

## Modular Repetition and Variation of Meaning: the Concentric Circles Motif

*In Late Antique art the modular repetition of motifs often was accompanied by variation in their meaning. A prime example is the module composed of concentric circles, which could take on a variety of roles and significations within differing overall compositions. While its basic physical form remained similar in repetition, concurrently it was subject to constantly changing colours of interpretation. For instance, it could represent consecutively an eye, a scale, a belly, a bead, or a grape. In addition the motif possessed an underlying significance resulting from its association with mirrors, which provided continual protection from the dangers of an unpredictable world. According to the context, Byzantine viewers could appreciate the repeating modules as abstract designs, as figurations, as symbols and as promises of security, all at the same time. Taken together, the multiple possible interpretations created different modular systems at the conceptual level. In Late Antique art variation was provided not only by changes in the physical characteristics of the modules, but also by their inbuilt capacity for presenting different interpretative systems to the viewer; they engaged the mind as much as the eye with their varietas.*

*In der spätantiken Kunst ging die modulare Wiederholung von Motiven oft mit einer Variation ihrer Bedeutung einher. Ein Paradebeispiel ist das aus konzentrischen Kreisen zusammengesetzte Modul, das innerhalb unterschiedlicher Kompositionen eine Vielzahl von Funktionen und Bedeutungen annehmen konnte. Während seine äußerliche Erscheinung in den Wiederholungen ähnlich blieb, war es gleichzeitig ständig wechselnden Nuancen der Interpretation unterworfen. So konnte dieses Modul zum Beispiel nacheinander ein Auge, eine Schuppe, einen Bauch, eine Perle oder eine Traube darstellen. Darüber hinaus besaß das Motiv eine unterschwellige Bedeutung, die sich aus seiner Assoziation mit Spiegeln ergab, die ständigen Schutz vor den Gefahren einer unberechenbaren Welt boten. Je nach Kontext konnten die byzantinischen Betrachter die sich wiederholenden Module gleichzeitig als abstraktes Muster, als gegenständliche Darstellung, als Symbol und als Versprechen von Sicherheit begreifen. Zusammengefasst schufen die vielfältigen Interpretationsmöglichkeiten unterschiedliche modulare Systeme auf der konzeptionellen Ebene. In der spätantiken Kunst wurde die Variation nicht nur durch die Veränderung der physischen Eigenschaften der Module ermöglicht, sondern auch durch die ihnen innewohnende Fähigkeit, dem Betrachter unterschiedliche Deutungssysteme zu präsentieren. Mit ihrer varietas sprachen sie den Geist wie auch das Auge an.*

**Keywords:** *Concentric circles/Konzentrische Kreise, varietas/varietas, polyvalence/Polyvalenz*

### ***Introduction: Fish Magic***

In Late Antique art the modular repetition of motifs often was accompanied by variation in their meaning. Here the focus will be on designs based on concentric circles, which took on different guises according to the contexts in which they appeared. The process can be described as the variation of modules, except that here the concern is not so much with changing physical characteristics, such as can be seen in the reuse of spolia, but rather with changes of meaning brought about by the different environments in which the motifs were employed. A good illustration of the phenomenon of repeated modules acquiring different connotations according to context is provided by a canvas painted in 1925 by the Swiss artist Paul Klee, which is entitled *Fisch Zauber* (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Klee was aware of the symbols employed in Late Antique magic, at least insofar as they had been transmitted through the Islamic tradition. In *Fisch Zauber* the artist repeats similar, but not identical, modules, giving them several different parts to play. The modules are created by the elements of a cone and a circle attached to one another. At the lower right Klee uses this configuration to depict a vase of flowers, together with its base. At the centre of the picture the module evokes a ray of light shining on a clock, and in the bottom left-hand corner it creates a man wearing a pointed hat. The man, who appears peeking around the edge of the frame, may be the magician himself, or possibly the artist, so that there is a kind of formal identity between the creator and his creations. Thus in his painting Klee incorporates a significant feature of Late Antique imagery, namely the employment of signs that are multivalent with the ability to create different associations depending on where and how they appeared.<sup>2</sup> In what follows we shall look at how this principle applied to the deployment of concentric circles in Late Antique art.

