

# Functions of Mountains in Visual Composition of Christian Paintings in the Monastery of Hosios Loukas

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**Abstract:** This paper clarifies the functions of mountains in the visual composition of the Christian paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas, weighs them against the functions of mountains in the visual composition of Christian Paintings in the Chora Church. We enumerated the elements of each painting, traced their outlines, and made “explanatory drawings.” In each explanatory drawing, we divided each painting into scenes, which we analyzed and discussed to determine the relationships between the mountains and the backgrounds of the people. In the Christian paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas, as is the case in the Chora Church, the mountains comprise the area with special meaning and divide one painting into different scenes and one scene into different areas. In the paintings, the mountains are drawn as “frames” that divide the world.

## 1. Introduction

In Europe, people<sup>1</sup> were historically expressed as the main theme of paintings. In some Byzantine paintings nature was drawn, not as the main theme but in the background or along with something else. What meaning does nature have in Byzantine paintings? In “Functions of Mountains in Visual Composition of Christian Paintings in the Chora Church” (Inomata, Okazaki & Yanagisawa, 2011), we analyzed and discussed the Christian paintings in the Chora Church (Turkey, the 14th century) because they are masterpieces of the Late Byzantine art and were drawn in the center of the Christianity world in medieval Europe. As a result, we clarified the mountains comprise areas with special meaning, they divide one painting into different scenes and divide one scene into different areas, the mountains are drawn as frames that divide the world in the paintings.

In this paper, we studied the Christian paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas<sup>2</sup> (Greece, the 10-11th century) which represents the Middle Byzantine art. This paper clarifies the functions of mountains in the visual composition of these paintings, weighs them against the functions of mountains in the visual composition of Christian Paintings in the Chora Church. Clarifying and weighing the functions of mountains in visual composition of Christian Paintings in different ages and areas lead to learning their meaning in Byzantine paintings and the fundamental relationship between people and nature. This research offers numerous suggestions about the view of nature in medieval Europe.

## 2. Related Works and Position of Research

There is much historical research on Christian paintings in medieval Europe. Chatzidakis (1997) and Connor (1991) are known on Christian paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas.

In European paintings, much research on paintings has focused on the post-Renaissance where nature was drawn, and most of these paintings are drawn in perspective. In contrast, the paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas and many other Byzantine paintings are not drawn in perspective, but two-dimensionally. Their visual composition is greatly different. In this context, to the best of our knowledge, no research exists on the functions of mountains in the visual composition of Christian Paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas. And, many previous studies say that nature was not a beautiful landscape in medieval Europe, but there are many unclear points. This research consider medieval European view of nature in detail and visually.

## 3. Research Method

### 3.1. ANALYSIS OBJECT

In the monastery of Hosios Loukas, frescoes are drawn in the Panagia Church (the church of the Virgin), mosaics and frescoes are drawn in the katholikon (main church), frescoes are drawn in the crypt (burial chapel). In the Panagia Church, there are only 7 paintings of saints. In the katholikon, there are 258 paintings of saints and the cycle of the life of Christ. In the crypt, there are 53 paintings of saints and the Passion cycle. Here, we analyzed 5 paintings where mountains<sup>3</sup> are drawn in the monastery of Hosios Loukas (Figs. 1-5)<sup>4</sup>.

### 3.2. ANALYSIS OUTLINE

We enumerated the elements<sup>5</sup> of each painting, traced their outlines, and made “explanatory drawings.” People, mountains, architecture, trees, animals, and so forth are drawn as the elements; people are the main themes in all 5 paintings.

Mountains, which also occupy a large area in each painting, are drawn as background behind other elements. We divided each explanatory drawing into scenes based on the narrative to determine the relationships among the elements. Next, we analyzed and discussed the functions of mountains in the visual composition to see the relationships between the mountains and people's backgrounds<sup>6</sup>.

In explanatory drawings, such numbers as “①” indicate different scenes. When more than one mountain is drawn on a single painting, they are called mountain I, mountain II, and so forth.

**4. Analysis**

Next we enumerate the elements of each painting, trace their outlines, and make explanatory drawings. We divide each explanatory drawing into scenes (Figs. 1-5).

