


## Article

# The Mandorla Symbol in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Iconography of the Dormition: Function and Meaning

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**Abstract:** The present study examines the use of the mandorla symbol in Byzantine and post-Byzantine iconography of the Dormition. The research aims to outline the reasons for the adoption of the mandorla in the iconographic scheme of the subject as a means of visualizing the heavenly Eden and the Glory of God's presence. It traces the main stages in the development of the Dormition iconography and the creation of its principal models, highlighting the diversity of the patterns in the post-Byzantine art in the Balkans.

**Keywords:** Dormition of the Theotokos; Dormition iconography; mandorla; Glory of God; Byzantine art; post-Byzantine art

## 1. Introduction

Between the 6th and 14th centuries, the iconographic models of some of the central feasts in the Church calendar gradually took form. Their development reflects the religious milieu of the time, the struggle against heresies, and the accompanying development of theological thought. One of these models is the depiction of the Dormition of the Theotokos, which despite the relatively quickly established basic scheme, continues to undergo late changes. One of them is the introduction of the symbol of the mandorla somewhere in the second half of the 11th century—a topic on which we will focus our attention here, due to the function of the mandorla as a visual representation of the Glory of God in its twofold meaning—spatial and luminous (Todorova 2016).

In Christian iconography, the mandorla is employed in certain iconic scenes, encompassing the figures of Christ, the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary, and occasionally, specific saints. The mandorla serves to demarcate a sacred space around Christ. This separated space can be interpreted as a representation of heaven, or the “other world”, as a metaphysical realm where sacred events occur, and as a symbol of the resplendent Divine Light of the Glory of God (Todorova 2013, 2020b). In some of the iconographical subjects in which it is involved, the mandorla primarily conveys a luminous connotation, as is the case, for example, in the Transfiguration of Christ, while in other subjects such as the Dormition of the Theotokos, its meaning is more spatial, as this research aims to demonstrate. While in the case of the Transfiguration, the mandorla symbol has been a part of the iconographical scheme since the beginning, in the Dormition scene, it was introduced much later, apparently following the development of theological debates. Furthermore, what is even more interesting is that the Dormition mandorla follows the dynamic character of the symbol and its ability to reflect the theological ideas of the time. It also takes on features that researchers attribute to the influence of Hesychasm on the late Byzantine art, as seen with the Transfiguration mandorla, while in the post-Byzantine period, it enjoys a similar variety in form and color (Todorova 2022a). Therefore, the aim of the present study is to outline the reasons for the adoption of the mandorla in the iconographic scheme of the Dormition of the Theotokos as a means of visualizing the heavenly Eden and the Glory of God's presence and to trace its development in Byzantine and post-Byzantine art in the Balkans.



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## 2. The Iconography of the Dormition

Following the definitive affirmation of the Virgin Mary as Theotokos at the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus in 431, devotion to her spread widely, and events from her life gained a prominent place in the Church's liturgical calendar (Baryames 1977, pp. 11–13). The feast of her Dormition began to be celebrated in the 5th century (Walsh 2007, p. 2), and its final establishment on August 15th was decreed by Emperor Maurice Tiberius (582–602) at the Church of the Most Holy Theotokos in Blachernae (Pentcheva 2006, p. 12). After the end of Iconoclasm, the iconographic image of the Dormition began to appear more frequently and became especially popular in the middle and late Byzantine culture. Its importance stems from the theological need to affirm the truth of the human nature of the Lord Jesus Christ—the human, mortal body of Christ is a fundamental argument against the Iconoclastic heresy, because it proves that the divine can be imaged and those images can be venerated. The Dormition of the Theotokos, in turn, constitutes the final proof of the reality of the human nature of the Son of God (Carr 1997, pp. 114–15).

The iconography of the feast is based on numerous written sources (Salvador-González 2011, pp. 238–39), the main ones being the second homily on the Dormition of St. John Damascene and the “Pastoral letter” of Archbishop John I of Thessaloniki. Both works are based on the *Transitus Mariae* legend, attributed to St. James Brother of the Lord, as well as on the accounts of the main non-canonical sources, the latest of which date from the 6th–7th century period (Baryames 1977, pp. 14–33; Najork 2018, pp. 478–79). The classic iconographic scheme represents the Holy Virgin lying on a bier surrounded symmetrically by the holy apostles while the Lord Jesus Christ stands behind the bed, holding in His hands the soul of the Theotokos depicted as a swaddled infant and raising her towards an angel who will take her to heaven. In the 10th century, it was fully developed and widespread, as shown by several reliefs from Constantinople and isolated examples of liturgical icons from that time. The composition was elaborated in the period of 11th–12th century so as to include buildings sheltering mourning women, bishops, the holy apostles on clouds, as well as the figure of Jephonias the Jew, whose hands were cut off by an angel due to his attempt to gather the bier of the Virgin and miraculously healed after he professed Christianity. The composition was further developed in the Palaiologan period, when more episodes from a longer narrative were added, some of which show the reception of the Theotokos in heaven, whose gates are widely open above (Taft and Carr 1991, pp. 651–53). The subject of the continuity and variation of the Dormition iconography will remain, to a certain extent, unclear until comprehensive research of the type of Anna Kartsonis' study of the Anastasis iconography (Kartsonis 1986) is conducted. The present article focuses solely on the question of the appearance and evolution of the mandorla symbol in the visual scheme of the Dormition.

## 3. The Symbol of Mandorla in Byzantine Iconography of the Dormition

### 3.1. Early Examples without Mandorla

A small eulogia token from Bet She'an, Israel of the 6th century is probably the earliest known fragmentary representation of the subject (Rahmani 1993, pp. 113–14). R. Baryames also mentions a wall image from the Basilica of Holy Sion, Jerusalem from the same century, preserved due to a later sketch (Baryames 1977, p. 34, fig. 2), as well as several Western images from the 7th–9th centuries (Ibid., pp. 42–48). Four reliefs from the second half of the 10th century and two more from the 11th century demonstrate the already established iconographical scheme of the Dormition (Salvador-González 2017, pp. 192–93), in which the symbol of the mandorla has yet to find a place. The mandorla is absent from the composition not only during the 10th and 11th centuries but often even during the 12th century. However, a more thorough search reveals that as early as the second half of the 11th century, there are signs of the gradual introduction of the idea of visualizing the heavenly Eden, which in turn, paves the way for the use of the mandorla as well, and by the 12th century, images of the Dormition with mandorlas were already encountered. In a Constantinopolitan icon from the second half of the 11th century,<sup>1</sup> part of the collection of

the Monastery of Saint Catherine (Lazarev 1986, p. 97, tab. 324), several angels are visible in the sky, three of whom on the right carry the soul of the Virgin Mary to heaven. These angels, as well as the others on the left, are depicted waist-high, as if peering from another space, and this impression is particularly strong in the left group—the area around the figures looks like a cloud or a cavity. At the upper edge of the icon are depicted seraphim with wings intertwined above their heads, thus, forming the heavens into which the Holy Virgin will enter.

The use of “clouds” housing angelic powers was also seen a century earlier, in the iconographic programs of Cappadocian churches. For example, in the Dormition fresco in the New Church of Tokali Kilise, Turkey, dated to the second half of the 10th century, the apostles coming on clouds are depicted in a kind of medallion (Jolivet-Lévy 1991, pp. 102–3). It is interesting that the mandorla around the figure of Christ is missing here, but He is still framed by a rectangular architectural structure with a triangular roof behind Him and is accompanied by an angel (Maguire 2019, pp. 60–61, fig. 49). In the fresco from the Church of Saint Sophia in Ohrid, Republic of North Macedonia (ca. 1050), which closely follows the scheme known from the reliefs, two elongated “alveoli” are already present in the upper corners, each containing six holy apostles (Salvador-González 2017, p. 222). These clouds or “cavities” in the real space in which the miracle of the Dormition takes place illustrate the apocryphal stories about the miraculous presence of all the holy apostles around the bed of the Virgin Mary, brought “on the wings of the clouds” (*Dormition of the All-Holy Theotokos and How the Undeified Mother of Our Lord was Translated.*, vers. 22–23. In (Shoemaker 2002, pp. 360–61; Panagopoulos 2013, pp. 343–51).

