SAINT SOPHIA OF KYIV AS A SACRED SPACE OF RELIGIOUS MEMORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

This article examines Saint Sophia of Kyiv as a sacred space where religious memory, Christian symbolism, sacred geography, and national identity intersect. Using historical, hermeneutic, cultural-studies, and discourse approaches, it analyzes the cathedral's architecture and iconography, particularly the Virgin Orans, the "Unshakable Wall," and the concepts of Kyiv as the Second and New Jerusalem. The study demonstrates how medieval Christian meanings have been preserved, transformed, and reactivated within cultural and religious memory. It argues that, particularly during Russia's war against Ukraine, Saint Sophia functions as a dynamic symbolic space where sacred meanings interact with contemporary national identity, historical continuity, and cultural resilience.

Keywords: Saint Sophia of Kyiv, religious memory, religious space, symbolic meanings, sacred geography, alienation, New Jerusalem, cultural memory, national identity.

Introduction

In contemporary humanities research on religion, increasing attention is being paid to the study of symbolic meanings, sacred spaces, and religious memory as important mechanisms in the formation and transformation of collective identity. In this context, religious sanctuaries appear not merely as places of worship or objects of cultural heritage, but as multidimensional symbolic spaces in which religious ideas, historical memory, ritual practices, cultural codes, and models of social self-identification interact. Their meaning does not remain unchanged but is reinterpreted in accordance with confessional, political, and cultural transformations,

enabling sacred heritage to preserve its original religious semantic core while simultaneously acquiring new social meanings.

A special place in this process belongs to sacred centers that have combined religious, cultural, and social functions over long historical periods. Such spaces are capable of accumulating different layers of memory and forming enduring religious meanings that provide a sense of historical continuity and belonging to a particular cultural and religious tradition. For the analysis of religious memory, it is essential to examine not only the original meaning of a sacred symbol or space, but also the mechanisms of its subsequent reception, reinterpretation, and incorporation into new models of collective identity.

One of the most representative examples of such a sacred space is Saint Sophia of Kyiv, a prominent monument of the Christian culture of Kyivan Rus and one of the key symbolic centers of Ukrainian religious and cultural memory. Throughout its centuries-long history, the cathedral functioned as a place of worship, a space for princely and ecclesiastical representation, and a center of book culture, education, and social communication. Its architectural composition, monumental painting, iconographic heritage, biblical inscriptions, and associated religious ideas formed a complex system of sacred meanings that was not limited to its liturgical function. Its inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List[1] further confirms its outstanding universal value and significance beyond national boundaries.

In this context, particular significance belongs to the image of Sophia as a kind of sacred text whose semantics are revealed through the interaction of architecture, iconography, liturgical practice, and historical memory. The spatial organization of the church, the image of the Virgin Orans, the biblical motif of the unshakable city, numerical symbolism, and the concepts of "Kyiv as the Second Jerusalem" and the "New Jerusalem" form an interconnected system of religious meanings. Their analysis makes it possible to trace how the medieval Christian semantics of sacred space were transformed throughout history and incorporated into broader models of cultural national memory.

It is particularly important that the contemporary meanings of Saint Sophia of Kyiv cannot be projected back onto the period of its creation. National, political, and cultural interpretations of the cathedral developed gradually, accumulating on top of its original Christian semantics. Therefore, methodologically, it is appropriate to regard Saint Sophia as a dynamic symbolic space whose meaning changed in accordance with its historical context.

[1] Kyiv: Saint-Sophia Cathedral and Related Monastic Buildings, Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/527

Such an approach makes it possible to avoid anachronisms while also explaining why the same sacred image can remain meaningful to different generations and acquire new meanings while retaining its connection to religious tradition.

This issue has acquired particular relevance in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, when the religious heritage of Kyivan Rus became one of the objects of competition among different historical interpretations, political claims, and religious meanings.[2] The interpretation of the Kyivan Rus past is used not only in academic discussions, but also in processes of political legitimation, the construction of models of historical continuity, and the substantiation of ideas about a shared religious and cultural space. Under such conditions, Saint Sophia of Kyiv acquires particular significance as a sacred center through which questions of religious continuity, historical agency, cultural belonging, and national identity are reactivated.[3]

The contemporary reactivation of Saint Sophia's symbolic potential cannot be reduced merely to a contrast between Ukrainian and Russian historical interpretations. Equally important is its incorporation into practices of state ceremonial, public diplomacy, and social communication. The use of the space of Saint Sophia for international ceremonies, official addresses, and the symbolic representation of Ukrainian statehood demonstrates how a medieval sacred space is incorporated into contemporary forms of political and cultural communication. Particularly indicative is the reference to the image of the Virgin Orans and the biblical motif of the unshakable city, which in wartime acquire new interpretations associated with protection, resilience, and collective solidarity.

The existing body of research on Saint Sophia of Kyiv encompasses a broad range of issues related to the history of its construction, its architectural and iconographic heritage, the semantics of Divine Wisdom, the image of the Virgin Orans, monumental painting, and the formation of the sacred topography of medieval Kyiv. In particular, in the contemporary studies of Ruslana Demchuk, the organization of Saint Sophia's sacred space is analyzed through the categories of temple consciousness, iconic thinking, and hierotopy, while Kyiv is interpreted within the framework of the Second Jerusalem model. The researcher demonstrates the

[2] O. Hordiichuk. "The Ideological and Ontological Causes of Russia's War on Ukraine. West versus East, Tyranny versus Democracy." *ETHNIC IN PROGRESS.* 2023. 14 (1). 4–23.

[3] L. O. Fylypovych, V. V. Tytarenko, O. V. Horkusha. "The Challenges of the Russian-Ukrainian War for Ukrainian Religious Studies: Methodological Aspects." *Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University Journal. Philosophical Sciences*. 2023. Vol. 2 (94). 45–52.

connection between the sacred status of Saint Sophia as the House of Divine Wisdom and the symbolic sacralization of Kyiv as a Christian city.[4]

Contemporary Ukrainian humanities also investigate the relationship between Saint Sophia's sacred space and processes of historical and national identification. In a study devoted to the Baroque ensemble of Saint Sophia of Kyiv, R. Demchuk traces the continuity between the Old Rus and Baroque iconographic structures of the cathedral, considering Sophia the Wisdom of God as a religious phenomenon, a marker of the Eastern Christian tradition, and an important component of Ukrainian cultural identity.[5] Thus, existing research provides substantial coverage of Saint Sophia's sacred semantics, its hierotopy, imagery, and particular historical forms of cultural representation.