### ***Concentric Circles in Late Antique Art***

The design of concentric circles, or, in its abbreviated form, circles enclosing dots, was very often encountered in Late Antique ornament, taking on different meanings in different contexts. In this case, the dots and the individual circles of increasing sizes are the elements that make up the modules, that is, the concentric circles motifs. These modules differ from each other not so much in their physical appearance as in their differing contexts, which lead the viewer to interpret the circles in various ways. Thus we are dealing here with a conceptual variation of the modules, rather than with changes in their formal characteristics. For example, on crosses manufactured in wood, bone, and base metal, it can be surmised that the circles at the ends of the arms stood in for the jewels that adorned more expensive objects in silver and gold.<sup>3</sup> On wooden dolls the motif represented various body parts, as can be seen in a doll found at Karanis in Egypt, and now in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology at the University of Michigan (fig. 2).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Gale 2013, 110. 128 f.

<sup>2</sup> On this phenomenon, see Maguire 1987, esp. 10–13.

<sup>3</sup> Maguire et al. 1989, 5. 166. 168, nos. 91. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Maguire et al. 1989, 5. 229, no. 147.

Here, each set of concentric circles around a dot is a module that differs in what it signifies, whether an eye, a mouth, a hand, a navel, or a knee; together, the modules form a conceptual modular system representing the human body.

In the majority of cases, concentric circles evoked mirrors, the legendary powers of which had been mythologized in the story of Perseus, who used his reflective shield to deflect the deadly gaze of Medusa. Mirrors continued to play a protective role in Late Antiquity and into the middle ages. According to the *Geoponika*, a collection of earlier agricultural treatises compiled in tenth-century Constantinople, a farmer could deflect hail from his crops by holding out a mirror to the looming cloud.<sup>5</sup> In Antiquity concentric circles, often with small dots at their centres, became the characteristic decoration of the lids or backs of circular mirrors fashioned in silver and bronze.<sup>6</sup> When reproduced in non-reflective materials, such as wood and stone, the concentric circles represented the gleam of light shining on reflective surfaces.

The numerous Late Antique mirror shrines found in Syria, Palestine and Egypt demonstrate that many mirrors were made for protective purposes. These shrines were plaques of clay, plaster, metal, or stone, which were displayed in houses or placed in tombs. They were too small to have been of much practical use in grooming. Many of the plaques take a miniaturized architectural form, with gabled tops. The terra-cotta plaque shown in figure 3, now in the collection of the University of Chicago, has the shape of an arched niche beneath a pediment.<sup>7</sup> A circular mirror was set into the lower half of the shrine, while a smaller one was incorporated into the pediment. The mirrors themselves have vanished, but the imprints of the prongs that retained them have still survived inside the circumferences of the circles. The architectural shape of the shrine magnified the status and powers of the mirrors, for the niche was an honorific form, used in Early Byzantine art for the presentation of rulers and saintly figures, as well as the cross. On the plaque in Chicago, the lower mirror was flanked by four small raised circles containing dots, and the mirror in the pediment by a pair of concentric circle devices also with dots at their centres. Thus in this case the modules in combination create a kind of system made up both of actual mirrors and of mirror cyphers created by the elements of dots and circles. The dot and circles motifs enhanced the powers of the real mirrors set between them.

On some plaques the concentric circles designs could take on further layers of meaning in addition to their association with mirrors. One fifth-century example, found in a tomb at Dikhrin in Judea and fashioned in terra cotta, is moulded in the shape of a fish (figure 4).<sup>8</sup> Like the other preserved plaques, it once held at its centre a circular glass mirror. Here too, as on other plaques, the apotropaic powers of the mirror are reinforced by modules comprised of circles framing dots, which are scattered over the entire body

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<sup>5</sup> *Geoponika*, 1.14.4.

<sup>6</sup> Maguire et al. 1989, 6 f. 195, no. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Maguire et al. 1989, 7. 218, no. 137.