The subsequent inclusion of the mandorla in the iconographic scheme can be explained in the same way—the only reason for this should be the mention of the Glory of God in the apocryphal sources of the Dormition story. For example, Pseudo-Melito describes the event that most likely became the reason for the depiction of the mandorla filled with angelic powers:

*“But the apostles carrying Mary came into the place of the valley of Iosaphat which the Lord have showed them, and laid her in a new tomb and shut the sepulchre. But they sat down at the door of the tomb as the Lord had charged them: and lo, suddenly the Lord Jesus Christ came with a great multitude of angels, and light flashing with great brightness, and said to the apostles: Peace be with you”. (Pseudo-Melito. De Transitu Virginis Mariæ Liber., XVI. In: (James 1924, p. 215).)*

The manifestation of the Glory of God in the form of a blinding light that surrounds the holy apostles is also present in the story of Joseph of Arimathea:

*“Then the apostles laid the body in the tomb with great honour, weeping and singing for pure love and sweetness. And suddenly a light from heaven shone round about them, and as they fell to the earth, the holy body was taken up by angels into heaven’ (the apostles not knowing it)”. (Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea. De Transitu Virginis Mariæ Liber., 16. In: (James 1924, p. 217).)*

The iconographic subject for the Dormition is not the only one influenced by the non-canonical literature. The Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ are also lacking in detail, which presents a significant challenge for iconographers when creating their pictorial schemes. They had to rely on additional sources, as well as the interpretations and teachings of experienced clerics, to create the visual scenes for these events. Sometimes, a successful iconographic solution includes avoiding a too narrative representation of the event in favor of a more symbolic image. This approach can also be applied in regards to the appearance of the mandorla symbol in the iconography of the Dormition.

The details of the story of the Dormition, which originate from non-canonical sources, are widely accepted in Church tradition, as evidenced by a summary made by St. John Damascene in his homily on the subject, according to how he heard the story from St. Juvenal of Jerusalem. Here, a direct connection is even made between the person of the

Theotokos and the Glory of God, which also serves as an illustration of the prerequisites for the addition of the mandorla symbol to the iconography of the Dormition:

*“ . . . The Holy Scripture inspired by God does not tell what happened in the death of the Holy Theotókos Mary, but we rely on an ancient tradition and very true that at the time of her glorious Dormition, all the holy apostles, which roamed the earth for the salvation of the nations, were assembled in an instant through the air in Jerusalem. When they were close to her, angels appeared to them in a vision, and a divine concert of the higher power was heard. And so, in a divine and heavenly glory, the Virgin gave her holy soul in the God’s hands in an ineffable way . . . ”.* (Saint Jean Damascène, *Deuxième discours sur l’illustre Dormition de la Toute Sainte et toujours Vierge Marie*, 18. In: (Saint Jean Damascène 1961, p. 173).)

### 3.2. Appearance of Mandorla without Inscribed Angelic Powers

After the first manifestations of “spatial” symbols in the iconography of the feast in the 11th century, in the 12th century, examples with a clearly defined mandorla were already observed, but the introduction of the symbol was far from widespread. For example, in the Transfiguration icon from Zarzma, Georgia, the twelfth-century reworking of its frame contains a Dormition scene in which the mandorla is missing (Eastmond 2011, pp. 73–78, fig. 5.5f). In one of the most well-preserved examples of the 12th century, the fresco from the Church of Agios Nikolaos Kasnitzi in Kastoria, Greece dated ca. 1170–1180, the mandorla and even the “alveoli” for the angels are also missing (Malmquist 1979, p. 53). The mandorla is also missing in the fresco from the Transfiguration Cathedral at the Pskov Spaso-Preobrazhensky Mirozhsky monastery, Russia, dating from the 12th century. On the other hand, the iconographic program of the Church of St. George in Kurbinovo, Republic of North Macedonia, dated ca. 1190, contains the Dormition scene in which Christ is depicted in a wide oval mandorla with a blue-green core and a white band, behind which the angelic forces are depicted (Figure 1) (Dimitrova 2016, pp. 8–9, 21). There is one more noticeable feature in this fresco as well—the iconography of the subject is related to the iconography of the Nativity of Christ due to the way the soul of the Virgin is represented. She is depicted not as a motionless image of a tightly swaddled baby but as a semi-seated infant, dressed in a looser robe and with arched legs. In addition, the position of the hands of Christ is the same as on the opposite fresco of the Virgin Hodegetria. This tendency to consciously create parallels between the iconography of the Dormition and the Nativity continued throughout the following centuries, for example, in the 13th century Dormition fresco in Sopoćani, Serbia (Maguire 2019, pp. 61–62).

In the Dormition fresco from the Church of The Panagia tou Araka in Lagoudera, Cyprus from 1192 (Figure 2), Christ is depicted taking the soul of the Virgin into a pointed monochrome mandorla placed against a blue background. The mandorla is outlined by two or three pale blue bands that disappear towards its core, which seems to be filled with clouds. A. Stilianou and J. A. Stilianou believe that the humanism of the time is clearly visible in this image, and based on its comparison with the homonymous fresco from the Church of Panagia Phorbiotissa in Asinou, Cyprus from the early 12th century, they conclude that the replacement of the restrained and alienated Christ with a more emotional and moving version of Him shows the processes in the development of the Constantinopolitan style in iconography during the Komnenian period (Stilianou and Stylianou 1997, pp. 169–70, 121).





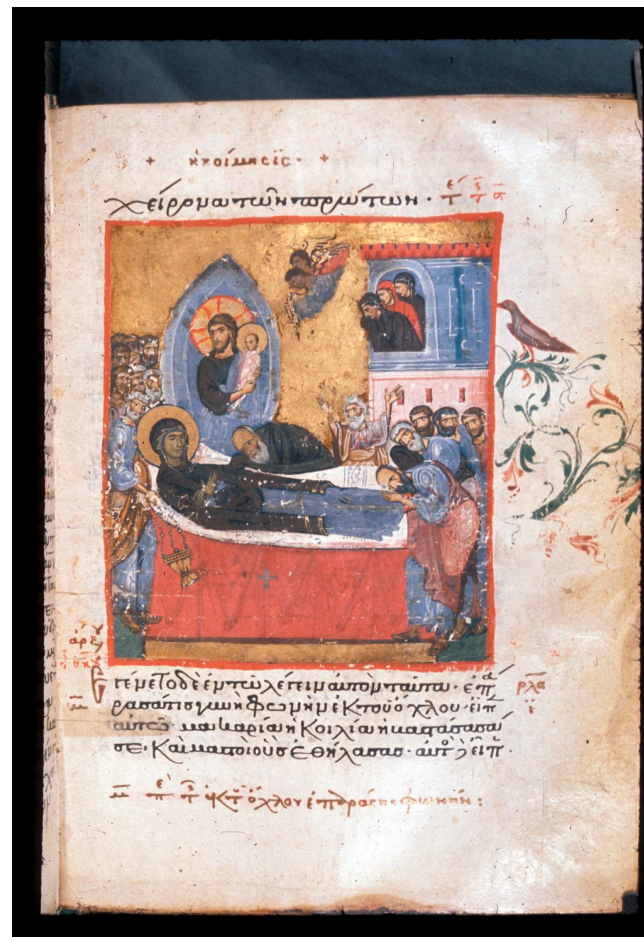
**Figure 1.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, ca. 1190, Church of St. George, Kurbinovo, Republic of North Macedonia. (Photo credit: *Pravoslavnyy Svyato-Tikhonovskiy Gumanitarnyy Universitet*).



**Figure 2.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 1192, Church of The Panagia tou Araka, Lagoudera, Cyprus. (Photo credit: Angel Yordanov, *TerraByzantica*).



The same scheme can be found in a miniature from the late 12th century from the collection of The British Library (Figure 3). The *Harley MS 1810 Tetraevangelion*, which contains the illustration, is believed to have originated from Nicaea, Cyprus, Jerusalem, or even Mount Athos. Despite the controversy over its provenance, the general consensus is that the handwriting and quality of the miniatures in the book are far above average, indicating that it is not an “ordinary” Gospel (Lowden 1997, pp. 384–85). The main feature of this miniature is that it illustrates an event that is not of a gospel nature. Along with the image of St. John the Baptist, these scenes are not commonly encountered in a Tetraevangelion. The Dormition is the third miniature in the Gospel of Luke and it reveals some typical 12th century changes in the iconographic scheme of the subject. The first feature is the depiction of Christ not in the middle of the bed but closer to its upper edge (Yota 2021, pp. 47, 126–31). Such a composition occurs in the homonymous scenes in the Church of The Panagia tou Araka in Lagoudera, Cyprus (Nicolaidès 1996, pp. 96–104, fig. 73); the Boyana Church, Bulgaria (Grabar 1978, p. 47, fig. 4); and several Cappadocian churches.



