The Ways of Byzantine Philosophy

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Transcendental Byzantine Body. Reading Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa and Plotinus in the Unfolded Marble Panels of Hagia Sophia

Uroš T. Todorović

In an attempt to contribute to the understanding of the often elusive theological influences in the Byzantine art of the Pre-Iconoclastic period,[1] I shall focus in this study on the unfolded marble panels inside the interior of Hagia Sophia of Constantinople and particularly on the way in which their selection and the conception of their installation may have been influenced by the mystical teachings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite and possibly by those of Gregory of Nyssa. The likelihood of other, philosophical influences will also be considered, such as the teachings of Plotinus. In addition to the Proconnesian variegated marble, quarried on the island of Proconnesus, present-day Marmara in Turkey, a variety of stones in varied colours and from dif-

1. In the field of Byzantine art, especially in consideration of artworks from the early Byzantine period, one of the biggest challenges for art historians has been to detect and interpret the visual outcome of those influences which are mainly theological and differentiate them from influences which, although in part also theological, are primarily morphological and structural. Accordingly, in respect to the period from the emergence of early Christian art until the period preceding the Iconoclastic controversy, the demanding task of comprehensively relating particular theological ideas and trends to particular examples of art has yet to be accomplished. On the other hand, comparatively speaking, in this particular regard the period of Iconoclasm and the succeeding periods of Byzantine art have been examined more studiously. Among more recent publications which relate to Iconoclasm are the following: Brubaker 2012, Ivanovic 2010. There are numerous publications which discuss Byzantine art as it developed after the iconoclastic controversy. We indicatively note the following: L. Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth Century Byzantium: Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999; R. Cormack, "Interpreting the mosaics of St Sophia at Istanbul," *Art History* 4, 2 (1981); A. Cutler, *The Hand of the Master: Craftsmanship, Ivory, and Society in Byzantium (9th–11th centuries).* Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994; O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium.* London: Routlidge and Kegan Paul 1948, ^{r}1976; H. C. Evans, W. D. Wixon, eds., *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D 843–1261*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1997; H. Maguire, *Rhetoric, Nature and Magic in Byzantine Art*, Ashgate: Variorum 1998.

ferent regions, such as Africa, Thessaly and Asia, have been selected for the abstractly designed sixth-century interior-decoration of Hagia Sophia.

The concept of book-matching or cutting the veined marble and unfolding it in order to create visual patterns seems to have originated in Hellenistic architecture and was applied in certain Late Roman buildings.[2] It is a process of splitting and unfolding a block of veined marble once, or multiple times, in order to create an extended repetition of the natural pattern of the marble. In Christian architecture, this ancient technique was employed from the period of Constantine the Great[3] until the late Byzantine period. For example, besides Hagia Sophia, it can be encountered in San Vitale of Ravenna (6th century), in Saint Demetrius of Salonica (reconstructed in 7th century), in Hosios Loukas near the town of Distomo in Greece (11th century), in Nea Moni on the Greek island of Chios (11th century) and in the church of Chora of Constantinople (rebuilt in the 11th century and renovated in 14th century).

The numerous sixth-century examples of the unfolded marble panels inside Hagia Sophia have been approached and interpreted by researchers in various ways. For example, they have been compared to the Rorschach test[4] and to the concept of Gestalt groupings,[5] and in her study entitled *The aesthetics of marble and coloured stone*, Bente Kiilerich argues that besides their beauty, these stones from three different continents (from Africa, from Thessaly and from Asia) "present a 'territorial' display of imperial power and might, suggesting the extent of Justinian's empire.[6]" The possible influence of the culture of ekphrasis and *encomium* (praise) on the way marbles in Hagia Sophia were perceived by the late antique viewer, has been discussed by John Onians, who argued that the development of imagistic capabilities which allowed viewers to observe naturalistic and anthropomorphic forms in the ab-

2. Pentcheva 2011: http://iconsofsound.stanford.edu/aesthetics.html
3. Kleinert 1979: 45–93.
4. Kiilerich 2006: 21–26. Explanation: The Rorschach test, named after its creator, Swiss Freudian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Herman Rorschach (1884–1922), is a psychological test in which the subject observes inkblots while their perceptions are recorded and then analysed as part of a personality assessment. Given that these inkblots are made by symmetrical folding and pressing of the paper which is previously stained with ink, they are characteristic for their symmetry.
5. Halper 2001: http://www.perceptionweb.com/ecvp/ecvp01.pdf Explanation: Gestalt laws of grouping are a set of principles in psychology, organised into six categories: Proximity, Similarity, Closure, Good Continuation, Common Fate, and Good Form. They were first proposed in the 20th century by Gestalt psychologists who argued that the human mind is naturally predisposed to perceive patterns in the stimulus based on certain rules, and that humans naturally perceive objects as organised patterns and shapes. Irvin Rock (1922–1995) and Stephen E. Palmer have built upon the work of Max Wertheimer (1880–1943) and others and have identified additional grouping principles.
6. B. Kiilerich, "The Aesthetic Viewing of Marble in Byzantium: From Global Impression to Focal Attention," in: *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, 21–26 August 2006*, v. 1, 238. Note: Only a short abstract of Kiilerich's study was available before the publication of the present text.

stract features of veined marble, is owed to the increased role of ekphrasis.[7] Ekphrasis, or description, is an exercise of late antique rhetoric incorporated by the Byzantines as part of their primary education, even as late as the 15th century.[8] Ekphrasis could be employed to describe not just examples of art but also persons, deeds, times, places and many other things. Hence, Bissera Pentcheva has insightfully discussed the appearance of marble and gold in the sixth-century interior of Hagia Sophia while exploring also their psychological effect on the spectator as recorded in Byzantine ekphrasis and liturgical texts.[9]

Bearing in mind the variety of previous approaches to this topic, in this study I will attempt to demonstrate that there is a previously unexplored, distinct and indicative aesthetic connection between the concept of unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia of Constantinople and certain core aspects of transcendental teachings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, such as the symmetric double semantics of apophatic terms in his writings, his idea of the infiltrating transcendental vision and the related concept of "divine darkness." Having said this, in this study I shall simultaneously discuss the relevant influence of both the writings of Plotinus and those of Gregory of Nyssa on Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. This hypothesised connection may serve as an indicator that the sixth-century unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia embody entirely abstract and deliberately cryptic visual representations of theological meanings, as well as abstract representations of human presence and of God's presence, as phenomena which are owed to the influence of a centuries long development in theological discourse, which began in Neo-Platonism and matured in the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite.

As seen in *plate 1*, not just their size but also the treatment of many of these unfolded marble panels as a kind of natural ready-made icons, which is observed in their elaborate framing, undoubtedly indicates the iconic importance that their creators observed in them, as does the fact that they are installed in the entire ground floor and in sections of the gallery (*plates 14*, *15*, *16* and *17*).

Such immense emphasis on this creative enterprise could certainly not have been realised without the approval from Emperor Justinian and his qualified advisers, who were making their decisions regarding the interior of Hagia Sophia at a time when the teachings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite were exerting a rising influence on the meaning and function of the icon.

7. Onians 1980: 1–23. See also: J. Trilling, "The Image Not Made by Hands and the Byzantine Way of Seeing," in: *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation*, Villa Spelman Colloquia, 6, ed. H. Kessler and G. Wolf, Bologna 1998, 109–128.
8. See: R. J. H. Jenkins, "The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Literature," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963) 39 ff., esp. 43, and M. Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, Oxford 1971, 85.
9. Pentcheva 2011: 93–111.

Having said this, in the present study I shall try to accomplish the following two tasks that to the best of my knowledge have not previously been realised.

Firstly, I shall attempt to examine the possible ways in which the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, as well as certain pre-existing ideas that he crystallised, could have exercised an aesthetic kind of influence on the concept and process of the cutting, selection and installation of unfolded panels of colourful veined marble that decorate the interior of Hagia Sophia. Given that there are no known Byzantine texts that record the actual aesthetic intentions behind the design of Hagia Sophia, rather than claiming the undoubted existence of such an influence, I primarily aim at pointing out the previously unexamined indicative parallels between the mystical teachings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa as well as those of Plotinus and the unfolded marble panels in the interior of Hagia Sophia.

Secondly, by discussing these parallels, I shall aspire to explain the existence of a phenomenon that should best be understood as an entirely abstract Byzantine icon, one which is not essentially related to the iconoclastic ideas. Due to the theological influences that underpin it, which shall shortly be discussed, I have named this phenomenon *Transcendental Byzantine Body*.

The methodology of this study will entail comparing certain of Dionysius' ideas which regard notions of vision, transcendence and enlightenment and which can also be encountered in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and to an extent in those of Plotinus, to the aesthetic characteristics observed in the sixth-century concept of unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia. The comparisons which shall be made are accompanied by visual demonstrations by which I aim to explain how in particular, in a practical sense, these theological ideas might have influenced the concept of unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia.

