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Χώρα: Χριστιανικές όψεις μιας πλατωνικής ιδέας

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The first time I came across the term χώρα in a sense that was not the equivalent of “country,” which is the most current sense in Modern Greek, was in 1967, in Giorgos Seferis’s poem bearing the title “Η ΧΩΡΑ ΤΟΥ ΑΧΩΡΗΤΟΥ,” in capital letters with no indication of the stresses.

Seferis explains in a note that the title of the poem refers to “an inscription of a mosaic in the monastery of the Chora in Constantinople.”

An investigation in the early Church Fathers’ writings shows that the notion of the term χώρα in the epithets η χώρα τῶν ζώντων and η χώρα τοῦ ἀχωρήτου, appearing as inscriptions on wall mosaics for the first time in the church of the Chora monastery in Constantinople, on images of Christ and the Virgin Mary respectively, originate in Plato’s Timaeus. The first one denotes a utopia in the afterlife, where the faithful will enjoy eternal peace. The second derives from a confusion of the platonic χώρα with the platonic υποδοχή and denotes a utopia where what is wrong in this world could be restored.

One’s body is all one is, one’s body is one’s self. This self has a native language. I felt that I had to write the following text in a foreign language in an attempt to install a distance between the text and myself.

Keywords
Χώρα, Plato, Church Fathers, Theodore Metochites.

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ΧΩΡΑ: CHRISTIAN ASPECTS OF A PLATONIC CONCEPT

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according to the demotic, while in the original inscription the stress is on the second syllable from the end (ἀχωρήτου) according to the rules of the Ancient Greek language. Then, the title of the poem should be understood in Modern Greek. In colloquial Modern Greek χώρα means “realm,” “country,” while the word ἁχώρητος, unusual in and of itself (in the demotic it should be ἁχωρητος), introduces the sense of a realm beyond the limitations of this world, a realm of a certain otherness. If translated as “The Container of the Uncontainable,” as it is often translated, it cannot be understood without knowledge of the theological background that is behind the inscription of the Chora monastery. The time in the poem is set on a Good Friday, the falling coins allude to the metallic sound of the bells but also to the tinkling of the coins by means of which Christians could buy off their sins and, as it becomes clear in the second and third lines, to drops of rain. The hollow spots made by the raindrops on the ground are likened to openings leading into new realms into the earth. The final phrase, “the moment has come, raise me up” supposedly uttered by the dead Christ, clearly alludes to the rites of the Epitaphios and to the Resurrection. In a world of sorrow, on a day of sorrow, the Man of Sorrows heralds the opening of new realms where things could be restored. Tracing this vaguely positive feeling is corroborated by the fact that the next poem in the collection is entitled “Interlude of Joy.”

In the monastery of the Chora in Constantinople there are two mosaics bearing this inscription: one is in the narthex, the other is in the naos. I think there can be no doubt that Seferis had in mind the mosaic of the exonarthex, the emblematic character of which, in terms of form and position in the entire iconographic program of the church, is prominent, as the existing literature on the Chora monastery shows and especially Ousterhout’s insightful studies on the iconography of this remarkable monument. The mosaic is in the lunette above the entrance door of the church, facing east. It depicts the Virgin, orant with Christ Child in an oval aureole on her breast, between two flying angels. She is accompanied by the inscription μητέρ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀχωρήτου, which means “mother of God, the realm of the uncontainable.” Underwood noted that the inscription was inspired by one of the epithets attributed to the Virgin in the Akathistos hymn. The same inscription appears once more in the background of the Virgin Hodegetria holding Christ Child on her lap, at the right end of the templon in the naos. The term χώρα appears three more times in the church, in the inscription Η Μητέρ τοῦ Χριστοῦ / ἡ χώρα τῶν
ζώντων, which means “Jesus Christ, the realm of the living” and accompanies the figure of Christ. First, in the exonarthex, opposite the Virgin Orant, in the lunette above the door leading to the narthex, in the lunette above the door leading to the nave, with the figure of Christ enthroned, receiving the model of the church from the outside. Second, in the exonarthex, in the lunette above the door leading to the nave, with the figure of Christ enthroned, receiving the model of the church from the kiotos Theodore Metochites. Third, only partially preserved, with the figure of Christ at the left end of the templon in the nave, which is positioned symmetrically to the figure of the Virgin Hodegetria mentioned above. Underwood has already noted that the phrase designating Christ as the “realm of the living” has its origins in the Book of the Psalms, and is introduced for the sake of a play on the name of the monastery and on the epithet ἡ χώρα τοῦ ἀχωρήτου attributed to the Virgin.14