At the same time, the predominant scholarly focus on the genesis, architecture, and original symbolism of Saint Sophia leaves room for further analysis of the mechanisms of long-term reception and transformation of its sacred semantics. The question of how architectural, iconographic, and biblical symbols formed within the medieval Christian context are incorporated into later structures of religious and cultural memory and acquire new identificational meanings remains insufficiently studied. Particular attention should be paid to the contemporary reactivation of these meanings and interpretations in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, when the sacred heritage of Kyivan Rus becomes not only a subject of historiographical interpretations but also a source for constructing models of religious continuity, cultural belonging, and historical legitimacy.[6]

Accordingly, the research approach of this article does not consist in reconstructing the original meaning of individual symbols of Saint Sophia of Kyiv as such, but in analyzing their semantic continuity and transformation. The focus is on the transition from medieval sacred semantics to their consolidation in cultural and religious memory and their subsequent reactivation in contemporary models of national identity.

The key scholarly issue is to identify the mechanisms through which the originally religious symbols, sacred images, and spatial structures of Saint Sophia of Kyiv become incorporated into processes of cultural memory formation and acquire new meanings under

[4] Р. В. Демчук. **"**Храмова свідомість та іконічне мислення у вимірі давньоруської культури." **[**Temple Consciousness and Iconic Thinking in the Context of the Culture of Kyivan Rus**].** *Наукові записки НаУКМА. Історія і теорія культури*. 2024. Т. 7. 113–116.

[5] Р. В. Демчук. **"**Бароко Софії Київської у контексті репрезентації національної ідентичності." **[**The Baroque of Saint Sophia of Kyiv in the Context of the Representation of National Identity**].** *Культурологічна думка***.** 2024. № 26 (2). 36–39.

[6] O. Mishalova, O. Hordiichuk, O. Sokolovskyi. Russia's War in Ukraine as a "War for Identity" and Appropriation of Cultural Tradition. *ETHICS IN PROGRESS*. 2024. *15*(1). 73.

changed historical conditions. Of particular research interest is the relationship between the stability and transformation of sacred semantics: how a religious symbol can retain a connection with the original Christian tradition while simultaneously functioning as an element of broader cultural, political, and national frameworks of meaning.

The purpose of the article is to provide a comprehensive study of Saint Sophia of Kyiv as a sacred and symbolic space in which religious memory, Christian iconography, sacred geography, and contemporary models of collective identity interact. Particular attention is devoted to the analysis of the cathedral's architectural and iconographic structure, the image of the Virgin Orans, the biblical symbolism of the unshakable city, the concepts of "Kyiv as the Second Jerusalem" and the "New Jerusalem," as well as the historical transformation of the meanings associated with them. A separate aspect of the study is the contemporary reactivation of these meanings and interpretations in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, state symbolic policy, and competition over the interpretation of the sacred heritage of Kyivan Rus.

The methodological foundation of the study draws on historical, hermeneutic, and cultural-studies approaches to the analysis of religious memory, complemented by elements of discourse analysis. The combination of these methodological perspectives makes it possible to regard Saint Sophia of Kyiv neither as a static object of cultural heritage nor merely as a national symbol, but as a dynamic space of interaction between the sacred and the social. From this perspective, religious meanings are not reduced to a political or ideological function, while contemporary national interpretations are regarded as the result of the long-term historical transformation of the original Christian semantics. This methodological perspective makes it possible to determine the place of Saint Sophia of Kyiv in the processes of religious and cultural memory formation, explain the resilience of its symbolic meaning, and trace the mechanisms of its contemporary reactivation.

The Sacred Space of Saint Sophia of Kyiv within the System of Religious and Symbolic Meanings

Saint Sophia of Kyiv occupies a special place in the religious and cultural history of Ukraine, combining the functions of a Christian sanctuary, a historic sacred center, a masterpiece of monumental art, and a symbolic space of collective memory. Its significance developed over a long historical period during which the original liturgical function of the church interacted with political, cultural, and educational practices. It is precisely this multifunctionality that makes it possible to regard Saint Sophia not merely as a material object of the Christian heritage of Kyivan Rus but as a sacred space in which religious meanings

acquired historical continuity and became incorporated into processes of collective identity formation.

Saint Sophia of Kyiv is the oldest surviving monumental stone monument of Kyivan Rus and contains a unique ensemble of approximately 3,000 m² of authentic eleventh-century mosaics and frescoes. The exceptional historical, architectural, and cultural value of the complex has received international recognition. In 1990, Saint Sophia of Kyiv, together with the associated monastic buildings, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.[7] In 2009, the 35th session of the UNESCO General Conference supported the commemoration of the millennium of the founding of Saint Sophia of Kyiv.[8] The international institutionalization of the memory of Saint Sophia simultaneously testifies to the extension of its symbolic significance beyond the national or confessional context and the incorporation of the monument into the broader European and global discourse of cultural heritage.



Figure 1. Saint Sophia Cathedral of the 11th century. Reconstruction by M. Kresalnyi, V. Volkov, and Yu. Aseiev (2026)[9]

[7] Kyiv: Saint-Sophia Cathedral and Related Monastic Buildings, Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/527

[8] Saint Sophia Cathedral, Kyiv. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Sophia_Cathedral%2C_Kyiv?utm

[9] Photo from the author's personal archive (Viktoriia Omelchenko).

The architectural image of Saint Sophia developed within the context of the reception of the Byzantine Christian tradition and its adaptation to the cultural environment of Kyivan Rus. The church's composition is based on a cross-in-square system, yet its specific realization demonstrates a distinctive combination of Byzantine architectural models with local artistic and building traditions. According to art historian and head of restoration works at Saint Sophia Cathedral Luka Kalenichenko, the Byzantine artistic tradition in the lands of Kyivan Rus underwent creative reinterpretation, contributing to the formation of distinctive features of monumental art. These included the synthesis of different artistic techniques the simultaneous use of mosaics, frescoes, inlays, and marble elements; the scale of the monumental painting, which encompassed the architectural space from the vaults to the lower sections of the walls; as well as the interaction of polychromy and polylithy, through which the artistic program of the church combined the monumentality of sacred images with a rich color scheme.[10]



Figure 2. Fragments of Wall Painting of Saint Sophia of Kyiv During the Restoration Period (1952-1962)[11]

[10] Л. П. Калиниченко. "Мистецтво Київської Русі." [Art of Kyivan Rus.] (Наукова праця, авторизований машинопис, Ф. 241, Оп. 1, Спр. 6). Центральний державний архів-музей літератури і мистецтва України, 1945. 27.