As is very well known, Hagia Sophia was built between 532 and 537 while the first known reference to the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite is found in the work of Severus of Antioch entitled *Adversus apologiam Juliani,* which scholars tend to date to 519 and which was translated into Syriac in 528. Although there is some disagreement regarding their dating,[10] it is not accidental that the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite historically emerged undoubtedly about a decade before the construction of Hagia Sophia and thereafter assumed a significant influence in the thought of the

10. For example, in her book entitled *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist: The Development and Purpose of the Angelic Hierarchy in Sixth Century Syria*, Rosemary A. Arthur says: "Given that they are so sparse and localized, it is possible that the so-called references to Dionysius the Areopagite in the writings of Severus may be later interpolations by editors, or others who wished to prove that Dionysius was prior to Severus rather than contemporary with him. Similar attempts, by Liberatus of Carthage and others, to prove his 'antiquity' have been revealed." (105)

Church as well as in the realm of ecclesiastical arts. Of course, as was mentioned earlier, the basic concept of installing unfolded marble panels in order to create visual patterns is much older than both the writings of Dionysius and the church of Hagia Sophia.

However, as noted by Ernst Kitzinger in his study entitled *The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm*, the adaptation of Neoplatonic philosophy to Christian needs, which is realised in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, provided a theoretical basis on which to build up a defence of Christian image worship[11] – and this could have easily influenced both the emerging and the already existing art techniques. For the present topic, this means that in Hagia Sophia, which was built about a decade after the appearance of Dionysius' writings, the connections to Dionysius' teachings and to the pre-existing ideas which his teachings entail, should be sought not so much in the basic concept and technique of unfolded marble panels but rather in the aesthetic particularities of the choices made in the selection and installation of these panels. Given that the topic is vast, I shall mainly discuss the type of the unfolded marble panels which consists of two rectangular pieces cut from the same block of marble and splayed in order to form antithetical patterns of veins (*plate 1*), while other types of combined marble panels in the interior of Hagia Sophia will be given more attention in the extended version of this study.

* * *

One of the simpler ways in which we could conceive of the concealed theoretical influence of apophatic theology on the conception of these unfolded panels of marble relates to the twofold meaning of apophatic terms used by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. For example, in his writings the apophatic or negative meanings which refer to God can and should also be understood as cataphatic or affirmative, that is, they can and should be understood as an affirmation of the state of lacking, which is stressed by the negative letter *a* in the beginning of such words, such as: *aoratos* (ἀόρατος), meaning invisible.[12]

Thus, although it is a negative name, *aoratos* simultaneously expresses an affirmation of the state of lacking visibility. In fact, in Orthodox tradition generally, regardless of whether one adheres to the apophatic or cataphatic method of theology, in each case, one symmetrically implies the other. This means that there are two equally important implications within adjectives such as "invisible," i.e. the first denoting the lack of visibility and the second confirming the invisibility. In order to translate this into a visual paradigm,

11. Kitzinger 1976: 120. In particular, Kitzinger states: "So far as clergy was concerned, the adaptation of Neoplatonic philosophy to Christian needs, which had been effected towards the end of the fifth century in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, provided a theoretical basis on which to build up a defence of Christian image worship."
12. The word ἀοράτῳ is used in the first chapter of the *Mystical Theology* by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite.

we could imagine these two implications as two visual panels which complete one another simply by being joined together and thus showing that they in fact stem from and reflect the same experience and meaning (*plate 2*).

As seen in the comparison between *plate 2* and *plate 3*, this symmetric twofold meaning of Dionysius' apophatic terms could have possibly provided the creators of Hagia Sophia, Isidorus and Anthemius, or their assistants, with a particular inspiration in the process of cutting, selecting and installing the double marble panels, where in each individual case, the exhibited surface comprising a symmetrical pattern vividly presents the viewer with an open insight into a careful incision which was made in the single solid stone – being understood as a selected piece of matter that belongs to the sphere of God's Creation. As seen in *plate 3*, similarly to the twofold meaning of Dionysius' apophatic terms, the two sides of the split marble, although seemingly standing as antithetical to one another, exhibit the inside of a content of a single piece of matter, thus making a reference not so much to division or contradiction but rather to a sense of harmonious wholeness that can not be denied. This analogy can take us even further. According to Dionysius, God is not adequately approached simply by the earlier mentioned twofold meanings of apophatic terms, but is considered, as expressed in the last words of *Mystical Theology*,[13] to be beyond every denial, free from any limitation and beyond them all. In a manner which is to an extent comparable, at the first level of the concept of unfolded marble panels, the viewer is invited to literally enter the solid mass of the stone and thereby to also exercise vision of the otherwise closed and concealed content of matter which is created by God. In a sense, this can be understood as an attempt to look inside the concealed levels of Creation in order to learn about both its Creator and its numerous implications for Man himself.

Inside the Creation, that is inside the otherwise closed mass of the stone, as seen in *plate 4*, by exercising a bilateral, bird-kind of vision of the two sides, the viewer encounters abstract colourful veins which, as we shall see, can be interpreted in various ways. But before any interpretation takes place, the first level of this concept of seeing the inside of the stone offers the bare phenomenon itself – which speaks of nothing else but of its own self. A noteworthy parallel with Dionysius' writings can be detected. In particular, as insightfully noted by Moshe Barasch, in Dionysius' writings, "the symbolon, while never negating the difference between symbol and symbolised, represents mainly what they have in common. Symbolon, in his view, is not only a sign, but is actually the thing itself.[14]"

As can be observed in *plate 3,* when two marble panels are placed next to each other so that their colourful grains together form a symmetric pattern, that which is immediately achieved is a sense of order in the vision of the

13. Διονυσίου Ἀεροπαγίτου, *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*, V, 150 (PG 3, 1048B).
14. Barasch 1992: 167.

otherwise apparently random-flowing content of Creation. Thus, while this is an exhibition of the concealed content of Creation, or of the thing itself, roughly speaking, there are two main points of minimal human intervention which took place before its installation within the interior of Hagia Sophia: (a) the cutting of the stone, or more precisely, the incision in the closed matter, and (b) placing of the two halves next to one another and exhibiting their so far unseen surface so that the act of incision can be perceived as an infiltrating, in-depth kind of vision. As shall be discussed in the following, this idea of the infiltrating vision is vividly reminiscent of Dionysius' teachings regarding the infiltrating, transcendental vision and divine *darkness*.

* * *

As noted by Lossky, even before specifically Christian exegesis, Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenised Jewish philosopher who lived in the 1st century BC and 1st century AD,[15] interpreted the darkness of Exodus as a condition of the knowledge of God.[16] As in regards to the Christian tradition, already in the writings of Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 222/231), the darkness into which Moses entered according to the Book of Exodus,[17] represented the ultimate inaccessibility of God, and later, regarding this issue, the Cappadocians followed Clement instead of Origen.[18] However, unlike in Cappadocian thought which was developed in the 4th century, in Clement's writings which date to the late 2nd and early 3rd century, the idea of darkness is not so much representative of the incomprehensibility of the transcendent God as it is of the ignorance of the human reason about God. It was in fact Gregory of Nyssa, who in the 4th century employed the notions of ignorance and darkness as a means of experiencing the transcendent God.[19] After Gregory's contribution, in late 5th and early 6th century (three centuries after Clement) when Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite speaks of the divine *darkness,* he does not speak of ignorance, something that would place an emphasis on the necessity of intellectual kind of learning about God, but he understands this *darkness* as the Light which cannot be seen because it transcends human logic.[20] Thus, the "*darkness* of God" implies that man's logic is limited, which is why the term *gnofos* (γνόφος), which Dionysius uses for *darkness* in this context and which was used before him in a like manner by Gregory of Nyssa, is an antithetic

15. Born 15–10 BC, Alexandria – died AD 45–50, Alexandria.
16. http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/en_main/catehism/theologia_zoi/themata.asp?cat=patr&NF=1&contents=contents_Texts.asp&main=texts&file=2.htm
17. "And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was" (Exodus 20:21).
18. Brooks 1958:108.
19. http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/en_main/catehism/theologia_zoi/themata.asp?cat=patr&NF=1&contents=contents_Texts.asp&main=texts&file=2.htm
20. Διονυσίου Ἀεροπαγίτου, *Ἐπιστολαί*, V, 162[1–3] (PG 3, 1073A): "'Ο θεῖος γνόφος ἐστὶ τὸ 'ἀπρόσιτον φῶς', ἐν ᾧ κατοικεῖν ὁ θεὸς λέγεται, καὶ ἀοράτῳ γε ὄντι διὰ τὴν ὑπερέχουσαν φανότητα καὶ ἀπροσίτῳ τῷ αὐτῷ δι' ὑπερβολὴν ὑπερουσίου φωτοχυσίας."

term that actually means *darkness of the light* (γνόφος τοῦ φωτός). More particularly, according to Dionysius, it is only by transcending the realm of logic that one can begin to experience God as Light – otherwise He is experienced as *darkness*. Also, he teaches that this transcendental process of experiencing God as Light is itself endless.

