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Text as Art? Byzantine Inscriptions and Their Display

The so-called “Lorsch Annals” (*Annales Laureshamenses*), a Frankish chronicle covering the years 703 to 803, state the following for the year 795:

Hadrian the supreme pontiff died; and the lord king, once he had ceased his mourning asked that prayers be said for him throughout the whole Christian people within his lands and sent an abundance of alms for him and ordered an epitaph, written in gold letters on marble, to be made in Francia so that he might send it to Rome to adorn the sepulchre of the supreme pontiff Hadrian.¹

This passage describes Charlemagne’s order to create an extraordinary tomb inscription, written in gold letters on marble (*ebitaffium aureis litteris in marmore*), for the deceased Hadrian I, who served as pope from 772 to 795. It states that the *epitaphius* should be sent to Rome to adorn the tomb of the pontifex (*ad sepultura summi pontificis Adriani ornandam*).

What is striking in this passage is that the primary motivation for creating the *epitaphius*, the tomb inscription with its golden letters, was not to be informative about the deceased but rather to adorn his sepulchre.

From this example and others, we learn that inscriptions were not regarded only as transmitters of information but also as adornments or, to put it another way, as works of art embedded in the performance of another work of art. Hadrian’s metrical *epitaphius* is still preserved (fig. 1), exposed at St. Peter’s in Rome, and as one can see from the decoration of the marble slab and the layout of the text, it is a masterpiece of imperial display and Carolingian craftsmanship.²

In addition, the text arranged for the tomb inscription is not a mere prose text; instead, it consists of verses composed in elegiac distichs that were not inscribed *in continuo* but under one another with the second line (the pentameter) intended. With this specific structure, the inscription becomes even more ornamental: it gives the text a regular, symmetrical form that could not have been achieved by a simple prose text. The impact of the text must have been twofold: for those not literate enough to understand the inscription, the impressive layout of the incised letters and their magical appearance must have symbolized the importance of the content; for the literate, on the other hand, the poetic language of the text must have underscored the

1 Pertz 1826, 36 (chap. XXVIII). English translation after Story 2003, 105; for the text of the tomb inscription see de Rossi 1888.

2 Silvagni 1943, pl. II, fig. 6; Favreau 1997, 63–68 and fig. 5.

significance of the deceased pope and his imperial mourner. The verse inscription, of course, was not only made to celebrate Pope Hadrian and his wise deeds and to mourn his death: from verse 17 onward, Charlemagne himself becomes part of the textual performance by indicating that he ordered the verses to be composed (*Karolus haec crimina scripsi*). It is probably no coincidence that the word KAROLVS is inscribed in the very center of the text ensemble as seen from the perspective of the beholder and reader.



Fig. 1: Vatican, St. Peter, epitaph of pope Hadrian I (taken from Silvagni 1943, pl. II, fig. 6).

To the best of my knowledge, there is only one such clear statement describing inscriptions as adornments from the Byzantine millennium.³ A passage in Niketas Eugenianos's metrical epitaph for the twelfth-century court poet Theodoros Prodromos refers to the verses composed by the latter: "You (i.e., Prodromos) have left behind the adornment of the holy icons. For, being adorned with stones and pearls, they also had your verses as a perfect adornment. Truly the poetry of the pearl (i.e., Prodromos) that adorned the icons was adornment."⁴ As we can see from these verses, Eugenianos employs jewelry imagery to present both Prodromos ("the pearl," *μόργαρον*) and his verses, which he calls "adornment" (*κόσμος*) for the icons. Unfortunately there is only one extant icon, now in the Kremlin in Moscow, with Prodromos's verses on its margins (and this is not even a contemporary one, since it dates to the fifteenth century⁵), but the content and the layout of many of his preserved poems reveal that they were composed in order to serve as inscriptions.⁶