**Figure 3.** Dormition of the Theotokos, miniature, late 12th century, *Harley MS 1810*, fol. 174r, 22.5 × 16.5 cm (page), *The British Library*, London. (Photo credit: *The British Library*).

The second feature concerns the way in which the mandorla is depicted as a symbol of the Glory of God. According to E. Yota, the mandorla in this miniature follows neither the round shape typical of monumental painting at the time nor the oval shape typical of miniatures and icons but is represented in the form of an almond. This applies to the mandorlas in the Ascension and the Transfiguration miniatures in the same manuscript (Yota 2021, p. 111). Yota cites two additional examples in addition to *Harley MS 1810* where the Dormition mandorla is oval and vertically pointed—the partially-destroyed miniature

in *Malibu Getty Ms. Ludwig II 5* from the early 13th century<sup>2</sup> and the fresco in the Church of The Panagia tou Araka in Lagoudera. Yota finds an explanation for this peculiarity of the mandorla in the apocryphal sources that describe how the Lord Jesus Christ comes “on clouds” to take the soul of the Virgin Mary. The account of Joseph of Arimathea quoted above describes the Lord’s appearance in splendor that caused those present to fall to the ground, as happened with the holy apostles at Tabor. Based on this, Yota concludes that the mandorla in the Dormition of the Theotokos in *Harley MS 1810* replicates the shining mandorla of Christ from the scenes of His Transfiguration and Ascension. Citing various arguments, Yota is inclined to indicate the source of this iconography of the miniature as the fresco from the Church of The Panagia tou Araka, emphasizing that *Harley MS 1810* is the first case in which the Dormition scene was included in the iconographical program of a Tetraevangelion, and the reason for this is likely purely liturgical. The pointed almond-shaped type of the mandorla is one of the pieces of evidence supporting the author’s hypothesis about the origin of the miniature (Yota 2021, pp. 131–35, 213–14, 252).

Regardless of whether Yota is right or not, in this particular case, it is necessary to explicitly mention another specific feature of the oval-pointed mandorla in the Dormition miniature—its emphasized spatial character. Christ is literally emerging from the middle of the blue three-layered mandorla. This effect is achieved by depicting the blue garment of the Lord in the same shade as the core of the mandorla. The folds in His garments are marked by thin white lines, as well as the separate layers of His mandorla. This monochromaticity later becomes common in the depiction of angelic forces inside the mandorla, but here, it directly creates the impression of Christ passing from one space to another.

For the completeness of the study, due attention should be given to the Dormition fresco from the western wall of the nave in the Bachkovo Monastery, Bulgaria, dated ca. 1180. From an iconographic perspective, this fresco allows researchers to establish the roots of a late Byzantine art tradition that was particularly popular in Bulgaria during the Middle Ages. The interpretation of the scene follows established 11th–12th century Byzantine traditions for depicting the subject, but the main image is flanked by the images of two Syrian hymnographers—St. Cosmas of Maiuma and St. John Damascene—authors of many hymns and homilies for the Dormition of the Theotokos. The two saints hold scrolls inscribed with carefully selected quotations from their works on the subject. This artistic solution is completely in line with the Komnenian period, where the use of texts often accompanied monumental painting as their commentaries. However, A. Grabar notes that the depiction of the images of Syrian saints hymnographers around the scene of the Dormition occurred for the first time here in Bachkovo (Bakalova et al. 2003, pp. 69–70, fig. 53). Regarding the mandorla in the fresco, no conclusions can be drawn due to the poor condition of the image. Researchers such as E. Yota and A. Nicolaïdès have drawn parallels between the aforementioned examples and the fresco in Bachkovo, but today, we can only observe that the position of Christ is central to the Virgin’s bed and that we cannot judge whether His figure was enveloped in a mandorla.

Growing reverence for the Virgin Mary and the intense formulation and enrichment of Mariological dogmatics in the 11th–12th centuries were likely the strongest factor that influenced the development and final formation of the iconographic subject of the Dormition of the Theotokos. As a result, in the 12th century, the scene not only spread widely in icon painting, mosaics, and monumental art but also continuously complicated its composition and increased its narrative, including more and more apocryphal details (Salvador-González 2017, p. 202). From the 13th century onwards, the subject of the Dormition began to occupy the entire western wall of the nave, incorporating many additional scenes and becoming an iconographic cycle in its own right.

### 3.3. Addition of Star-Shaped Geometric Forms to the Mandorla

Some of the most significant examples from the late 13th century demonstrate a new change in the symbol of the mandorla—the addition of star-shaped geometric forms. An example in this regard is the famous Dormition fresco from the Church of the Holy Mother



of God Peribleptos in Ohrid, Republic of North Macedonia from 1294/5 (Figure 4), the work of the painters Michael Astrapas and Euthychius, who probably came from Thessaloniki (Velmans 1999, p. 194) and worked there together with some local masters (Lazarev 1986, p. 139, tab. 451). The two Greek artists<sup>3</sup> brought with them all the features of the best Byzantine traditions of the second half of the 13th century, mixed with the new stylistics of the Paleologan period, which gradually spread further and further from its capital source (Djuric 2000, pp. 54–58, 542).



**Figure 4.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 1294/5, Church of the Holy Mother of God Peribleptos, Ohrid, Republic of North Macedonia. (Photo credit: Angel Yordanov, TerraByzantica).

The large fresco details the entire narrative of the Dormition of the Theotokos as it is presented in the main apocryphal sources. Without dwelling on the other details, we will only focus on the manner in which the sacred space is represented. Christ is depicted in a wide oval mandorla whose outlines follow the posture of His body bent over the bed of the Theotokos. The mandorla has a dark core, from which radially symmetrical wide dark rays emerge. These rays do not extend beyond the boundaries of the symbol. The remaining part of the mandorla is golden, and its border is marked by a wide, translucent stripe. A golden square star-like shape, rimmed with a thin white line, is depicted around the head of Lord Jesus Christ behind the halo. This combination of forms creates an impression of emphasizing the uncreated light of God's *energies* in the context of its description as "super-luminous darkness", fully in line with the growing power of the Hesychasm at that time (Todorova 2013, p. 293; Todorova 2022a, pp. 8–11).

In the background, another mandorla is depicted, large and round, with several bands of color, but paler than the mandorla of Christ. In its center are depicted the open gates of heaven, from which the angelic powers come to receive the soul of the Virgin. A total of thirteen "balloons" or "alveoli" surround the central composition of the fresco, each of these zones containing one character. Their form is sharpened, which some researchers interpret



as a visual expression of the speed of their movement—these are the shining clouds on which the holy apostles arrive to attend the Dormition of the Theotokos, as described in the apocryphal sources (Salvador-González 2011, pp. 249–50). In addition to being used in the mandorla of Christ, the same star-shaped form is used behind the Lord’s halo in the Old Testament cycle, for example, in the scene with the Hospitality of Abraham. The mandorla with a dark core and wide symmetrical rectangular rays emanating from it is also common. The dark core is also present in the double mandorla (a combination of a wide circle and a narrow oval) around Christ in the Transfiguration scene. Despite the fact that the remaining mandorlas in the iconographic program of the church are mainly circular with several colored bands, the pre-“hesychastic” type of the symbol already seemed quite consolidated and ready for widespread use, as we see in many monuments in the next few decades.

### 3.4. *The Model from the Dormition Mosaic in the Chora Monastery*

The subsequent development of the subject of the Dormition during the Palaiologan period directly affected the mandorla symbol, which underwent a change in form and color and acquired new elements. One of the most important examples from this era is the mosaic from the western wall of the nave of the Chora Monastery, Istanbul, Turkey, created ca. 1315–1321 (Figure 5). Despite the current tendency towards a more detailed narrative of the subject, the earlier iconographic scheme, limited to one central episode, was used in the Chora. The triangular composition is deliberately symmetrical and based on the horizontal bed of the Holy Virgin, and its apex is located in a seraph, crowning Christ’s mandorla. The mandorla is double, with a regular oval-pointed shape, colored in grayish tones. The inner mandorla is reserved only for the Lord Jesus Christ, while the monochrome images of four angels and one seraph are arranged in the outer mandorla. The only colorful objects within the mandorla are Christ Himself and the face and halo of the soul of the Virgin. The color of the mandorla casts reflections on the surrounding objects, and those parts of them that enter its space lose their normal color and become monochrome like the angels (Underwood 1966, pp. 164–68).



**Figure 5.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, (detail), mosaic, ca. 1315–1321, The Chora Monastery, Istanbul, Turkey. (Photo credit: the author).



