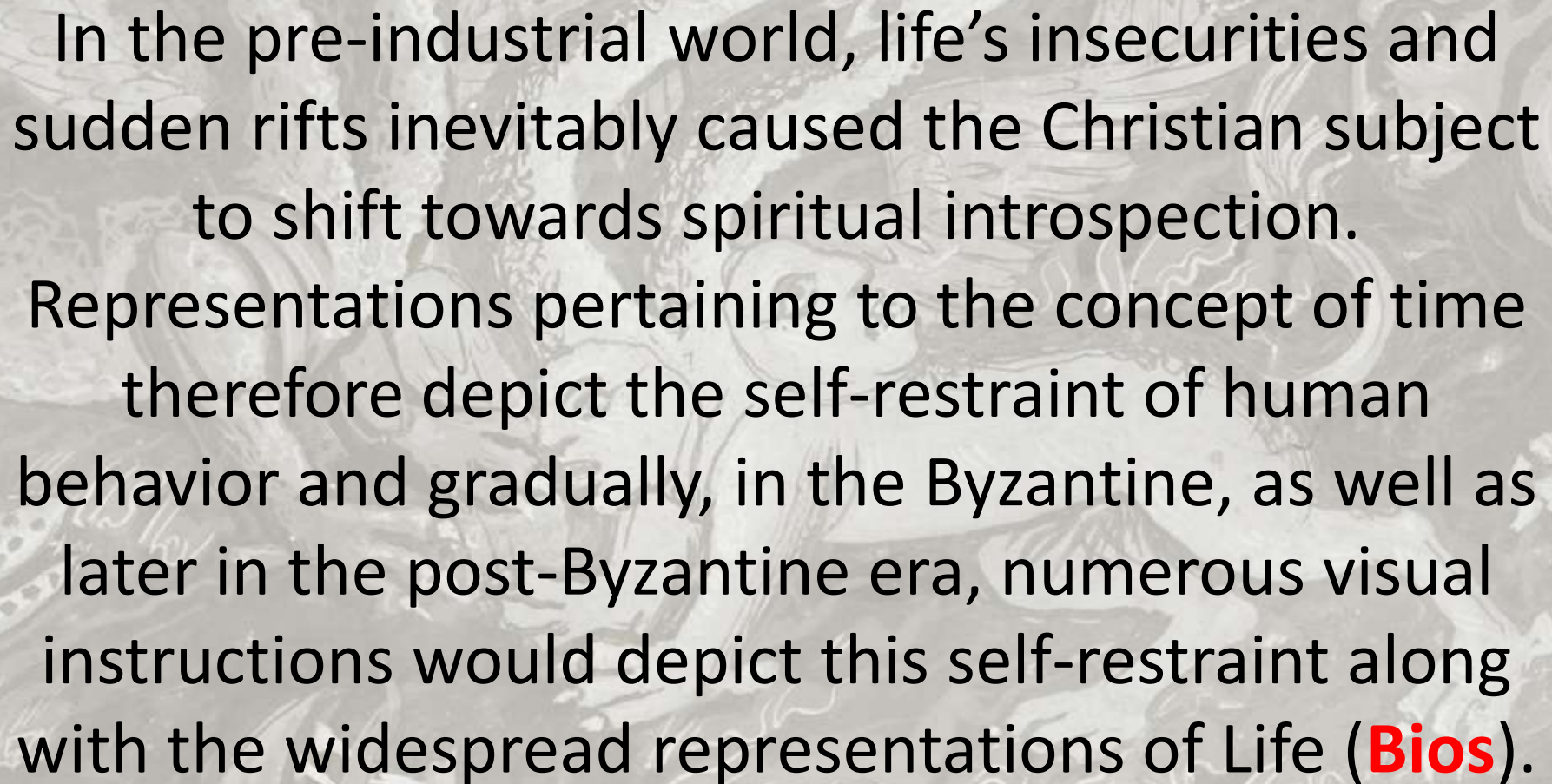


Dragons in a World of Uncertainty: Cosmological Representations from Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Era

