledge and transmitting it to lower ranks, thereby instructing them how to celebrate worthily the One and Triune God, the One who comprehends all things, from heavenly beings to the lowest, the One who is the primal origin of all.⁹³



Figure 13. Creation of the Lights in the Firmament of the Heaven, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348. © Photo courtesy of the Blago Fund, Inc.

The fourth scene in Dečani marks the beginning of the second day of creation.⁹⁴ Christ is shown creating the firmament, again with a circular halo containing a cross, framed by six triangles. The third, fourth, and fifth days are illustrated in the vault of the second bay.⁹⁵ The cycle continues with the creation of land and sea, followed by the emergence of plants and seeds,

⁸⁹ Радовановић 1988, 133.

⁹⁰ Радовановић 1988, 128, 134–135; On the connection between Genesis and the prologue of John's Gospel, and the eschatological and liturgical dimension of Creation, see: Kuyumdzhieva 2015, 238.

⁹¹ See: Цветковић 2023, 599–632.

⁹² It has been judged that the wings around the mandorla are a clumsy allusion to the presence of heavenly forces (Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 343) as depicted in the Florence Octateuch (Florence, BML, MS cod. Plut. 5.38, fol. 1^r) and in Serbian Munich Psalter (Munich, BS, MS Cod. Slav. 4, fol. 181^r), for example.

⁹³ Pseudo-Dionysios, *De caelesti hierarchia*, 7, 4. It is worth noting that thesis of unity and distinction in God and the theme of angelic mediations in divine revelations were the key points of Palamas' reception of Areopagite, Knežević 2015, 378–379.

⁹⁴ Марковић and Марковић 1995, 326; Радовановић 1988, 129; Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 342–343.

⁹⁵ Радовановић 1988, 130.

concluding the third day.⁹⁶ The fourth day begins with the creation of the heavenly lights. In all these scenes, Christ is shown with the same halo. Notable features include the appearance of personifications, as well as the three rays emanating from a segment of the sky during the creation of land and sea, and two during the creation of heavenly lights. The fifth day is illustrated by the scene of the creation of birds and fish. Christ again has a halo with a colourless hexagonal frame, but that changes in the next scene, which depicts the beginning of the sixth day.⁹⁷



Figure 14. Creation of Moving Creatures on the Earth, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348. © Photo courtesy of the Blago Fund, Inc.

The sixth day is depicted in the third bay of the northern aisle.⁹⁸ In the scene depicting the creation of terrestrial animals, Christ is shown surrounded by an angular mandorla. It is the mandorla consisting of two overlapping rhombuses, which creates an eight-rayed shape - a wisdom star. It is suggested that the symbol, which first appeared in the 14th century, is a visual counterpart to the teaching of Pseudo Dionysius on ‘a model of the action of light by which God manifests His Oneness in the creation.’⁹⁹ In Dečani, the star-shaped mandorla is painted in light blue shades. I believe Christ’s appearance within the star-shaped mandorla can be connected with the first appearance of the Logos Creator before the living world, with which He interacts. In addition to highlighting the manifestation of the One and the unity of the Trinity in creation, this mandorla emphasises the somewhat conscious participation of living beings in Divine action and energy. Christ appears before Adam and Eve in a very similar mandorla after the Original Sin.

In the scenes depicting the creation of man and woman and their placement in Eden, Christ the Logos is shown within a wisdom star mandorla, which consists of two overlapping rhombuses framing an oval aura, or with a halo that is a reduced star mandorla.¹⁰⁰ Some differences appear here, which can hardly be attributed to chance. In the scene of the creation of Adam,¹⁰¹ Christ is depicted with a circular halo in which a cross is inscribed. Around the figure

⁹⁶ Марковић and Марковић 1995, 326–327; Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 342–343.

⁹⁷ Painters are not always consistent in their depiction of this star-shaped nimbus and mandorla. Sometimes the star shape behind the halo appears to be closer to the intersection of triangles, and sometimes to the intersection of rhombuses. The same can be said for the star-shaped mandorla. Its form is often distorted, and the number of arms varies, in order to adapt the shape to a certain compositional solution.