In chapter 2 of *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius instructs that through not seeing (δι' ἀβλεψίας) and through not knowing (καὶ ἀγνωσίας) we may arrive at the darkness which is beyond light (ὑπέρφωτον γνόφον). In the continuation of that text he uses an interesting metaphor by referring to the process of carving a marble statue, where the real emphasis is not so much on the statue but rather on the process of removal of the excess material which hinders the path of one's "clear vision." In fact, as we shall see, when the text is read analytically, it becomes clear that the metaphor implies that the "clear vision of the hidden" (τῇ καθαρᾷ τοῦ κρυφίου θέᾳ) is in fact synonymous with the deducting process of carving or chiselling. The metaphor of carving is of course much older than Dionysius. For example, there is the following similar passage by the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus, who lived in the 3rd century: "Withdraw into yourself and look; and if you do not find yourself beautiful as yet, do as does the sculptor of a statue [...] cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is shadowed [...] do not cease until there shall shine out on you the Godlike Splendour of Beauty; until you see temperance surely established in the stainless shrine."[21]

The analogous segment incorporating the carving metaphor from Dionysius' 2nd chapter of *Mystical Theology,* reads as follows:

> We pray that we may come unto this *gnofos* (darkness) which is beyond light, and that, through unseeing and through unknowing, we come to see and to know that which is above vision and knowledge, precisely through not-seeing and through not-knowing – because this in fact is the truthful seeing and knowing – and thus praise, superessentially, Him who is superessential, by the abstraction of all things, like those who, making a self-existent statue, deduct all the surrounding material that hinders the vision of the concealed, and simply by that abstraction, show the hidden beauty.[22]

21. *Ennead*, I. 6. 9. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: "ἄναγε ἐπὶ σαυτὸν καὶ ἴδε· κἂν μήπω σαυτὸν ἴδῃς καλόν, οἷα ποιητὴς ἀγάλματος, ὃ δεῖ καλὸν γενέσθαι, τὸ μὲν ἀφαιρεῖ, τὸ δὲ ἀπέξεσε, τὸ δὲ λεῖον, τὸ δὲ καθαρὸν ἐποίησεν, ἕως ἔδειξε καλὸν ἐπὶ τῷ ἀγάλματι πρόσωπον, οὕτω καὶ σὺ ἀφαίρει ὅσα περιττὰ καὶ ἀπεύθυνε ὅσα σκολιά, ὅσα σκοτεινὰ καθαίρων ἐργάζου εἶναι λαμπρὰ καὶ μὴ παύσῃ 'τεκταίνων' τὸ σὸν 'ἄγαλμα', ἕως ἂν ἐκλάμψειέ σοι τῆς ἀρετῆς ἡ θεοειδὴς ἀγλαΐα, ἕως ἂν ἴδῃς σωφροσύνην ἐν ἁγνῷ βεβῶσαν βάθρῳ."

22. Διονυσίου Ἀεροπαγίτου, *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*, II, 145[1–7] (PG 3, 1025AB): "Κατὰ τοῦτον ἡμεῖς γενέσθαι τὸν ὑπέρφωτον εὐχόμεθα γνόφον καὶ δι' ἀβλεψίας καὶ ἀγνωσίας ἰδεῖν καὶ γνῶναι τὸν ὑπὲρ θέαν καὶ γνῶσιν αὐτῷ τῷ μὴ ἰδεῖν μηδὲ γνῶναι – τοῦτο γάρ ἐστι τὸ ὄντως ἰδεῖν καὶ γνῶναι – καὶ τὸν ὑπερούσιον ὑπερουσίως ὑμνῆσαι διὰ τῆς πάντων τῶν ὄντων ἀφαιρέσεως, ὥσπερ οἱ αὐτοφυὲς ἄγαλμα ποιοῦντες ἐξαιροῦντες πάντα τὰ ἐπιπροσθοῦντα

Despite the fact that it was Plotinus who was first to understand not simply the activity but also the existence of the sensible world as dependent upon the One,[23] as can be observed through the comparison of the above citations, Plotinus understood matter as intrinsically evil, and through that understanding his philosophy noticeably reflects the old Platonic and Aristotelian dualism of two eternal principles that exist independently. Therefore, it is noteworthy that it is mainly from Plotinus and thereafter that the dividing gap between the sensible and noetic (intelligible) worlds is bridged,[24] and Dionysius in a sense concludes that process – and thus says in the 2nd chapter of *Celestial Hierarchy*, that it is lawful to portray Celestial Beings "in forms drawn from even the lowest of material things."[25] Having said this, it should also be noted that theological symbolism is very important in Dionysius' writings because within it, the symbol functions as a mediating experience through which meanings can be passed from the realm of the incomprehensible God to earth and through which man can anagogically ascend towards the incomprehensible God.

Therefore, Dionysius' originality is not to be detected in the metaphor of carving itself but in the particularity of the transcendental meaning that he ascribes to it, that is, in the idea of the anagogical, infiltrating and transcendental vision which implies seeing and experiencing *that* which is beyond vision and knowledge. The main quality of such a transcendental vision is seeing through things and seeing within things – or seeing the content of things which is otherwise unapproachable and then arriving at a new state of unknowing or not-seeing as at another level of ceaseless evergrowing enlightenment. Accordingly, in the 2nd chapter of *Mystical Theology*, the adjective *apokekrymmenon* (ἀποκεκρυμμένον = hidden) which refers to the beauty of the metaphorical statue, and the adjective *apokryptomenon* (ἀποκρυπτόμενον = hidden/concealed) which refers to super-essential Darkness (ὑπερούσιον γνόφον) that, in Dionysius' words, "is hidden by all the light that is in sensible things" (τὸν ὑπὸ παντὸς τοῦ ἐν τοῖς οὖσι φωτὸς ἀποκρυπτόμενον), both allude to the vision of that which is otherwise unapproachable by ordinary sight and understanding.

τῇ καθαρᾷ τοῦ κρυφίου θέᾳ κωλύματα καὶ αὐτὸ ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ τῇ ἀφαιρέσει μόνῃ τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀναφαίνοντες κάλλος."

23. O'Brian 1971: 28.

24. See K. I. Κορναράκης, *Κριτικές Παρατηρήσεις στις Εικονολογικές Θέσεις του Υπατίου Εφέσου*, Αθήνα 1998, 55.

25. Διονυσίου Ἀεροπαγίτου, *Περὶ τῆς οὐρανίας ἱεραρχίας*, II, 4, 15^{1-7} (PG 3, 144BC): "Ἔστι τοιγαροῦν οὐκ ἀπαδούσας ἀναπλάσαι τοῖς οὐρανίοις μορφὰς κἀκ τῶν ἀτιμωτάτων τῆς ὕλης μερῶν, ἐπεὶ καὶ αὐτὴ πρὸς τοῦ ὄντως καλοῦ τὴν ὕπαρξιν ἐσχηκυῖα κατὰ πᾶσαν αὐτῆς τὴν ὑλαίαν διακόσμησιν ἀπηχήματά τινα τῆς νοερᾶς εὐπρεπείας ἔχει καὶ δυνατόν ἐστι δι' αὐτῶν ἀνάγεσθαι πρὸς τὰς ἀΰλους ἀρχετυπίας, ἀνομοίως ὡς εἴρηται τῶν ὁμοιοτήτων ἐκλαμβανομένων καὶ τῶν αὐτῶν οὐ ταὐτῶς, ἐναρμονίως δὲ καὶ οἰκείως ἐπὶ τῶν νοερῶν τε καὶ αἰσθητῶν ἰδιοτήτων ὁριζομένων."

As used by Dionysius, these adjectives also allude to something which is not a product of one's fantasy or imagination, but which exists regardless and independently of one's vision and understanding of it. This is explicitly implied in the carving metaphor mentioned above, where Dionysius says "like those who, making a self-existent statue [...]." More particularly, Dionysius uses the Ancient Greek adjective αὐτοφυές (*aytofyes*) which is composed of two words, αὐτο + φύομαι (*ayto* + *fyomai*). The first word in this context means "that" – denoting a thing, a fact or other phenomenon, and the second means "(I am) begetting." Hence, the adjective *aytofyes* (αὐτοφυές) does not simply mean "natural" but also bears the implication of "self-existent" and "non-artificial."

Of course, Dionysius' conception of vision and understanding constitutes a product of a centuries-long maturing of philosophical and theological discourse. As was mentioned earlier, Dionysius' early sixth-century idea of divine transcendental darkness is quite different to Clement's early third-century idea of darkness as ultimate inaccessibility of God, because Clement's idea is not so much representative of the incomprehensibility of the transcendent God as it is of the ignorance of the human reason about God. Comparatively speaking, Clement of Alexandria was more of a philosopher. Of course, in Dionysius' writings the Platonic influence can be detected in the differentiation between the sensible and the noetic (intelligible), but his idea that transcendental vision should in fact infiltrate through things or rather, embody things which are unapproachable to ordinary sight, is presented in his text in a rather authentic manner. In particular, by relating the transcendental vision to the idea of darkness which is beyond all the light that is in sensible things, Dionysius ascribes to the process of seeing one paradoxical attribute. Despite the nuances of philosophical influences, this attribute which Dionysius ascribes to vision is distinctly original when compared to the earlier traditions of ancient Greek optics, which can roughly be divided into three broad categories: (a) medical tradition, (b) physical or philosophical tradition and (c) mathematical tradition.[26] In particular, Dionysius ascribes to the experience of vision a bodily quality, where in a certain sense vision is understood as an experience of the entire body. In the following pages I shall elaborate on this understanding of vision and on how its influence could be perceived in the unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia.