S. Makseliene notes that the same pattern was repeated in the Peribleptos Monastery in Mistra, Greece in the mid-14th century, as well as in the fresco in the St. George Chapel in the Agiou Pavlou Monastery on Mount Athos, painted in 1423. Virtually the same iconographic scheme is present in the Athos fresco, containing a complex oval mandorla with a seraph at the top, a cherub above Christ's halo, and archangels and angels on either side of Him. Makseliene associates this Athonite iconography with the sermon of St. Gregory Palamas, who, in his homily on the Dormition, describes the divine Holy Liturgy, served at the moment of the Dormition of the Virgin. In addition, the author makes a reference to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and his description of the celestial hierarchy due to his depiction in the iconographic scheme as one of the four bishops, as well as due to the popularity of his theology during the Palaiologan era (Makseliene 1998, pp. 51–52, fig. 39). Moreover, although the Dormition mandorla in the Chora lacks the added "hesychastic" angular forms, the hesychastic understanding of the uncreated light of God's *energies* penetrating matter is clearly visible here. In addition, the iconographic program of the church includes a fresco of the Virgin with a "hesychastic type" of mandorla, which demonstrates the current artistic trend (Todorova 2022b). According to researchers, the mosaic from the Chora Monastery is the earliest example of the monochrome depiction of angelic forces inside the mandorla—a model that later became particularly popular in Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia but not in Serbia. Additionally, it is the first time that the great seraph is seen above the top of the Christ's mandorla—a pattern that occurs only once in Serbia, in Lesnovo, but is almost mandatory in all subsequent depictions of the Dormition in Bulgaria, Athos, and Russia. Thus, the iconographic scheme of the subject established in the 14th century remained almost unchanged over the centuries, tolerating only slight variations in some minor elements (Wratislaw-Mitrovic and Okounev 1931, pp. 169–70).

The Chora mosaic was executed by an outstanding artist, and every detail of the composition carefully conveys connections not only to the literary sources of the narrative but also to the theological content, both of the particular sacred event and of various other related theological themes. The color of the mandorla is of significant importance in this case. Its greyish-bluish hue visualizes the radiance of the uncreated light of God's presence. Even the absence of outlined light beams does not spoil this impression, as the artist used other methods to depict the brilliance, such as the grayish hues on the lower feathers of the seraph's wings, creating the effect of reflections of the light from the mandorla. The change in the color of the objects partially entering the mandorla also has the effect of illumination—quite deliberately, the lower part of the seraph's last pair of wings is depicted in monochrome where they have entered the outlines of the symbol. The same happens to the arms, vestments, book, and halo of one of the bishops to the left of the mandorla, as well as to the halo and vestments of the other to the right. The two angels in the upper right corner of the scene, who are waiting to take the soul of the Virgin to heaven, are also depicted in monochrome, except for their heads and halos.

The monochrome depiction of angels in the Chora mosaic is not unprecedented; it was present as early as the late 6th-century as shown by the Sinai encaustic icon of the Virgin and Child with St. George and St. Peter where two angels are portrayed in grisaille in the background (Weitzmann 1976, Figs. B.3.). This painting technique originated from antiquity and quickly became the dominant way of depicting celestial characters in Christian art, especially in moments when they were represented as dwelling in heavens. Hence, in certain iconographical scenes, the angelic powers, the Virgin Mary, etc., are depicted monochrome (Karahana 2010, pp. 102–6). In the case of the Chora mosaic, the monochrome images of angels in the mandorla demonstrates in the most direct way possible that the space inside it is invisible to human sight in the material world.

The elegant white accents on some of the lines of the objects inside the mandorla also lend it the luminosity it needs, denoting the uncreated light of God's Glory. This lighting effect demonstrates the mastery of the artist, who, by placing the white lines only on the left side of the boundary between the two mandorlas and on the left side of the halos and

vestments of the figures inscribed within them, creates the impression of a single source of light illuminating everything from the same position. The same source of light illuminates the angelic figures above to the right, which is essential to the hypothesis argued here. The oval mandorla in this mosaic has a pronouncedly spatial character, although at first glance, it is only discussed in terms of its lighting characteristics. The mandorla indicates a space that is not of “this” world. It is a *topos* of the non-material, spiritual space in which God and His angels reside. The borders of the mandorla outline the invisible in the subject, the invisible to the material eyes, to the basic human senses. Those characters who inhabit its space are monochrome and lack the colors of the material world because they do not live in it. That is why those parts of the objects that are depicted half in the material and half in the non-material space of the mandorla are colored differently—the uncreated light that evenly illuminates the celestial space is the true reason for the monochromacy of these elements.

This categorical distinction between the celestial and the terrestrial is also demonstrated by the way the light sources are positioned in the image. As previously mentioned, all the figures in the mandorla, plus the two angels in the upper right corner, are depicted illuminated from the left if we follow the white glares on them. However, only the figures inhabiting heaven are illuminated by this light source, which remains invisible to the viewer. If we follow the white glares on the illuminated parts of all other figures and objects located in the material space, we will see that they are arranged as if illuminated by a central source of light—He Who stands at the center of the mandorla, the Source of the uncreated light, shining in the place of His dwelling, penetrating all that exists in the carnal matter. A theological parallel to this iconographic solution can be seen in the description of the angels given by St. Gregory of Nazianzus:

*“Fixed, almost incapable of changing for the worst, they encircle God, the first cause, in their dance. . . . He makes them shine with purest brilliance or each with a different brilliance to match his nature’s rank. So strongly do they bear the shape and imprint of God’s beauty, that they become in their turn lights, able to give light to others by transmitting the stream which flows from the primal light of God. As ministers of the divine will, powerful with inborn and acquired strength, they range over the universe. They are quickly at hand to all in any place . . . ”.* (St. Gregory Nazianzus. *Orationes theologicae*. 28.31. On the doctrine of God. In: (Norris et al. 1991, p. 244).)

Thus, St. Gregory of Nazianzus asserts that angels reflect the pure brilliance, the pure beauty of God; therefore, in iconography they are depicted monochromatically, with monochrome or golden effects, because they reflect the light of the Prime Source.

Who stands behind the perfection of details in both artistic and theological context? Who was the author of the mosaic, who made decisions about its composition, who advised the artist on how to depict the scene of the Dormition of the Theotokos, taking place on the boundary between two worlds, and managed to do so in a way that truly visualizes her transition from mortal to eternal life, greeted by her Son and accompanied by angelic hosts? Without any doubt, the iconographic program of the church was developed with the active participation of the patron Theodore Metochites—not only the richest but also the most scholarly person of his time (Ousterhout 2002, pp. 12–14). Certainly, the decoration of the church started with the mosaics in the nave, even before the construction activities in it were fully completed (Underwood 1966, p. 15), and the artists were given freedom to work, clearly evident in their style and interpretation of the scenes. Theodore Metochites himself explained that the main purpose of the decoration of the church was “to relate, in mosaics and painting, how the Lord Himself became a mortal man on our behalf”, but only the mosaic of the Dormition has survived from the visual narrative in the naos (Ousterhout 2002, pp. 19–21). It is impossible to know the details that interest us, such as who the authors of the artistic decoration and the multi-layered theological content were, but models created at the Chora Monastery spread exceptionally quickly in the Orthodox world.

### 3.5. Spread of the Model from the Chora Monastery

One direct example in this regard is the Dormition fresco from the Church of St. Peter in Berende, Bulgaria (Figure 6), from the 14th century. This is the most interesting scene from the festive cycle, whose most distinctive feature is the presence of St. John Damascene and St. Cosmas of Maiuma on both sides of the main core of the composition. The two hymnographers hold scrolls with phrases from hymns in honor of the Annunciation and the Dormition. This feature, according to A. Grabar and E. Bakalova, is mainly found in the churches in Bulgaria. Although observed in some Byzantine and Serbian frescoes and icons, it remains a distinctive feature of the Dormition iconography in Bulgarian church art in the 13th–15th centuries—Boyana (1259 AD), Kalotino (14th–15th centuries). Significantly later, from the 16th to the end of the 18th century, the two saints became mandatory components of the iconographic scheme of the subject in the Athonite churches (Bakalova 1976, pp. 38–42).



**Figure 6.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 14th century, Church of St. Peter in Berende, Bulgaria. (Photo credit: Angel Yordanov, TerraByzantica).