⁹⁸ Марковић and Марковић 1995, 327; Радовановић 1988, 131; Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 342–343.

⁹⁹ Hunt 2009, 64.

¹⁰⁰ On the similarity with the Serbian Psalter, see: Милорадовић 2022, 341.

¹⁰¹ Марковић and Марковић 1995, 328.

of Christ is an oval mandorla inscribed within a rhombus. Another rhombus appears in the background deformed into the form of three rays. One ray of the mandorla, where Christ's right hand is positioned in a gesture indicating creation by the spoken word, is directed towards the naked figure of Adam lying on the ground. So, unlike older Byzantine examples of the creation of the world, here the Logos is the Creator in the image of Christ. He creates man in His image,¹⁰² but he also appears to him in bodily form and in full glory. Therefore, not only does the hesychastic mandorla appear here, but also the idea that seeing God in glory is available to man in the Edenic state, that is, the state of the righteous.

The next scene, 'Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there He put the man He had formed', follows after the seventh day, which is not illustrated in Dečani.¹⁰³ In the enclosed Garden of Eden, Adam is depicted dressed in purple garment, while Christ is portrayed with a halo that has a form of the reduced mandorla from the previous scene. The Logos created Adam in the image in which he will be incarnated on earth, i.e. Adam is an iconic image of God and an announcement of the appearance of Christ,¹⁰⁴ the new Adam, through whose sacrifice Adam would regain heavenly glory. Adam's prelapsarian purple garment represents the glory he gained and consequently lost in Paradise.¹⁰⁵ One wonders if it is a coincidence that in both scenes where Adam is clothed in Paradise, the Logos is depicted with a halo rather than a mandorla.¹⁰⁶



Figure 15. Creation of Eve, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
© Photo courtesy of the Blago Fund, Inc.

The creation of Eve in Dečani, shown on the south side of the vault of the third bay, takes place in the Garden of Eden. Naked Adam and Eve lie side by side, while the Logos, surrounded by a mandorla in the form of an oval aura of light encircled by a star-like form, extends one arm towards the first humans, creating Eve. The star form appears to be a distorted

¹⁰² Радовановић 1988, 131–132. The Logos Creator in the image of God the Father in a mandorla surrounded by heavenly beings appears in some Cretan cycles and the cathedral of San Gimignano, which has closer parallels to the representations in the manuscripts than the Dečani. The oldest example was recently discovered in Cappadocia, see: Horn 2020, 192, 198.

¹⁰³ Марковић and Марковић 1995, 328; Радовановић 1988, 132.

¹⁰⁴ Радовановић 1988, 132; Kuyumdzhieva 2015, 239–240.

¹⁰⁵ For further detail see the study of Adam and Eve in Cretan painting, Horn 2020, with an exhaustive survey of analogies, in Eastern and Western Christian art, as well as an analysis of textual sources, especially p. 198, with quoted references; for a textual and iconographic analysis of the invisible garment of Adam's glory, see: Bucur and Ivanovici 2019.

¹⁰⁶ As if he shared the light with Adam, reminding us that grace is always a gift from God, that is, it does not naturally pertain to our created nature, Gendle and other, *Gregory Palamas*, p. 140 n.53.

image of two overlapping rhombuses, and the main difference compared to the scene of the creation of Adam is the emphasis on the oval form, highlighted by a greenish frame. This intervention brings it closer in appearance to the mandorla in the Anastasis. The creation of Eve, who led Adam to original sin, is also visually connected to Christ's descent into Hades, when the first parents of the human race were cleansed of sin.¹⁰⁷ Thus, on one cross-shaped vault, Christ the Logos appears in four more or less different mandorla forms. If, as a result of inaccuracy, we reject the variations in the number of rays, the question arises whether the complete absence of the oval in the scene of the creation of animals, its appearance in the scene of the creation of Adam, and its emphasis in the scene of the creation of Eve is a deliberate intervention to highlight the stages of seeing the divine light.¹⁰⁸ Taking into consideration the spiritual climate of the time in which the Dečani painting was created, this possibility cannot be completely dismissed.