* * *

Firstly, Dionysius' understanding of infiltrating vision is most probably significantly inspired by the writings of St. Gregory of Nyssa and more particularly by his understanding of the earlier mentioned term *gnofos*, meaning

26. In his book entitled *Theories of Vision from Al-kindi to Kepler*, D. C. Lindberg states: "Despite some overlapping, three broad traditions appear to contain the great bulk of Greek optics: a medical tradition, concerned primarily with the anatomy and physiology of the eye and the treatment of eye disease; a physical or philosophical tradition, devoted to questions of epistemology, psychology, and physical causation; and a mathematical tradition, directed principally toward a geometrical explanation of the perception of space." (1)

divine darkness, stipulated in his work entitled *The Life of Moses*. The common understanding and usage of the term *gnofos* and the usage of the verbs *diadyi* (διαδύη)[27] and *eisdynei* (εἰσδύνει),[28] which both mean "infiltrates" and which are implemented in Gregory's and Dionysius' work respectively, are among the aspects that leave little doubt that Dionysius borrowed from Gregory's understanding of the vision of God. In the following, I shall cite a small segment of the aforementioned work by Gregory of Nyssa in which he addresses the question of what it means that Moses, when stepping in front of the burning bush on Mount Horeb, actually entered the *gnofos* and there saw God:

> What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness (gnofos) and then saw God in it? [...] Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is uncontemplated. For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, no one has ever seen God,[29] thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature.[30]

27. Γρηγορίου Νύσσης, *Εἰς τὸν βίον Μωυσέως*, II, 87^{1-6} (PG 44, 376D–377A): "Καταλιπὼν γὰρ πᾶν τὸ φαινόμενον, οὐ μόνον ὅσα καταλαμβάνει ἡ αἴσθησις, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅσα ἡ διάνοια δοκεῖ βλέπειν, ἀεὶ πρὸς τὸ ἐνδότερον ἴεται, ἕως ἂν διαδύῃ τῇ πολυπραγμοσύνῃ τῆς διανοίας πρὸς τὸ ἀθέατόν τε καὶ ἀκατάληπτον κἀκεῖ τὸν θεὸν ἴδῃ."
28. Διονυσίου Ἀεροπαγίτου, *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*, I, 144^{9-15} (PG 3, 1001A): "Καὶ τότε καὶ αὐτῶν ἀπολύεται τῶν ὁρωμένων καὶ τῶν ὁρώντων καὶ εἰς τὸν γνόφον τῆς ἀγνωσίας εἰσδύνει τὸν ὄντως μυστικόν, καθ' ὃν ἀπομύει πάσας τὰς γνωστικὰς ἀντιλήψεις, καὶ ἐν τῷ πάμπαν ἀναφεῖ καὶ ἀοράτῳ γίγνεται, πᾶς ὢν τοῦ πάντων ἐπέκεινα καὶ οὐδενός, οὔτε ἑαυτοῦ οὔτε ἑτέρου, τῷ παντελῶς δὲ ἀγνώστῳ τῇ πάσης γνώσεως ἀνενεργησίᾳ κατὰ τὸ κρεῖττον ἑνούμενος καὶ τῷ μηδὲν γινώσκειν ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσκων."
29. Gospel according to St John, 1:18.
30. Γρηγορίου Νύσσης, *Εἰς τὸν βίον Μωυσέως*, II, 86^{11}–87^{13} (PG 44, 376C–377A). The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: "Τί δὲ δὴ βούλεται τὸ ἐντὸς γενέσθαι τοῦ γνόφου τὸν Μωϋσέα καὶ οὕτως ἐν αὐτῷ τὸν Θεὸν ἰδεῖν; [...] Διότι τὸ ἐξ ἐναντίου τῇ εὐσεβείᾳ νοούμενον σκότος ἐστίν· ἡ δὲ ἀποστροφὴ τοῦ σκότους τῇ μετουσίᾳ τοῦ φωτὸς γίνεται. Προϊὼν δὲ ὁ νοῦς καὶ διὰ μείζονος ἀεὶ καὶ τελειοτέρας προσοχῆς ἐν περινοίᾳ γινόμενος τῆς τῶν ὄντων κατανοήσεως, ὅσῳ προσεγγίζει μᾶλλον τῇ θεωρίᾳ, τοσούτῳ πλέον ὁρᾷ τὸ τῆς θείας φύσεως ἀθεώρητον. Καταλιπὼν γὰρ πᾶν τὸ φαινόμενον, οὐ μόνον ὅσα καταλαμβάνει ἡ αἴσθησις, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅσα ἡ διάνοια δοκεῖ βλέπειν, ἀεὶ πρὸς τὸ ἐνδότερον ἴεται, ἕως ἂν διαδύῃ τῇ πολυπραγμοσύνῃ τῆς διανοίας πρὸς τὸ ἀθέατόν τε καὶ ἀκατάληπτον κἀκεῖ τὸν Θεὸν ἴδῃ. Ἐν τούτῳ γὰρ ἡ ἀληθής ἐστιν εἴδησις τοῦ ζητουμένου καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τὸ ἰδεῖν ἐν τῷ μὴ ἰδεῖν, ὅτι ὑπέρκειται πάσης εἰδήσεως τὸ ζητούμενον, οἷόν τινι γνόφῳ τῇ ἀκαταληψίᾳ πανταχόθεν διειλημμένον.

It is instructive that, just like in the above citation of Gregory's text, who in explaining what it means when it is said that Moses actually entered the *gnofos*, used the verb *diadyi* (διαδύῃ), which means "infiltrates," the related verb *eisdynei* (εἰσδύνει) which also means "infiltrates," is used in relation to Moses in the following characteristic way by Dionysius, in the 1st chapter of *Mystical Theology*:

> And then he (Moses) becomes also set free from that which is seen and from that which sees, and he infiltrates into the *gnofos* (darkness) of unknowing, into the truly mysterious, where he renounces all perception that stems from knowledge, and he arrives at that which is altogether intangible and invisible, surrendering his entire self to Him who is beyond all, and belonging neither to his own self nor to someone else; and through the deactivating of all knowledge, being united at a higher level with the entirely unknown, by not knowing anything, knows beyond all knowledge.[31]

Given that in many available English translations of the above excerpt from Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, the verb *eisdynei* (εἰσδύνει), meaning "infiltrates," is insufficiently translated as "plunges," in order to clarify the significance of the correct understanding of its implications, I shall briefly explain the etymology of the related verb *diadyi* (διαδύῃ) which is used in the third person by Gregory of Nyssa, as well as the etymology of the verb *eisdynei* (εἰσδύνει) which is used in the third person by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. The verb *diadyo* (διαδύω), as it is written in first person, consists of two following parts:

δι(α) + δύω

through + setting/sinking/diving in.

The verb *eisdyo*/*eisdyno* (εἰσδύω/εἰσδύνω), as it is written in first person, consists of two following parts:

εἰς + δύω

in + setting/sinking/diving in.

In the particular context in which these verbs are used by Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, they imply that not simply Moses' vision, but rather, in a bodily sense, Moses himself: (a) goes through the unknown, (b) enters into the unknown and (c) finally sinks deep within

Διό φησι καὶ ὁ ὑψηλὸς Ἰωάννης, ὁ ἐν τῷ λαμπρῷ γνόφῳ τούτῳ γενόμενος, ὅτι· Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακε πώποτε, οὐ μόνον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἀλλὰ καὶ πάσῃ νοητῇ φύσει τῆς θείας οὐσίας τὴν γνῶσιν ἀνέφικτον εἶναι τῇ ἀποφάσει ταύτῃ διοριζόμενος."