Two other passages are preserved in which Byzantine authors discuss the meaning and purpose of inscriptions. The first is a marginal note on fol. 1v of the Vatican codex Regimensis Graecus 1 (end of the ninth or first decades of the tenth century), the only manuscript of the famous Bible⁷ donated by Leon Sakellarios. It offers this statement on the meaning of the metrical captions of the miniatures in the codex: "In every picture scanned iambic verses go round the four corners of the borders, signifying most clearly in summary form the meaning of the representations."⁸ A very similar statement is made by Maximos Planudes at the end of the thirteenth century in an epigram written in the name of Theodora Rhaulina, a niece of the emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos. This epigram, which may have been inscribed next to a portrait of Theodora in the Hagios Andreas *ἐν τῇ κρίσει* church in Constantinople, begins with the observation that "inscriptions reveal the representations of things and persons in pictures."⁹ These two quotations refer primarily to the content of inscriptions: the potential reader is asked to study the texts attached to pictures in order to learn more about their meaning. However, in accord with the statement in the Bible of Leon Sakellarios, which indicates that the verses accompanying the illuminations "go round the four corners of the borders [of each miniature]", I suggest that these inscriptions are more than mere transmitters of information; rather, they are part of the artistic composition of each depicted scene.

³ For more examples from the Latin West see Treffort 2008, 73.

⁴ Gallavotti 1935, 226 (vv. 150–154). English translation after Drpić 2011, 149; cf. Lauxtermann 2003, 34.

⁵ Ostashenko 2013, 424–429; Rhoby 2010, no. Ik48.

⁶ On this subject Zagklas 2014, *passim*.

⁷ Only Genesis through Psalms is preserved.

⁸ Mango 2011, 64; on this passage cf. Rhoby 2012, 732. English translation after Mango.

⁹ Lampros 1916, 426 (no. 2); cf. Rhoby 2011a, 318–319; Riehle 2014, 300.

In Pope Hadrian's *epitaphius* and the verses in the Bible of Leon Sakellarios, it is poetry, not prose, that is chosen to enlarge the artistic and symbolic impact of the performance of an object or a scene. If we take a closer look at the dedication epigram that introduces the verse romance "Rhodanthe and Dosikles" by the already mentioned mid-twelfth-century author Theodoros Prodromos, we find that the act of composing verses is itself compared to painting and that poetry is considered painting:

Your servant Theodore ... Prodromos, / having grasped these ... colours in his own hands, / has depicted the image of Dosikles and Rhodanthe, / ... / Do not put my recent efforts to be viewed / with the beautifully drawn panels and charming early works / of the great craftsman Praxiteles, or Apelles, / ... / but compare my skills with recent painters / and it might seem not much worse than those.¹⁰

Another poem, entitled "On verse", formerly attributed to the mid-eleventh-century Byzantine statesman and author Michael Psellos, opens with a similar statement: "Writing verse with skill is a kind of art (τέχνη), / a most beautiful art ..."¹¹

The theme of poetry as painting is not an invention of the Byzantine period, of course, but an established *topos* that dates to Antiquity.¹² Already the famous poet Simonides of Keos is thought to be the author of the following phrase preserved in Plutarch's *Moralia* 346F: "Simonides, however, calls painting inarticulate (σιωπῶσαν) poetry and poetry articulate (λαλοῦσαν) painting." In this respect, it is no surprise that the Greek word γράφειν can mean both "to write" and "to paint."¹³ Horace's famous *ut pictura poesis* (Hor. ars. 361) testifies to the same *topos*.¹⁴

When dealing with the inscriptions of premodern societies, one is always confronted with the question how connected words were perceived by their beholders. As regards Byzantium, several studies have been devoted to this topic in recent years. Did the Byzantines gaze at inscriptions rather than read them, as Marc Lauxtermann suggested?¹⁵ Did inscriptions primarily fulfill an active ornamental function, as Liz James has proposed?¹⁶ Or were inscriptions primarily set up to be read, to be "speaking" monuments that made their content available in different ways to both literates and illiterates, as Amy Papalexandrou has argued in several publications?¹⁷

It was long assumed that inscriptions played a very minor role in Byzantium because the production of public texts had, for many different reasons (decline of

¹⁰ Agapitos 2000, 175–176. English translation after Jeffreys 2012, 19–20.