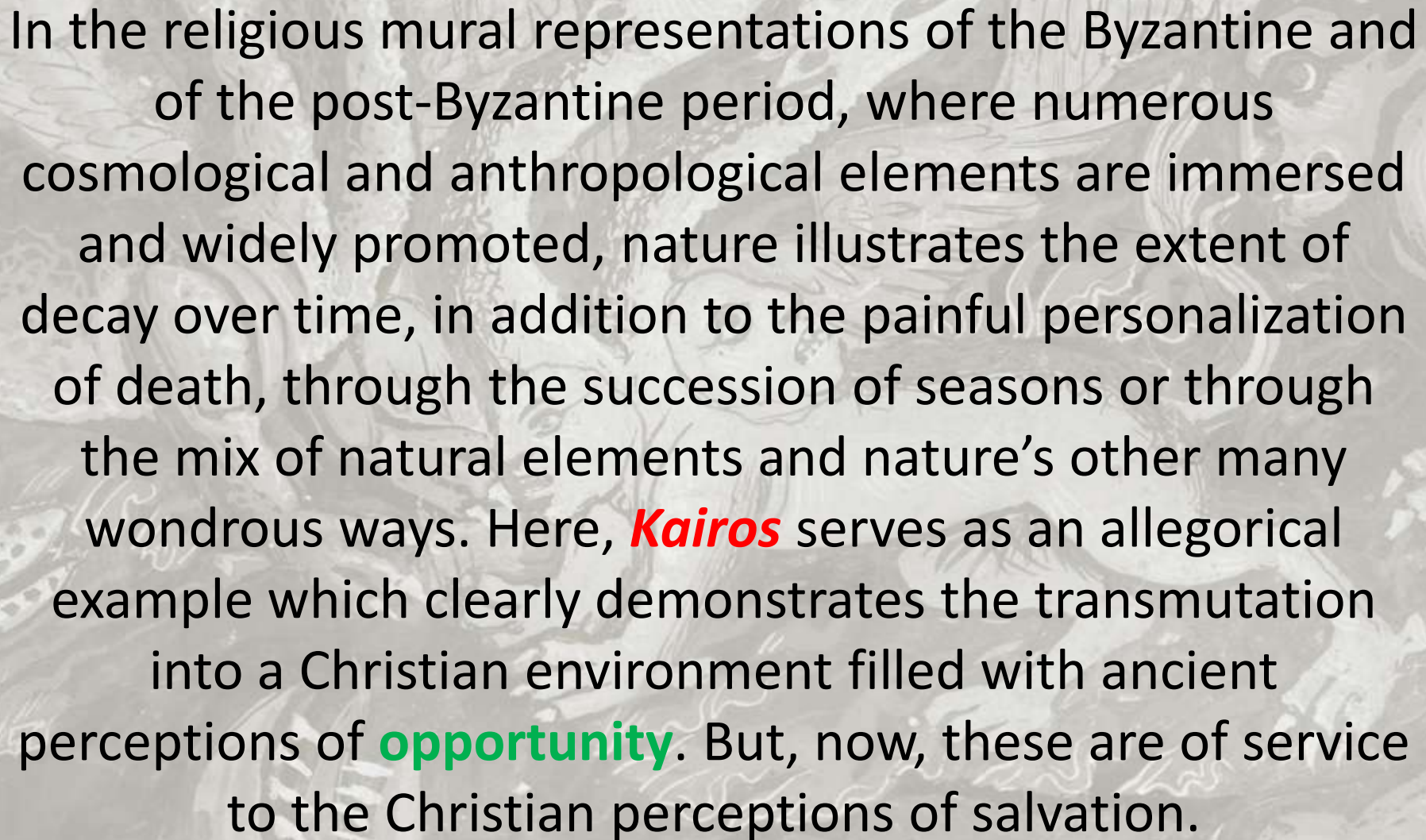


It is without a doubt that Christian spirituality offered human history some very valuable content which dictated that ancient cosmological themes from Greco-Roman tradition related to **time** and **eternal transformation** were to be converted into a set of standardized models of salvation. In turn, due to their apocalyptic features, these models would set out to define the teachings and behaviors that would allow the Christian believer to reach salvation. In reality, however, these ancient themes did not exclusively refer to the passage of time; instead, they concerned the worldly presence of the human body. Specifically, these themes were directed to the human being that ought to care about the fate of his body, along with the widespread representations of Life (**Bios**). **1**