The mandorla in Berende differs in shape from the one in Chora, but it is also double and uses the same colors. The outer part of the mandorla is round, surrounded by a thick light band, and bordered by a thin white line. In its dark, grayish core, the monochrome painted figures of four angels are located. Where parts of the angelic wings and halos enter the wide light band, they are completely dematerialized and only indicated by lines. The same approach is used in the overlapping of some elements with the light band of the inner mandorla, which is triangular in shape and is reserved only for Christ and the soul of the Theotokos, who are the only full-color figures in the field of the mandorla. As with the Chora mosaic, the light rays are absent here, but the white glares again play the role of a reference point for a single source of light for the entire composition, which, in this case, is found in the figure of the Son of God. Researchers note as a special feature of the composition the turning of Christ to the left (Grabar 1928, p. 192), pointing out that this is a loan from the Western art, which is also observed in Staro Nagoričane, as well as in Matejče, Republic of North Macedonia (Wratislaw-Mitrovic and Okounov 1931, p. 31).

The model from the Chora Church was also transferred to Romania, as evidenced by the fresco from the Princely Church of Saint Nicholas at Curtea de Argeș. However, here, the outer part of the double mandorla was greatly enlarged to accommodate a multitude



of angels. The seraph on top of the inner mandorla falls completely within the outline of the outer mandorla; however, this does not change its coloring. The double mandorla is connected vertically to another circular mandorla, in which the Virgin ascends to heaven on a throne carried by angels. At the top, the scene is crowned with a third semicircular monochrome mandorla with four sharp rays of light emanating from it—it depicts the heavenly realm into which the Theotokos will enter. The holy apostles, present at the Dormition, are depicted being carried in clouds in the form of alveoli, as is observed in the Ohrid fresco (Figure 4) (Grecu 2011, pp. 455–56; Barbu 1986, p. 54; Mihail 1917–1923, fig. 184).

A “hesychastic type” of mandorla is employed in the Dormition from the Gračanica Monastery, Kosovo, from 1321–1322 (Figure 7). The church was painted under the direction of the painters Michael and Euthychius immediately after the completion of Staro Nagoričane. Its iconographic program features numerous innovations in the compositions, including the scene of the Dormition of the Theotokos. From a stylistic point of view, researchers believe that the decoration of this church is a true synthesis of all the experience, skill, and talent of the masters of Milutin’s court atelier, inspired by the Constantinopolitan art of the Palaiologan period (Djuric 2000, pp. 150–53). As a narrative, the fresco from Gračanica closely resembles the one from Staro Nagoričane in its comprehensiveness (Figure 8). The greatest difference is visible in the form of the mandorlas in the two churches (Wratislaw-Mitrovic and Okunev 1931, pp. 157–59). While in Staro Nagoričane, we see a double mandorla more modest in size, achieved by combining a circle with a five-pointed geometric form and colored in light silvery tones, in Gračanica, the round mandorla inscribes the angelic host and is combined with a double star-shaped form around Christ, obtained by overlapping four-pointed and five-pointed geometric forms. In my opinion, Wratislaw-Mitrovic and Okunev are wrong that the round mandorla is missing here. It is present but much expanded to encompass the dozens of angels surrounding Christ, and only its dark core and the thick lighter blue band that frames it are visible. The apex of the star-shaped form behind Christ interrupts into the space of the semicircular mandorla at the top of the scene depicting the open gates of heaven. Between the open gates are painted monochrome angelic powers awaiting the soul of the Virgin Mary. The color of the mandorlas is greyish-silver with white splashes and a dark core of the “hesychastic type” mandorla behind the figure of Christ.



**Figure 7.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, ca. 1321–1322, Church of the Holy Virgin, Gračanica Monastery, Kosovo. (Photo credit: The Yorck Project).



**Figure 8.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, ca. 1317–1318, Church of St. George, Staro Nagoričane, Republic of North Macedonia. (Photo credit: Tiffany Ziegler).

#### 4. The Symbol of Mandorla in Post-Byzantine Iconography of the Dormition on the Balkans

The changes in the mandorla symbol, caused by the general influence of Hesychastic theology on preferences towards certain iconographic themes and their interpretation, remained in Balkan Orthodox art even after the fall of Byzantium. The reasons for this were more likely to be purely artistic as there were no suitable conditions for continuing the active theological debate on Hesychasm. The importance of the Dormition of the Theotokos subject continued to be substantial, and in the post-Byzantine era, a new nuance emerged as a result of the piety towards the Virgin Mary during the times when Orthodox people fell under the rule of the Ottomans. Therefore, during this time, in the iconographic programs of the churches, a significant space began to be occupied not only by cycles of the Akathist hymn but also by other hymnographic images of the Mother of God. New subjects in which the Virgin was depicted in glory also appeared, such as the visualization of the Christmas stichera “What shall we offer Thee, O Christ”, “Axion estin (It is truly meet)” and “The Virgin, Lady of the Angels”.

Regarding the main Marian subject of the Dormition of the Theotokos, in which the mandorla plays a role not only as a symbolic expression of the Glory of God but also as a central element of the sacred event, it should be noted that the main feature of the symbol—the inclusion of monochrome depicted angelic forces—remains unchanged. An interesting change is observed in the color palette and form of the symbol, which takes on a considerably more geometricized appearance, especially in the patterns from Bulgaria. Systematically speaking, the main models of the Dormition iconography in the post-Byzantine era of the Balkans can be reduced to three: following the Palaiologan model from the Chora Monastery with the inscription of monochrome angelic powers into the mandorla; following the earlier iconographic scheme without angelic powers into the mandorla; and using a complicated scheme that combines scenes of the Dormition and the Assumption of the Virgin into heaven.

##### 4.1. Following the Palaiologan Model from the Chora Monastery with the Inscription of Monochrome Angelic Powers into the Mandorla

The Dormition fresco from Church of the Holy Cross of Agiasmati, near Platanistasa, Cyprus, dated to 1494, demonstrates the persistence of the model from the Chora Monastery after the fall of Byzantium (Stilianou and Stylianou 1997, pp. 198–99). The spatial character of the mandorla is emphasized in a manner similar to the prototype: the seraph at its apex is



monochrome in the part that is inside it, while the tips of its wings, which are located in the material space of the scene, are red; also, the halo of one of the angels on the left and the halo and wing of one of the angels on the right are depicted in the same way. The iconographic program of the church, created by the unknown painter Philip “Goul”, contains several more mandorlas with monochrome depicted angelic powers, even in a manner atypical for Byzantine models. For example, in the Nativity scene, the double semicircular mandorla contains two monochrome angelic figures, and three sharp asymmetrical rays emanate from it.

A monochrome angelic host is also present in the double blue oval mandorla from the scene with the 16th stanza of the Akathist hymn in the katholikon of the Saint Neophytos Monastery near Paphos, Cyprus, from the 16th century. The inner oval is reserved solely for Christ on His throne, while the outer one is densely filled with angels (Ibid., pp. 186–88, 190–91, fig. 107, pp. 372–75, fig. 222). The same manner of depicting angelic powers within the mandorla is evident in the Dormition scene from the Church of St. Archangel Michael or Panagia Theotokos in Galata, Cyprus, dated to 1514 (Figure 9). The tips of the wings of the seraph and angels, as well as a portion of the halo of the left angel, which have extended beyond the space of the mandorla, are brightly colored in red-orange. A similar mandorla is found in an icon of the Dormition from the old katholikon of the Holy Monastery of Pantokrator on Mount Athos, dating from the last quarter of the 16th century. The seraph on top of the deep blue oval-pointed mandorla is absent, but the four angels inside are depicted in grisaille, while only the candles on the candlesticks they hold and their flames are depicted in full color. The mandorla is filled with thin golden rays arranged symmetrically around the figure of Christ. The iconographic scheme follows the style of Theophanes the Cretan and differs slightly from his Dormition icon from 1546 in the Stavronikita Monastery Mount Athos, showing similarities with several other Cretan examples from the same period (Papadopoulos and Kapioldassi-Soteropoulou 1998, p. 172, fig. 89).



**Figure 9.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 1514, The Church of the Archangelos Michael, or Panagia Theotokos, Galata, Cyprus. (Photo credit: Angel Yordanov, TerraByzantica).

An interesting Cretan icon from the late 15th century demonstrates the influences of Italian art at the time, as the angelic powers inscribed in the wide blue mandorla are depicted in pink. Another Cretan-style icon from the same period, but from Patmos, Greece, features an oval double-pointed triple-layered mandorla, in which the angelic powers are also mainly depicted in reddish tones (Khatzidákis 2004, p. 404, fig. 45; p. 494, fig. 138). An icon of the Dormition from the second half of the 17th century, created by Ilias Moskos, follows an established Cretan model based on the model from the Chora Monastery but with an increased Western influence. The mandorla is a wide oval with monochrome angelic powers inscribed in it and with a linearly depicted seraph at the top. The alveoli with the Holy Apostles above the mandorla are missing, replaced by rounded white clouds from which the winged heads of angels emerge (Akhimástou-Potamiánou 1997, pp. 158–59, fig. 40). A mandorla with fully colored angelic powers and without a seraph on top of it is present in a 17th-century Dormition fresco from the Monastery of Seltsou in Piges, Arta, Greece (Papadopoulou and Tsiára 2008, pp. 121–23, fig. 17).