[11] Л. П. Калиниченко. "Фотографії деталей настінного живопису Софії Київської після реставрації." [Photographs of Details of Wall Paintings of Saint Sophia of Kyiv After Restoration]. Центральний державний

From the perspective of the analysis of sacred space, the architecture of Saint Sophia appears not as a neutral environment for worship but as a component of an integral system of sacred communication. The spatial organization of the church, its monumental painting, and its iconographic program ensured a symbolic experience of the Christian worldview. Architecture in this case performed not only a structural or aesthetic function but also a religious-semiotic one. Movement through the interior of the church simultaneously implied entry into a hierarchically organized sacred universe. This approach corresponds to the research of R. Demchuk, who regards the sacred organization of the church as a particular form of temple consciousness and iconic thinking, in which architectural and visual space appears not merely as a material embodiment of church architecture but as an integral system for the formation and experience of sacred meanings.[12]

Originally, the church was five-aisled and surrounded by open galleries, which were transformed into enclosed interior spaces as a result of subsequent reconstructions. A distinctive feature of its construction technique was the use of plinthite, a thin slab-like fired brick, in combination with natural stone. According to the interpretation of Myroslav Popovych, the church's design is based on principles of harmony and proportion that symbolically represent the transition from chaos to an ordered cosmos structured according to a sacred order.[13] In such a reading, the church can be regarded as a model of the Christian universe in which material space is subordinated to religious semantics.

The symbolic-semantic structure of Saint Sophia is directly connected with the Christian concept of Divine Wisdom. At the same time, the interpretation of the dedication of Saint Sophia itself, as well as the relationship between Sophianic, Christological, and Marian semantics requires consideration of the complexity of the medieval theological tradition and cannot be reduced to an unambiguous identification of Wisdom with the Virgin Mary. In the Christian tradition, the image of Sophia as the Wisdom of God has primarily biblical and Christological connotations, while Marian symbolism is incorporated into this system through the understanding of the Virgin Mary as the one through whom the incarnation of the Logos

архів-музей літератури і мистецтва України, Київ, Україна. Фонд № 241, Опис № 1, Справа № 118, 81 документ, 81 аркуш.

[12] Р. В. Демчук. **"**Храмова свідомість та іконічне мислення у вимірі давньоруської культури." **[**Temple Consciousness and Iconic Thinking in the Context of the Culture of Kyivan Rus**].** *Наукові записки НаУКМА. Історія і теорія культури*. 2024. Т. 7. 110–114.

[13] М. Попович. "Русь у культурно-політичній перспективі України. У *Нарис історії культури України*." [Rus' in the Cultural and Political Perspective of Ukraine. In *An Outline History of Ukrainian Culture*]. АртЕк, 1998. 96.

took place. It is precisely the interaction of Christological, ecclesiological, and Marian semantics that creates the complex structure of the sacred meanings of Saint Sophia Cathedral.

The architectural composition of the church is also interpreted by scholars through a system of numerical Christian symbolism. The central group of domes is associated with the image of Christ and the Evangelists, while the thirteen domes are traditionally interpreted as symbolizing Christ surrounded by the twelve apostles.[14] In some interpretations, this composition is simultaneously associated with the idea of the Christian consolidation of Rus'. The seven domes of the western part of the cathedral are associated with the biblical image of the House of Wisdom built upon seven pillars. The number seven could acquire multiple meanings in medieval Christian symbolism, including ecclesiological and Marian ones, while its semantics were revealed through the relationship between three as a symbol of divine order and four as a symbol of the created world.[15] It is important, however, to regard such numerological interpretations as part of the religious hermeneutics of sacred architecture rather than as the sole explanation of the church's structural organization.



Figure 3. Architectural and spatial composition of the interior of Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv (2025)[16]

[14] Н. Нікітенко. "Собор святої Софії в Києві." [Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv]. Техніка, 2002. 25.
[15] Ibid. 22–23.
[16] Photo from the author's personal archive (Viktoriia Omelchenko).

The interior of Saint Sophia was decorated by masters associated with the Byzantine artistic tradition, and the techniques they employed demonstrate continuity with Late Antique and Hellenistic principles of monumental art. The structural elements of the church interact organically with decorative forms, niches, windows, columns, meander ornaments, and crosses formed from plinthite.[17] For the analysis of sacred semantics, however, the internal hierarchy of the iconographic program is more important than a purely artistic characterization. The arrangement of sacred images from the dome down to the lower registers of the walls reflects a vertically organized model of the Christian cosmos in which the heavenly, ecclesiastical, and earthly levels form an interconnected symbolic structure.

Within such a system, the sacred space of the church appears not simply as a collection of images but as an integral system of visually represented religious meanings. Their hierarchical organization from the upper parts of the church to the lower registers reflects the structure of sacred reality and defines the place of the human being in the Christian worldview. Iconography, architecture, and the liturgical use of space interact to form a specific religious experience in which Christian doctrinal propositions receive visual and spatial expression.

A special place in this symbolic system belongs to the image (icon) of the Virgin Orans in the central apse. The placement of the monumental mosaic in the heart of the altar space determines its special role in the iconographic program of the church. Above the image is a Greek inscription: “God is in its midst; it shall not be moved; God will help it when morning dawns” (Psalm 46:5). In its original biblical context, this text refers to the city of God, yet its incorporation into the iconographic program of Saint Sophia created possibilities for a broader symbolic interpretation of Kyiv’s sacred space.[18]

It is here that the mechanism of semantic transfer becomes apparent. The biblical image of a sacred city protected by God interacts with the concrete urban space of medieval Kyiv. Through such a transfer, the sacred topography of biblical history could become a model for interpreting a local political and religious center. In subsequent cultural memory, this semantics acquired new forms and contributed to the formation of a lasting connection between the Orans, Saint Sophia, Kyiv, and the idea of divine protection of the city.