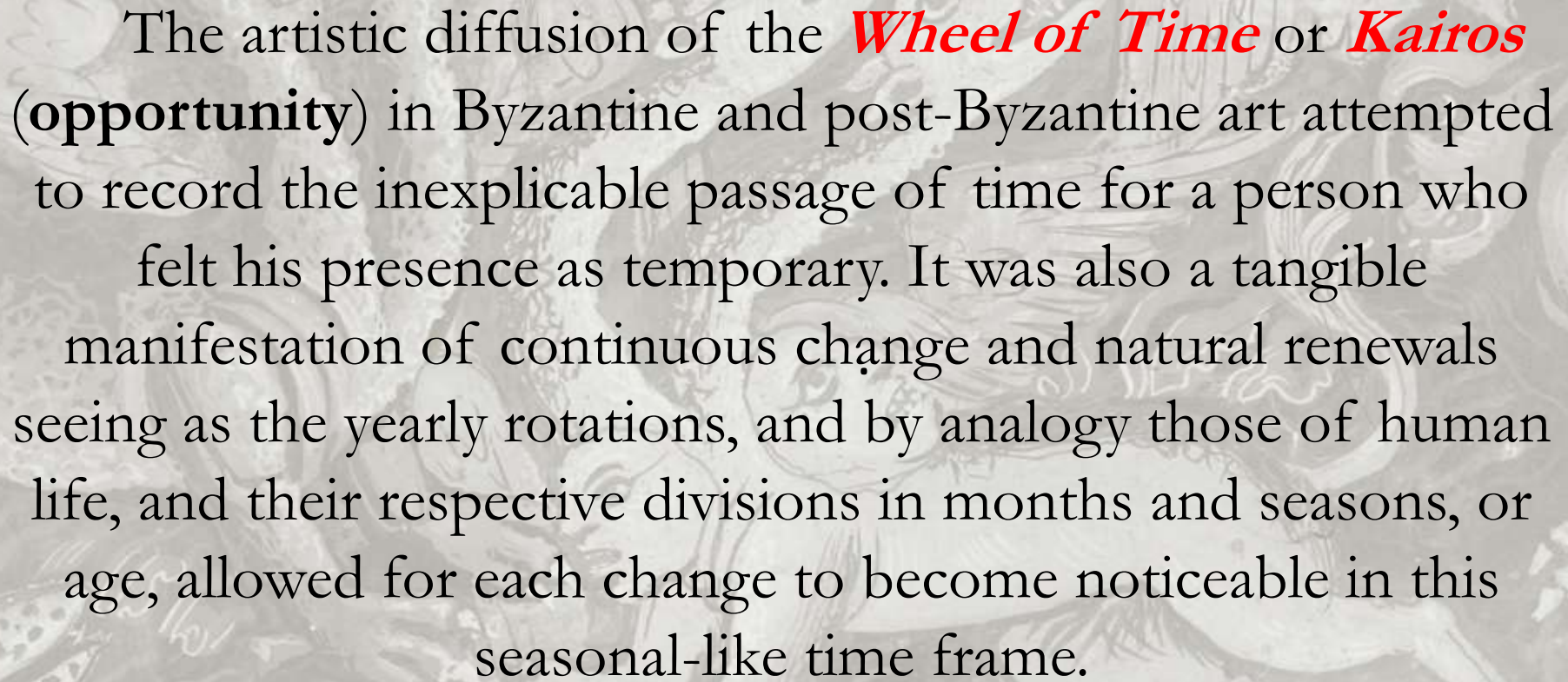


In the pre-industrial world, life's insecurities and sudden rifts inevitably caused the Christian subject to shift towards spiritual introspection. Representations pertaining to the concept of time therefore depict the self-restraint of human behavior and gradually, in the Byzantine, as well as later in the post-Byzantine era, numerous visual instructions would depict this self-restraint along with the widespread representations of Life (**Bios**).

In Christian worship the apocalyptic concept of time is perceived as a straight path. It is equally associated with the course of the world - that is from creation to redemption. However, this notion of linear time was in tune with the Greco-Roman and Old Testament view where, over the course of history, the reshaping and recycling of all living things contributes to the evolution of nature. As a result, the flow of natural time (e.g. days, months, seasons, years) would provide religious Christian life a conceptual dimension of lasting memory and a consciously active participation in church's history, along with the daily devotional participation of the Christian believer in the redemptive nature of the church's past.



In the religious mural representations of the Byzantine and of the post-Byzantine period, where numerous cosmological and anthropological elements are immersed and widely promoted, nature illustrates the extent of decay over time, in addition to the painful personalization of death, through the succession of seasons or through the mix of natural elements and nature's other many wondrous ways. Here, *Kairos* serves as an allegorical example which clearly demonstrates the transmutation into a Christian environment filled with ancient perceptions of **opportunity**. But, now, these are of service to the Christian perceptions of salvation.



The artistic diffusion of the *Wheel of Time* or *Kairos* (**opportunity**) in Byzantine and post-Byzantine art attempted to record the inexplicable passage of time for a person who felt his presence as temporary. It was also a tangible manifestation of continuous change and natural renewals seeing as the yearly rotations, and by analogy those of human life, and their respective divisions in months and seasons, or age, allowed for each change to become noticeable in this seasonal-like time frame.

In the eyes of Christian believers, evolving organic matter is composed and decomposed daily.

In Byzantine culture, in addition to the fields of literature and art, the effect of time on tangible bodies consists of a qualitative and a temporal condition that is *the bitterness of an ever changing Kairos* and *the shortness of time respectively*. With regards to the symbolic substrate of tangible bodies, we need to pay special attention to the fact that since Greco-Roman antiquity, modern pleasures and the mortality of life coexist. The first Hippocratic aphorism “**Life is short, art long, opportunity fleeting**” was consistently repeated in Christian literary sources, and indeed with great frequency.



