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C H O R O G R A P H Y- A SPACE FOR CHOREOGRAPHIC INSCRIPTION

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Abstract: *Chorography tries to come to terms with the challenging notion of chôra space in Byzantium. Chorography draws on the intimate relation between the two related Greek notions chôra (chôros) and chorós, translated the first as "space," and the second as "choral dance," and which are deeply rooted in the ancient language as an enduring paradigm of Greek thinking and imagination. Chorography is based on the assumption that there is a dynamic relationship contained in these two words chôra (chôros) and chorós, which is creative (generative) of sacred things, and which are fully revealed in the liturgical performance. The contribution of chorography to the study of Byzantine chôra consists in exploring the performative relation between space and movement, insisting on chôra's dynamic dimension and her cosmic vocation.*

Key words: *Chôra*; *chorós*; *chorography; sacred space; space-in-between; sacred dance; Byzantine image.*

1. *Chôra* Space In-between

Space is what we see without noticing, what we hold without possessing, a presence that we ignore, merely a trope. It was not the same for cultures before Modernity. Chorography tries to come to terms with the challenging notion of 'sacred space' *chôra* in Byzantium. The task is not an easy one, the notion of the sacred (i.e. 'sacred space') cannot be captured with common theoretical tools; it can neither be contained by mere modern scholarly discourse. 'Sacred space' belongs to another order of cognitive apprehension and discursivity. The discourse of the sacred is paradoxical (para-*doxa*);[1] it resists Kantian logic and any other modern categories of cognition. The choric discourse (choro-logy) insists on the incognoscibility of the sacred; it is apophatic (negative discourse/denies speech),[2] and oxymoronic. Oxymoron[3] is among those few figures of style apt to contain such sacred phenomena located between plans, between visible and invisible, both visible and invisible; furthermore both a presence and an absence – like *chôra* herself. The oscillation between opposites – visible-invisible, present-absent – the paradoxical phenomenality of the iconic *chôra* is founded on a theology of *kenôsis*,[4] which sole could explain how emptiness and fullness, presence and absence are "foiled" and transfigured in the choric space.[5]

Therefore, chorography understands to reconstruct the phenomenon of 'sacred space' in Byzantium with its own bricks, with the Greek notions *chôra* (space) and *chorós* (round movement or circle dance), borrowed by the Byzantines from Classical

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Hellenic culture. Byzantine *chôra* has no doubt some kinship with Plato's *chôra*, which is commonly translated by the philologists as space, to distinguish it from the place (which is *tópos* in Greek). Yet Plato's *chôra* remains a specific kind of space, a third genre, with some kinship with the Platonic *metaxe* (the interval), where the *daímôn*[6] dwells, or a revelation of some kind occurs.

With the subject of the space in-between we find ourselves on a territory most fashionable in postmodern discourse. Difference, repetition, iteration, interval are nothing but offsprings of the notion 'in-between'; they pervade the philosophical writings of contemporary philosophers (Derrida, Deleuse, Serres, Irigaray) and form an excellent model of indeterminacy and undecidability to disrupt the operation of the identities; they oppose structures of rigid polar oppositions, mutually exclusive and exhaustive, which dominate Western knowledge. Yet the in-between-ess of Byzantine chorography serves not the cause of a mere Other – the feminist or the marginalized voice, the revenant (Derrida's spectral Ghost[7]), not even of Plato's *daímôn* – but of the invisible Other, the Sacred, which irrupts hierophanically[8] in the visible – to use Eliade's language. There is however some-thing or some special circumstance in which visible and invisible are held together in the sacrosanct space in-between. This is a kind of movement, "the arc of movement", to speak like Bergson,[9] and this takes us to the second term of chorography – *chorós* – the round movement or circle dance, which brings the invisible sacred into visible and makes it leave its trace behind.

Summing up this introductory exposition, one can say that chorography, a made up term or syntagm, a project with international hierotopic[10] vocation, may be translated as 'writing (*graphè*) space (sacred)' or 'inscribing the sacred space with the dance.' Chorography studies the making of sacred space in Byzantium not as a stable or static notion of some kind, but as a performative inscription. The discourse of chorography is fundamentally the discourse of the trace of the invisible sacred in the visible. The definition of the trace (inscription) of the *chôra* is obviously at the heart of choro-graphy, due to the instrumentality of the *graphè* in revealing the sacred (*hierós*).

2. The Trace of the *Chôra* in the Visible

It is interesting to remember that Plato's *chôra*, this space-in-the-making, and in-between, which partakes both of the intelligible and sensible, although she retains neither of the phenomenal bodies visiting her, she has epiphanic moments of manifestation in the visible. Plato refers to the appearing *chôra*. Indeed, Plato refers to her manifestation in the visible, where the verb *phaínesthai* means "to become manifest", "to show (herself)" or "to appear to sight" (50b-c). *Chôra* appears episodically to sight only the moment when the bodies collide with her. But she appears only in movement, only in the traces of movement since only the things that move are visible things and leave their traces in the visible.[11] One could therefore speak of the *chôra* as itself only in movement, as the moving trace of the *chôra*. At the same time, it is fair to say that the trace of the *chôra* is an impermanent trace.