Having in mind that the term χώρα was introduced by Plato.15 I was surprised that this was not mentioned in relation to the inscriptions at the Chora monastery church. Being, also, aware of the fact that some of the early Church Fathers have written comments on the Psalms, I was challenged to check about any possible connections. I found that Basil of Caesaria (329 or 330-379) in his homilies on the Psalms describes the “Χώρα τῶν ζώντων” in the following manner:

“There is no male or female in the resurrection, but life is one and in one way: in the way of the ones who reside in the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.”18

14 Ibid., 39. Psalm 114. 9: “I will be pleasing before the Lord in the land of the living,” see Septuaginta, Bibelanstalt Stuttgart 1935 (8th ed. 1965), vol. II, 128.
15 Plato, 15 I was surprised that this was not mentioned in relation to the inscriptions at the Chora monastery church.
What is anticipated in this passage of the Apocalypse is similar with what is defined as the “realm of the living” by Basil of Caesaria, only the latter has modeled it on Platonic terms: God, who in the Old Testament is named ὁ ὄν, synonymously to the Platonic Being, is “the land of the living” in which “the living indeed” live eternally “remaining forever the same,” exactly in the same way as ideas do in the Platonic Being. There is no doubt, also, that this “realm of the living” concerns the afterlife, a life promised to the faithful in this life but which will be in a future, in a place where everything that is wrong in this life will not be then. This is a Christian utopia described in terms of the Platonic Being. In fact, the “realm of the living” is a euphemism for death. At the same time the beings of this world are described as composite, having to decompose, in the same way that beings in Plato’s sensible world do.

“what is that is Existent always and has no Becoming? And what is that is Becoming always and never is Existent? Now the one of these is .... ever uniformly existent; whereas the other .... becomes and perishes and is never really existent.”

The inscription ἡ χώρα τοῦ ἀρχωρήτου (e chor a του achoreto s) that accompanies the figure of the Virgin was, as already noted above, inspired by one of the epithets attributed to the Virgin in the Akathistos hymn, that is, ὁ ὄν, τὸ αὖ ἄει γεγονός καὶ ἀπολύμενον, ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν.”


Some decades before, Clement of Alexandria (150-215) in his Stromateis uses the word χώρα in a purely Platonic context referring directly to Plato: “Plato says that the contemplative-intellectual god of ideas will live among the humans; and that mind is the realm (χώρα) of ideas, and god himself is mind. He has said [also] that the contemplative-intellectual god of the invisible god lives in the human.” Elsewhere he says: “because hard is to take hold


20 Plato, Timaeus, 27d 28a: “τί τὸ ὂν ἀεί, ... allusion to the χώρα τοῦ ἀχωρήτου.

21 The earliest allusion to the χώρα τοῦ ἀρχωρήτου I know of is indirect and is found in the Comments on Psalms by Eusebius of Caesarea (263-339): “... like Sion which, being the city of God, is the chor a of the man who has been born in it, so this man becomes the chor a and the container of the Word of God who has been born in it, as in a holy sanctuary and temple or, rather, as in a statue that is the container of the deity that has made it its abode...”

22 Sion, one of the commonest metaphors for the Mother of God, is the chor a of Christ’s body that, in its turn, is the chor a and the container of the Word of God. In other words, the Virgin, having contained the body of Christ which contained the Word of God, is also the chor a and the container of the latter (of the Word of God); shortly, the Virgin is the chor a of the achoretos. Eusebius uses the words χώρα and δοχεῖον not as synonymous but as supplementary; to the word χώρα he attributes the sense of place one is borne by, born in and bred in. The word δοχεῖον is for Emmanuel’s body, the material container of God; strangely enough, it is paralleled with a statue in which a (necessarily) pagan deity is residing. It is this meaning that, by its relation to material utilitarian objects, is convenient for exploitation in figural terms, as it is the case in the iconography of the Chora monastery church: for example, baskets for the bread and jars for the wine or water in the depiction of Christ’s miracles.