Ο Μέγας Δούκας Αλέξιος Απόκαυκος (1345) / Alexios Apokaukos (before 1345)
Ελληνικός κώδικας 2144, φύλλο 11α / Greek Codex 2144, fol. 11a
Εθνική Βιβλιοθήκη της Γαλλίας / National Library of France



“Life is short, art long, opportunity fleeting”

In the Byzantine and post-Byzantine representations, the elderly and much desired ***Kairos*** retains all his physical ancient traits; having wings on his legs, he moves on oversized wheels.

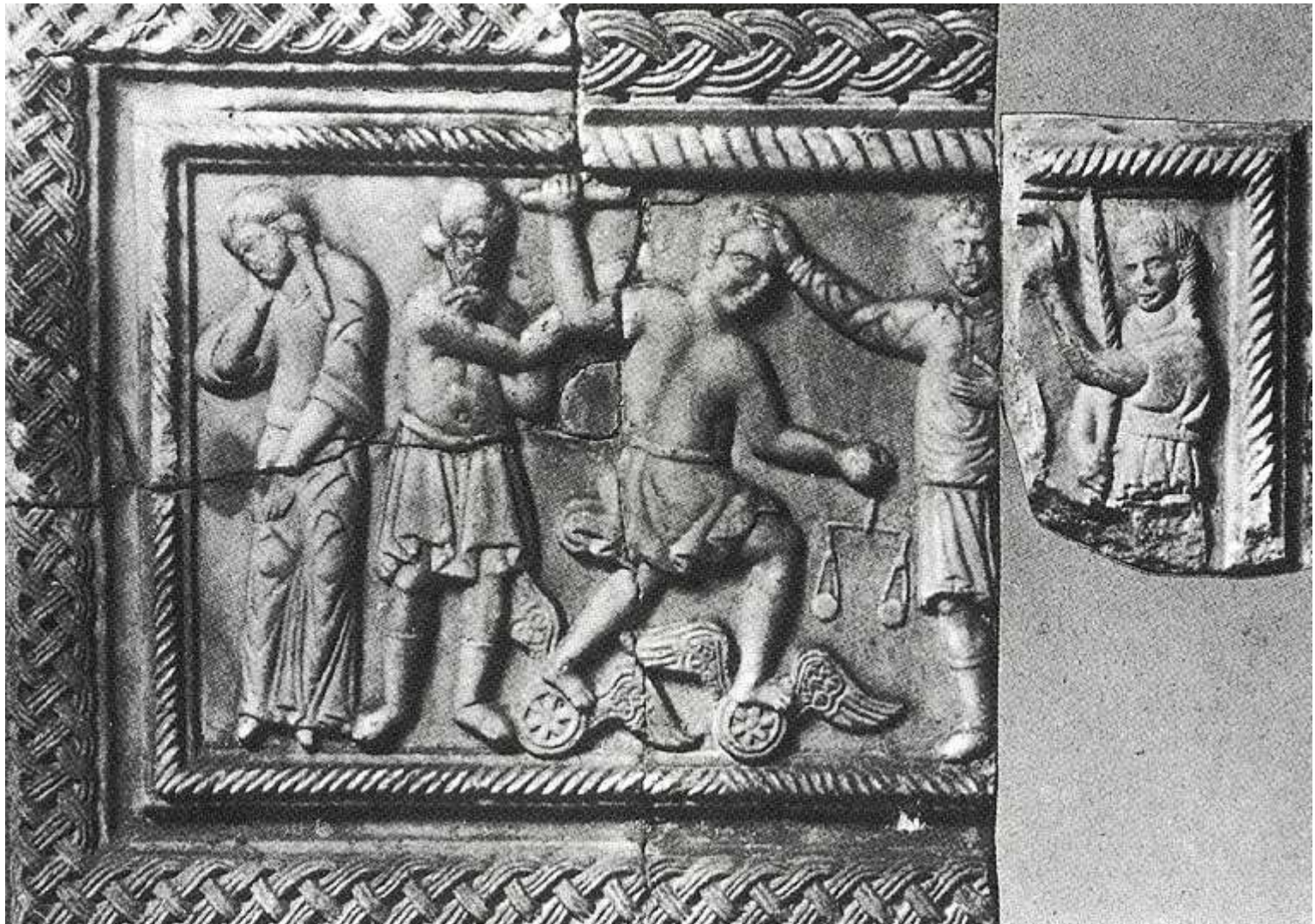
He has a loincloth around his waist and holds a sword in his right hand. However, there is a difference with the older model. He isn't represented here with youthful features. His features are those of elders - probably a reminder of Renaissance and Baroque-style art. In post-Byzantine art the elderly ***Kairos*** is usually accompanied by the inscription of Posidippus of Pella, the epigrammatic poet (born around 300 BC) who is presented in a question/answer form between a passerby and ***Kairos***, and decrypts the enigmatic figure of the latter. From the inscription, we learn that ***Kairos***, which subdues everything, is constantly on the move.