This observation, recently made by John Sallis,[12] is, no doubt, after Derrida's work on *chôra*,[13] the most important contribution in the field. Unlike Derrida, Sallis retains the article (**the** *chôra*) as an index of a certain differentiation, without which the entire discourse on *chôra* "will

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collapse into itself, into a kind of discursive autarky." He searches into "the almost paradoxical structure of this self-showing," because "it is this *manifestation* that is the most important stake here."[14] Sallis opens thus up an unexpected field of possibilities for the study of visibility of the *chôra* without betraying her undecidable nature. The trace, which is *ichnos*[15] in Greek, translated also as imprint, or footprint, is a very important notion to come close to *chôra.* Indeed, the trace has some indexical relevance,[16] but it is only relative and temporary, due to the impermanence of the trace. Yet the footstep of the Platonic *chôra* is volatile: "(It) fleets (*phéretai*) ever as a phantom (*phántasma*) of something else."[17] Byzantine chorography takes up this strategy in approaching the hesitant notion and makes the most of it in order to capture something of the impermanent visibility of the *chôra*. The trace, i.e. the performative inscription of the *chôra*, is a key chapter of Byzantine chorography.

3. The Byzantine *Chôra:* her Inscription in the Visible

In the history of Byzantium, the visibility of the iconic image was the subject of intense debate. The Christian theorist of the sacred image, Nicephoros the Patriarch of Constantinople (9th c.), formulates it specifically in terms of iconic space *chôra*. The icon has its specific space, which reveals the *chôra* and not the *tópos*, spells out Nicephoros, when he applies to the verb *ekchôréô* in order to speak about the iconic inscription (*graphè*). In Marie-José Mondzain's interpretation, the iconic *chôra* is a space extension, where *chôréô* means both to occupy a space and to contain something, which means that the content and the container coincide. The iconic line (*graphè*) is the trace of coincidence between content and container, which manifests into visible the limitless Word (*aperígraptos Lógos*). The iconic inscription (*graphè*) is the trace in the visible of this *chôra* space, which reveals itself completely only as an imaginary[18] (*hennoêsei*) place. This is how one could understand the oxymoronic term *chôrêtòn kaì achôrêton*,[19] that is, "that which occupies space, and does not occupy space," which is the space designated by the Byzantines to be the matrix of the Incarnation. Scholars of the Byzantine *chôra* gave full attention to this paradox – the dwelling space of the uncontainable God, expressed in what R. Ousterhout called the "typology of containment." Chorography takes a further step from this spatial oxymoron of the Incarnation discussed in the Byzantine circle of scholarship of *chôra*.

4. The Performative Trace in the Visible of the Invisible *Chôra*

Byzantine chorography intends to go beyond the typology of containment of *chôra*, and show that *chôra* space can be perceived not just as an impossible containment, but as a sacred movement, a crossing through, where 'crossing through' (X) corresponds to the Greek letter x (chi), as in, for instance, *chôra*, *chorós*. The choric relationships between container and content, the place where God's energies irrupt in the visible, are not static phenomena. As Marie-José Mondzain rightly puts it, the iconic space is "centrifugal" and "invasive,"[20] a property that derives from the power of iconic contagion. But in my interpretation, there is a sense of movement contained already in the very word *chôra,* which is related with the verb *chôréô,* with the sense to go forward, or to withdraw, or recede, having the effect to generate a particular kind of

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space. Chorography draws on the intimate relation between *chôra* and *chorós*, between space and movement, deeply rooted in the ancient Greek language as an enduring paradigm of Greek thinking and imagination. Chorography is based on this paradigm and on the assumption that there is a dynamic relationship contained in the words *chôra* (*chôros*) and *chorós*, which is creative (generative) of things of sacred (*hierós*), enacted in liturgical performance.

The contribution of chorography to the study of Byzantine *chôra* consists in exploring the performative relation between space and movement, insisting on *chôra*'s dynamic dimension and her cosmic vocation. Her undecidability is the source of her vitality since the quality of being *hierós* reaches its fullness in the completion of the circle, the trace of her choreographic inscription.[21] In my article "The Dance of Adam: Reconstructing the Byzantine *Chorós*,"[22] I read the Resurrection as a cosmic event in which the space of creation is restored again. Creation is restored by the circular movement that initially turned chaos into order, the mystical dance (*sacer ludus*); I applied it to the Anastasis image and show how image becomes space, a sacred space inscribed out by the holy fire liturgically performed around the church at the Resurrection. This is a *chôra-chorós* (space-movement) type of space, as the likes of fire are held in the *chôra*.[23] The abstract Platonic *chôra* space becomes in Christianity a kenotic space mystically 'erased' and 'crossed through'. The crossing through of Christ's sacrifice is the trace of the *chôra* that seals the world (Philo, *De somniis* II, 6). The invisible and paradoxical *chôra* crosses the visible realm leaving behind her trace. The discourse of the Byzantine *chôra* space is the discourse of her trace. It marks the whole world, both its length and breadth and height and depth, as the Son of God was also crucified in these dimensions.[24] True to its etymology, the Byzantine *chôra* space is a space in expansion and movement. "Centrifugal" and "invasive" (Mondzain), the *chôra* space is vaster than the sacred places and the saints because it contains the entire universe.[25] Yet she is not a mere physical extension of space, but a living body of liturgical experience. She is an orderly moving space, circularly turning its sacred narrative. *Chorós* is the ordering force, which restores creation anew, and makes possible the discourse of the *chôra*. *Chôra* space is as much about movement as it is about containment; it is a contained movement or a moving container. It is a space of 'sacred containment', from which the modern distinction between contained space and container should be removed in order to make room to that power of creative imagination, which has once enabled the participation of being in the wholeness of the universe and in Being.