24 Clemens Alexandria, Stromata IV, Cap. XXV. 155, 2: “τίκοταις ὁ Θεοῦ θεωρητικὸν θεὸν ἐν ἀνθρώποις εἴρηκεν... ὃς ἐν σώματι καὶ νοὐ, μίλλων δὲ ἐς ἐν ἱερῷ καὶ δοχεῖον τῆς ἡτοιμαζόμενης ἐν αὐτῷ κυτῳδούμενης.”
of (δυσάλωτος) the realm of god, [the god] whom Plato has named the realm (χώρα) of ideas.”25 He is obviously alluding to Timaeus’ attempt to define the υποδοχή, “the Mother and the Receptacle of this generated world, perceptible by sight and all the senses, ... if we describe her as a Kind invisible and unshaped, all-receptive, and in some most perplexing and most baffling (δυσαλωτότατον) way partaking of the intelligible, we shall describe her truly.”26 As usual since Antiquity, Clement identifies the concept of χώρα with that of υποδοχή.27 Plato introduces and explains the υποδοχή as following:

“... it should be the receptacle, and as it were the nurse, of all Becoming”28; “... is the Mother and the Receptacle of this generated world, which [world] is perceptible by sight and all the senses ...”29

By means of a metaphor, υποδοχή is given a gender that is female; in this context the word “receptacle” (υποδοχή) can only be understood as the womb of a woman, in which all becoming is sown and borne. The metaphor leads to a parable by the introduction of the following phrase:

“... moreover, it is proper to liken the Recipient to the Mother, the Source to the Father, and what is engendered between these two to the Offspring ...”30

Father, mother and son corresponding to the Being, the υποδοχή and the Cosmos (the sensible copy of the Being); there can be no doubt that the scheme fits perfectly the triad Father-Virgin Mary-Christ, providing meaningful images and narrative to be used in literature and illustrations serving the Christian faith. It is not without significance that the Nicene Creed attributes to the Son of God the epithet μονογενής (only son, unique of his kind), which Plato attributes to Heaven-Cosmos31 which he parallels to the Son engendered between the Being and the υποδοχή.

It is true that the early Church Fathers acted in and reacted to a Platonic or neo-Platonic philosophical milieu, and that this influenced their formation, their writings and the interpretation of Christian faith and concepts.32 Timaeus, especially, was at the centre of their interests concerning natural theology, the deity and many other things.33 This explains the way in which they use the term χώρα (χώρα) and leaves no doubt that it originates in the Platonic χώρα as defined in Plato’s Timaeus. I have noted above that, commonly, the concept of χώρα is treated as identical with that of υποδοχή.34 Nevertheless there is an essential difference between them. The way Plato defines the word initially in Timaeus makes it clear to me that χώρα is the whole of space in which beings can exist only by occupying a part of it. Χώρα is the totality of all places

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26 Plato, Timaeus, 51a, b: “Διὸ καὶ τὴν τοῦ γεγονότος ὁρατοῦ καὶ πάντως αἰσθητοῦ μητέρα καὶ ὑποδοχήν ... ἀνόρατον εἶδός τι καὶ ὑποδοχὴν μητρί, τὸ δ᾽ ὅθεν πατρί, τὴν δὲ μεταξὺ τούτων φύσιν ἐκγόνῳ, ...” See also Derrida, op.cit., 44: “Le cosmos est le ciel (χώρα) is female; in this context the word “receptacle” (ὑποδοχή) corresponding to the Platonic concepts of χώρα, Cosmos and Being; see P. Wendland, Philonis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt, vol. 3, Berlin 1898 (reprint 1962).


28 Plato, Timaeus, 49a: “... πάντος γίνεται υποδοχήν αὐτῆς, εἰς τὸν τύπημα.”

29 Plato, Timaeus, 51a: “... τὴν τοῦ γεγονότος ὁρατοῦ καὶ πάντως αἰσθητοῦ μητέρα καὶ ὑποδοχήν ...”

30 Plato, Timaeus, 50c: “... ἀλλ᾽ εἷς ὅδε μονογενὴς οὐρανὸς γεγονὼς ἔστι τε καὶ ὑποδοχή ...” See also J. Pelikan, Christianity and Classical Culture.

31 See previous note but especially Pelikan, op.cit., 20, 95 96, 188.

32 Timaeus (ed. Bury), op.cit. (n. 20), 10 11. Τίμαιος (ed. Kallas), op.cit. (n. 20), 135 136 ff. Τίμαιος (ed. Mavropoulos), op.cit. (n. 20), 466 470. See also above, n. 27.
(τόποι) where beings can be. It has the same sense as in the phrase λοιμήθανον χώραν, ἔχω χώραν, that is, “to have place,” to happen or, in French, avoir lieu. This phrase, colloquial in antiquity, is used in the introductory definition of χώρα in Timaeus in order to explain it in a fairly “simple” manner: “… we say that it is necessary that every being should be in some place (ἐν τοῖς τόποι) and occupy some space (χώραν τινά), and that what is not in the earth or somewhere in the sky is nothing.”35 It is the concept of what later was defined by Descartes as the geometric three-dimensional space.36 Υποδοχή is the χώρα filled with the matter of sensible beings - matter that changes perpetually. Χώρα has no material substance, υποδοχή has adopted matter. If χώρα is space, room (in the sense of the German Raum), υποδοχή is space’s adopted properties, its δύναμις.37 In this sense, υποδοχή can be described through its multiple adopted properties and the innumerable metamorphoses it appears to go under. Χώρα cannot be described, it can be grasped only in terms of words (λόγος). Υποδοχή can be grasped in terms of imagery and narrative. I think this might explain why in later times and in Christian contexts, the term χώρα, understood as bearing the physical properties adopted by the υποδοχή, has prevailed.