¹¹ Westerink 1992, 463 (no. 91). English translation after Bernard 2010, 294.

¹² Agapitos 2000, 179–181.

¹³ Cf. Liddell/Scott/Jones/McKenzie, ⁹1925–1940, s.v.; 1996, s.v.; cf. Hunger 1984; Drpić 2013, 334–353.

¹⁴ Cf. Cavallo 1994, 31–32.

¹⁵ Lauxtermann 2003, 272–273.

¹⁶ James 2007.

¹⁷ Papalexandrou 2001a; Papalexandrou 2007.

cities, loss of epigraphically productive regions in the eastern part of the empire, etc.), declined after Late Antiquity.¹⁸ It is certainly true that Byzantium was not “une civilisation d’*épigraphie*,” as the famous epigrapher Louis Robert once called the old Greek and Roman Empires,¹⁹ and we are also aware that the epigraphic habit²⁰ was not as developed as it had been in earlier centuries, simply because other methods of communication had been invented. Nevertheless, Byzantine inscriptions—preserved on or in stones, mosaics, frescoes, portable objects, textiles, seals, coins, and other media—were an important and long-underestimated component of Byzantine society.²¹ A simple fact supports this assertion. Until recently, the number of Byzantine metrical inscriptions—the usual term is “epigrams”—that are still found *in situ* was thought to be “extremely limited,”²² but it is now known that more than seven hundred inscriptional epigrams are preserved in different media, including quite a few traditional stone inscriptions.²³ A person walking through a Byzantine town (especially Constantinople before the Fourth Crusade) probably was not confronted with as many inscriptions as his ancient or late antique predecessor had been, but inscriptions could still be seen everywhere, inviting their beholders to interact with them. Just as today, in everyday Byzantine life it was rather difficult to avoid the multiple opportunities to meet letters and words. The fact that the so-called *Παραστάσεις σύντρομοι χρονικάί*, a collection of reports on Constantinople’s monuments from the early eighth century,²⁴ states that the “old” inscriptions were no longer understood indicates that numerous inscriptions, at least ancient and late antique ones, were omnipresent and still visible.²⁵ The *Παραστάσεις* even speak about the amazement inspired by careful research on the inscriptions in the Forum of Constantinople.²⁶

If we turn now to the questions posed by Lauxtermann, James, and Papalexandrou regarding the perception of inscriptions in Byzantium, the reaction of a recipient confronted with an inscription can best be demonstrated by an example from the eleventh century. Michael Psellos was the author of a letter addressed to Emperor Michael VII Dukas (1071–1078), one of his former students.²⁷ In this letter we learn that the emperor had ordered Psellos to examine the inscription (*γραφή*) and the carving

18 Mango 1991a, 239–240.

19 Robert 1961, 454 = Robert 2007, 88.

20 MacMullen 1982.

21 Cf. Mango 1991b, 711: “A discipline of Byz. Epigraphy does not yet exist.” Fresh impetus for the discipline of Byzantine epigraphy is provided by Rhoby 2015.

22 Lauxtermann 2003, 33.

23 Rhoby 2009; Rhoby 2010; Rhoby 2014.

24 Cameron/Herrin 1984; for more literature on this subject Rhoby 2012, 735–736 and n. 18.

25 Mango 1991a, 240–241; see also Mango 1963a.

26 Cameron/Herrin 1984, 103.

27 Kurtz/Drexler 1941, 207–209 (no. 188) = Littlewood 1985, 126–127 (no. 32).

(γλυφή) of a stone that had been shown to him previously.²⁸ Psellos describes the two figures on the stone plaque, whom he identifies as Odysseus and Kirke; he then reads the letters that accompany the figures and—to please the emperor—interprets the scene as a favorable prediction of the emperor’s future policies. Thanks to Růžena Dostálová, we now know that the stone Psellos interpreted for the emperor belonged to a series of Iliac and Odyssean tablets (*Tabulae Iliacae* and *Odyseaeae*) created in the first century A.D.²⁹