#### 4.2. *Following the Earlier Iconographic Scheme without Angelic Powers into the Mandorla*

Simultaneously with the dominance of the Chora model, the earlier scheme without angelic powers inscribed in the mandorla continued to circulate, as shown in an icon from the second half of the 15th century from the Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopedi, Mount Athos. The blue triple-layered mandorla here is shaped as an elongated rhombus, connected in its upper part to a blue three-layered semicircle with three rays emanating from it. Thin, lighter rays are visible within the mandorla, enveloping the figure of Christ. The holy apostles are depicted, along with angels, in two symmetrical groups of cloud-like alveoli on both sides of the mandorla. Discussing the shape of the mandorla, researchers draw parallels with the frescoes from Staro Nagoričane, Gračanica, and the Church of Taxiarchis Mitropoleos in Kastoria, Greece. The connection of the mandorla with the semicircle above it resembles the fresco in the Marko's Monastery near Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, from 1366–1371, which depicts the raising of the soul of the Virgin towards the gates of heaven. In its entirety, the iconographic scheme of the model presents the eclecticism that was typical of the work of the post-Palaiologan icon painters of the Cretan school in the mid and late 15th century (Tsigaridas and Lovérdou-Tsigarida 2006, pp. 237–43, fig. 178).

#### 4.3. *Using a Complicated Scheme That Combines Scenes of the Dormition and the Assumption of the Virgin into Heaven*

In the second half of the 15th century, the Cretan iconographic school began using a complicated scheme for the Dormition subject. It is based on the Chora monastery model but includes a vertical development of the scene with the addition of a mandorla, in which the Virgin ascends to heaven, carried by angels and flanked by the holy apostles depicted in alveoli. A semicircular mandorla with the open gates of heaven, waiting for the Mother of God, is placed in the upper part. This model settled permanently not only in the art of the Cretan masters but transited through their influence to Mount Athos and the Balkan lands. An icon of the Dormition from the mid-17th century, created by an Athonite master for the Dormition Chapel of the Pantokratoros Monastery, Mount Athos, is an excellent example of the typical post-Byzantine iconography of the subject, combining the scenes of the Dormition and the Assumption of the Mother of God into heaven. The closest parallels to this pattern are an icon from the Monastery of Saint John of Rila, Bulgaria, from 1638–1639, an icon from the so-called “Macedonian school” from the Latsis Collection, and an icon from the Koutloumousiou Monastery, Mount Athos, from 1657 (Papadopoulos and Kapioldassi-Soteropoulou 1998, pp. 233–35, fig. 124).

A similar iconographic scheme was used in a Dormition icon from Cappadocia, dating from the early 18th century. The mandorla of Christ is black, with a double golden frame, flanked by two angels in the lower part and crowned by a red seraph. Above it, the oval blue mandorla of the Virgin is depicted, carried upwards to heaven by two angels. The Holy

Trinity, depicted as the “Throne of Mercy” in a semicircular black mandorla with open gates of paradise, framed by round red clouds, receives the Virgin (Drandáki 2002, p. 244, fig. 61). The same composition of the Holy Trinity is present in another 18th-century Dormition icon, probably originating from Zakynthos, Greece, and preserved in the Velimezis Collection. The mandorla is dark, with a triple border and filled with thin golden rays, while the angelic powers inscribed in it are depicted in full color. In its upper end, the symbol is flanked by monochrome cloud-shaped alveoli, bearing the holy apostles without angels. A similar large semicircular mandorla with the “Throne of Mercy” is depicted at the top of the icon, and the Holy Spirit is presented in a separate round red mandorla (Khatzidáki 1997, pp. 388–90, fig. 55).

A combination of the Dormition and the Assumption scenes is depicted in an 18th-century icon from The Church of the Parigoritissa in Arta, Greece. In the wide oval mandorla, filled with monochrome angelic powers, only the flames of the candles they carry are colored. A golden seraph is placed atop the mandorla, above which angels carry the Virgin on clouds towards heaven. The icon was produced by a local iconographic workshop that utilized established Cretan models, as evidenced by numerous parallels (Papadopoulou and Tsiára 2008, pp. 260–63). By the end of the 17th century, the clouds permanently settled in the interpretation not only of heaven but also of the mandorla as a symbol of the Glory of God in the Dormition narrative. An icon from Argostoli, Kefalonia, Greece, dated to 1698 and preserved in the Collection of M. Cosmetatou, clearly demonstrates the amplification of these Western influences in the iconographic scheme. The monochrome mandorla of Christ has clouds at its base from which angelic figures emerge. The upper pair of angels are outside the mandorla above the seraph, again on clouds, while the holy apostles are arranged in two large groups, also carried by clouds. Clouds also enclose the heavenly space with the gates of paradise, in which the Virgin is depicted in the upper end of the scene (Khatzidákis 1985, fig. 175).

#### 4.4. Examples with Unique Shapes and Color Schemes of the Mandorla

The post-Byzantine models of the Dormition subject in Bulgaria utilize all the three main iconographic schemes. However, there are also examples with a more distinctive shape and coloration of the mandorla, which we will focus on.

The Dormition fresco from the Church of St. Demetrius in Boboshevo Monastery, dated 1488 (Figure 10), includes a bright mandorla with inscribed angelic powers (Mincheva and Angelov 2007, pp. 31–33). G. Subotić finds a close similarity between the iconographic program of this church and the churches in Leskovec and Lešani, as well as in the stylistic features of the decoration of the Church of St. Nicholas in Kosel, Republic of North Macedonia, all made by Ohrid masters (Subotić 1980, pp. 134–41).

The Dormition fresco from the Orlitsa Cloister in Rila, Bulgaria, from 1491, contains a mandorla with inscribed angelic powers (Figure 11). The symbol is double, with an oval-pointed form and grayish color, and the angels inside it are depicted in full color. The mandorla here is intentionally dematerialized, thus, making the Lord Jesus Christ appear distant from the central scene. This impression is reinforced by the added grieving figures leaning over the Virgin’s bed. Christ’s mandorla is crowned by a seraph and connected to the open gates of heaven, held by two angels. The holy apostles are also present, but the alveoli in which they are usually depicted are of a peculiar shape. The main elements of the iconographic scheme resemble the composition of the fresco at Marko’s Monastery, Republic of North Macedonia, and its parallels (Wratislaw-Mitrovic and Okounev 1931, pl. XV).





**Figure 10.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 1488, The Church of St. Demetrius, Boboshevo, Bulgaria. (Photo credit: Angel Yordanov, TerraByzantica).



**Figure 11.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 1491, Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, Orlitsa Cloister, Monastery of Saint John of Rila, Bulgaria. (Photo credit: Angel Yordanov, TerraByzantica).

Angel powers in Christ's mandorla can also be seen in the Dormition fresco from the Ascension Church in Alino Monastery, Bulgaria, dating back to 1626 (Figure 12) (Floreva 1983, pp. 123, 172, fig. 95). The scheme follows the model of the Chora Monastery, with the mandorla being oval, wide, and composed of two parts. The outer part of the pointed oval is painted in pale tones with the monochrome figures of the four angels with lit candles in their hands. The middle part of the mandorla is particularly interesting because it represents a vertically elongated red rhombus crowned by a red seraph. This rhombus is reserved only for Christ and consists of a bright red core surrounded by a dark red stripe. Thin white rays radiate from the figure of the Lord, and some of the mourning figures, leaning over the bed of the Virgin, cover Him and His mandorla, as in the fresco from the Orlitsa Cloister.





**Figure 12.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 1626, Ascension Church, Alino Monastery, Bulgaria. (Photo credit: Ivan Vanev, The Roads of the Balkan Painters and Post-Byzantine Artistic Heritage in Bulgaria Project, <http://zogرافي.info/>, accessed on 2 February 2023).