31. Διονυσίου Ἀεροπαγίτου, *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*, I, 144[9–15] (PG 3, 1001A). My translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: "Καὶ τότε καὶ αὐτῶν ἀπολύεται τῶν ὁρωμένων καὶ τῶν ὁρώντων καὶ εἰς τὸν γνόφον τῆς ἀγνωσίας εἰσδύνει τὸν ὄντως μυστικόν, καθ' ὃν ἀπομύει πάσας τὰς γνωστικὰς ἀντιλήψεις, καὶ ἐν τῷ πάμπαν ἀναφεῖ καὶ ἀοράτῳ γίγνεται, πᾶς ὢν τοῦ πάντων ἐπέκεινα καὶ οὐδενός, οὔτε ἑαυτοῦ οὔτε ἑτέρου, τῷ παντελῶς δὲ ἀγνώστῳ τῇ πάσης γνώσεως ἀνενεργησίᾳ κατὰ τὸ κρεῖττον ἑνούμενος καὶ τῷ μηδὲν γινώσκειν ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσκων."

the unknown. This can also be observed in Gregory's formulation ἐντὸς γενέσθαι τοῦ γνόφου,[32] meaning that Moses, before seeing God, literally "entered into the gnofos" – being the divine darkness. As was already cited, Dionysius says that Moses *εἰς τὸν γνόφον τῆς ἀγνωσίας εἰσδύνει*, that is "infiltrates into the *gnofos* of unknowing."[33]

This concept of a bodily kind of infiltration into a sphere which is normally off limits, could have inspired those who were in charge of cutting and selecting marble blocks and installing them thereafter as panels within Hagia Sophia. They could have reinvented this concept for it to be applicable to the cutting of solid marble blocks in a rather immediate way. The visual explanation of how the reinvention of Dionysius' and Gregory's concept of the infiltrating transcendental vision could have occurred in the process of producing unfolded marble panels, is offered in plates *7, 8,* and *9.* These three images attempt to reconstruct a scene at one of the Proconnesian marble quarries. They depict a sixth-century Byzantine viewer responsible for selecting marble slabs to be used, who in his contemplation of the unfolded stone: (a) goes through the stone, (b) enters the stone, and finally (c) infiltrates deep into the stone – which is the analogical stage at which the actual act of the transcendental vision commences and where, metaphorically speaking, the viewer himself becomes identified with the *self-existent*, *non-artificial* statue (aytofyes agalma/αὐτοφυὲς ἄγαλμα) mentioned in Dionysius' carving-metaphor, and thus becomes immersed in the divine darkness which then is experienced by him as Light. Within that Light the body becomes vision itself and exercises a new kind of seeing.

Thus, in *plates 7* and *24* we are presented with an image which aims at explaining how Dionysius' concept of vision that – to use his terms – can "carve" or "infiltrate" its way through stone in order to embody its content and reach its hidden beauty, could have practically influenced those who were responsible for the entire process from cutting and selecting to installing the marble panels in Hagia Sophia. More particularly, in *plate 8* we discern a human figure which stands between two freshly cut marble blocks, as if trying to envisage how it would be to see within the closed mass of the marble before it was cut. Accordingly, in *plate 9*, we see how the same human figure becomes absorbed into the colourful veins of the marble and thus becomes one with its own vision. More precisely, *plate 9* shows how the body of the sixth-century Byzantine viewer transcends into vision itself and thus can hardly be differentiated from it. Through the act of infiltrating, transcendental vision, the body is absorbed by the beauty of the absolute Other. This experience could also be formulated in the following way: *contemplating the uncreated and in his*

32. Γρηγορίου Νύσσης, *Εἰς τὸν βίον Μωυσέως*, II, 86^{11}–87^{13} (PG 44, 376C–377A): "Τί δὲ δὴ βούλεται τὸ ἐντὸς γενέσθαι τοῦ γνόφου τὸν Μωϋσέα καὶ οὕτως ἐν αὐτῷ τὸν Θεὸν ἰδεῖν;"

33. Διονυσίου Ἀεροπαγίτου, *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*, I, $144^{9–15}$ (PG 3, 1001A): "Καὶ τότε καὶ αὐτῶν ἀπολύεται τῶν ὁρωμένων καὶ τῶν ὁρώντων καὶ εἰς τὸν γνόφον τῆς ἀγνωσίας εἰσδύνει τὸν ὄντως μυστικόν [...]"

essence incomprehensible Creator in view of the beauty of Creation means truthful being and truthful seeing of the oneness and unity of everything. It should be noted that this experience of the viewer becoming vision itself, observed in the unfolded marble panels of Hagia Sophia, is reminiscent not only of Dionysius' and Gregory's teachings but also, to an extent, of Plotinus' idea as expressed in his own words: "If you see that this has happened to yourself, since you will become vision itself, having trust in your own self, without needing someone to show you, since you would have already ascended, focus your gaze and see, because only such an eye sees the great Beauty."[34]

But despite the obvious similarities between Plotinus' and Dionysius' concepts of transcendental vision, once again, their differences become obvious when they elaborate on their ideas by relying on examples from the realm of art practices and this is understandably of particular importance for the present topic. For example, in his text entitled *Regarding the Noetic Beauty* (Περὶ τοῦ νοητοῦ κάλλους), when Plotinus compares the two hypothetical adjacent stone masses, one untouched by the human hand and amorphous and the other a statue of a god or of a man, he argues that: "It is apparent that the stone in which the art has begotten a form is beautiful not because it is a stone, because in such a case any stone-mass would be equally beautiful, but because of the kind of form or idea which was given to it by art."[35] This stipulation by Plotinus allows us to understand that he does not speak of a kind of *self-existent*, *non-artificial* statue or beauty (aytofyes agalma/αὐτοφυὲς ἄγαλμα) of which Dionysius speaks three centuries later. In contrast to Plotinus' concept of beauty, which is rather dependent on the practical execution of an idea, Dionysius' notion of the *non-artificial* beauty which exists in matter even without human intervention corresponds much more to the unfolded marble panels inside Hagia Sophia, for he says in the 2nd chapter of *Celestial Hierarchy*:

> It is, then, permissible to depict forms, which are not discordant, to the celestial beings, even from portions of matter which are the least honourable, since matter also, having been granted its existence from the truly Beautiful, has throughout the whole range of its material composure some echoes of the noetic reverence; and it is possible through

34. *Ennead*, I. 6. 9. My translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: "εἰ τοῦτο γενόμενον σαυτὸν ἴδοις, ὄψις ἤδη γενόμενος θαρσήσας περὶ σαυτῷ καὶ ἐνταῦθα ἤδη ἀναβεβηκὼς μηκέτι τοῦ δεικνύντος δεηθεὶς ἀτενίσας ἴδε· οὗτος γὰρ μόνος ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς τὸ μέγα κάλλος βλέπει."

35. *Ennead*, V. 8. 1. My translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: "Κειμένων τοίνυν ἀλλήλων ἐγγύς, ἔστω δέ, εἰ βούλει, [δύο] λίθων ἐν ὄγκωι, τοῦ μὲν ἀρρυθμίστου καὶ τέχνης ἀμοίρου, τοῦ δὲ ἤδη τέχνηι κεκρατημένου εἰς ἄγαλμα θεοῦ ἢ καί τινος ἀνθρώπου, θεοῦ μὲν Χάριτος ἤ τινος Μούσης, ἀνθρώπου δὲ μή τινος, ἀλλ' ὃν ἐκ πάντων καλῶν πεποίηκεν ἡ τέχνη, *φανείη μὲν ἂν ὁ ὑπὸ τῆς τέχνης γεγενημένος εἰς εἶδους κάλλος καλὸς οὐ παρὰ τὸ εἶναι λίθος–ἦν γὰρ ἂν καὶ ὁ ἕτερος ὁμοίως καλός – ἀλλὰ παρὰ τοῦ εἴδους, ὃ ἐνῆκεν ἡ τέχνη. Τοῦτο μὲν τοίνυν τὸ εἶδος οὐκ εἶχεν ἡ ὕλη, ἀλλ' ἦν ἐν τῶι ἐννοήσαντι καὶ πρὶν ἐλθεῖν εἰς τὸν λίθον·* ἦν δ' ἐν τῶι δημιουργῶι οὐ καθόσον ὀφθαλμοὶ ἢ χεῖρες ἦσαν αὐτῶι, ἀλλ' ὅτι μετεῖχε τῆς τέχνης. Ἦν ἄρα ἐν τῆι τέχνηι τὸ κάλλος τοῦτο ἄμεινον πολλῶι." (Emphasis added)

> these echoes to be anagogically led to the immaterial archetypes, under the condition that, as was said, similarities are understood dissimilarly and are not defined as identical – thus the qualities should be understood in the harmonious and appropriate way concerning on the one hand the noetic and on the other the sensible beings.[36]

In view of the possible influence of Dionysius' appreciation of raw matter, the unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia could be understood as examples of the exhibited beauty of raw matter, which of course is not *self-existent* (aytofyes/αὐτοφυὲς) in a "self-created" sense, but self-existent in a sense that it is created by God as beautiful even without further intervention. Thus, Dionysius gives us reasons to observe these marble panels as paradoxical natural icons created by God and revealed by man.