After all, it seems as a matter of course that the Mother of God was identified with the chora (see hypodoche) as God’s receptacle during pregnancy. The musical assonance and the intellectual associations in the Greek phrase He chora tou achoretou contribute a metaphorical depth that escapes any translation. Especially the “container of the uncontainable,” which sometimes is preferred because it sounds technically correct, deprives chora of all its depth. In visual terms, the image of Virgin Mary with Child Christ in an aureole on her breast seems to be the perfect rendering of the aforementioned ideas. This image is interpreted as a symbol of the incarnation of God in the body of Christ in Mary’s womb and its origins can be traced early in the Christian Era.38 In that sense, the incarnation can be understood as a parallel of the Being’s becoming the sensible and material world by means of being copied by the Demiurge in the υποδοχή. The aureole enclosing child Christ may be seen as an allusion to the world’s being “... round, in the shape of a sphere...”39

The depiction of the υποδοχή as a woman, in this case the Virgin Mary, gives a visual-sensible form to χώρα (see υποδοχή) according to the metaphor provided in Plato’s Timaeus, as mentioned above.40 Besides this metaphor or, rather, the personification of the υποδοχή, the actual main quality of the latter is that she has no sensible qualities but, by being the hostess of every being of the sensible world, takes every sensible being’s appearance, remaining always essentially identical to herself and formless:

“And of the substance which receives all bodies the same account must be given. It must be called always by the same name; for from its own proper quality it never departs at all; for while it is always receiving all things, nowhere and in no wise does it assume any shape similar to any of the things that enter into it. For it is laid down by nature as a moulding-stuff for everything, being moved and marked by the entering figures, and because of them it appears different at different times. And the figures that enter and depart are copies of those that are always existent, being stamped from them in fashion marvelous and hard to describe, ...”41

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35 My translation; Timaeus, 52b: “... καὶ φαμεν ἀναγκαῖον εἶναί που τὸ ὁν ἅπαν ἔν τινι τόπῳ κατέχον χώραν τινά, τὸ ... cho-ra of all its depth. In visual terms, the image of Virgin Mary with Child Christ in an aureole on her breast seems
37 Derrida, op.cit. (n. 27), 30, puts the question rhetorically: “Il y a un khoia, on peut même s’interroger sur sa physis et sa dynamis ...”; he does not aim to providing any answer to his potential question.
38 For a 4th century image of the Virgin (or possibly a diseased mother) orant with Christ child (or possibly the diseased child of the mother) in her breast see: A. Grabar, Le premier art Chretien (200-395), Paris 1966, 211, fig. 232; also M. Andaloro, La pictura medievale a Roma. L’orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini 312-468, Rome 2008, 158 159. For the Virgin holding the Christ child in an aureole (dating from the 400 to the 7th c.), see A. Grabar, L’age d’or de Justinien, Paris 1966, 170 174, figs 180, 193; Chr. Baltoyan, “The Mother of God in Portable Icons,” in M. Vassilaki (ed.), Mother of God, Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art, Athens Milan 2000, 139 142. The very moment of the incarnation of God’s Word in Virgin Mary’s womb is elegantly but forcefully rendered in the Annunciation icon at the monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai, see H. C. Evans  W. D. Wixom (eds), Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era. A.D. 843-1261, New York 1997, 374 375, fig. 246 (A. Weyl Carr).
39 Timaeus, 33b: “... οὕτως εἰς τὸν κόσμον... νομιστέως...”
40 See also n. 28 30.
41 Timaeus, 50b, c: “ο οὐχός δὴ λόγος και περὶ τῆς τί πάντων διαφορομενος ομοιμαι φύσεως τοιτού αὐτον ἑαυτην δεχομενον ἐκ γερα τῆς ἐπουθής τὸ πορεῖν τὸν εὐστόμα τυμβρύας δέχεται τε γέρα
Therefore, the identification of the Virgin Mary with the χώρα/ὑποδοχὴ may explain why she is often depicted in the form of other material substances, different between them but which, by means of elaborate mental associations, are understood as pictorial substitutes for the Mother of God. These verbal or pictorial metaphors are known as τύποι or refigurations and they usually bear an indication that allows the spectator to understand that the image is symbolizing Virgin Mary. I believe that the term τύπος, could originate in Timaeus, 50c,d, where the ὑποδοχή is described as a medium in which the beings of the sensible world are stamped (τυπωθέντα, ἔκτυποτέρων). Because they act exactly in the same way as written metaphors do (that is, they substitute the real substance behind the metaphor), they can be depicted without the provision of any written or pictorial help for their interpretation, as happens for instance in the Kokkinobaphos manuscripts.