<sup>8</sup> Israel Antiquities Authority, no. 62-286; Israeli - Mevorah 2000, 123. 220.

and tail of the fish, so that they can be read as its scales. Another dot and circle motif isolated in the centre of the creature's head forms its eye. Once again, as in the case of the wooden doll (figure 2), the module of concentric circles changes its meaning according to the context, forming scales on the body and tail, and an eye on the head. Together, the modules create the concept of a fish. The same idea is presented on a smaller scale by a pierced bone pendant from Egypt, which likewise is carved in the form of a fish.<sup>9</sup> Here also, the creature is marked with "scales" and an "eye" in the form of concentric circles. In both cases the well-known Christian symbolism of the fish is enhanced by the magical potency of the circles. The repeated modules that make up the body, tail, and head of the creatures can be read not only as scales and as eyes, but also as mirrors. The variation in the modules comes not from their form, for each circle and dot motif is virtually identical, but from the variety of their meanings.

Interesting examples of the repetition of modules composed of concentric circles together with variation in their meanings can be found in Late Antique textiles from Egypt, in spite of the difficulties inherent in rendering curved shapes in weaving.<sup>10</sup> On a band of tapestry weave from the Choron collection that originally decorated a tunic, we find at the centre two explicitly naked women with somewhat irregular concentric circles over their abdomens.<sup>11</sup> (fig. 5). These figures are enclosed by a rectangular frame filled by interlace studded with crosses, which has a long fictive fringe at the bottom, so that a textile is portrayed within a textile. The threads of the fringe are interrupted by two rows of almost identical concentric circle motifs representing beads. Thus the modules composed of concentric circles in the weaving can represent beads in one context or bellies in another. In addition, the motifs here may evoke the protective powers of mirrors, as is suggested by another textile from this group, also in the Choron collection, which portrays a male and female pair, again naked, and again with circles over their abdomens. In this case the circles, which are more skilfully rounded, frame crosses, and the couple wear large amulet cases suspended from their necks.<sup>12</sup> In these weavings, which were worn on the body, the designs of concentric circles may have acted as sealing charms to ensure healthy pregnancy and childbirth for the women, and possibly to ward off stomach problems in the case of the men.

In Early Christian floor mosaics the concentric circles motif was sometimes combined with a representation of a flower in the form of a cross, so as to produce a design of

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<sup>9</sup> Newark Museum, Inv no. 29.1437; Auth 1978, 1–28, esp. 20, no. 37.

<sup>10</sup> For a recent discussion of the replication of visual types in Late Antique textiles, see J. Elsner, *Mutable, Flexible, Fluid. Papyrus Drawings for Textiles and Replication in Roman Art*, ArtB 102, 2020, 7–27.

<sup>11</sup> Maguire 1999, 129 f. no. B30; Baginski – Tidhar 1980, 160, no. 254. A chronological range of the fifth to sixth century for the group of textiles to which this textile belongs is suggested by a fragment in the Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, which has been radiocarbon dated: Schrenk 2004, 265 f., no. 108.

<sup>12</sup> Maguire 1999, 128. 130, no. B29. A similar clavus band, on which the abdomen circles frame crosses, is in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C, no. BZ.1953.2.12.

multifaceted significance. A good example can be found in the sixth-century mosaic of the nave of the church excavated at Nahariya in Israel. Here the main field of the mosaic is covered with white tesserae arranged in imbrications, with each scale of the pattern enclosing a pink and white bud. At the middle of the nave, in front of the entrance to the sanctuary, this overall composition is interrupted by a large medallion containing a radiating pattern that frames a circle at the centre containing a single rose (fig. 6).<sup>13</sup> The sepals of the flower create a cross with four flared arms aligned with the cardinal directions of the church and projecting well beyond the outlines of the rose itself. There can be no doubt in this case that the combination of the rose and the cross has a special significance that goes beyond the merely accidental.<sup>14</sup> Their association brings to mind a poem on the cross by the sixth-century bishop Venantius Fortunatus, where he wrote that its “wood is sweet, excelling in its scent gardens of roses”.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the tesserae that make up the rose form five concentric rings of pink and white stones. The resulting motif is complex, in that it combines the protective powers of the cross and the concentric circles with the nature symbolism of the flower, so that it acts as a protective device and as a metaphor at the same time.