On the other hand, Plotinus' opinion that beauty is not caused by symmetry and also his general discussion of symmetry (in his text entitled *On Beauty*[37]), could have exercised a certain kind of dialectical influence in the obvious preference for symmetrical patterns created by the joining of the two panels of marble cut from the same block. Of course, the opposite perception that the principles of beauty are harmony, symmetry and symphony among separate elements is much older and can be found in Plato's thought. For example, In Plato's dialogue entitled *Philebus*, Socrates refers to Protarchus and says: "So now the power of the good has taken refuge in the nature of the beautiful; the measure and symmetry are turned into beauty and virtue."[38]

In the centre of the lower section of *plate 16*, we discern a framed composition of unfolded marble panels whose veins collectively produce a symmetrical pattern, while on each side of this composition there are two single marble panels whose patterns do not produce symmetry but nevertheless are directed towards the piece in the middle. As we look upwards in the same image we discern a narrower horizontal stripe of marble panels whose veins do not form any kind of symmetry. Then above this horizontal stripe we have three framed compositions of marble panels. The two which are bigger on each side consist of unfolded panels and produce particularly symmetrical patterns, while the middle one, which is of a different colour, is a single one-piece panel. As can be seen more clearly in *plate 17*, this rhythmical repetition

36. Διονυσίου Ἀεροπαγίτου, *Περὶ τῆς οὐρανίας ἱεραρχίας*, II, 4, 15^{1-7} (PG 3, 144BC). My translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: "Ἔστι τοιγαροῦν οὐκ ἀπᾳδούσας ἀναπλάσαι τοῖς οὐρανίοις μορφὰς κἀκ τῶν ἀτιμωτάτων τῆς ὕλης μερῶν, ἐπεὶ καὶ αὐτὴ πρὸς τοῦ ὄντως καλοῦ τὴν ὕπαρξιν ἐσχηκυῖα κατὰ πᾶσαν αὐτῆς τὴν ὑλαίαν διακόσμησιν ἀπηχήματά τινα τῆς νοερᾶς εὐπρεπείας ἔχει καὶ δυνατόν ἐστι δι' αὐτῶν ἀνάγεσθαι πρὸς τὰς ἀΰλους ἀρχετυπίας, ἀνομοίως ὡς εἴρηται τῶν ὁμοιοτήτων ἐκλαμβανομένων καὶ τῶν αὐτῶν οὐ ταὐτῶς, ἐναρμονίως δὲ καὶ οἰκείως ἐπὶ τῶν νοερῶν τε καὶ αἰσθητῶν ἰδιοτήτων ὁριζομένων."

37. *Ennead*, I. 6.1.

38. My translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: "Σωκράτης: νῦν δὴ καταπέφευγεν ἡμῖν ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ δύναμις εἰς τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ φύσιν: μετριότης γὰρ καὶ συμμετρία κάλλος δήπου καὶ ἀρετὴ πανταχοῦ συμβαίνει γίγνεσθαι." *Philebus*, 64e, 6.

which exploits the antithesis between the symmetrical and the amorphous, continues upwards all the way until the gallery level in Hagia Sophia. It is possible that the choice of these motifs and the way they are organised owes to an extent to the theories mentioned above regarding beauty and symmetry by Plato and Plotinus respectively. However, while the possible influences of the philosophical-aesthetic discourse of the Ancient Greek world can indeed be detected in the unfolded marble panels of Hagia Sophia, they seem to be less pronounced than the possible influence of the experience of the infiltrating, transcendental vision of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, according to which the archetypal beauty of the matter can be discovered within its content and without additional human intervention.

Therefore, with multiple layers of their likely theoretical influences from the history of philosophy and theology, the framed icon-like marble panels in Hagia Sophia, such as that shown in *plate 1*, could be understood as Pre-Iconoclastic, abstract Orthodox icons which simultaneously depict the following: God, through His creative act; Creation, through the inside of a stone; and Man, through his minimal intervention to the stone and his free interpretations of the abstract patterns. These examples of abstract Orthodox icons, do not owe their abstraction to iconoclastic ideas but to iconophile theories of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, to the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa and possibly to those of Plotinus. We know that Dionysius' theories could have easily influenced the concept of the unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia not simply because these theories exercised a rising influence on the perception of icons at the time, but also because such importance was given to the island of Proconnesus generally in this period where such a significant amount of marble was quarried for Hagia Sophia, that emperor Justinian I (483–565) erected a large convent on the island. As noted by Alexandra Karagianni, this convent eventually had active libraries established by educated monks, who worked as scribes of religious books, psalms and Greco-Roman philosophical texts.[39] This convent also attracted a significant number of pilgrims[40]. Having in mind this intellectual activity on the island of Proconnesus whose marble quarries were exploited in the same period for the construction of Hagia Sophia, it appears as plausible that Dionysius' and Gregory's theories, but also Plotinus' teachings, besides being well known in intellectual circles, where the interest in theory prevailed, also became creatively understood as applicable, in a practical sense, to the artistic conceptualisation of unfolded marble panels. In addition, as noted by Professor Pavlos Kalligas, an interesting link could also be observed in the fact that one of the architects of Hagia Sophia, Anthemius of Tralles (ca. 474–ca. 534), was most likely a student of Proclus (412–485) whose school exercised an influence on Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. This assists us in understanding how philo-

39. Karagianni (year?): 4.
40. Ibid., 4.

sophical and theological ideas of that period were able to unassumingly find their way to practical application in the realm of art and architecture.[41]

The previously described idea of standing within that which is normally unapproachable, bears instructive resemblance to later Byzantine depictions of Moses taking off his sandals upon God's request in front of the burning bush. One characteristic example of such depictions is an early 13th century icon from Mount Sinai shown in *plate 6*, where Moses is shown taking his sandals off after hearing God saying: "[...] Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus, 3:5).

The symmetrical patterns, such as those in *plates 1*, *3*, and *13*, must have been selected according to certain agreed-upon criteria, since most of them are quite impressive and remind of letter-like or arabesque-like symbols rather than merely accidental shapes. A possible inspiration for the actual selection of these patterns is not detectable only in Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* but also in his other writings, such as the second chapter of his text entitled *Celestial Hierarchy*, which bears the subtitle: *That Divine and Celestial things are appropriately revealed, even through dissimilar symbols.* For example, in one characteristic section of that chapter Dionysius gives an instructive explanation of how one could be led to immaterial archetypes even through portions of matter which, as he puts it, are "the least honourable."[42] Having in mind that the descriptions of Moses' encounter of the burning bush by Gregory of Nyssa involve the motif of thorns,[43] perhaps Dionysius, by using the phrase "portions of matter which are the least honourable," though admittedly not speaking of Moses in that section, was nevertheless inspired by the fact that the Hebrew word "seneh" (סנה), used for the bush which was burning in front of Moses, refers in particular to a thorn-bush or bramble.

In case Dionysius' phrase "portions of matter which are the least honourable" (τῶν ἀτιμωτάτων τῆς ὕλης μερῶν) is indeed inspired by the thorn-bush which was burning in front of Moses, this would imply that the notion of Moses standing at a transcendental place where he was asked by God to take off his sandals, permeates much more of Dionysius' thinking than what

41. http://www.sgt.gr/players/athensdialogues/20131115/en/

42. Διονυσίου Ἀεροπαγίτου, *Περὶ τῆς οὐρανίας ἱεραρχίας*, II, 4, 15^{1-7} (PG 3,144BC): "Ἔστι τοιγαροῦν οὐκ ἀπᾳδούσας ἀναπλάσαι τοῖς οὐρανίοις μορφὰς κἀκ τῶν ἀτιμωτάτων τῆς ὕλης μερῶν [...]"

43. Γρηγορίου Νύσσης, *Εἰς τὸν βίον Μωυσέως*, II, 41^{2-16} (PG 44, 333C): "Ἐν τούτῳ τοίνυν γενόμενος τότε μὲν ἐκεῖνος, νυνὶ δὲ πᾶς ὁ κατ' ἐκεῖνον τῆς γηΐνης ἑαυτὸν ἐκλύων περιβολῆς καὶ τὸ ἐκ τῆς βάτου φῶς βλέπων, τουτέστι πρὸς τὴν διὰ σαρκὸς τῆς ἀκανθώδους ταύτης ἐπιλάμψασαν ἡμῖν ἀκτῖνα ἥτις ἐστί, καθὼς τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν φησι, τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια, τότε τοιοῦτος γίνεται οἷος καὶ ἑτέροις εἰς σωτηρίαν ἀρκέσαι καὶ καθελεῖν μὲν τὴν ἐπικρατοῦσαν κακῶς τυραννίδα, ἐξελέσθαι δὲ πρὸς ἐλευθερίαν πᾶν τὸ τῇ πονηρᾷ δουλείᾳ κατακρατούμενον, τῆς ἀλλοιωθείσης οὖν δεξιᾶς καὶ τῆς εἰς ὄφιν μεταβληθείσης βακτηρίας τῶν θαυμάτων καθηγουμένης. Ὧι μοι δοκεῖ δι' αἰνίγματος τὸ διὰ σαρκὸς τοῦ κυρίου παραδηλοῦσθαι μυστήριον τῆς φανείσης τοῖς ἀνθρώποις θεότητος, δι' ἧς γίνεται ἥ τε τοῦ τυράννου καθαίρεσις καὶ ἡ τῶν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ κρατουμένων ἐλευθερία."

has so far been anticipated. Also, due to Dionysius' influence, those responsible for the cutting, selecting and installing the marble panels in Hagia Sophia might have approached the abstract features created by veined marble as the lowest of material things that nevertheless may portray Celestial Beings.