[17] Ibid. 20–21.
[18] Ibid. 33.

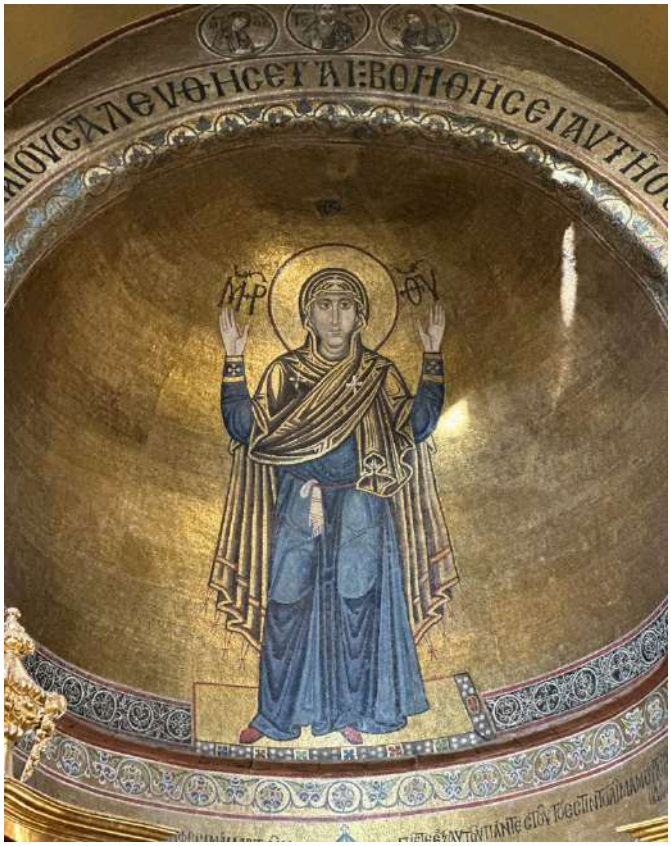


Figure 4. Icon of the Virgin Orans[19]

Related to this is the image of the Orans as the "Unshakable Wall," formed in cultural and religious memory. Its significance extends beyond its original iconographic function and gradually acquires the character of an independent symbol. The widespread notion that "as long as the Unshakable Wall stands, Kyiv stands" demonstrates a characteristic mechanism of transformation of sacred symbolism. A specific Marian image becomes a symbol of the city's inviolability and, under contemporary conditions, also of Ukraine's resilience.[20] It is important to emphasize that this is not a matter of an unchanged meaning embedded in the image from the time of its creation, but rather a historical process of expanding and reinterpreting its semantics.

The mosaic of the Virgin Orans is one of the central images of the entire monumental ensemble of Saint Sophia. According to Luka Kalenichenko, the mosaic decoration of the cathedral demonstrates an exceptionally high level of artistic mastery and may be compared with outstanding ensembles of the Byzantine tradition, including monuments in Venice, Ravenna, and Palermo. The stylistics of Saint Sophia's monumental painting testify to a

[19] Photo from the author's personal archive (Viktoriia Omelchenko).
[20] Ibid. 33.

profound reception of artistic principles inherited by Byzantium from the Late Antique and Hellenistic traditions.[21]

From an iconographic perspective, the Orans is represented as the Virgin Mary with her hands raised in a gesture of prayer. The visual semantics of the image are constructed, in particular, through the interaction of the blue chiton and golden maphorion. The color structure of the image emphasizes the special place of the Virgin Mary in Christian tradition. Its iconographic semantics are revealed within a broader Christological and ecclesiological context, combining the motifs of the Incarnation, the Church, Marian intercession, and prayerful mediation.

Important for understanding the cultic status of the image is the research of V. Korniienko, D. Kaporikov, and V. Shevchuk. On the basis of archaeographic evidence and field research, the authors draw attention to traces of fastenings for metal elements that may have adorned the image, including a halo, decorative appliqués on the hands, neck ornaments, and crosses on the forehead and shoulders. Although the metal components themselves have not survived, traces of their attachment and historical evidence allow researchers to hypothesize about the special veneration of this image and to reconstruct certain elements of its historical presentation within the tradition of Orthodox veneration of icons.[22]

These material testimonies are significant not only for reconstructing the original appearance of the image. They point to the interaction between the monumental image, religious practice, and the community of believers. It is precisely the practice of veneration that transforms the sacred image from an element of the church's monumental program into an active object of religious communication. Thus, the semantics of the Orans are formed at the intersection of the iconographic program, liturgical space, practices of veneration, and subsequent cultural memory.

The architectural and iconographic system of Saint Sophia as a whole reproduces the model of sacred cosmos characteristic of medieval Christianity. The vertical orientation of the church space symbolically directs the human being toward the transcendent, while the horizontal organization of space incorporates the community into a sacredly ordered earthly world. In scholarly interpretations, the thirteen domes are associated with Christ and the twelve

[21] Л. Калиниченко. "Мистецтво Київської Русі." [Art of Kyivan Rus.] Наукова праця, авторизований машинопис, Ф. 241, Оп. 1, Спр. 6). Центральний державний архів-музей літератури і мистецтва України, 1945. 32.

[22] В. Корнієнко, Д. Капоріков, В. Шевчук. "Свідчення особливого пошанування фрескового образу Богородиці Оранти у Софії Київській." [Evidence of the Special Veneration of the Fresco Image of the Virgin Orans in Saint Sophia of Kyiv]. *Сіверянський літопис.* 2021. 6. 44.

apostles, while the combination of different spatial and numerical structures is regarded as a way of visualizing an integral medieval worldview.

A special place in the symbolic space of Saint Sophia belongs to the concept "Kyiv as the Second Jerusalem" or the "New Jerusalem." It should be regarded not merely as a political ideologeme but above all as a form of medieval sacred geography. Christian tradition allowed for the symbolic transfer of the sacred status of biblical centers to new Christian capitals. From this perspective, Jerusalem functioned not only as a specific geographical location but also as an archetype of a sacred city, a model of an ordered Christian space, and a symbol of the presence of God among God's people.