In Fig. 1, “Nativity,” the birth of Christ is drawn. The Virgin and Christ are inside a cave in mountain I (scene ①). Joseph is at the lower left of mountain I (scene ②), Christ in the bath and two women are at the lower right of mountain I (scene ③), the Magi that came from the East following the star and angels are at the left of mountain I (scene ④), and shepherds are visited by angels on the right of mountain I (scene ⑤).

Fig. 2, “Entry into Jersalem,” is the first painting of the

Passion cycle in the crypt. Christ mounted on an ass and John get down Mount Olives, are greeted by Jews in front of an open gateway.

In Fig. 3, “Crucifixion,” Christ is on the Cross, the Virgin is at the left of him, John is at the right of him.

Fig. 4, “Descent from the Cross,” follows “Crucifixion”. Joseph of Arimathaea supports Christ and the Virgin holds Christ's right arm at the left of the Cross, John stands and Nicodemos bends to remove nails from Christ's feet with a pair of pincers at the right of the Cross.

Fig. 5, “Entombment and the Women at the Empty Tomb,” is the last painting of the Passion cycle in the crypt. On the left the body of Christ is lifted into a sarcophagus by the Virgin, Joseph and Nicodemos (scene ①). On the right an angel points out the empty tomb to two women; this scene shows the Resurrection of Christ (scene ②).

**5. Results and Discussion**

Here, we analyze and discuss the functions of mountains in the visual composition to see the relationships between the mountain and the people's backgrounds. A list of the analysis objects and the functions of mountains in the visual composition in each painting are summarized in Table 1.

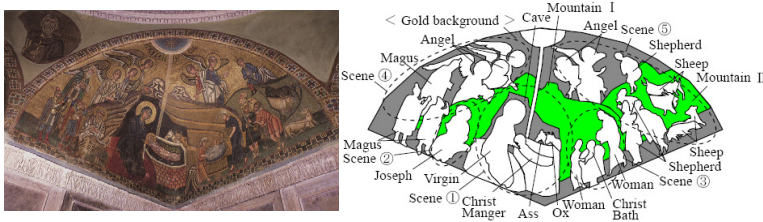


Fig. 1. Nativity: (mosaic) picture (left) (Chatzidakis, 1997) explanatory drawing (right)

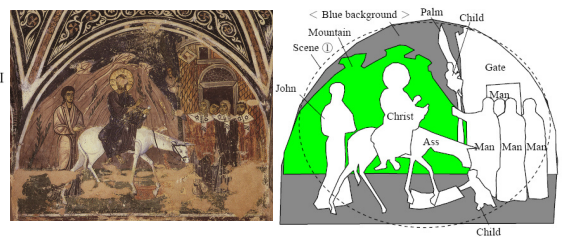


Fig. 2. Entry into Jerusalem: (fresco) picture (left) (Chatzidakis, 1997) explanatory drawing (right)

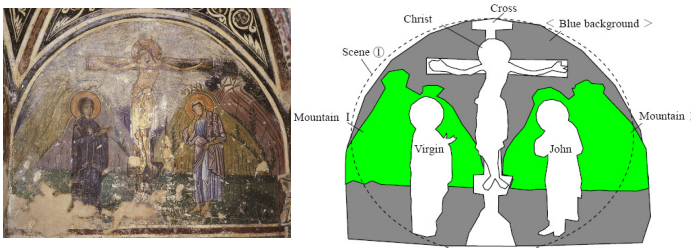


Fig. 3. Crucifixion: (fresco) picture (left) (Chatzidakis, 1997) explanatory drawing (right)

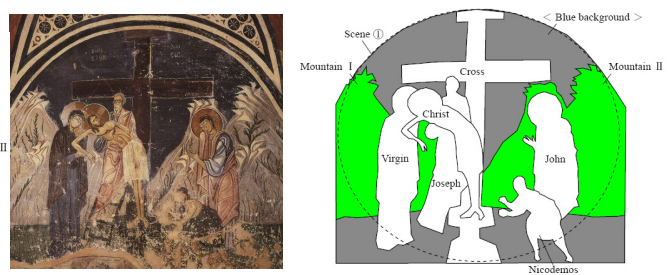


Fig. 4. Descent from the Cross: (fresco) picture (left) (Chatzidakis, 1997) explanatory drawing (right)