After selecting the pieces to be cut into even panels and after bringing them from the quarry, the hidden beauty (ἀποκεκρυμμένον κάλλος) observed in the inner world of the veined marble was then not only installed within the interior of the church, but was also superbly and vividly framed. The argument which I would like to put forth here is that in each individual case, the paired panels of marble were envisaged by their installers as a ready-made kind of an icon, or more precisely, as an icon which through its aspect of minimal human intervention, becomes a natural icon which simultaneously refers to the mysteries of God, Creation and Man – without necessarily depicting any of them formally. As seen in *plates 1, 3, 13, 14, 15, 16* and *17*, perhaps the most obvious indication that these pairs of marble panels were indeed envisaged as icons, is the fact that most of them are deliberately and tastefully framed either by narrow decorative frames or broader frames carved with vegetal ornament. The abstract effect of the patterns of the veined marble is of course intended and desired. It is well known that the original sixth-century decoration of the interior of Hagia Sophia is entirely abstract – the only exception is observed in the section of the sixth-century mosaic decoration depicting the leafy rinceau, in the soffits of the gallery colonnade, which constitutes a small part of the entire decorated area.[44]

Of course, the Byzantines were not using the term "abstract" to describe any of the aspects of their art and we can indeed conceive of how they were quite able to read into symmetrical abstract features of unfolded veined marble and employ some of those features as parallel inspiration in rendering the monumental cherubs in the pendentives of Hagia Sophia. One of those cherubs is shown in *plate 20*, where, for example, we might also compare the cherub's head immersed in massive wings (*plate 21*) to the central feature in the middle of the unfolded marble panel shown in *plate 22*. The dense curvy flow and the almost impressionistic effect of the features created by marble veins are reminiscent of volcanic lava and are present in a number of examples in Hagia Sophia, such as those shown in *plates 15* and *22.* These are aesthetic characteristics which can to a significant extent be detected in the way the cherub's wings are rendered and in the way they tightly and dynamically surround the portrait of the cherub (*plate 21*). The drawing and colours of the cherub echo a kind of immediacy that can be compared to Van Gogh's portraits (*plate 23*). The overall rendering of the cherub, especially its flame-like wings (*plate 20*), bespeaks the notable Persian influence and reminds us that the influence of the Eastern artistic traditions, including that of Persia, played a significant role in the formative centuries of Byzantine art.

44. Mango 1977: XLII.

As shown in *plate 23*, the austere and monumental expression of the cherub and his emphasised widely open eyes can be interpreted to bespeak a pressing importance of the kind of infiltrating vision conceived by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite and Gregory of Nyssa. As is very well known, Dionysius discusses cherubs in his *Celestial Hierarchy*, where he says that "the most Holy Thrones, and the many-eyed and many-winged hosts, named in the Hebrew tongue Cherubim and Seraphim, are established immediately around God, with a nearness superior to all."[45]

The hypothesis that the symmetrical patterns in unfolded marble panels may have influenced the rendering of the cherubs in Hagia Sophia is also conceivable for the following reason: The selected marble panels were installed in their place after the structural walls of the church were raised. This means that by the time the construction of the church reached the level of the pendentives and then later the level of the dome, these marble panels were already visible for a considerable amount of time. There would have been enough time for a subconscious kind of influence from the symmetrical patterns in unfolded marble panels to set in the minds of those who were eventually assigned to render the voluminous cherubs. A comparison between *plates 21* and *22* is only one of many that may serve to indicate to the probability of this hypothesis. In *plate 15* we observe other examples of unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia that just as well may have inspired the rendering of the cherubs. Also, perhaps the similarity of the cherub's wings (*plate 20*) to abstract shapes in marble panels (*plates 15* and *22*) may provide part of an explanation as to why even well after the construction of Hagia Sophia, the symmetric patterns of unfolded marble panels were mimicked in church decoration by adhering to the technique of painting.

In the unfolded marble panels of St. Demetrius in Thessaloniki, which date back to the 7th century (one of them shown in *plates 10, 11* and *12*) we observe a tendency to select those slabs of marble whose unfolding may produce a pattern reminiscent to an extent of human contours. Thus, in *plate 11*, we can almost discern the basic contours of human features. Because of their reminiscence of human form, the patterns in these marble panels in St. Demetrius may indicate to a continuation of the concept of "infiltrating" of the human figure into the stone, which was begun so authentically in Hagia Sophia and which was then lost in later centuries. For example, the marble panels in the 11th century church of Nea Moni (*plate 26*) on the island of Chios, and the marble panels of the 11th century church of Hosios Loukas near Distomo (*plate 25*), while demonstrating the same methodology, do not insist on the symmetrical pattern achieved through the joining of two panels which are cut from a single slab of marble; fewer of the marble panels

45. Διονυσίου Ἀεροπαγίτου, *Περὶ τῆς οὐρανίας ἱεραρχίας*, VI, 26$^{15–18}$ (PG 3, 200D–201A): "Τούς τε γὰρ ἁγιωτάτους θρόνους καὶ τὰ πολυόμματα καὶ πολύπτερα τάγματα Χερουβὶμ Ἑβραίων φωνῇ καὶ Σεραφὶμ ὠνομασμένα κατὰ τὴν πάντων ὑπερκειμένην ἐγγύτητα περὶ θεὸν ἀμέσως ἱδρῦσθαί φησι παραδιδόναι τὴν τῶν ἱερῶν λογίων ἐκφαντορίαν."

in these two churches adhere to this concept and when they are collectively compared to marble panels in Hagia Sophia of Constantinople and to those in St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki, the fading away of the concept of *infiltrating of the human figure into the stone*, becomes evident. Also, in the church of Chora of Constantinople, which was rebuilt in the 11th century and renovated in the 14th century, this concept is clearly preserved (*plate 18*).

Conclusion

Before the conclusion of this study is made, it should be noted that due to reasons which are not directly related to the abstract appearance of the sixth-century marble panels in Hagia Sophia, the succeeding period of Iconoclasm had brought with it the contempt of representational and anthropomorphic art and thus created a polarised iconological quarrel which eventually permanently influenced the way in which both the Byzantines and later art historians viewed non-anthropomorphic Byzantine art. Because of this, until now, the unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia, as well as many other abstract aspects of its sixth-century interior-decoration, have at times been regarded as examples of art that allude to the early iconoclastic tendency.

Contrary to this understanding, the present study has approached the unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia as art which is not necessarily non-representational and which is possibly profoundly inspired by the developments of the theology between the 3rd and early 6th century. Thus, because of the aesthetic characteristics discussed above and given the likely theological influences which were explained in this study, in the sixth-century unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia we can discern the previously unobserved characteristic process of the notion of vision becoming body-like, in a sense that rather than being understood as the function of simply seeing an object, vision becomes an experience of embodying an object from within and thereby of identifying itself with it. Simultaneously, in the same process, the notion of the human body becomes more vision-like, in a sense that it becomes closely identified with the objects that the vision embodies.

As I tried to demonstrate in this study, especially through the argumentation involving *plates 7, 8* and *9*, this characteristically transcendental experience of vision observed in unfolded marble panels of Hagia Sophia, is best understood as an entirely abstract and yet not necessarily non-representational Byzantine *icon* which entails the cryptic and anagogical experience of the *transcendental byzantine body* and which is likely inspired by the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa, as well as possibly by those of Plotinus. As was already said, this experience of the *transcendental byzantine body* is not related to iconoclastic ideas. Of course, the stipulated aims of this study are realised only to an extent. There are other types of multiple unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia that have not been discussed in relation to the teachings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, Gregory of

Nyssa and Plotinus. Also, there are other aspects of the discussed theological and philosophical teachings that could be related to the concept of unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia. It is hoped that this study may serve as an indication of the possible new directions of future research exploring connections between the theology of the Pre-Iconoclastic period and Byzantine art.

Epilogue

The influence of these sixth-century unfolded marble panels on later examples of Byzantine art could be traced in a separate study. We can perhaps perceive such an influence when we look at the 14th century depiction of *Transfiguration* (*plate 19*) where the symmetrical rendering of the mountainous landscape as well as the repetition of the stripe-like rays of light which emanate from Christ, remind us of some of the symmetrical abstract patterns of unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia.

Lastly, there are several ways in which we can observe an aesthetic connection between the discussed sixth-century unfolded marble panels and the experience of modern art. For example, as is very well known, the central thought in Dionysius' teaching is that the transcendental path to deification is not through acquiring the supposed knowledge of God but through the rejection of all knowledge for the sake of enlightenment which exceeds human understanding itself. In the context of art-making, this idea of the rejection of all knowledge is to an extent comparable to the 20th century artistic concept of a found or ready-made object, an object which has undergone minimal or no human intervention. The concept of a "found object" was developed by a 20th century, French-American artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968). Found objects or "Readymades" were simply found objects which Duchamp chose and then presented as art. His idea was to question the notion as well as the adoration of art – which he found redundant. Duchamp sought new methods of expression because he was not interested in art that was only visual or as he called it, retinal art. Around 1915, he began creating "readymades" as an antidote to "retinal art." However, before Duchamp, in his piece entitled *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912), as part of the actual work, Picasso used a found object, the actual chair caning. Thus, it could be argued that the concept has its early beginnings in Picasso's work.