This approach is confirmed by contemporary studies of Kyiv's sacred space. R. Demchuk regards Saint Sophia of Kyiv as a key element of the hierotopic model of the medieval city, within which the sacredness of the House of Divine Wisdom was symbolically extended to Kyiv. In this model, Kyiv as the Second Jerusalem appears as an intermediary between the biblical Jerusalem of the sacred past and the Heavenly Jerusalem of the eschatological future.[23] Such an interpretation makes it possible to regard the concept of the New Jerusalem not merely as a political metaphor but as a way of sacredly structuring space and historical time.

The formation of the Saint Sophia sacred complex in Kyiv can be interpreted in the context of the incorporation of Rus into the Christian symbolic universe. Following the Christianization of Rus, Kyiv's sacred topography was intended not only to meet the cultic needs of the new Christian state but also to represent its new religious and political status. Within this system, Saint Sophia functioned as one of the central spatial symbols of Christianization and of a new model of collective self-identification. This process involved was not simply the borrowing of Byzantine architectural forms but the incorporation of Kyiv into the broader symbolic space of the Christian *oikoumene*.

The dating of the foundation and principal stages of construction of Saint Sophia of Kyiv remains the subject of a longstanding scholarly debate. One hypothesis dates it to 1011–1018, associating the beginning of the cathedral's creation with the reign of Volodymyr the Great and the completion of the main stage of its formation with the period of Yaroslav the Wise. At the same time, alternative chronological models are also represented in the scholarly literature, and therefore the question of the exact date of the foundation and construction of Saint Sophia cannot be regarded as definitively resolved. For the purposes of this study, what is fundamental

[23] Р. В. Демчук. **"**Храмова свідомість та іконічне мислення у вимірі давньоруської культури." **[**Temple Consciousness and Iconic Thinking in the Context of the Culture of Kyivan Rus**].** *Наукові записки НаУКМА. Історія і теорія культури*. 2024. Т. 7. 115–116.

is not establishing a definitive chronology of construction but reconstructing the symbolic significance of the cathedral in the process of forming the sacred topography of Christian Kyiv.

Within the early-dating hypothesis, particular interest is attached to the calendrical interpretation of the date of the church's consecration, May 11, 1018, which is correlated with the day of the consecration of Constantinople. This correlation is interpreted by scholars as a possible element of the symbolic program of sacralizing Kyiv and representing it as a Christian capital.[24] The presence of graffiti dated to 1022, in turn, is used as evidence that the cathedral was already functioning in the early 1020s.[25]

For the medieval person, Saint Sophia was not only the principal church and a space of liturgical action but also an important center of cultural, intellectual, and socio-political life.[26] This multifunctionality of sacred space is fundamental for understanding its subsequent symbolic significance. The religious function of the church was not isolated from other spheres of medieval life; sacred space could simultaneously serve as a place for the representation of power, book culture, education, and communication.

The presence of centers of book-related activity and a library within the cathedral complex demonstrates the characteristic combination of religious tradition and educational activity in medieval Christian culture. A particularly valuable source is the graffiti of Saint Sophia, which contain numerous testimonies concerning the religiosity, language, social relations, legal culture, and everyday life of the people of Kyivan Rus'. In the context of research on religious behavior, the graffiti are also important because they make it possible to move from the analysis of ecclesiastical culture to direct manifestations of individual communication between a person and sacred space.

Saint Sophia was also incorporated into the system of the socio-political life of Kyivan Rus, particularly in the context of dynastic marriage ties, which were an important mechanism for integrating the princely dynasty into the political space of medieval Europe. During the reign of Yaroslav the Wise (1019–1054), the dynasty's matrimonial ties extended to leading European courts. Yaroslav himself was married to Ingigerd, daughter of the Swedish king Olaf; his daughter Anna of Kyiv became Queen of France, the wife of Henry I; Elizabeth became

[24] Час заснування Софії Київської. Пристрасті довкола мілленіума. [The Time of the Foundation of Saint Sophia of Kyiv: Controversies Surrounding the Millennium]. К.: Горобець, 2010. 14.
[25] Ibid. 17.
[26] Н. С. Картамишева. "Щодо етапів перебудов Софійського собору: план дослідження та перші результати." [Regarding the Stages of Rebuilding of Saint Sophia Cathedral: Research Plan and First Results]. У Н. Нікітенко (Ред.), *Софія Київська у новітніх дослідженнях. Колективна монографія*. ПрАТ «Вінницька обласна друкарня», 2018. 21.

the wife of the Norwegian king Harald Hardrada; and Anastasia became the wife of the Hungarian king Andrew I.[27]

In the context of the study of Saint Sophia, the significance of these dynastic ties lies not only in their foreign-policy function. They contributed to the formation of the image of Kyiv as one of the legitimate centers of Christian Europe, while Saint Sophia served as a sacred representation of this status. In this sense, the cathedral can be regarded as a space in which the Christian legitimation of princely power, the international representation of the state, and religious symbolism formed a single semantic complex.

The history of Saint Sophia also demonstrates mechanisms for preserving sacred heritage under conditions of political catastrophes and radical transformations. In the 1930s, during the period of Stalinist anti-religious policy and large-scale destruction of religious buildings, the cathedral was threatened with destruction as part of the redevelopment of central Kyiv. The preservation of Saint Sophia in subsequent cultural memory acquired significance as an example of the survival of sacred heritage under the Soviet anti-religious project. The history of the monument is also associated with the dramatic events of the Second World War and the activities of Oleksa Povstenko, director of the Saint Sophia reserve.[28]

The very fact that the church survived despite changes in states, political regimes, confessional structures, and cultural-policy models contributed to the formation of a particular sense of historical continuity. In this respect, resilience should be attributed not to the "nation" itself as an abstract subject, but to cultural and religious memory, which is capable of preserving and reactivating symbolic objects even after a radical transformation of their original social context.

Throughout its history, Saint Sophia of Kyiv has repeatedly become a space of intersection between the sacred and the political. From the princely period and forms of social life associated with Saint Sophia Square to the proclamation of the Act of Unification of the Ukrainian People's Republic and the West Ukrainian People's Republic on January 22, 1919, the space surrounding the cathedral was incorporated into key practices of political representation and state-building memory. It is important, however, that this political function did not replace the sacred significance of Saint Sophia but was layered upon it. It was precisely

[27] М. Ф. Котляр. "Дипломатія Київської Русі." [Diplomacy of Kyivan Rus']. У В. А. Смолій (Ред.), *Енциклопедія історії України* (Т. 2). Наукова думка, 2004. https://surl.li/mfadpw

[28] В. Агеєва. "Проти культурної амнезії. Есеї про національну пам'ять та ідентичність." [Against Cultural Amnesia. Essays on National Memory and Identity], 2025. 10.

the prolonged interaction of these semantic levels that created the conditions for the cathedral to become one of the most recognizable symbols of Ukraine's historical continuity.