To express this movement he uses the verb “**rotate**” which indicates eternal movement. The elderly ***Kairos*** is inconceivable because with the wings on his legs he can fly like the wind, while he touches the ground with his limbs. In his right hand, he holds a razor sharp blade, a sign of his bitterness. His hair falls forward on his forehead. On the contrary, the back of the head is bald. So if someone, following an encounter with ***Kairos***, is not able to catch him from the front, it is then impossible to win when overtaken. In accordance with the inscription, we learn that ***Kairos*** runs, flies and is sharper than any blade.



“Βίος”, Codex Urbani (fol. 333v.),
Biblioteca Franzoniana, Genova





A marble relief of “Kairos”. Cathedral of Torcello, Italy, 12th century



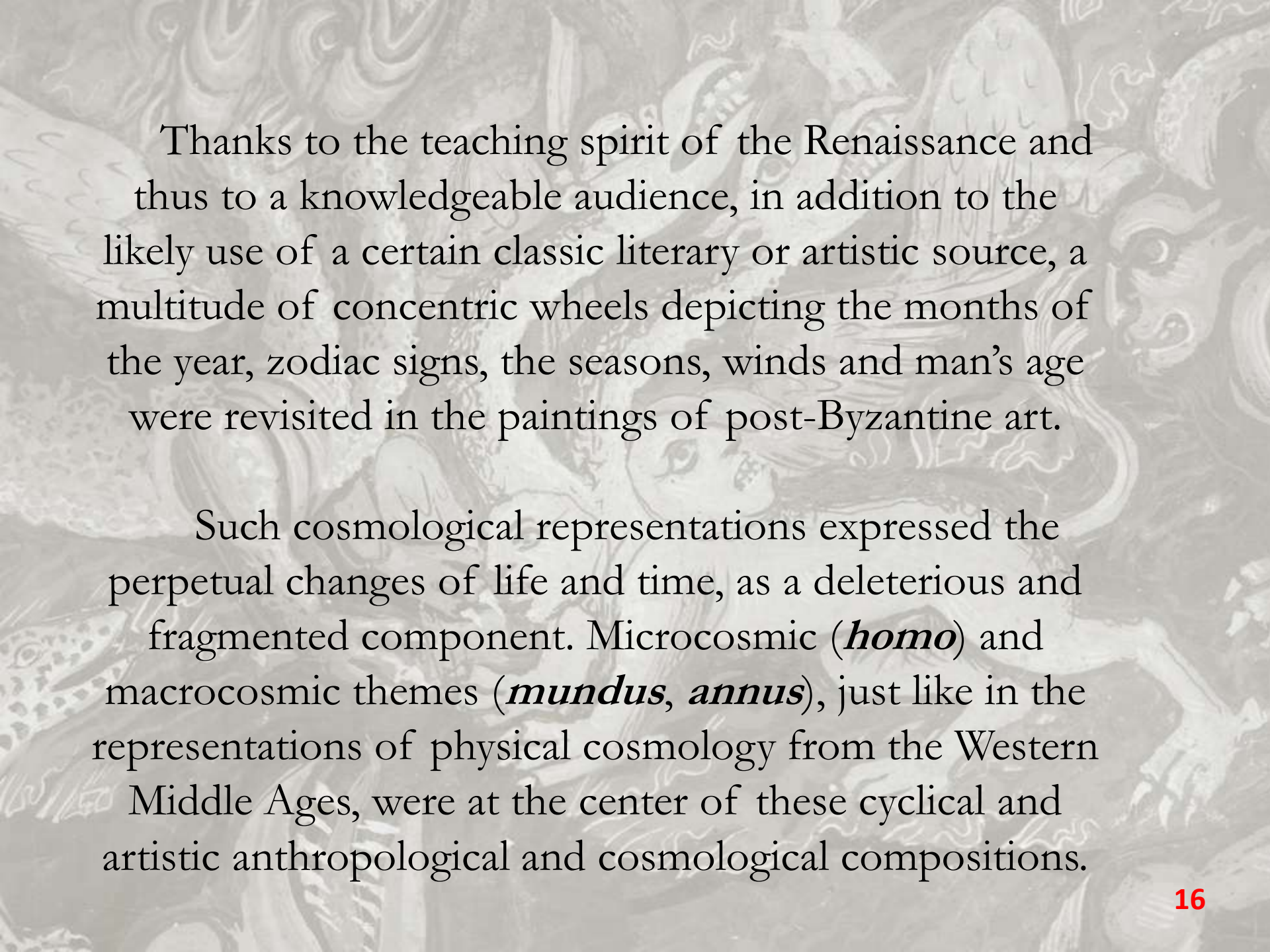
“Kairos” moves on oversized wheels. Codex H. 16 (no 671), fol. 48. Monastery of Lavra, Mount Athos, 1602



“Kairos” accompagnied by the inscription of
Posidippus of Pella. Monastery of Redina,
Afgrafa, Thessaly, exonarthex, 18th century.