The scenes 'God Bringing Eve to Adam', 'The Serpent Tempting Eve', 'Original Sin', and 'Adam and Eve Hiding' are depicted on the vault of the eastern bay.¹⁰⁹ In the first episode, Adam and Eve stand in the Garden of Eden before the Logos, who has a halo corresponding to a diminutive star-shaped mandorla. Adam is clothed in a purple robe, while Eve wears a blue robe with a purple mantle, signifying their participation in divine glory, while at the same time they can be seen as prefigurations of Aaron in the high priest's robe and the Virgin.¹¹⁰



Figure 16. Lord God Bringing a Woman to Adam, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348. © Photo courtesy of the Blago Fund, Inc.

In the Temptation scene, Eve stands clothed by the Tree of Knowledge, while a serpent whispers in her ear. The next scene is the Original Sin, where the clothed Adam and Eve flank the Tree of Knowledge. Eve brings the fruit to her mouth with her left hand, and with her right she offers the fruit to Adam, who also reaches for the tree. The final scene in this segment, located on the south side of the vault, depicts Adam and Eve unsuccessfully hiding from the Lord. Here,

¹⁰⁷ It was noticed that in the Genesis cycle in Dečani, the choice of scenes and iconography emphasised the thought of hope for forgiveness and salvation, contained in the service of the Sunday before Easter, Todić and Čanak-Medić 2005, 343.

¹⁰⁸ Horn concludes that these examples demonstrate the possible image strategy of depicting the presence of the transcendent creator god in the protological paradise, influenced by hesychastic-luminaristic theories, Horn 2020, 213.

¹⁰⁹ Марковић and Марковић 1995, 329–330.

¹¹⁰ Радовановић 1988, 132; Ricks 1994, 714–715.

the Logos appears again in a star-shaped mandorla, as if to remind the sinful couple the glory they once had and then lost, which is also illustrated by the loss of their splendid clothes, i.e. their now naked bodies. The mandorla, consisting of two overlapping rhombuses but without the oval aura, is the visual counterpart of the mandorla from the animal creation scene, i.e. the moment that precedes the creation of man. Thus, Adam and Eve were marked as unreasonable creatures, unworthy to participate in the fullness of the Glory of God. It was also the last time that glory appeared to them.



Figure 17. Adam and Eve Hiding Themselves from the Presence of the Lord God, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348. © Photo courtesy of the Blago Fund, Inc.

Chronologically, the next appearance of Christ in the star-shaped mandorla in the Dečani church occurs in the depiction of the Anastasis, when He again appears before Adam and Eve, whom He frees from the Original Sin with His sacrifice. Shown on the northern arch under the dome, the scene communicates through the symbolic language of light, but also topographically, with the episodes of the creation of man and woman. Therefore, this type of mandorla is shown around Christ in scenes related to the time before the incarnation and the time after the Resurrection. Adam also represents the idea of future participation, as expressed through the analogy between the mandorla in creation and the Anastasis; it is the moment of redemption and the fulfillment of the promise, as New Testament events were predicted by the Old Testament narrative.

The star-shaped mandorla in which God appears during the creation of man can be linked to Palamas, who revives the patristic interpretation that Adam was created in the likeness of the radiant Logos, participating in divine light until he lost his light garment due to Original Sin.¹¹¹ Rooted in the Judeo-Christian world of late antiquity, the understanding of Adam's luminous clothing is documented in midrashic and rabbinic texts, as well as Christian patristics and apocrypha.¹¹² The change of state is described in the Bible: 'And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and for his wife and clothed them' (Genesis 3:21). The similarity between the Hebrew words for 'skins' and 'light' led to speculation about Adam's garment of

¹¹¹ Similarly depicted hair of Christ, Adam and Eve is interpreted as a visual expression of likeness, Horn 2020, 216.