A special stage in the history of the sanctuary is associated with the activities of Metropolitan Petro Mohyla. The restoration of Saint Sophia in the seventeenth century was part of a broader process of institutional, liturgical, and intellectual renewal of Orthodoxy in the Metropolis of Kyiv. The organization of liturgical publications, the development of education, and the restoration of ecclesiastical structures contributed to the restoration of Saint Sophia's status as one of the important centers of Orthodox religious life. In this sense, the Mohyla restoration can be regarded as an example of the reactivation of sacred memory, in which an appeal to the Old Rus Christian heritage became a means of affirming contemporary ecclesiastical identity.

The subsequent restoration of the cathedral with the support of Hetman Ivan Mazepa also had not only architectural but symbolic significance. The restoration of Saint Sophia in the aesthetics of Ukrainian Baroque of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries demonstrates a characteristic mechanism of cultural continuity, whereby a medieval sanctuary is not preserved in an unchanged form but reinterpreted in accordance with a new historical era.[29] R. Demchuk, analyzing the Baroque program of the paintings of Saint Sophia, traces its semantic continuity with the Old Rus ensemble and demonstrates that Sophianic semantics received a new expression in the early modern cultural and religious context. Such transformation demonstrates not a rupture with the preceding sacred tradition but its historical redefinition, which at the same time contributed to the representation of cultural identity.[30] In this case, Saint Sophia became one of the means of symbolically connecting the Hetmanate with the Kyivan Rus tradition, while the restoration of the sacred space simultaneously performed a function of historical legitimation. Following the proclamation of Ukraine's independence in 1991, what occurred was not so much a reinterpretation of Saint Sophia of Kyiv from a religious sanctuary into a national symbol as an enhancement of its significance as a site of national memory and a symbol of Ukraine's historical agency.

Particularly indicative in this process is the contemporary perception of the Virgin Orans. Her image increasingly functions not only within the Orthodox iconographic tradition but also in the broader cultural sphere as a symbol of the protection of Kyiv and Ukraine. This makes

[29] Софія Київська. ЮНЕСКО. [Sofiia Kyivska. UNESCO]. https://sofiia-kyivska.ua/unesco/?utm

[30] Р. В. Демчук. "Бароко Софії Київської у контексті репрезентації національної ідентичності." [The Baroque of Saint Sophia of Kyiv in the Context of the Representation of National Identity]**.** *Культурологічна думка*. 2024. № 26 (2). 35–39.

it possible to speak of an expansion of the field of social reception of the symbol; however, the concept of a "non-confessional protective amulet" requires cautious use. The Christian Marian semantics of the Orans remain a basic semantic level of the image while simultaneously being supplemented by cultural and national-symbolic connotations.

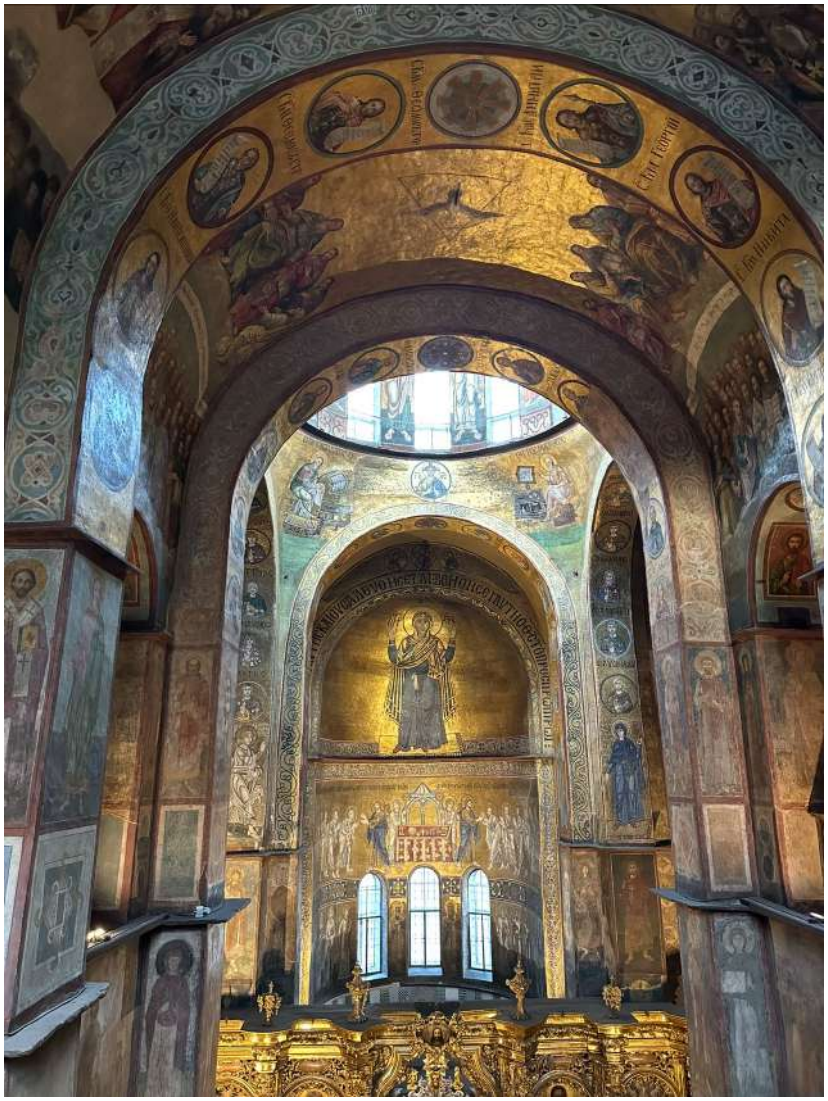


Figure 5. Interior view of the central nave of Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv (2025)[31]

The contemporary transformation of the symbolic status of Saint Sophia of Kyiv occurs within a broader process of rethinking the place of religious heritage in Ukrainian society. At the same time, the specificity of Saint Sophia lies in the fact that its social reactivation is achieved through direct reference to historically formed sacred semantics. The image of the Virgin Orans, the biblical inscription concerning the unshakable city, the conception of Saint

[31] Photo from the author's personal archive (Viktoriia Omelchenko).