According to M. Kuyumdzhieva, the master of the frescoes in the western half of the church, including the scene under consideration, was the same painter (Iovan) Komnov who painted the St. Petka Church in Selnik, Republic of North Macedonia (Kuyumdzhieva 2012, 2020a). Although the frescoes in both churches were created by the same painter, the central part of Christ's mandorla in the Dormition scenes in the two churches differs. While there are similarities in the composition, the outer oval of the mandorla in Selnik is filled with monochrome angelic powers, and the inner oval has a traditional pointed shape and color scheme framed by a distinct white band (Mašnik 1994).<sup>4</sup>

The Dormition fresco from the Church of St. Theodor Tyron and St. Theodor Stratilates in Dobarsko, Bulgaria (Figure 13), from 1614, interprets the same iconographic scheme as in the Alino Monastery (Kuneva 2012; Kolusheva 2020). Numerous identical elements are present in the interpretation of the scene—the figure of the Virgin Mary, the decoration of her bed, the arrangement of the figures around it, the placement of the figure of Christ in the background of the bed, and the same diamond-shaped red element in the mandorla. At first glance, the main difference lies in the absence of an oval mandorla filled with angelic powers around the red rhombus, but the second reading shows that the mandorla is present in the form of a triple-layered blue arc. In other words, we also see a double mandorla here, consisting of a blue oval and a red inner element, but in Dobarsko, the oval is transformed into a semicircle that encompasses the angelic powers as in the Alino fresco, and the angels themselves are not monochrome but colorful. Thus, the main difference between the two scenes remains the absence of a seraph at the top of the red rhombus in the scene from the Dobarsko church.

The closest parallels to the Dobarsko murals were identified in the iconographic program of the Seslavtsi Monastery, Bulgaria, and recent field studies demonstrate thematic, stylistic, and epigraphic parallels with the wall paintings from the Church of the Dormition of the Theotokos in Zervat, Albania. Parallels with the iconographic programs of the listed churches can also be found in the frescoes of the Church of the Virgin, Slimnitsa Monastery, Republic of North Macedonia, from 1606/1607, where a large-scale scene of the Dormition is depicted on the western wall of the nave (Figure 14). Its composition follows



the traditions of the Palaiologan and Cretan art, showing similarities with the Athonite examples from the monasteries of Great Lavra, Xenophontos, and Dionysiou (Millet 1927, p. 132, pl. 1, p. 189, pl. 1, p. 197, pl. 2). The mandorla is double and painted in grisaille, with angelic powers inscribed in it, but its outer and inner ovals are demarcated by a red triple stripe, which separates the space around Christ from that of the angels. There is no space for a seraph at the top of the mandorla, but on both sides of the window above the mandorla, two cloud-like alveoli in red are depicted, carrying the holy (Popovska-Korobar 2015, p. 225). This type of Dormition mandorla with a red inner oval is also present in Arbanasi, Bulgaria, as well as in many examples created by the iconographers from Linotopi and Grammosta, which will be mentioned shortly.



**Figure 13.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 1614, Church of St. Theodore Tyron and St. Theodore Stratilates, Dobarsko, Bulgaria. (Photo credit: Ivan Vanev, The Roads of the Balkan Painters and Post-Byzantine Artistic Heritage in Bulgaria Project, <http://zogradi.info/>, accessed on 2 February 2023).

A similar rhomboid mandorla as in the fresco in Dobarsko was also used in the Dormition scene at the Dragalevtsi Monastery of the Dormition, Bulgaria, from the 16th century. It was located on the western wall, along with the Transfiguration of Christ and the Supper at Emmaus. The composition is simple, supplemented only by Jephonias the Jew and the angel, and the mandorla is composed of several color layers (Floreva 1968, pp. 26–27, fig. 42). A mandorla with a red rhomboid element is present in the Dormition fresco at the Kremikovtsi Monastery of St. George, Bulgaria, from 1493. The iconographic scheme follows the model used in the frescoes in Dobarsko and the Alino Monastery. The mandorla here is in the form of a large semicircle, framed by a white stripe and including the fully-colored figures of two angels flanking Christ, arranged within a red rhombus with three colored layers.<sup>5</sup> There are many similarities between the iconographic program of the Kremikovtsi Monastery and that of the Poganovo Monastery, Serbia, and their authorship belongs to iconographers from the artistic circle in Kastoria (Kostur). The Dormition fresco from the Poganovo Monastery of St. John the Theologian, created in 1499 (Figure 15), contains an oval monochrome mandorla with inscribed monochrome angelic powers and a red geometric element in the center. Christ is depicted in front of a combination of two red rhombuses, the first of which is horizontal and the one placed on it is vertical. Both



rhombuses consist of several color layers, creating a partially visible eight-pointed red star-shaped figure. Along the vertical axis, the monochrome mandorla is connected to a simple monochrome semicircle at the top of the fresco. The holy apostles are depicted in two groups on both sides of the mandorla, placed in leaf-shaped alveoli. Researchers believe that the Kastoria iconographers firmly based their work on the Palaiologan models, but added new elements to them or further developed established iconographic schemes (Kuneva 2018, pp. 26–27). Presumably, this has also happened with the interpretation of the Dormition subject in question, where the classic Palaiologan model from the Chora Monastery has received a new expounding, borrowing elements typical to the depiction of the Glory of God in other subjects such as the Transfiguration of Christ.



**Figure 14.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 1606/1607, Church of the Virgin, Slimnitsa Monastery, Republic of North Macedonia. (Photo credit: Ivan Vanev, The Roads of the Balkan Painters and Post-Byzantine Artistic Heritage in Bulgaria Project, <http://zogرافي.info/>, accessed on 2 February 2023).



**Figure 15.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 1499, Poganovo Monastery of St. John the Theologian, Serbia. (Photo credit: Ivan Vanev, The Roads of the Balkan Painters and Post-Byzantine Artistic Heritage in Bulgaria Project, <http://zogرافي.info/>, accessed on 2 February 2023).

A mandorla consisting of a large white semicircle and a red geometric element is present in the Dormition fresco from the Church of St. Nicholas in the Seslavtsi Monastery, Bulgaria (Figure 16), from 1616. The semicircle contains full-color angels holding lit candles, while Christ is depicted in a geometric figure consisting of a horizontally placed red

rhombus, framed by an ochre band, on which is placed a pointed dark red oval, framed by a black band and white line. In front of the Christ's mandorla are depicted a row of mourning figures leaning over the Virgin's bed, thus, making the Lord Jesus Christ appear distant in the background. Researchers believe that the Seslavtsi Monastery, along with the Dobarsko Church, the Zervat Church, and the Slimnitsa Monastery, were painted by masters from the same iconographic atelier, who worked in churches in Northern Macedonia, Greece, and Bulgaria in the late 16th and early 17th centuries (Gergova 2012; Kuyumdzhieva 2020b). A despotic icon of the Dormition, painted in 1637–1638 by Konstantinos of Linotopi for the katholikon of the Vellas Monastery in Kalpaki, Ioannina, Greece, contains the same elongated triple-layered rhombus with a darker core in the mandorla of Christ as used in the Dobarsko fresco, thus, demonstrating the persistence of the model (Tsámpouras 2013, fig. 585).



**Figure 16.** *Dormition of the Theotokos*, wall painting, 1616, Church of St. Nicholas, Seslavtsi Monastery, Bulgaria. (Photo credit: Ivan Vanev, The Roads of the Balkan Painters and Post-Byzantine Artistic Heritage in Bulgaria Project, <http://zogرافي.info/>, accessed on 2 February 2023).

Mandorlas composed of two elements, the central of which is red, are often present in the Dormition frescoes from the 17th century, even when not featuring a diamond shape or a combination of a diamond and an oval but a red pointed oval. An example in this regard is the mandorla from the fresco of the Church of St. Athanasius in Arbanasi, Bulgaria. It consists of a double pointed oval, the outer layer of which is grayish while the inner one is red. The angels are not inscribed in the oval but are fully colored and positioned in front of it. The red oval, filled with thin radial white rays, is reserved only for Christ, Who is slightly obscured by the figures leaning over the Virgin's bed. In the upper part of the composition, the Holy Virgin is depicted in an oval grayish mandorla with a red, vertically positioned rhombus with three color layers below it. The cloudlike alveoli of the holy apostles are depicted in gray and red (Gergova and Penkova 2012a). The scheme used in the frescoes of Ioannis Skoutaris, Dimitrios (II)<sup>6</sup>, and Georgios from Grammosta in the Monastery of Prophet Elijah in Zitsa, Ioannina, Greece in 1658 is very similar, as well as in those of Skoutaris in the katholikon of the Ravena monastery in Goranxi, Albania. An oval-pointed mandorla with a red heart also appears in the fresco of Dimitrios (II) and Georgios from Grammosta in the Church of St. John the Baptist in Polilofos, Ioannina, from 1672 (Tsámpouras 2013, fig. 170α, β, 213). The Dormition fresco in the homonymous



monastery in Zervat, Albania, employs the same scheme and contains a wide oval-pointed mandorla with a monochrome outer oval inscribed with angelic powers, crowned by a red seraph, and a bright red inner oval framed by a lighter stripe, reserved only for Christ (Kolusheva 2018). The composition was made by Michael and Nikolaos (III) from Linotopi, and ten years later Michael used it again in the Dormition church in Elafotopos, Ioannina. The same scheme is used in 1639 in the Dormition fresco in the Church of St. Nicholas in Kastoria, by Nikolaos (IV) from Linotopi—the intensely red oval mandorla around Christ is surrounded by an outer oval with monochrome inscribed angelic powers.