We find a similar design, combining concentric circles with a flower and a cross, in another sixth-century pavement, the mosaic of the Striding Lion from the eponymous house at Antioch, where the motif appears as repeated modules in the border.<sup>16</sup> At the centre of the pavement a magnificent lion with open jaws strides across a trellis made up of flower buds, which contains in its compartments various emblems of prosperity and well-being, including fruit, brimming baskets, fish, and peacocks together with other birds. Images of roaring lions had an apotropaic force; they also appeared on a much smaller scale on early Byzantine bronze amulets manufactured in Syria and Palestine.<sup>17</sup> Around the pavement there is a frame composed of rows of flowers each with four petals forming a cross (fig. 7). Each petal is filled with convex bands of colour, which radiate outwards. These radiating bands of colour can be seen as segments of concentric circles, so that the one modular motif combines as its elements the petals, the cross, and the circles of the mirror cypher. Similar motifs, combining four-petalled flowers with circles, had occurred earlier in pavements of the Roman period. One can be found, for example, on the floor of a room in the House of Dionysos at Sepphoris in Israel, which dates to the first half of the third century.<sup>18</sup> However, in the Roman mosaic the petals of the flower take a fat and fleshy form, so that they do not resemble a cross. In the mosaic in the house at Antioch, whose inhabitants must have been Christian, the width of the four

<sup>13</sup> Dauphin – Edelstein 1993, 49–53, esp. 50 f., pl. 2A; Dauphin – Edelstein 1984, 25–49, pl. 1.

<sup>14</sup> On the four-petal rose design in Byzantine art, see Maguire 2020, 162–187.

<sup>15</sup> *De signaculo sanctae crucis*, ed. and trans. M. Roberts, Poems, Venantius Fortunatus, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2017, 80 f.

<sup>16</sup> Levi 1947, 321–323, pl. 74a; Baltimore Museum of Art, inv. 1937.136 and 139.

<sup>17</sup> Bonner 1950, 211–214, 303 f., nos. 299–309, 311.

<sup>18</sup> Talgam 2014, 43, fig. 56.

petals is greatly attenuated. Moreover, at the centre of each flower a rectilinear cross composed of red cubes stresses the relationship of the whole motif to the Christian sign.

The modular border motifs of the Striding Lion mosaic are made of elements that carry different meanings: the cross is a sign of Christ, the flower can be said to be symbolic of its sweetness, and the concentric circles, like the striding lion itself, act as devices to keep away harm. In this case, neither the elements nor the repeated modules that they create vary in their physical characteristics, for each of the border motifs is virtually identical. Nor do the contexts of the modules change, for they all fill the same border. Rather, each module contains within itself a variety of possible references – to crosses, to flowers, and to mirrors – so that the whole series becomes for the viewer a kind of kaleidoscope of possible interpretations, which combine to form a frame for the mosaic of conceptual richness and complexity.

During the Early Byzantine period concentric circles frequently appear as modular elements on domestic clay lamps. On the lamps, the concentric circles often were arranged to form crosses. Thus a specimen from Bet Shean in Israel, dating to the fourth or fifth century, shows five concentric circle devices arranged in the shape of a Greek cross, with six more flanking the cross above and below its arms.<sup>19</sup> On another contemporary lamp from the same site, we see an actual cross that is flanked by four motifs made up of circles.<sup>20</sup> More inventively, an eighth-century clay lamp from Egypt, now in the Archaeological Museum at the St. Barnabas Monastery, Cyprus, bears an ornament of triangular bunches of grapes on its sides, in which each individual grape is a module composed of concentric circles framing dots (fig. 8).<sup>21</sup> Thus the lamp takes the design of lamps marked with circles, such as the examples from Bet Shean, and assimilates the devices with the fruit of the vine. Here, very clearly, we see a combination of the Christian symbolism of the vine with the apotropaic force of the circles. Furthermore, the triangular arrangement of the bunches containing the grapes resembles the so-called “wing” pattern found in Late Antique magical papyri, which arranges letters, usually vowels, in the form of triangles resembling grape clusters, as in the following example taken from a fourth- or fifth-century charm now in Berlin.<sup>22</sup> Here, seven vowels are introduced with the words “the writing on the strip is”, and arranged in a line as follows: α εε ηηη ιιι οοοοο υυυυυ ωωω. These letters are followed by the instruction “making two figures”, which is illustrated by two triangular formations of the same vowels, with the triangles being oriented vertically in different directions, as shown below.

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<sup>19</sup> Hadad 2002, 30, no. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Hadad 2002, 32, no. 101.

<sup>21</sup> A very similar lamp is in the collection of the Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst der Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, inv. no. 9382; von Falck – Lichtwark 1996, 228, no. 247.