¹¹² Aaron 1997, 299–314; Anderson 2002, 117–133; Broderick 1985, 252; Costache 2009, 42–43; Horn 2020, 121–129; Orlov 2009, 98–100; Ricks 1994, 705–739.

light and its (partial) recuperation by Moses.¹¹³ There is also a legend that Adam's clothes were inherited by Noah and his descendants.¹¹⁴ These ideas seem to have been reflected in Dečani's Genesis, as well as in Palamas's assertion that human nature has been stripped of this divine illumination as a result of transgression.¹¹⁵ The interpretation of the complex nature of Adam's garment in Dečani goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is necessary to point out the long history of the motif and its most important parallels.¹¹⁶

The oldest depictions of a clothed Adam in Paradise are recorded in late antique mosaics, where Adam is clothed in white or purple robes.¹¹⁷ In the Byzantine Octateuchs, Adam is shown covered in a white transparent cloth.¹¹⁸ Variations in the colour and quality of the fabric seem to correspond to the earlier debates about the nature of Adam's clothing in Paradise. In Dečani, Adam and Eve are dressed in festive clothes, which, to my knowledge, is the only instance where this is connected with the elaborate depiction of divine glory. In Serbian monuments, Adam and Eve appear crowned and clothed in royal vestments in condensed episodes in the exonarthex of the Patriarchate of Peć and the Church of St. Nicholas in Velika Hoča from the 16th century, where these episodes are shown among the scenes illustrating the readings from the Gospels by week.¹¹⁹ In Romanian churches, they are shown richly dressed. In Voronet, their clothes are decorated with pearls.¹²⁰ Although the presumed sources for these frescoes are similar to those in Dečani,¹²¹ the association with the participation of the first people in heavenly glory, as hinted at in Dečani, is missing. Some allusions to Adam's Edenic state also appear in frescoes from Crete, created during Venetian rule and interpreted as influenced by Western tradition. The Edenic glory of the protoplast is shown here by the crowns they wear in the creation episodes or by the fine layer of hair covering their bodies.¹²² While in different cycles, geographically and chronologically distant, the apocryphal dimension of the story prevails, in Dečani, the apocryphal elements are subordinated to the eschatological dimension of Genesis, maintaining a separate flow compared to other preserved examples.¹²³

¹¹³ Drpić 2008, 243; Orlov 2006, 498–513; Ricks 1994, 711; Bucur 2021, 38; Bucur and Ivanovici 2019, pp. 4–8.

¹¹⁴ Grypeou and Spurling 2013, 204; Ricks 1994, 711–716.

¹¹⁵ 'Now that our nature has been stripped of this divine illumination and radiance as a result of the transgression, the Word of God has taken pity on our disgrace and in his compassion has assumed our nature and has manifested it again to his chosen disciples, clothed more remarkably on Tabor', Palamas, *Capita* 150, 66; Costache 2014, 189; Drpić 2008, 243.

¹¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of the depiction of Adam and Eve, see: Horn 2020, 175–196.

¹¹⁷ For example mosaic from Huarte, Canivet, and Canivet 1979, 92, fig. 20; Ivanovici connects these representations to Adam's Edenic glory and points to parallels with neophyte clothing, Ivanovici 2016, 25, 34–35; For the identification of protological luminosity with the luminous priestly vestment, see: Bucur 2021, 38; For late antique examples and exegetical interpretation, see: Maguire 1987, 363–373; Bucur and Ivanovici 2019, 5–6.

¹¹⁸ Broderick 1985, 251; Horn 2020, 217; Rome, BAV, MS Vat. Gr. 746, fol 37^v; Istanbul, TS, MS cod. 8, fol. 42^v; A clothed Adam and Eve also appear in Armenian manuscripts from the 14th century, Horn 2020, 181–182.

¹¹⁹ Horn 2020, 196–195, 217–218; Kuyumdzhieva 2015, 239; Петковић 1965, 96, 163, 178. This corresponds to Palamas claims that Adam was not naked in paradise but 'dressed more richly than those who wear diadems ornamented with much gold and shining stones', Palamas, *Capita* 150, 67.

¹²⁰ Horn 2020, 217.

¹²¹ Kuyumdzhieva 2015, 240.

¹²² For interpretation and parallels, see: Horn 2020, 216–218; Hair depiction has parallels in the Islamic tradition, Ricks 1994, 707–708.