In a fresco by the painter Parvu Parvescu (Parvu the Mute) in the Fundenii Doamnei church in Bucharest, from 1699, the mandorla of Christ is depicted as a narrow pointed blue oval combined with an outer pinkish oval containing the figures of two angels, half hidden behind the blue oval and holding it with their hands. The pink oval has a vertical connection to a semicircular triple-layered blue mandorla at the top of the scene. The core of this connection is red, and the traditional seraph is located there (Arteni 2014, p. 63).

The earlier model of the mandorla without inscribed angelic powers was used in the Dormition fresco in the Church of St. Petka in Vukovo, Bulgaria, from 1598. Here, the symbol is depicted as a simple white oval without any rays of light, resembling the shape of the mandorla from Boboshevo. In addition to the white color of the mandorla, a specific feature of this model is the winged figure of the Virgin's soul, although it should be noted that this element has parallels in a series of patterns from the late 13th and the early 14th centuries. Floreva cites the frescoes from the Peribleptos Church in Ohrid; the Church of St. Nicholas in Prilep, republic of North Macedonia; the Church of Our Lady of Ljeviš in Prizren, Kosovo; the monasteries of Vatopedi, Staro Nagoričane, Žiča, and Peć; and the churches of St. Clement and St. Demetrios in Ohrid. The appearance of this feature, which has its roots in ancient art, two centuries later in Vukovo, is interpreted by E. Floreva as a sign of the vitality and stability of the earlier iconographic models (Floreva 1987, pp. 74–75, fig. 52). A simple greenish oval-pointed mandorla was used in the fresco of the Church of St. Demetrios in Zvan, Republic of North Macedonia, from 1633–1634 (Tsámpouras 2013, fig. 41, 170γ, 502). A classical blue multilayered mandorla is present in the Dormition fresco from the small funerary Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in Pefkari, Romania, dated from the 17th century (Arteni 2014, p. 45).

The use of the third main iconographic model of the Dormition of the Theotokos, which combines the scenes of the Dormition and the Assumption of the Holy Virgin to heaven, is seen in the fresco of the Church of St. George in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, dated to 1616. Here, the classical subject is combined with two additional episodes of the Dormition narrative (Gergova and Penkova 2012b). The mandorla of Christ is blue, triple-layered, with inscribed colorful angelic powers, and is vertically connected to the semicircular blue mandorla of the heavens, with the gates of paradise opened by two angels. In the center of this vertical connection, the red, oval-pointed mandorla of the sitting Virgin, carried by two angels, is depicted. Thin white rays emanate from the outline of this mandorla, similar to those emanating from the figure of Christ below. The authors of the fresco are two icon painters of probable Greek origin, and the style of one of them is similar to that of the masters who painted the narthex of the Slimnitsa Monastery. Thematic similarities can be found with the iconographic programs of the Dobarsko Church, Kurilo, and Seslavtsi Monasteries in Bulgaria.<sup>7</sup>

This iconographic scheme was also used to depict the Dormition of the Theotokos in the Church of St. Demetrios in Arbanasi, Bulgaria, in 1621. Christ is presented in an oval mandorla with inscribed monochrome angelic powers and crowned by a seraph, above which the Virgin is ascending to heaven in a narrow oval-pointed mandorla, carried by two angels (Gergova and Penkova 2012c). The same composition was used in the Dormition fresco from the Monastery of St. Nicholas in Toplica, made by Ioannis from Grammosta in 1536–1537. The only difference is the shape of the Virgin's mandorla, as a star-shaped element with three blue layers was added around the blue oval (Tsámpouras 2013, fig. 17). The Dormition fresco in the Rozhen Monastery, Bulgaria, created in 1727

by the iconographers Nikola and Teohari, employs a similar composition (Penkova 1992). Christ's mandorla is similar to the mandorlas in Boboshevo and Vukovo and is vertically connected to the elongated oval mandorla in which the standing Virgin ascends to heaven, while the holy apostles are depicted around her, carried by clouds. The same slightly oblique oval shape of the mandorla, filled with monochrome angels and crowned with the narrow oval mandorla of the Virgin, is present in the Dormition fresco painted by Michael and Konstantinos from Grammosta in the Monastery of Divrovounion, Albania, in 1603 (Tsámpouras 2013, fig. 75). The composition was also used in the Church of the Nativity of Christ in Arbanasi from the 17th century, where the mandorla is a wide semicircle inscribed with two angels, above which the Holy Virgin ascends to heaven (Gerov et al. 2012, pp. 91–94).

The diversity of post-Byzantine models of the Dormition subject is infinite. The various local artistic traditions undoubtedly leave their mark and lead to different interpretations of both the iconographic scheme and the symbol of the mandorla within it. Wonderful examples in this regard are the Russian iconography of the subject, which is beyond the scope of the present study, as well as the heightened Western influence on late post-Byzantine art, which transforms the mandorla into clouds (Todorova 2020a, pp. 139–40). However, it is important to emphasize that throughout all stages of the development of the Dormition iconography, the changes in its visual narrative and the set of symbols it employs are directly related to the current state of Mariology and devotion to the person of the Theotokos.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be inferred that the incorporation of the mandorla symbol into the iconographic scheme of the subject of the Dormition of the Theotokos is driven by the desire for detailed depiction of the literary account. First, this level of detail serves as a means of emphasizing the veracity of the sacred event. Additionally, it serves as an argument in favor of its dogmatic significance in both Christological and Mariological aspects. The mandorla is a visual denotation of the descriptions of the wondrous light of God's manifestation, accentuating the dichotomous spatiality of the event and addressing its soteriological importance. Once introduced into the composition, the symbol does not remain stagnant but dynamically reflects the theological tendencies of the time, such as incorporating elements that correspond to the Hesychastic understanding of the uncreated light of God's glory and participating in the Akathist iconography of the Theotokos.

After the fall of Byzantium, the metropolis that for centuries had disseminated artistic and theological trends to the periphery of its religious influence disappeared, leading to an incredible proliferation of models. The iconography of the Theotokos also reflected this state of affairs through its narrative lines and the morphology of the mandorla within them. The personal preferences of artists, woven into local artistic traditions and catalyzed by the socio-historical context, led not only to a new interpretation of the narratives but also to changes in the narratives themselves. The creation and multiplication of new models must be sought in the artistic practice of specific groups of masters and in the extent of their familiarity with classical models, in their sets of copies, and in their authorial choices. This process was certainly influenced by the trends in the Athonite workshops, which replaced the missing metropolis as centers for the dissemination of patterns, as well as by the free movement of iconographers over a larger territory.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Dormition of the Virgin (Koimesis)*, XI (XII?) century. Princeton Work Number 87. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3HkFsgo> (accessed on 2 February 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> See the image in the digital collection of the *The J. Paul Getty Museum*: <https://bit.ly/2VdYcHs> (accessed on 2 February 2023). More info here: (Marinis 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> Some researchers believe that there were three painters whose names were Astrapas, Michael, and Euthychius. See: (Talbot Rice 1966, pp. 205–6).
- <sup>4</sup> See more about the St. Petka Church in Selnik here: [http://zogرافي.info/?page\\_id=298](http://zogرافي.info/?page_id=298) (accessed on 2 February 2023).
- <sup>5</sup> See the image here: [http://zogرافي.info/?page\\_id=243](http://zogرافي.info/?page_id=243) (accessed on 2 February 2023).
- <sup>6</sup> The use of numbering (II) was adopted by Tsámpouras in his dissertation to distinguish between painters by the same name. The same goes for the painters Nikolaos (III) and (IV) mentioned further down.
- <sup>7</sup> See the image here and some more information about the iconographic program of the church here: [http://zogرافي.info/?page\\_id=183](http://zogرافي.info/?page_id=183) (accessed on 2 February 2023).

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