<sup>22</sup> Berlin, Staatliche Museen, P.Berol. inv. 5025; Parthey 1866, 120; Betz 1992, 3. On the “wing” pattern, see Faraone 2012, 2; Dornseiff 1925, 58.

|        |        |
|--------|--------|
| α      | ωωωωωω |
| εε     | υυυυυυ |
| ηηη    | οοοοο  |
| ιιιι   | ιιιι   |
| οοοοο  | ηηη    |
| υυυυυυ | εε     |
| ωωωωωω | α      |

Thus on the lamps the individual modules composed of dots and concentric circles, are grouped into differing modular systems, either crosses or triangular bunches of grapes. In each case the compositions, whether crosses or triangular grape clusters, have a protective and symbolic value that is enhanced by the potency of its modular components.

### ***Varietas and the mutability of meanings***

In the examples of the concentric circles motif that have been considered above we have seen how one module could convey more than one concept, whether it represented a mirror, the scale of a fish, a bead on a fringe, a flower, a grape, or a body part, such as an eye or an abdomen. Often, more than one meaning appears to have been intended at the same time, so that the meanings of the module were not only varied in different contexts, but also overlapped in the same context. In the following pages we will consider some literary evidence bearing on how Late Antique viewers interpreted such equivocal designs, which had the potential for multiple layered interpretations.

We begin with another design that was based on concentric circles, namely the symbol of the triple blue orb that crowns the Justinianic mosaic in the basilica of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai, which dates between 548 and 565 (fig. 9).<sup>23</sup> The motif appears at the apex of the apse arch, directly above the mosaic of the transfigured Christ. It is comprised of three concentric circles, each of a different shade of blue, with the darkest at the centre, and the lightest on the outside. Superimposed on the triple orb is a golden cross. We are fortunate that a contemporary writer, John of Gaza, has left us a precise description of this motif, together with his explanation of its meaning. John of Gaza saw the same design at the centre of a painting of the universe that decorated a bathhouse in his city. In an ekphrasis of this painting, the sixth-century author described the symbol as follows:

“The auspicious image of the spiritual Trinity surrounds [the cross] with dark blue whirls; it [the Trinity] is inscribed in circles which are like a representation

<sup>23</sup> Forsyth – Weitzmann 1965, 13, pl. 103. For discussions of the motif at Sinai, see de’ Maffei 1982, 91–116, esp. 103, and Weitzmann 1966, 401 f. (reprinted in idem, *Studies in the Arts of Sinai*, Princeton 1982, 14 f.).

of the celestial sphere. And inside it is possible to observe the holy brightness of both arms [of the cross].<sup>24</sup>

For this Late Antique viewer, therefore, the three blue circles in the painting were not only symbols of the Trinity, but also a representation of the sphere of heaven; for him the motif represented two different concepts at the same time. The characterization of the motif as the sphere of heaven was probably inspired by the concept of the celestial globe, which in ancient art appeared as the attribute of Urania, the muse of Astronomy, and which was often portrayed as being made of blue glass or crystal.<sup>25</sup> The triple rings evoked the common literary image of the Trinity as a unity created by the combination of three lights. In the late fourth century Gregory of Nazianzus produced a pithy formulation of this idea, calling the Trinity: “light and light and light, but one light.”<sup>26</sup> Writing around a century later, Pseudo Dionysios the Areopagite expanded upon the theme, saying:

“When there are many lamps in a house, there is nevertheless a single undifferentiated light and from all of them comes the one undivided brightness.”<sup>27</sup>

However, in the mosaic at Sinai there may be another layer of meaning, beyond the heavenly sphere and the light of the Trinity, which is connected with the founder and patron of the monastery, the emperor Justinian. For an orb was a symbol of the dominion of Christ and also of the emperor, as could be seen on coins of Justinian I, which showed the emperor holding a globe surmounted by a cross.<sup>28</sup> In the Sinai mosaic, the two angels portrayed immediately above the apse proffer blue orbs marked with golden crosses to the Lamb of God as a sign of his universal rule.<sup>29</sup> Again, we have a contemporary discussion of this motif and its meaning. The historian Procopius, describing the equestrian statue of Justinian in the Augusteum in Constantinople, wrote:

“In his left hand he [the emperor] holds a globe, by which the sculptor signifies that the whole earth and sea are subject to him, yet he has neither sword nor spear nor any other weapon, but a cross stands upon the globe which he carries, the emblem by which alone he has obtained both his empire and his victory in war.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ed. P. Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentiarius. Kunstbeschreibungen justinianischer Zeit* (Leipzig 1912) 137 f. On the text see: Talgam 2009, 91–120; Kraemer 1920; Cupane 1979, 195–207.