¹²³ A similar conclusion was made when it comes to Romanian monuments, see: Kuyumdzhieva 2015, 236.

Namely, the main idea of the economy of salvation expressed in the Genesis cycle is also present in Dečani.¹²⁴ The placement in the liminal zone of the temple follows familiar patterns and interpretations of paradise lost.¹²⁵ Furthermore, the link established by the symbolic representations of light connects the lost paradise and the Kingdom of Heaven to come, most notably through the Anastasis scene. This underlines the eschatological dimension of the Dečani Genesis, enriched with subtle allusions to hesychastic theology and the anthropology of light. Adam's clothing in paradise simultaneously shows the grace he received and lost, but also a hint of salvation and resurrected bodies.¹²⁶ In this way, it maintains the tradition of older iconography while incorporating iconographic details that can be connected with the spirit of the times, that is, the concept of the 'horizon of expectations'.

Gregory Palamas' reflections on the nature of the 'uncreated divine light, God's self-manifestation, his natural energy', and limitations of sensory perception are also suggestive for the interpretation of the artistic elements of Dečani's Creation in a hesychastic spirit.¹²⁷ Subtle differences in the representation of the mandorla, in which the Logos appears before the animals and the first parents after the Fall, echo the words of Palamas:

'If an irrational animal happened to be present on the mountain [of the Transfiguration], would it have sensed that light brighter than the sun? I do not think so. For nor the glory of the Lord that shone upon the shepherds at the nativity of Christ was written to have been perceived by the flocks. [...] If not by the sensible capacity - for then even the animals would have been able to see it - then by the intelligible capacity that comprehends through the senses; or rather not even that, for every eye, in particular those nearby, would have seen the light that was brighter than the sun. If, then, it was not seen not even through the intelligible capacity, then that light is not strictly speaking sensible. And if it is not sensible, it is eternal; for the divine light, which is also called in many passages 'the glory of God,' is without beginning or end. Therefore, it is not sensible.'¹²⁸



Figure 18. Lord God Cursing Adam and Eve and Expulsion from Paradise, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348. © Photo courtesy of the Blago Fund, Inc.

¹²⁴ On the way liturgical texts use the Scriptures and the eschatological dimension of Genesis, see: Costache 2020, 73–76.

¹²⁵ Kuyumdzhieva 2015, 237–238.

¹²⁶ Ricks 1994, 717.

¹²⁷ Bucur 2021, 46–50; Tănase 2017, 333; Golitzin 2003, 300–301.

¹²⁸ Palamas, *Triads*, 1.3.27.

The pronouncement of the curse on Adam and Eve, their expulsion from Paradise, and further events are illustrated in the upper zone of the walls of the north nave.¹²⁹ In the scene *Lord God Cursing Adam and Eve*, Christ the Logos is shown with a circular halo, marking the moment when the vision of uncreated light was denied to Adam and Eve. In the hierarchy of space, creation and the Garden of Eden occupy the highest zone, while humanity after the fall is shown in the lower zone. In these episodes, Christ the Logos appears only twice. In the scene of His conversation with Cain, He is shown with a circular halo inscribed with a cross. In the scene of the sacrifice of Cain and Abel, a ray from a heavenly segment containing the Divine Hand testifies God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice. The second appearance of the Logos, this time within a mandorla, that is, a semicircular segment with four rays, is the moment when He orders the righteous Noah to build an ark, thus announcing the way of salvation for sinful humanity. In Dečani, Adam loses his vision of God, while the righteous Noah gains it – those who seek refuge in the church and choose the path of righteousness can expect to return to the shelter of God's glory. Noah is the only figure shown with a halo in all remaining scenes of the Genesis cycle – he met God and he was touched by the glory of God.