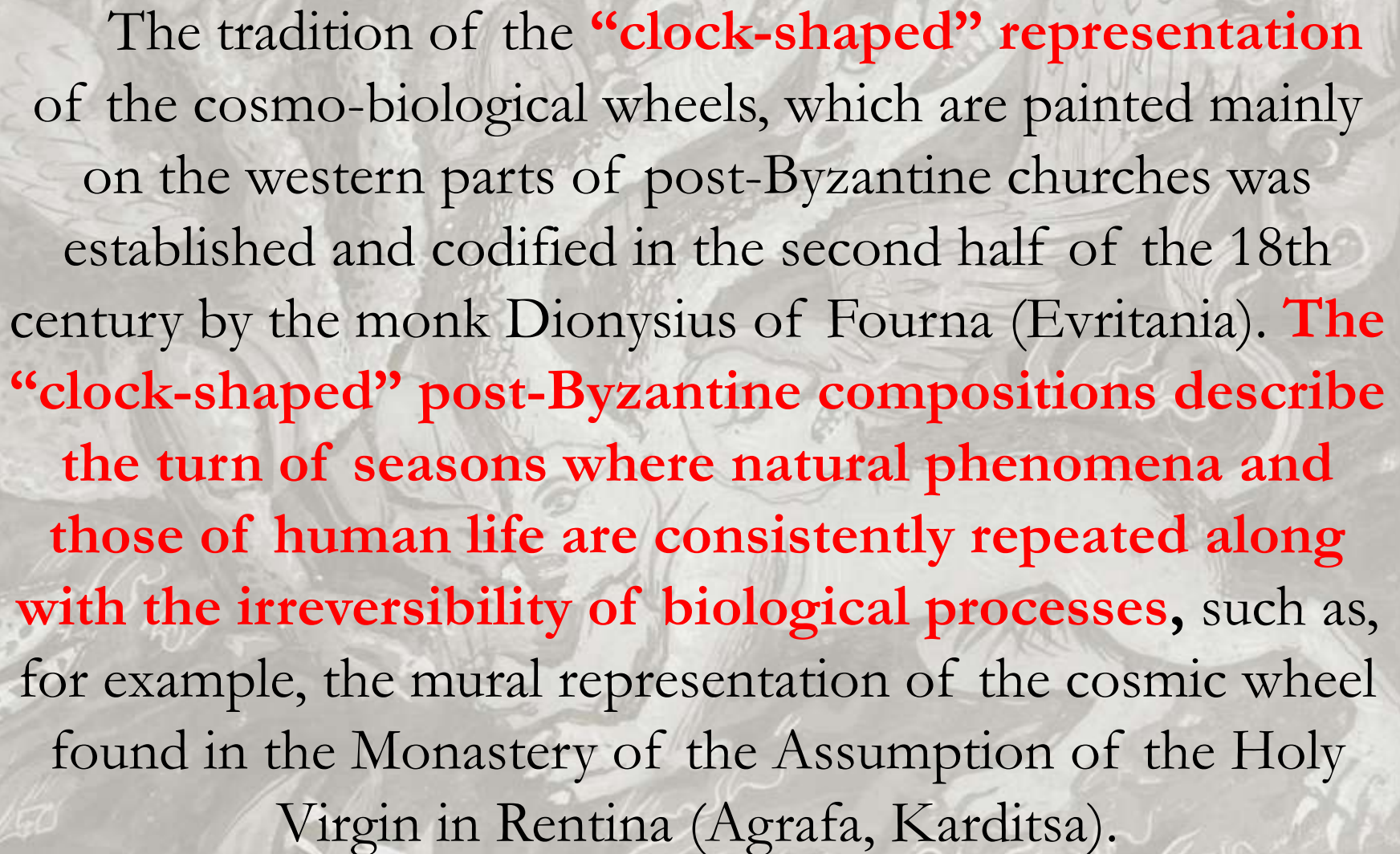


“Bios” captured by “Mundus”. Krina Monastery, Island of Chios,
1734

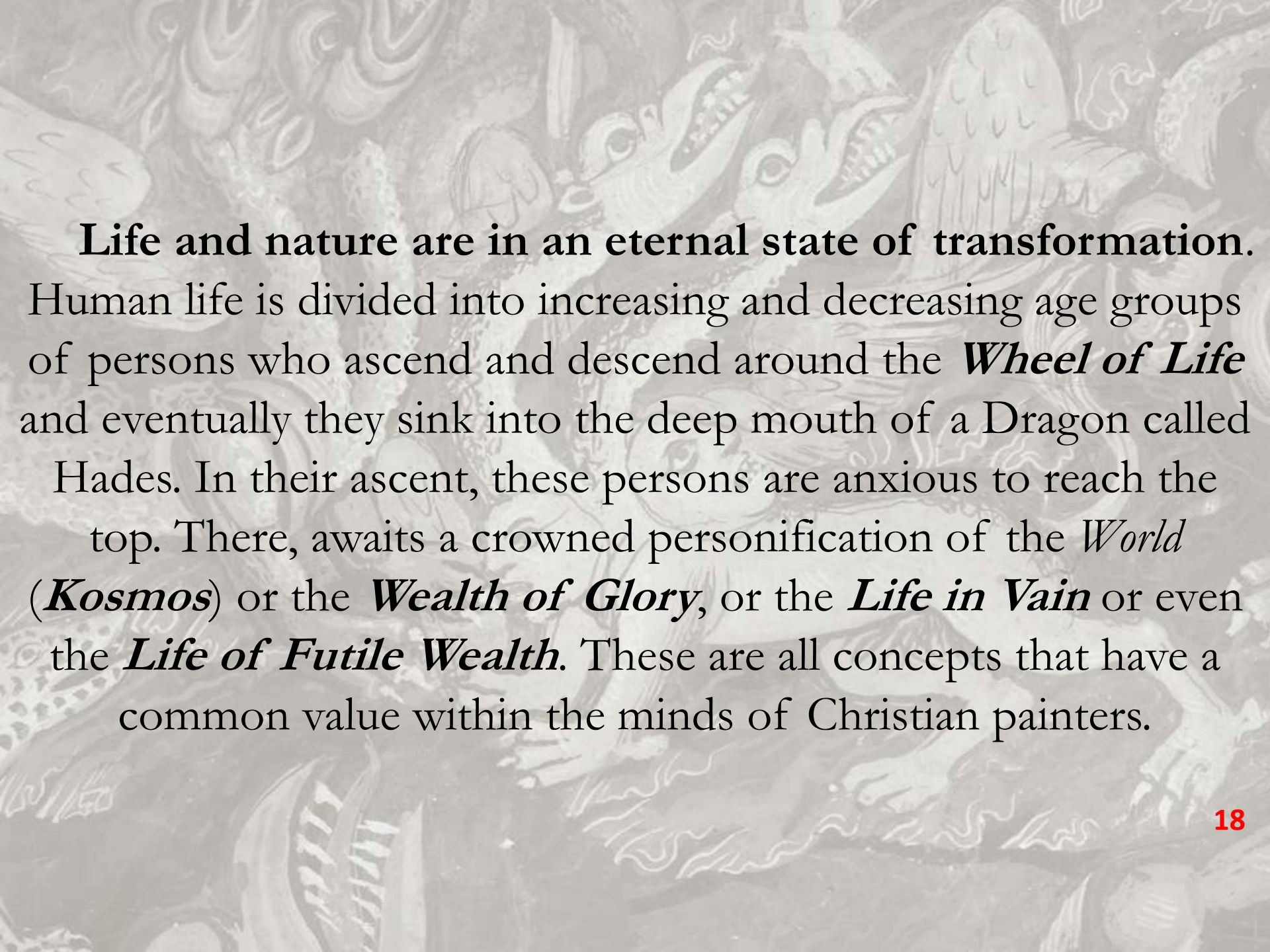


Thanks to the teaching spirit of the Renaissance and thus to a knowledgeable audience, in addition to the likely use of a certain classic literary or artistic source, a multitude of concentric wheels depicting the months of the year, zodiac signs, the seasons, winds and man's age were revisited in the paintings of post-Byzantine art.

Such cosmological representations expressed the perpetual changes of life and time, as a deleterious and fragmented component. Microcosmic (*homo*) and macrocosmic themes (*mundus, annus*), just like in the representations of physical cosmology from the Western Middle Ages, were at the center of these cyclical and artistic anthropological and cosmological compositions.

The background of the slide is a faded, grayscale image of a fresco. It depicts a circular, 'clock-shaped' composition. At the top, a figure, possibly a deity or saint, is shown. Below this, a series of figures and animals are arranged in a circular pattern, suggesting a cycle of life or seasons. The overall style is characteristic of Byzantine or post-Byzantine art.

The tradition of the **“clock-shaped” representation** of the cosmo-biological wheels, which are painted mainly on the western parts of post-Byzantine churches was established and codified in the second half of the 18th century by the monk Dionysius of Fournia (Evritania). **The “clock-shaped” post-Byzantine compositions describe the turn of seasons where natural phenomena and those of human life are consistently repeated along with the irreversibility of biological processes**, such as, for example, the mural representation of the cosmic wheel found in the Monastery of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin in Rentina (Agrafa, Karditsa).