The preceding investigation has made it clear that by the early 14th century “chora,” the name of the establishment that Theodore Metochites undertook to renovate, had already been laden with meanings resulting from a history that could be summarized as follows: χώρα is a term introduced by Plato in his Timaeus in order to define a concept synonymous with the modern Greek term χώρος, i.e., space. Ὑποδοχή is a parallel platonist term that defines space (χώρα) in function, that is, filled with the beings which cannot exist outside space. Already in antiquity, the confusion of these two concepts endowed χώρα with properties that were associated with the ὑποδοχή by means of metaphors used by Plato in his Timaeus. In the Christian era, the early Church Fathers, in their attempt to create Christian theology and homology, often had recourse to Plato’s writings, especially Timaeus. In this context, the Platonic term χώρα (see ὑποδοχή), was imbued with Christian metaphysical connotations related to Plato’s metaphors for ὑποδοχή. The epithet ἡ χώρα τῶν ἄνων for Christ as the Being (ὁ ἄνω) appears the latest in the early 4th century and refers to eternity in the afterlife. The epithet ἡ χώρα τῶν ἄνων of Virgin Mary as the instrument of God’s incarnation refers to the Akathistos hymn, dated in the 6th century but, before that and with minimum variations, it appears the latest in the early 4th century. In spite of their long and interesting history, these epithets of Christ and the Virgin Mary appeared as inscriptions accompanying the relevant figures for the first time in the aforesaid mosaics of the Chora monastery church in the second decade of the 14th c. Theodore Metochites, ktetor of the church and, undoubtedly, the intellectual author of the iconographic program, chose the epithets as a play upon the name of the monastery. Not having any pictorial tradition for either of the two figures that would illustrate the inscriptions, Metochites used older types, which he distributed in the overall scheme of the pictorial program in a way that would serve his purpose with regards to the transmission of specific messages. Metochites was conscious of the fact that the “realm of the living” alludes to salvation in Christ in the afterlife. By inscribing it in the most conspicuous places on the central axis on the way into the naos, he intended to stress the sepulchral character of the church. In the naos, the figure of Christ bearing the inscription ἡ χώρα τῶν ἄνων holds an open book on which we can read: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28), leaving no doubt that the stress on the afterlife is intentional. This supports Ousterhout’s remark: “Looking at the entry sequence as a whole, we might say that the eastward view, toward the sanctuary and altar, stresses Christ and salvation, leading to the Eucharist at the altar.”

Ousterhout continues: “However, looking back from the

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43 See Timaeus, 50c, d. See also above n. 41.
inner narthex, it is the Virgin and the Incarnation that are given prominence." There is no doubt about this. I think that the sequence starts with the Hodegetria of the temple, inscribed ἡ χώρα τοῦ ἄχωρήτου, goes to the Koimesis on the west wall of the naos above the central door, then continues with the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple on the central axis of the exonarthex, and culminates in the figure of the Virgin orant with Child in a medallion, inscribed ἡ χώρα τοῦ ἄχωρήτου, in the lunette above the west entrance of the exonarthex. We might say that, on the way in, the iconography alludes to spirituality and the afterlife, and on the way out, the iconography suggests a gradual return to the present world. Metochites’ renovation of the katholikon of the Chora monastery included the south parekklesion which was then added to serve as a funeral chapel for Theodore Metochites and his family. This would suffice to explain why the decoration of the central part of the church stresses salvation in the afterlife in a conventionally Christian sense. But Chora could also be seen as a metaphor of the chief interest or even the anxiety of Metochites, with regard to the fate of his writings, his works and his reputation after his death. In Ihor Ševčenko’s words: “Several of his achievements might assure him immortality, he said ... but among all his works, the Chora constituted his chief claim to it: a claim not so much to the eternal life in which the righteous contemplate God – for when he spoke of the Christian beyond, Metochites usually saw there the threat of eternal punishment – as to the glory of a mortal, remembered by unending generations of other mortals.” There can be no doubt that most of the information provided above and concerning Plato, the writings of the Church Fathers, and hymnography were in Theodore Metochites’ knowledge while he was striving to elaborate an iconographic program that would do justice to his learning, intelligence, and taste. He is recognized as an astonishing polymath in virtually every field of classical or Christian literature. In his writings he shows a preference for using the word χώρα, most probably for the multiple nuances it was endowed with by Plato, Platonist and neo-Platonist philosophers, the early Church Fathers and hymnographers. For example, in his poems, Metochites names the Virgin Mary with some versions of the epithet χώρα τοῦ ἄχωρήτου. He also uses the expression χώραν ἔχειν (to happen, to come into existence) which could have derived directly from Plato, Timaeus 52b. He also uses the word often in its common sense of “territory,” “land,” “place” etc. As far as Metochites’s “humanism” is concerned, that is too complicated a topic to deal with and far beyond the scope of this paper. However, it seems to me that Metochites’s intellectual persona was essentially relying on his readings and his writings. He was indeed a prolific reader