<sup>25</sup> Beretta – Pasquale 2006, 159–163, figs. 2–4, nos. 4.1. 4.2.

<sup>26</sup> *Oratio XXXI*, 3; ed. J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca* 36, col.136B.

<sup>27</sup> *The Divine Names*, 2.4; ed. J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca* 3, col. 641B; translation by C. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius* (New York 1987) 61. Ultimately, the evocation of the Trinity in terms of light was derived from the 9th verse of Psalm 36: “In your light we will see light.”

<sup>28</sup> Grierson 1968, 84–86.

<sup>29</sup> Forsyth – Weitzmann 1965, 13, pls. 103, 122 f.

<sup>30</sup> *De aedificiis*, 1.2.11; translation by H. B. Dewing, *Procopius*, vol. 7, *The Buildings* (Cambridge 1971) 34 f.



In the mosaic at Sinai, the triple orb and its superimposed cross are placed directly in line with a medallion in the lower border which portrays David among the prophets. As Kurt Weitzmann argued, this ruler in his imperial regalia is very probably a reference to Justinian, the patron of the monastery,<sup>31</sup> for it was a long-standing convention of Byzantine political thought and rhetoric to associate a reigning Byzantine emperor with the Old Testament king. Thus the triple concentric rings at in the mosaic at Sinai may have carried a triple signification: the Trinity, the sphere of heaven, and the universal dominion of Christ and the emperor. Nor can it be excluded that here, too, the motif retained its old association with the protective force of light-reflecting mirrors, so that a fourth component can be added to the spectrum of potential meanings.

It seems, then, that designs such as the triple blue orb were appreciated by contemporary viewers for their very complexity, which allowed for a variety of interpretations. This aspect of such motifs is well captured by a passage in the long poem by Paul the Silentiary describing the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, after its recent restoration by Justinian I following the collapse of its dome in 558. In his account, Paul tells us that the marble panels of the barrier around the chancel bore a monogram, or possibly two monograms, with the names of Justinian and the Empress Theodora. These monograms, which no longer survive, are described by the poet in somewhat ambiguous language:

“On the middle panels of the sacred screen..., the carver’s tool has incised one symbol that means many words, for it combines the names of the empress and emperor. It is like a shield with a boss in whose middle part has been carved the sign of the cross.”<sup>32</sup>

Since Paul the Silentiary describes the motif as the boss of a shield and says that the cross is in the centre, it is probable that the poet is referring to a cross-shaped monogram carved on a boss,<sup>33</sup> such as that of Theodora which appears on a capital in the south aisle of Hagia Sophia (fig. 10),<sup>34</sup> although other interpretations of this passage can be proposed.<sup>35</sup> Whatever the design’s precise form, Paul the Silentiary’s characterization of it as “one symbol that means many words” indicates an appreciation of motifs that condensed a variety of meanings and functions into a single compass – in this case the cross, the names of the imperial couple, and the protective value of the shield.

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<sup>31</sup> Forsyth – Weitzmann 1965, 15, pls. 103, 119.

<sup>32</sup> *Descriptio S. Sophiae*, lines 712-17; ed. P. Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentiarius. Kunstbeschreibungen justinianischer Zeit* (Leipzig 1912) 247; translation by Mango 1972, 87 f.

<sup>33</sup> As suggested by Mango 1972, 88, note 157.


<sup>34</sup> Garipzanov 2018, fig. 6.11; Kähler 1967, fig. 73.

<sup>35</sup> Fobelli 2005, 78 f. 183 f.