Was the emperor not capable of explaining and reading the plaque even though he had been a student of Psellos? This is hard to believe, because as we know from a didactic poem by Psellos that the emperor was even capable of composing iambic and hexameter verse.³⁰ What we learn from this passage is that the accurate deciphering and interpreting of inscriptions and accompanying scenes must indeed have been the privilege of a very learned elite. Had inscriptions (and scenes) become not fully understandable even for the literates among whom the emperor belonged? Had they indeed become secret or magical messages? Did they serve as signs of a “passé oublié,” as Gilbert Dagron averred for the numerous ancient inscriptions and statues still visible in pre-1204 Constantinople?³¹

In my view, there are three possibilities for how inscriptions were perceived in Byzantium.

(1) As in the case of Psellos, who interpreted the text and the scene for Michael VII, inscriptions seem to have been presented to the public on certain occasions. There is some evidence that some were read aloud, such as a donor’s inscription in a church on the day of its inauguration or a tomb inscription on the commemoration day of the deceased. Unfortunately, Byzantine sources do not offer much information about this practice. There is precise evidence for the long dedicatory epigram, today entirely lost, of the famous mid-twelfth-century Pantokrator church in Constantinople: manuscripts that transmit the epigram³² state that the verses composed for the inauguration of the church are recited on the relevant commemoration day.³³ We can imagine that the inscription, which was probably painted or installed on one of the interior walls of the monastery church, was read aloud by a priest in the presence of the imperial family responsible for the commission and others in the aristocratic milieu.³⁴ In this

28 On this letter Dagron 1984a; cf. Moore 2005, 354 (no. 926).

29 Dostálová 2011, 138–142. Psellos probably also wrote an ekphrasis on this very plaque, ed. Littlewood 1985, 128–129 (no. 33); cf. Moore 2005, 354–355 (no. 927).

30 Westerink 1992, 84 (no. 6, vv. 92–100); cf. Bernard 2014, 216, 246.

31 Dagron 1984b, 150.

32 Vassis 2013, 213–218. An English translation of the Greek text by is found in the same volume, 49–52.

33 Cf. Hörandner 2006; Rhoby 2012, 745–746.

34 On feasts and their performance at the Pantokrator monastery Kotzabassi 2013.

connection it is appropriate to cite Papalexandrou, who stated that “we are probably safe [...] in assuming that letter forms became meaningful even when they could not be read. The beholder, for example, may have relied on intermediaries who could read and communicate the otherwise arcane knowledge of the inscriptions.”³⁵ Gianfranco Agosti supposed that this practice already existed in Late Antiquity when the *θυρωροί* (doorkeepers) in churches read and explained certain inscriptions to visitors; this method might also have existed in the West.³⁶

While listening to the verses, the public at the Pantokrator church might have enjoyed not only their rhetoric, which compares present-day Constantinople with ancient Athens and celebrates the role of the empress Irene at the foundation of the monastery, but also the layout of the inscription and its place in the decorative program of the church. The same may have been true for tomb inscriptions: despite the lack of clear evidence in the sources, it is easy to imagine that these texts were read aloud on the commemoration day of the deceased whose names were preserved in specific commemoration books, such as the *βρέβιον*³⁷ and the (less well-known) so-called *ψυχοχάρτια*.³⁸ The extraordinary mid-fourteenth-century burial place of Michael Tornikes in the parekklesion of the Chora monastery church (Kariye Camii) in Constantinople is a likely candidate for the practice of reciting a tomb inscription, here placed above the arcosolium (fig. 2).³⁹