It appears that in the transhistorical context of art-making, the ancient theological concept of "rejecting all knowledge" for the sake of enlightenment which characterises Dionysius' thought, can be creatively translated to "rejecting to intervene in a material" but rather simply exercising various new perceptions of it. The analogy in the interior of Hagia Sophia is that the found *object* is observed in the unfolded marble panels, where, roughly speaking, the only human intervention is the splitting of the solid stone and displaying its two halves over a vertical axis as a single symmetrical pattern.

In this sense, similarly to the 20th century concept of a found object, the unfolded marble panels in Hagia Sophia could be understood as revelations of Creation as it becomes experienced when it is seen from within. For different reasons but with comparable artistic needs, the sixth-century Byzantine creators and the 20th century creators sought for ways in which they could bring their perception alone to an experience of enlightenment.

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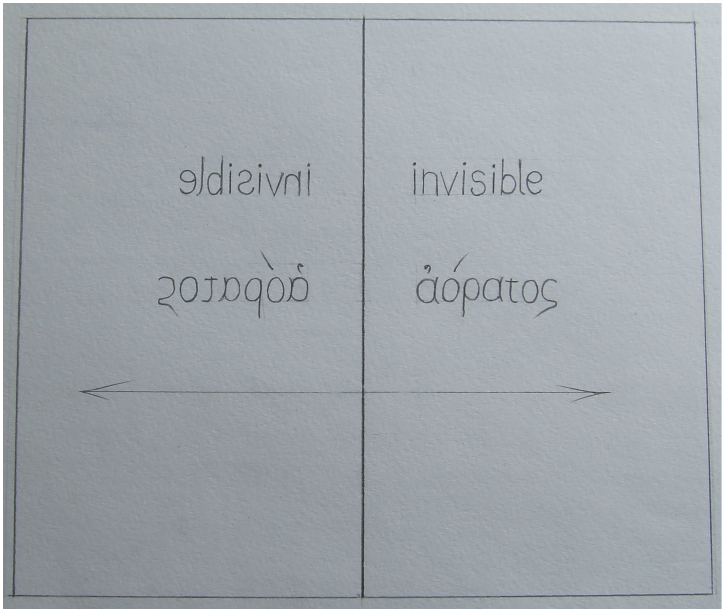
1. One of the unfolded marble panels inside Hagia Sophia of Constantinople; 6th century.



2. Explanation drawing.

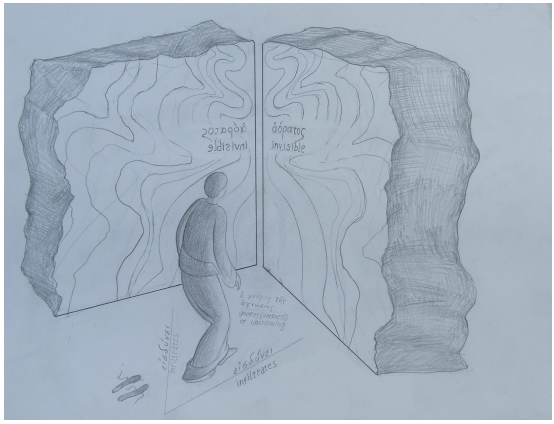
3. One of the unfolded marble panels
inside Hagia Sophia of Constantinople; 6th century.

4. Detail of visual demonstration II (plate 8), showing the human figure standing between two freshly cut marble blocks, as if trying to envisage how it would be to see within the closed mass of the marble before it was cut.

5. Left: Detail of visual demonstration II (plate 8), showing the human figure standing between two freshly cut marble blocks, as if trying to envisage how it would be to see within the closed mass of the marble before it was cut.

6. Right: Byzantine icon depicting Moses in front of the burning bush; early 13th century, St Catharine's Monastery on Mount Sinai.

7. *Visual demonstration I*, showing a sixth-century Byzantine viewer and explaining schematically how, not simply the viewer's vision of the inside of the stone, but rather like Moses, the viewer himself, in a bodily sense: (a) goes through the unknown, (b) enters into the unknown, and finally (c) infiltrates deep into the unknown.



8. *Visual demonstration II*, showing the human figure standing between two freshly cut marble blocks, as if trying to envisage how it would be to see within the closed mass of the marble before it was cut.

9. *Visual demonstration III*, showing how, through the process of observing the inside of the marble, the human figure becomes absorbed into the colourful veins of the marble and thus becomes one with its own vision.

10. One of the unfolded marble panels inside the church of St Demetrius in Thessaloniki; 7th century.

11. One of the unfolded marble panels inside the church of St Demetrius in Thessaloniki; 7th century.

12. One of the unfolded marble panels inside the church of St Demetrius in Thessaloniki (detail); 7th century.

13. One of the unfolded marble panels inside Hagia Sophia in Constantinople; 6th century.

14. Unfolded marble panels inside Hagia Sophia of Constantinople; 6th century.

15. Unfolded marble panels inside Hagia Sophia of Constantinople; 6th century.

16. Unfolded marble panels inside Hagia Sophia of Constantinople; 6th century.

17. Unfolded marble panels inside Hagia Sophia of Constantinople; 6th century.

18. Unfolded marble panels inside the church of Chora in Constantinople; rebuilt in the 11th century and renovated in the 14th century.

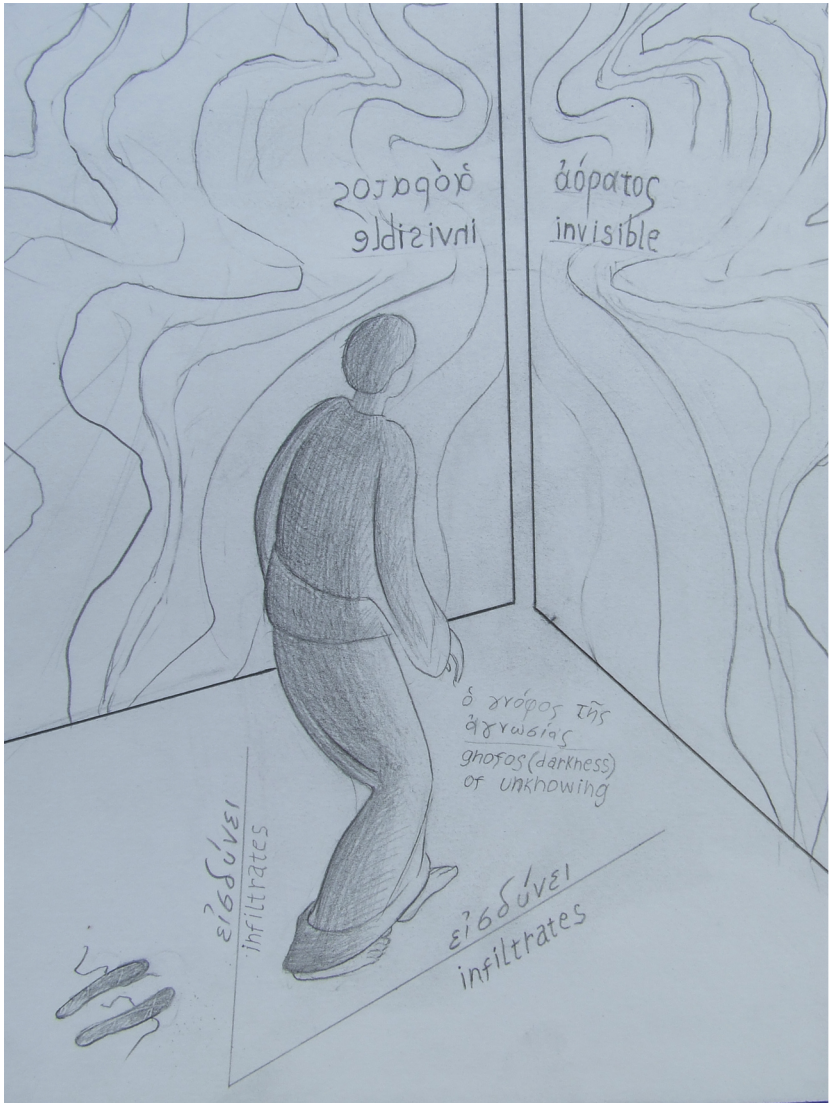
19. The Transfiguration of Christ, Byzantine manuscript, 1347-1355, National Library, Paris.

20. One of the four cherubs which are rendered in the pendentives of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

21. Detail of one of the four cherubs which are rendered in the pendentives of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

22. One of the unfolded marble panels inside Hagia Sophia of Constantinople; th century.

23. Detail of one of the four cherubs which are rendered in the pendentives of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.



24. Detail of *Visual demonstration I* (plate 7), showing a sixth-century Byzantine viewer and explaining schematically how, not simply the viewer's vision of the inside of the stone, but rather like Moses, the viewer himself, in a bodily sense: (a) goes through the unknown, (b) enters into the unknown, and finally (c) infiltrates deep into the unknown.

25. Detail of the interior of the 11th century church of Hosios Loukas near Distomo in Greece.

26. Detail of the interior of the 11th century church of Nea Moni on the island of Chios in Greece.