Life and nature are in an eternal state of transformation. Human life is divided into increasing and decreasing age groups of persons who ascend and descend around the ***Wheel of Life*** and eventually they sink into the deep mouth of a Dragon called Hades. In their ascent, these persons are anxious to reach the top. There, awaits a crowned personification of the *World* (***Kosmos***) or the ***Wealth of Glory***, or the ***Life in Vain*** or even the ***Life of Futile Wealth***. These are all concepts that have a common value within the minds of Christian painters.

In some compositions the personification of the *Mundus* is accompanied by these vaunting words: “Who exists like me?”. In its depictions, *Mundus* usually holds a cup in one hand, where its liquid content perhaps symbolizes the sweetness of life or the bitterest cup of death. On the other hand, *Mundus* is seen holding a sword, a reminder of the blade held by the elderly *Kairos* and its trenchancy, or flowers, which refer to the illusion of time and the futility of human things. Upon their descent the persons of the wheel, which gradually get older, are seen resenting the painful and inevitable end. Of particularly instructive interest are the words that accompany, as inscribed, the person who is immersed in the mouth of the Dragon: “I wasn’t there nor was I seen”.

The kinematic mechanism of the rotating *Wheel of Time* usually is activated by the personifications of *Day* and *Night*.



“Wheel of Time”, St. Nikolas of Tsaritsani, Thessaly, 1753





“Wheel of Time” (detail). Church of Taxiarches, Tsaritsani,
17th century



“Mundus”, Retha Monastery, Aitolocarnania,
exonarthex, 19th century

The circular and perpetual rotary transformation of the properties of the four elements, the temporal changes of the seasons and months of the year, the birth and the deterioration of the human body are revealed in these cosmological compositions of the post-Byzantine era. This is how the cosmic as well as the biological cycles merge into a shape. This also occurs in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine composition of **Psalms 148-150**, inhabited by different species of dragons, where the cycle of time (both natural and life cycles) merges with the linear time of salvation. These two cycles of time meet at a common point: **the person of Christ Almighty, who occupies a central position and is surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac.**

Christ is the axis around which the miracle of creation and the drama of redemption take place. Within the sky's transcendental and infinite nature along with the earth's volatile nature, which is a symbolic declaration of the linear motion of time and the cyclical renewal of life on earth, is the salvific nature of the resurrection and of human redemption. Here, the figure of Christ, the ruler of the universe or Cosmic leader is at the center of the composition of *Eternity (Aion)*. The representation of *Aion* symbolizes the beginning and the end of the world, in other words the creation and the apocalyptic dimension of the Last Judgment.



Psalms 148-150. St Paraskevi, Patero, Ioannina, Epirus, 18th century



Psalms 148-150. St Paraskevi, Patero, Ioannina, Epirus, 18th century



Psalms 148-150. St Paraskevi, Patero, Ioannina, Epirus, 18th century



Psalms 148-150. Church of St. Nikolaos, Vitsa, Zagori, Ioannina, Epirus, 1618-1619



Psalms 148-150. Church of St. Nikolaos, Vitsa, Zagori, Ioannina, Epirus, 1618-1619



Psalms 148-150. Church of St. Nikolaos, Vitsa, Zagori, Ioannina, Epirus, 1618-1619



Psalms 148-150. Church of St. Nikolaos, Vitsa, Zagori, Ioannina,
Epirus, 1618-1619



Psalms 148-150. Church of St. Nikolaos, Vitsa, Zagori, Ioannina, Epirus, 1618-1619



Psalms 148-150. Seltsou Monastery, Arta, Epirus, 1697

All cyclic cosmological representations that flood the narthex of post-Byzantine churches constantly pose questions to the human subject-believer regarding his place as a living being in the world. These representations set out the direction of the subject-believer's possibilities to shape life, opening a fertile route toward the treaty of afterlife, in addition to a subjective uncertainty and insecurity. These iconographic paradigms serve a propagandist and educational role regarding the qualitative structure of how the relationship of the believer with the world is founded, which leads to the understanding that the objective nature of time is finite in relation to the infinity of time in the afterlife. **In post-Byzantine iconography, the public and shared face of time incorporates in one's daily awareness the notions of change (the three ecstasies of time in past, present and future) and decay (human skeleton).**

Human life is inevitably bound up with future uncertainty and indeterminacy.

The Christian believer, with reference to the Last Judgment, should be alert to the event that is to come. So, the anticipation of this specific future event requires alertness and spiritual awakening and a life that constantly stands before death while maintaining a daily relationship, one where there is a possibility in every moment, which is a realization of the coming status of another life.

Time therefore exists on the basis of the subject-believer's temporality and as he who understands the notion of death.