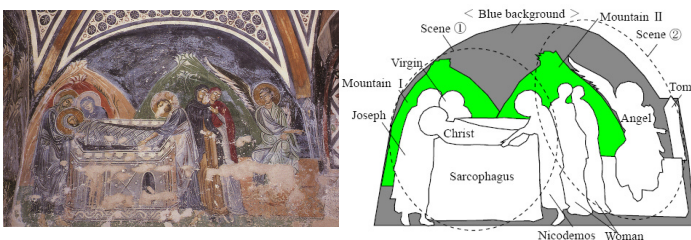


Fig. 5. Entombment and the Women at the Empty Tomb: (fresco) picture (left) (Chatzidakis, 1997) explanatory drawing (right)

Table 1. List of Analysis Objects and Results

Fig.	Title	Functions of Mountains in Visual Composition	
1	Nativity	Mountain I	Comprise an area of Christ, Virgin, Joseph and women Divides scene ④ into areas of mountain and gold background Divides scene ① and ②, and scene ④
		Mountain II	Comprise an area of the shepherds Divides scene ⑤ into areas of mountain and gold background Divides scene ① and ③, and scene ⑤
2	Entry into Jersalem	Mountain	Comprise an area of Christ and John Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and blue background
3	Crucifixion	Mountain I	Comprise an area of the Virgin Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and blue background
		Mountain II	Comprise an area of John Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and blue background
4	Descent from the Cross	Mountain I	Comprise an area of the Virgin Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and blue background
		Mountain II	Comprise an area of John and Nicodemos Divides scene ① into areas of mountain and blue background
5	Entombment and the Women at the Empty Tomb	Mountain I	Comprise an area of Christ, the Virgin and Joseph
		Mountain II	Comprise an area of Nicodemos and the women Divides scene ② into areas of mountain and blue background

### 5.1. MOUNTAINS THAT COMPRISE AN AREA

In Figs. 1-5, a mountain is in a person's background. A mountain's ridge line comprises one area within which a person is enclosed.

In Fig. 1, Mountain I is in the background behind the newborn Christ, the Virgin, Joseph and two women. The mountain comprises an area, within which Christ and the Virgin in scene ①, Joseph in scene ② and Christ and the women in scene ③ are enclosed, is in the backgrounds behind a miracle of the birth of Christ. Furthermore, there is a cave in the mountain where the newborn Christ and the Virgin are drawn inside; the mountain seems to protect them. And mountain II comprises an area, within which the shepherds listening to the angels in scene ⑤ are enclosed. In Fig. 2, the mountain comprises an area, within which Christ and John proceeding to Jerusalem are enclosed. In Fig. 3, mountain I comprises an area, within which the Virgin mourning Christ's death is enclosed, mountain II comprises an area, within which John mourning is enclosed. In Fig. 4, mountain I comprises an area, within which the Virgin holding Christ's arm is enclosed, mountain II comprises an area, within which John mourning and Nicodemos are enclosed. In Fig. 5, mountain I comprises an area, within which the Virgin and Joseph burying Christ in scene ① are enclosed, mountain II comprises an area, within which Nicodemos in scene ① and the

women informed the Resurrection by the angel in scene ② are enclosed.

As exemplified above, the mountain's function comprises an area with a special meaning that is different from its surroundings. Sometimes mountains are drawn as places that offer protection.

### 5.2. MOUNTAINS THAT DIVIDE ONE SCENE INTO AREAS

In Figs. 1-5, a mountain is the background behind a person; gold or blue is the background behind another person<sup>7</sup>. One person is drawn in the area of a mountain; another is drawn in the gold or blue background. In other words, the ridge line of the mountain divides one scene into areas of mountain and gold or blue backgrounds.