'Sacred space' is of course a conventional term, restrictive in describing such complex phenomena like *chôra* in which space and time, figure and ritual are impossible to dissociate. Chorography will hopefully demonstrate that 'sacred space' in Byzantium is a space of presence and presencing, a verb rather than a noun; hence the type of realization of sacred space is the dance, in the *chorós*. Gesture, motion, choreography – this is the evanescent yet essential language in which the idea of the sacred is expressed in space. Here, in the dance, one can perhaps see united those two elements of sacred space, the material frame and the numinous sacred presence, which is called into being within it. For in the dance, as Yeats wrote, the two are united:

'How can we tell the dancer from the dance?'[26]

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[1] Paradox is a situation or a statement that seems to contradict itself, but on closer inspection, does not. A true statement that seems contradictory ("Less is more").

[2] The discourse on the transcendent which contains both saying and unsaying.

[3] A combination of contradictory terms ("living corpse" or "black light").

[4] The *kenosis* (from the Greek *kénôsis* = emptying; the verbe *kenóô* = to empty) attempts to solve the paradox between the nature of God and man as united in Christ. It refers both to the Incarnation and His Sacrifice. For example in *Philippians* 2: 7: "Jesus made himself nothing (*ekénôse*)."

[5] Nicoletta Isar, "The Iconic Chôra. The Kenotic Space of Presence and Void," *Transfiguration* 2 (2000), pp. 65-80.

[6] Between god and mortal ("A great *daímôn*, for the whole of the daimonic is between (*metaxe*) god and mortal")

[7] Derrida calls the ghost "this non-present present, this being-there of an absent" which defies "semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy" (Jaques DERRIDA, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Trans. Peggy Kamurf, New York: Routledge, 1994, 60).

[8] Mircea ELIADE, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York: Harper & Row, 1957, p. 26f.

[9] Bergson's vision of "the arc of movement" as a space of becoming. Bergson himself was a scholar of the in-between.

[10] Hierotopy, a compound term based on the Greek words *hierós* and *tópos*, is an international project conceived by Dr. Alexei Lidov and devoted to the elaboration of the main principles and boundaries of a new field of research of sacred space. In the description of its founder, hierotopy overlaps the traditional fields of art history, cultural history, anthropology, religious studies, but coincides with none of them. It attempts to demonstrate the need for the definition and categorization of sacred space as an independent subject of study, and for the elaboration of a methodology that would aim at the historical reconstruction and interpretation of this important kind of human creativity. Byzantine chorography is an intimate part of this international project.

[11] The phenomenal appearances, copies of the eternal Forms, are subject to becoming and visible (*mímema dè paradeígmatos…génesin echon kaì oratón*) (*Timaeus*, 50c).

[12] John Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato's Timaeus*, Indiana University Press, 1999.

[13] Jacques Derrida, "Khōra," trans. Ian McLeod, in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995)

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[14] Outi Pasanen, "Double tryths: An interview with John Sallis," *Man and World* 30 (1997): 113. My exphasis in the quotation.
[15] *Timaeus*, 53B.
[16] Following the classic distinction made by the American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce between the iconic and the indexical aspects of the sign.
[17] "how that it belongs to a copy – seeing that it has not for its own even that substance for which it came into being, but fleets (*phéretai*) ever as a phantom of something else" (*Timaeus*, 52C)
[18] Nicephore *Discours*, p. 28).
[19] Gregory Nazianzus, *Epist*. 101 (PG 37, col. 177B).
[20] Mondzain, "Iconic Space and the Rule of Lands," p. 67. Mondzain, *Image, icône, économie Les sources byzantines de l'imaginaire contemporain,* p. 183.
[21] Nicoletta Isar 'Chorography (*Chôra, Chôros, Chorós*) – A performative paradigm of creation of sacred space in Byzantium', chapter in the book *Hierotopy: Studies in the Making of Sacred Space*, 2005.
[22] Nicoletta Isar, 'The Dance of Adam: Reconstructing the Byzantine *Chorós,*' *Byzantinoslavica* 61 (2003), pp. 179-204.
[23] J. Sallis, Chorology On Beginning in Plato's *Timaeus*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1999, p. 119.
[24] Irenaeus, *Demonstration* (34 p. 69f) is referring back to Plato, perhaps via Justin. See RIJNERS, p. 196.
[25] *Nicephore Discours contre les iconoclasts*, note 122, p. 249.
[26] William Butler YEATS, *Among School Children.*

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