Ousterhout B. Pitarakis (eds), The Kariye Camii Reconsidered / Kariye Camii, Yeniiden, Istanbul 2011, 213 237, especially 222, 235 236.

55 Θεόδωρος Μετοχίτης, Μονῳδία ἐπὶ τῆ βασιλίδι Θεοδώρᾳ, τῇ Αἰγύπτει, τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τῆς Ἡρακλείου, τῇ τῆς Μεσσηνίας Ἐπιτάφῳ, Τάξις πάντεσσι χώρα, ...”; 130 (Poem XVII, lines 393 394): “… ἀχωρήτοιο διά χώραν τοῦ ἄχωρήτου ...”; 14 15.

57 Ibid., 32, lines 50 51 (f. 211), see Polemis (ed.), op.cit., 164, lines 14 15.

58 Θεόδωρος Μετοχίτης, Μονῳδία ἐπὶ τῆ βασιλίδι Θεοδώρᾳ, τῇ τῆς Μεσσηνίας Ἐπιτάφῳ, Τάξις πάντεσσι χώρα, ...”; 130 (Poem XVII, lines 393 394): “… ἀχωρήτοιο διά χώραν τοῦ ἄχωρήτου ...”; 14 15.

59 Ibid., 102 104. Ousterhout suggests that “an interpretation of the mosaic must take into consideration its relationship to the walls of the city.” ibid., 102.


61 Ibid., especially 37 51.

62 The influences of hymnography on the decorative program of the Chora have already been noted; see Ousterhout, “The Virgin of the Chora,” 97.


ΔΧΑΕ ΑΔ΄ (2013), 405-416

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and writer. In his writings, for which he coined his own peculiar “ancient Greek,” 59 objects and works of art or architecture are not described in concrete visual terms, but always in terms of abstract concepts concerning social, financial, moral or other invisible qualities. I understand that his communication with images must have functioned through words 60 and this may explain the fact that he was not interested in creating new iconographic types for The Chora ton Zonton and The Chora tou Achorou or, at least, in identifying each of them with a unique iconographic type. In this context, I consider the depiction of hymnographers in the pendentives below the dome of the Parekklesion crowned by the Virgin Mary in a medallion, as an additional indication of his interest in the world of the written word: if Christ is supported by the poetry of the God-inspired evangelists, then it is appropriate for the Virgin to be supported by the poetry of the hymnographers who praised her. 61 As already noted, one should not expect to see more concrete manifestations of Theodore Metochites’s “humanism” in the iconographic program of the Chora katholikon. 62 However, the fact that he brought out the metaphysical qualities of the word Χώρα as inherited from Antiquity is, on its own, a considerable accomplishment.

The epithets Ἡ χώρα τοῦ ἀχωρήτου and Ἡ χώρα τῶν ζῶντων did have a long past, but as attributes on images of Christ and Virgin Mary in the way introduced by Theodore Metochites in his chef d’oeuvre, they had practically too little and insignificant future. 63 This, I believe, is due to the fact that, in the church of the Chora where they appeared, they were not identified with specific iconographic types, but were applied to different ones and integrated in the decorative program of the church.

On the contrary, the concept of χώρα, rooted in the national notion discussed above, has preserved the meaning of a utopian realm where beings and events that are impossible in this world, can ultimately find place and come into existence. This notion underlies Giorgos Seferis’s poem “ιὴ χώρα τοῦ ἄγουσίοντος.” There is an example from modern literature, which bears witness that the notion of “ἡ χώρα τῶν ζῶντων” has also survived to our days. In Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “Ariadne auf Naxos,” put into music by Richard Strauss, the aria es gibt ein Reichtum... (there is a realm...) makes clear reference to that realm of the dead (the literally opposite of “the realm of the living”) where Ariadne will find relief from the pain caused to her by Theseus.