Figure 19. Noah Receives from God the Order to Build the Ark and Sons of God and Daughters of Men, Visoki Dečani Monastery, Serbia. Ca. 1337–1348.
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I assume that the various forms of the mandorla and halo in the Genesis arose out of a desire to express the presence of the incarnate Logos on earth, the dual nature of Christ, and the understanding that all three persons of God participate in creation from the beginning, as hypothesised by earlier researchers. In addition, the gradation of divine revelation and the transformative power of Divine light, or divine energy, during creation are shown, which coincides with the doctrine of *theosis*. The spirit of the times and hesychastic polemics are reflected through the idea that the vision of the transfigured Christ is available to man, and through Him, the vision of the Uncreated Light. The markedly different articulation of symbols of divine light in different episodes, the visual parallels between certain episodes of the cycle of Creation, but also the connection with Anastasis, also evoke the influence of Hesychasm, that is, the understanding of the stages of ascent to God. The cycle of Genesis in Dečani, i.e. the episodes from the beginning of Creation to the Expulsion from Paradise, shows certain peculiarities,

¹²⁹ Марковић and Марковић 1995, 331–347.

notably in the specific forms of the halo and mandorla, as well as the appearance of clothed Adam and Eve. Christ as the Creator of the world, is shown with a halo and mandorla of different shapes, which symbolise that all three persons of the Holy Trinity participate in Creation, as well as that Christ, pre-existing before creation, has a dual nature. In addition, the various forms of depicting divine light in the episodes where it appears before man and the living world underline the ability of created beings to perceive divine glory. Through the appearance of clothed Adam and Eve, the prelapsarian garment of the protoplast is shown. Although this garment was lost when humanity sinned and lost access to earthly paradise, salvation was promised through the righteous Noah and the incarnate Christ. The Resurrection of Christ, which is necessary for the realisation of the Kingdom of Heaven, is visually connected to Creation, while at the same time announcing the Second Coming of Christ.

Some ideas in this paper are drawn from the representation of divine light in Dečani. The symbolism of light works on different levels when it comes to conventions for representing light. In most of them, one can find an echo of theological reflections on the divine uncreated light, which is linked to the influence of Hesychasm on late Byzantine iconography. The questions raised in this paper require further research, particularly in identifying the literary template for depicting the Genesis cycle. Certain episodes in the Dečani fresco programme, such as the story of Wisdom or the cycle of Akathistos Hymn, are linked to the influence of Hesychasm, and it seems that the same can be said for the distinctive pictorial language used to depict the glory of God at Dečani Monastery. While the symbols used were not new in Byzantine painting, the way they were articulated allowed the viewer to associate the visual features with the prevailing ideas of divine light and the then-dominant hesychastic theology.

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**МАНДОРЛА И ОРЕОЛ У ДЕЧАНСКОМ ЖИВОПИСУ:
ФОРМА, КОНТЕКСТ И ЗНАЧЕЊЕ**

У обимном корпусу очуваног живописа манастира Дечани (1338 – 1348), значајно место заузимају и теме и мотиви у којима је симболично представљена Божанска светлост. У раду су разматране форме ореола и мандорле, односно веза између њиховог облика и значења које добијају у различитом контексту. Ореол и мандорла представљају визуелна средства која означавају појављивање Христа, Богородице и светих у божанској светлости, којом зраче и која их окружује у вечности. Оба симбола имају корене у прехришћанској уметности. Појављују се релативно рано у хришћанској визуелној култури, док се њихово значење фиксира током времена, уз појаву нових форми. Док се ореол појављује око главе различитих светих личности, појава мандорле је нешто специфичнија. Као визуелни симбол Божије славе, мандорла означава ретке тренутке у библијском наративу када је Бог човечанству открио своју суштину и енергију. У питању је аура светлости која обухвата целу фигуру Христа, Богородице, Свете Тројице и ређе светитеља. Сликари дечанских фресака упоредо употребљавају различите облике ореола и мандорле, уз мање и веће варијације. Поставља се питање да ли су ове варијације условљене теолошким разлозима или су производ различитих предлога. Посебна пажња биће усмерена на циклус Генезе, где се у различитим епизодама стварања света појављује чак четири типа ореола и исто толико форми мандорле. Прелиминарна истраживања указују да то није случајно, те да се на овај начин суптилно показују различити степен божанског обзнањивања људима посредством светлости, чиме се дечански живопис повезује са актуелним теолошким полемикама времена повезаним са исихазмом.