In Fig. 1, scene ④, mountain I is in the background behind the Magi, and the background is gold behind the angel and another Magus. In Fig. 1, scene ⑤, mountain II is in the background behind the shepherds, and the background is gold behind the angel and another shepherd. In Fig. 2, the mountain is in the background behind Christ and John, and the background is blue behind the Jews. In Fig. 3, mountain I is in the background behind the Virgin, mountain II is in the background behind John, and the background is blue behind Christ. The ridge lines of the

mountains divide the scene into the area of mountain that indicates the Virgin and John are in the earthly world and the area of blue background that indicates Christ is dead and disappeared from the earthly world. The deep sorrow for the death of Christ is expressed on the whole. In Fig. 4, mountain I is in the background behind the Virgin, mountain II is in the background behind John and Nicodemus, and the background is blue behind Christ and Joseph. In Figs. 3 and 4, mountains are drawn on each side of the paintings; Christ and the Cross at the center are emphasized. In Fig. 5, scene ②, mountain II is in the background behind the women, and the background is blue behind the angel.

As exemplified above, the mountain's function divides one scene into different areas. Furthermore, the background behind angels is either gold or blue, and no mountain is in the background behind them. In other words, a person in front of angels is drawn in the area of a mountain, and the angels are drawn in the gold or blue background areas.

### 5.3. MOUNTAINS THAT DIVIDE ONE PAINTING INTO SCENES

In Fig. 1, a mountain is in people's background and 5 scenes are drawn. Mountain I is in the background behind Christ and the Virgin in scene ①, Joseph in scene ② and Christ and the women in scene ③. Scene ④ is on the left of the mountain, and scene ⑤ is on the right of the mountain. scenes ①-③ are unfolded before the mountain; scenes ④, ⑤ are unfolded behind the mountain. In other words, the mountain divides the painting into scene ①-③ that show the birth of Christ and scene ④, ⑤ that the Magi and the shepherds are listening to the angels.

Therefore, the mountain's function divides one painting into different scenes.

As described above, in the Christian paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas, the mountains comprise areas with special meaning. They are considered to be places where we connect to the world of God, function as "frames" divides the earthly world and the world of God. They divide one painting into different scenes and divide one scene into different areas, function as "frames" divides the narrative in the paintings. The functions of mountains in the visual composition of the Christian paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas are the same as the functions of mountains in the visual composition of the Christian paintings in the Chora Church (Inomata, Okazaki & Yanagisawa, 2011). The mountains are drawn as frames that divide the world in the paintings in the Christian paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas, drawn in the different age and the area from the Chora Church.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper clarified the functions of mountains in the visual composition of the Christian paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas, weighed them against the functions of mountains in the visual composition of Christian Paintings in the Chora Church. We enumerated the elements of each painting, traced their outlines, and made explanatory drawings. In each explanatory drawing, we divided each painting into scenes. Next, we analyzed and discussed the relationships between the mountains and the backgrounds. In the Christian paintings in the monastery of Hosios Loukas, as is the case in the Chora Church, the mountains comprise areas with special meaning. They divide one painting into different scenes and divide one scene into different areas. The mountains are drawn as frames that divide

the world in the paintings.

## Endnotes

1. In this paper, we treated Christ, the Virgin, and angels as "people" because they are drawn as human figures.
2. The monastery of Hosios Loukas dominates the slopes of Mount Helicon, which is in the northwest of Athens, Greece. It was probably built in the 10-11th century, but the exact dates of the monuments are not clear.
3. In this paper, we defined a mountain as a rugged ground that greatly rises and excluded a smooth ground that only slightly rises.
4. Fig. 1 is a mosaic in the katholikon. "The Nativity is the only mosaic composition in the katholikon which depicts the landscape to any extent." (Chatzidakis, 1997, p.25) Figs. 2-5 are frescoes of the Passion cycle in the crypt.
5. One main purpose of the Christian paintings in medieval Europe was to faithfully express a Biblical content (Wakakuwa, 2000, p.104). Such drawn elements are comparatively rare.
6. In this paper, "background" refers to what is drawn around the outline of a person. However, exceptions are hereinafter described.
7. In Fig. 1, the Magi and the shepherd listening to the angels protrude from the area of the mountain to the area of the gold background. In Fig. 4, the Virgin holding Christ's arm protrudes from the area of the mountain to the area of the blue background. A person whose background is the mountain protrudes from the area of the mountain to contact the person in the area of the gold or blue backgrounds.

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The pictures in Figs. 1-5 are by HOSIOS LOUKAS (Chatzidakis, 1997) . The other figures and tables were made by the authors.