“There is a realm, where all is clean: it has also a name: the realm of the dead.
Here nothing is clean! Here all is in complete disorder!
But soon a herald will come,
his name is Hermes.
With his wand he rules the souls
.....
Ah, of all the wild pains
the heart will be purified
.....
will set me free,
will give me back myself, ...
” 64

62 Ševčenko, “Metochites and Intellectual Trends,” op.cit. (n. 50), 51 55, especially 53: “... to expect traces of bold experimentation in the program of the Chora is to expect the unlikely. For Metochites as I know him, the Chora had to be recherche but conservative.” J. Meyendorf, “Spiritual Trends in Byzantium in the Late Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries,” in Underwood, The Kariye Djamii, vol. 4, 106: “As long as these new humanistic elements were coexisting peacefully with tradition, the results could be very remarkable and the Kariye Djamii is an example, in the field of art...” O. Demus, “The Style of the Kariye Djamii and its Place in the Development of Palaeologan Art,” in Underwood, The Kariye Djamii, vol. 4, 159: “... the Kariye phase would correspond to a humanistic ‘Late Renaissance’ with definite leanings toward mannerism.”
64 “Es gibt ein Reich, wo alles rein ist:
Es hat auch einen Namen:
Totentreich.
Hier ist nichts rein!
Hier kam alles zu allem!
Bald aber naht ein Bote,
In Dylan Thomas’s poem *And Death Shall Have No Dominion* we find a phrase from Apocalypse XXI 465 as the title, and at the beginning and the end of the stanzas. The phrase is understood metaphorically. By using this phrase, that is the equivalent of καὶ ὁ θάνατος οὐ σχήματι χώραν,66 Thomas allows space for the images in the collective memory of the humans who will live in the future:

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean
And the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

Yet another poem emerges from my memory of older readings. I cannot identify the author or the title. It was copied years ago and sent to me in a letter by a friend, now dead. It sounds precisely like the aspiration to an apocalyptic utopia, a chora where justice will be restored and make us happy after all. The third verse, especially, betrays direct influence from Apocalypse XV 2. In English the beginning of this poem could be rendered as follows:

“There is a realm and a time
where is all that could not be in our life
where the sea glitters like glass
with the colours of dreams trapped by our soul
from the legions of love in the foliage of the Infinite.
There then,

67

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Τάσος Τανούλας

ΧΩΡΑ: ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΕΣ ΟΨΕΙΣ ΜΙΑΣ ΠΛΑΤΩΝΙΚΗΣ ΙΔΕΑΣ

Η λέξη χώρα απαντάται σε επιγραφές παραστάσεων μνημειακής ένοχοφρασίας, για πρώτη φορά στο α’ τέταρτο του 14ου αιώνα, στη Μνή της Χώρας στην Κωνσταντινούπολη. Η επιγραφή ή χώρα του άρχοντος συνοδεύεται τη μορφή της Παναγίας σε δύο περιπτώσεις, ενώ η επιγραφή ή χώρα των ζώντων συνοδεύεται τη μορφή του Χριστού σε τρεις περιπτώσεις.

Έχει εντοπιστεί η καταγωγή της προσωνύμημα ή χώρα των ζώντων από τους Παλαιούς του Δαυίδ (114, 9). Μια έρευνα, όμως, στα σχόλια που έγραψε για τους Παλαιούς του Δαυίδ ο Μέγας Βασίλειος (4ος αι.) και ο Ευσέβιος Καισαρείας (3ος-4ος αι.), δείχνει ότι χώρα των ζώντων είναι η μετά θάνατον ζωή των ποιητών Χριστιανών, δηλαδή μια χριστιανική ουτοπία όπου οι ποιητές θα ζούσαν σε αιώνα μακαριστής. Τα σχόλια τους εμπνέονται από το χορό ΧΧΙ 3-6 της Άποκάλυψης του Ιωάννη, όμως ορισμάτων που χρησιμοποιεί προέρχονται από τον Τίμαιο του Πλάτωνα. Έχει ήδη αναγνωριστεί ότι η προσωνύμημα αυτή ή χώρα ιδιαίτερα προέρχεται από τον Ακάθιστο Ύμνο, και η επιμέρους άλλους διαπίστωσε, όπου το χώριν του άρχοντος του Κυρίου Αλεξανδρείας (4ος-5ος αι.). Αναφέρεται, όμως, σε παλαιότερες πηγές, βλέποντας ότι ο Ευσέβιος Καισαρείας, τουλάχιστον ένα αιώνα νωρίτερα, ορίζει ήμεσα, πλην όμως σαφώς, την Παναγία ως χώρα του άρχοντος, ενώ ο Κλήμης Αλεξανδρείας (2ος-3ος αι.), στους Σφυροκοπητές, ορίζει τη χώρα με καθαρά πλατωνικούς όρους. Επίσης, ο Κλήμης ορίζει τη χώρα ως δυσάλωτη, ενώ ο Πλάτωνας χρησιμοποιεί το ίδιο επίθετο για να ορίσει την ιστορία της νέας θρησκείας, σε επίπεδο τόσο εικονογραφικός όσο και λόγιος. Εν τέλει, ο πρωτογενής όρος χώρα, που ανταποκρίνεται σε μια έννοια αφηρημένη και αντιληπτή μόνο μέσω του λόγου, επικράτησε από τους δεύτερους αιώνες της ιστορίας της, παραμένοντας ως τέκνο του παλαιούς του Δαυίδ, ενώ ο Χριστός, το μοναδικό αντίγραφο του (πλατωνικού) αισθητού κόσμου, δηλαδή του δικού μας κόσμου που είναι αναγνωρίζεται με την Παναγία και της χώρας με καθαρά πλατωνικούς όρους. Ηλέξη μνημειακής ζωγραφικής, για πρώτη φορά στο α’ τέταρτο του Δαυίδ, ορίζει τη χώρα τοῦ ἀχωρήτου του Δαυίδ (114, 9).