Sophia as the spiritual center of Kyiv, and concepts of historical continuity continue to function as recognizable elements of contemporary symbolic discourse.

In this process, the field of reception of sacred images expands without their necessarily undergoing secularization. The Orans may simultaneously be perceived as a Marian image of the Christian tradition, a historical monument of monumental art, and a symbol of the protection of Kyiv and Ukraine. Such coexistence of different semantic levels demonstrates that the contemporary national symbolism of Saint Sophia does not emerge independently of its religious foundation but is formed through the reinterpretation of an already existing sacred resource.

For this reason, the contemporary use of Saint Sophia of Kyiv should be analyzed not as a simple process of transferring the sanctuary from the sphere of religion to the sphere of politics, but as an interaction of several regimes of memory. Religious memory maintains the connection with Christian tradition; cultural memory establishes Saint Sophia as a historical symbol; national memory incorporates this symbol into models of historical continuity and collective self-identification. Their intersection creates a multilayered semantic structure that explains Saint Sophia's ability to remain relevant in fundamentally different historical and social contexts. In this respect, the mechanism of Saint Sophia's functioning as a space of memory corresponds to the concepts of J. Assmann and D. Hervieu-Léger, according to which materially and symbolically anchored memory contributes to the preservation and transmission of religious memory from generation to generation, while its reactivation sustains the idea of continuity in cultural and religious tradition.[32]

Such reactivation became particularly pronounced after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion.[33] The National Conservation Area "Saint Sophia of Kyiv" has increasingly functioned as a space of public diplomacy and state ceremonial. An illustrative example is the practice, initiated in 2022, of foreign ambassadors presenting their credentials to the President of Ukraine in the interiors of Saint Sophia.[34] The choice of this particular space for the diplomatic ritual has symbolic significance. Contemporary Ukrainian statehood represents

[32] J. Assmann. "*Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011. 36–42; D.Hervieu-Léger. "*Religion as a Chain of Memory*." Cambridge: Polity Press. 2000. 97–101.

[33] O. Hordiichuk, O. Halapsis, M. Kozlovets, M. How the information warfare turns into full-scale military aggression: the experience of Ukraine. Przegląd Strategiczny. 2023. 16. 345–362.

[34] Президент прийняв вірчі грамоти в послів США, Індії та Молдови в Україні й започаткував нову традицію таких церемоній у Софії Київській [President received the credentials of the ambassadors of the United States, India and Moldova to Ukraine and launched a new tradition of holding such ceremonies at Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv]. *Офіційне інтернет-представництво Президента України*, 2.06.2022. https://surl.li/euykiv

itself to the international community through a sacred-historical space associated with Kyivan Rus' and a centuries-old Christian tradition.

In this case, there is a characteristic combination of religious, historical, and political narratives. Saint Sophia becomes not merely an architectural backdrop for a state ceremony but a symbolic resource for representing historical continuity. The diplomatic ritual, transferred into sacred space, creates a semantic connection between the contemporary Ukrainian state, medieval Kyiv, and the European Christian cultural tradition. Thus, the architectural space of Saint Sophia becomes incorporated into contemporary practices of political symbolization while retaining its connection with its sacred semantic foundation.

The mechanism of the contemporary reactivation of sacred semantics becomes even more evident in presidential Easter addresses delivered from Saint Sophia of Kyiv. The formula "Ukrainians kneel only in prayer"[35] combines the religious practice of prayer with a political discourse of resistance. Particularly significant is the reference to the biblical inscription above the Orans: "God is in the midst of the city, and it shall not be shaken." In contemporary presidential discourse, these words are directly correlated with the resilience of Ukraine, Kyiv, and Ukrainian society under conditions of war.[36]

For the subject of this study, this example is of fundamental importance. It demonstrates not simply the political use of religious symbolism but a more complex mechanism through which the meanings and symbolic significance of a sacred space are reactivated. A biblical text incorporated into the iconographic program of a Christian church in the eleventh century receives a new reading a thousand years later under conditions of war. The original semantics of divine protection of the sacred city are transferred to contemporary Kyiv and Ukraine, while the image of the Orans becomes a symbolic intermediary between the biblical narrative, medieval sacred tradition, and the contemporary experience of society.

At the same time, it is important to maintain analytical distance regarding such a transformation. Contemporary national interpretation should not be retrospectively projected onto the eleventh century as though it were the original meaning of Saint Sophia's iconographic program. What is at issue is precisely the historical dynamics of the symbol. The original Christian semantics remain one of its basic semantic levels but simultaneously become the basis for new cultural, political, and identificational readings. It is precisely the ability of a

[35] Зеленський у великодньому зверненні: Українці стають на коліна лише у молитві. [Zelenskyy in His Easter Address: Ukrainians Kneel Only in Prayer]. *NV Україна,* 5.05.2024. https://surl.li/awtqfv

[36] Великоднє привітання Президента України та першої леді [Easter greetings from the President of Ukraine and the First Lady]. *Офіційне інтернет-представництво Президента України*, 12.04.2026. https://surl.li/iafsvl

sacred symbol to produce new meanings under changed historical conditions that ensures the duration of its presence in collective memory.