### **Conclusion**

In Late Antique art the module composed of dots and concentric circles, like the combined circles and cones in Klee's painting, could take on a variety of roles and a variety of meanings within differing overall compositions. The motif resembled a chameleon, in that its basic physical form remained similar in repetition, but concurrently was subject to constantly changing colours of interpretation. Or, to change the metaphor, one could see the module as a neutral screen which allowed the viewer to project onto it a variety of meanings, depending upon the bearing created by the image – for example, a scale, an eye, a belly, a bead, or a grape. In addition, the motif possessed an underlying significance resulting from its association with mirrors, which provided continued protection from the dangers of an unpredictable world. According to the context, Byzantine viewers could appreciate the repeating modules as abstract designs, as figurations, as symbols, and as promises of security, all at the same time. In the case of these designs, it is impossible to separate decoration from potency, or potency from symbolism. One could say that, taken together, the multiple interpretations created different modular systems at the conceptual level, expressing, for example, a belief in the prophylactic properties of the concentric circles portrayed upon on a tunic, or the propitious and Eucharistic connotations of the grapes clustered on a lamp. In Late Antique art variation was provided not only by changes in the physical characteristics of the modules, but also by their inbuilt capacity for presenting different interpretative systems to the viewer; they engaged the mind as much as the eye with their *varietas*.

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**Fig. 6.** Author.

**Fig. 7.** Author.

**Fig. 8.** Author.

**Fig. 9.** Reproduced through the courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai.

**Fig. 10.** Author.

Figures



Fig. 1: Paul Klee, Fisch Zauber, Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Fig. 2: Wooden doll, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.



Fig. 3: Terra-cotta mirror shrine, University of Chicago.

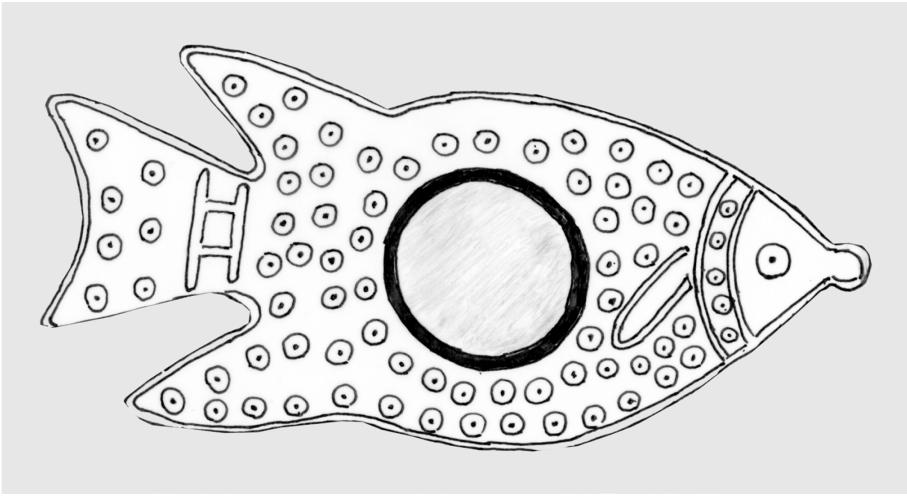


Fig. 4: Mirror plaque from a tomb at Dikhrin, Israel Antiquities Authority 62-286.



Fig. 5: Tapestry woven band from a tunic, Choron Collection.



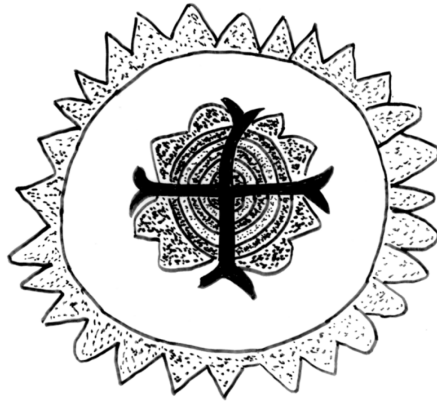


Fig. 6: Central motif in the mosaic pavement of the nave in the church at Nahariya, Israel.



Fig. 7: Detail of the border of the Striding Lion mosaic from the House of the Striding Lion in Antioch, Baltimore Museum of Art.



Fig. 8: Clay lamp with design of concentric circles forming triangular bunches of grapes, Archaeological Museum, St. Barnabas Monastery, Cyprus.



Fig. 9: Mount Sinai, Church of St. Catherine, apse mosaics.



Fig. 10: Capital with monogram of Theodora in the south aisle of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.