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στο Σύμβολο της Πίστεως ονομάζεται μονογενής υιός του Πατρός. Η μορφή της δεομένης Παναγίας με τον Χριστό μέσα σε μετάλλιο στο στήθος της, όπως εικονίζεται στον εξωνάρθηκα του καθολικού της Μονής της Χώρας, φαίνεται να εικονογραφεί ιδαιτέρως την ιδέα της χώρας του άχωρητου, όπου ο Χριστός συνελήφθη και κυανοφόρηθηκε, για το λόγο αυτό και συμβολίζει την ενσάρκωσή του. Με της άπειρες μεταμορφώσεις στις οποίες φαίνεται να υπόκειται η ιδανικά την ιδέα της χώρας τοῦ ἀχωρήτου, όπου ο Χριστός συνελήφθη και κυανοφόρηθηκε, για το λόγο αυτό και συμβολίζει την ενσάρκωσή του. Με τις άπειρες μεταμορφώσεις στις οποίες η Παναγία εικονίζεται ή αναφέρεται σε κείμενα.

Ο Θεόδωρος Μετοχίτης, κτήτωρ της μονής, εκτός από εξέχουσα πολιτική προσωπικότητα, ήταν και ένας από τους επιφανέστερους και πολυμαθέστερους διανοουμένους του Βυζαντίου. Θεωρούσε ότι η μονή, η βιβλιοθήκη, η αναμόρφωση της αρχιτεκτονικής του ναού και ο εικαστικός διάκοσμος ήταν σπουδαία επιτεύγματα, αντιπροσωπεύοντα σπουδαότερες και πιο αξιόπιστες προσωνυμίες του Χριστού και της Παναγίας. Αυτή πρέπει να είναι και η αιτία για το γεγονός ότι οι συγκεκριμένες προσωνυμίες δεν εφαρμόστηκαν ξανά σε εικονογραφικά προγράμματα ναών, παρά μόνο σε ένα μικρό ναό στη σημερινή Αλβανία, όπου απεφέρθη η επιγραφή η Χώρα τοῦ άχωρητου. Ο Μετοχίτης δεν φρόντισε να συνδέσει ένα ιδιαίτερο εικονογραφικό τύπο με καθεμία από τις παραπάνω προσωνυμίες του Χριστού και της Παναγίας. Αυτή πρέπει να είναι και η αιτία για το γεγονός ότι οι συγκεκριμένες επιγραφές δεν εφαρμόστηκαν ξανά σε εικονογραφικά προγράμματα ναών, παρά μόνο σε ένα μικρό ναό στη σημερινή Αλβανία, όπου απεφέρθη η επιγραφή η Χώρα τοῦ άχωρητου. Εντούτοις, η λέξη χώρα, στην ελληνική γλώσσα, αλλά και στις ιερογραφίες της σε άλλες ευρωπαϊκές γλώσσες, εξακολουθεί να διατηρεί, ιδιαίτερα στην ποίηση, τον υπερβατικό χαρακτήρα που συνδέεται με την πλατωνική και νεοπλατωνική παράδοση, καθώς και με την παράδοση που καλλιεργήθηκε από τους Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας στην Ύστερη Αρχαιότητα.