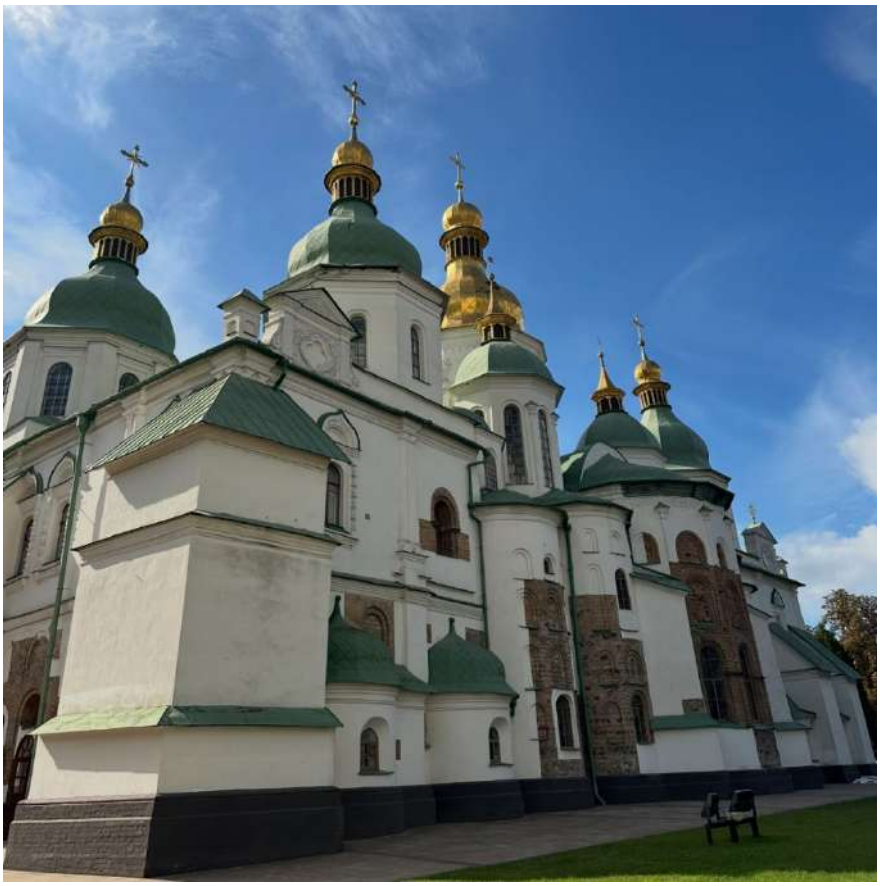


Figure 6. Contemporary exterior view of Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv (2026)[37]

This process acquires particular intensity in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine and the confrontation over the interpretation of the Kyivan Rus' legacy. Saint Sophia of Kyiv is one of the key sacred objects through which models of historical and religious continuity are constructed. Its symbolic significance therefore cannot be separated from the broader debate over the ways in which the heritage of Kyivan Rus' has been incorporated into the Russian imperial and post-imperial historical narratives. In this respect, the decolonization of memory implies not the mechanical creation of an alternative national myth but a critical reconsideration of established models of historical continuity and the restoration of Kyiv and the Kyivan Rus' Christian tradition to their complex Eastern European and broader European contexts.[38]

[37] Photo from the author's personal archive (Viktoriia Omelchenko).
[38] О. Забужко. "Наша Європа. Збірка есеїв." [Our Europe. A Collection of Essays]. Комора, 2025. 10.

The analysis of sacred geography and religious continuity makes it possible to deepen this approach, since the object of confrontation is not only the political history of Kyivan Rus but also the right to symbolically inherit its sacred space. Concepts of a "common spiritual cradle," a single religious space, or uninterrupted spiritual continuity can serve the function of contemporary political legitimation.[39] Saint Sophia of Kyiv is therefore an important example of how sacred geography becomes a space for the formation and interaction of different interpretations of the past, while religious heritage acquires political significance in the context of disputes surrounding historical memory and national identity.

The contemporary significance of Saint Sophia of Kyiv becomes particularly evident in the interaction between its historical religious meanings and their reinterpretation within Ukrainian society. The cathedral's architectural and iconographic heritage continues to shape perceptions of sacred space, while the image of the Virgin Orans and the biblical symbolism of the unshakable city acquire renewed significance in the context of war. These developments reveal how religious symbols participate in contemporary processes of collective identification without losing their connection to the Christian tradition from which they emerged.

Conclusions

The study provides grounds for regarding Saint Sophia of Kyiv as one of the key sacred and symbolic centers of Ukrainian religious, cultural, and national memory. Its significance is not limited to its status as an outstanding architectural or artistic monument, since for centuries the cathedral functioned as a space for the formation, preservation, and interpretation of religious and cultural meanings. It is precisely the multilayered nature of its sacred semantics that enabled Saint Sophia to become an important carrier of historical continuity within which the religious heritage of Kyivan Rus interacts with later models of cultural and national self-identification.

The concepts of "Kyiv as the Second Jerusalem" and the "New Jerusalem" should be regarded as manifestations of medieval sacred geography and the symbolic legitimation of Kyiv within the Christian world. Their functioning testifies to the aspiration to incorporate Kyivan Rus into the broader space of the Christian *oikoumene* and to form an understanding of Kyiv as a sacred and political center of a Christianized state. In subsequent historical memory,

[39] L. Fylypovych, O. Horkusha. *"Ruskiy Mir" and "Ukrainskyi Svit": Ontological and Anthropological Antagonists. Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*. 2024. Vol. 44. Iss. 5. 22–30.

these symbolic meanings acquired new interpretations and became an important element of debates concerning cultural and religious continuity.

Under contemporary conditions of Russia's war against Ukraine, the process of reactivating the symbolic potential of Saint Sophia of Kyiv has acquired particular intensity.

At the same time, analysis of the interaction between the sacred and the social makes it possible to regard Saint Sophia of Kyiv as a multidimensional religious and cultural phenomenon whose symbolic significance cannot be reduced to its socio-political interpretations. Its contemporary national symbolism interacts with much older religious semantics, and therefore the process of its reactivation should be regarded as an interaction of sacred, cultural, and political discourses. It is precisely this interaction that explains Saint Sophia's ability to retain its significance in different historical contexts while simultaneously remaining a recognizable carrier of Christian and cultural memory.

Crucially, the contestation over the Kyivan Rus' legacy extends beyond political history to the symbolic right to sacred heritage and succession. Decolonizing historical memory therefore requires critically rethinking historical continuity and restoring this tradition to its broader European context, rather than replacing one mythologized narrative with another.

The synthesis of the results obtained makes it possible to propose a model of the multilayered semantic reactivation of sacred heritage. Its essence lies in the fact that the original religious meaning of a sacred symbol is not necessarily displaced by later cultural or political interpretations but may coexist and interact with them, forming a multilayered structure of collective memory. In the case of Saint Sophia of Kyiv, three interconnected levels of this process can be traced: the formation of the medieval Christian semantics of sacred space; its consolidation and transmission in cultural and religious memory; and the contemporary reactivation of particular symbolic elements in discourses of national identity, historical agency, and social resilience.

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