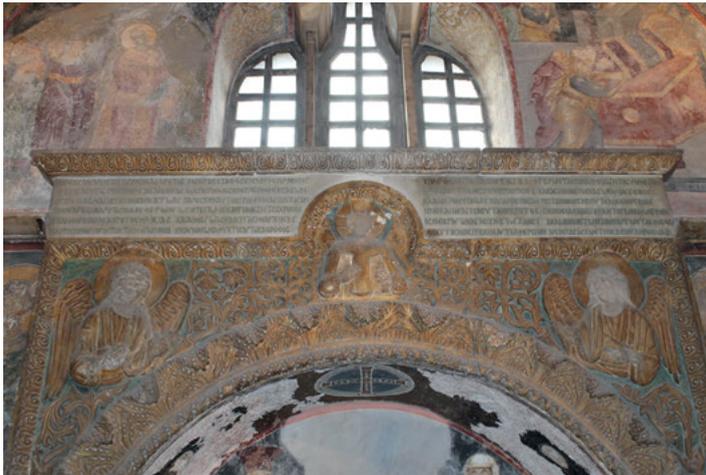


Fig. 2: Constantinople, parekklesion of the Chora church, arcosolium © Andreas Rhoby.

³⁵ Papalexandrou 2003, 71.

³⁶ Agosti 2010, 177.

³⁷ Kazhdan 1991.

³⁸ On the term Lefort/Oikonomidès/Papachryssanthou/Kravari 1994, 286.

³⁹ Underwood 1966, 276–277. A new edition of the metrical Greek inscription is published by Rhoby 2014, no. TR68.

While listening to the text, the visitor to the church likely gazed at the images depicted in the arcosolium: the Mother of God in the middle flanked by Tornikes and his wife, with the latter two also shown as a monk and a nun in the soffit of the arcosolium. As the text was recited, the depicted persons might have become living, speaking figures in the perception of the beholder. The listener/viewer may also have had the opportunity to enjoy the regular form of the inscription, the verses of which were divided with three dots incised into the marble, stressing the visual features of the text in concert with the whole monumental tomb ensemble.

As Papalexandrou has demonstrated, for some Byzantine inscriptions it seems likely that listeners were invited to join voices with the one reciting the text. This is the case for a ninth-century inscription on the island of Samos in which the listeners are explicitly exhorted to join in. It is the castle of Samos, where the inscription was placed, that speaks these lines:

Everybody passing by and seeing this / and having known my former bad reputation / praises you rightly, the benefactor, / and shouts without ending: 'Many years to the ruler Theophilos and Theodora! / O emperor of all the inhabited world, be well, Theophilos, ruler of the Romans'. / ... glorifying the sceptre and your crown / we duly say: 'Live many years!'"⁴⁰

One can readily imagine that when the inscription was read aloud the listeners participated in saying "Live many years" (πολλοί σου χρόνοι). Just such an invitation to join the performance of the inscription was found in the tomb inscription of Pope Hadrian with which this paper began: "Whoever is reading these verses ... / may say ... 'God, have pity on the one and the other!' (i.e., with Pope Hadrian and Charlemagne).

In Byzantium it seems to have been very popular to begin inscriptions, especially epigrams, with a rhetorical question that invites the recipient of the text—regardless of whether he read the inscription on his own or just listened to it—to become an active member of the performance. The dedicatory epigram in the church of St. Barnabas in Louros in the Preveza district of western Greece starts with such a rhetorical address: "You seek to learn, man, who commissioned the erection of the sacred church that you see from its foundations?"⁴¹ Similar approaches can be found on other monuments, too, including city walls. A thick slab of white marble, now housed in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, bears a long but unfortunately not fully preserved inscription, probably of the eleventh century, that was once set up on the walls of Dyrrhachion (Durrës) in Albania.⁴² It consists of two parts, the first being the question of the passer-by (ξένοϛ) addressed to the city and the second the city's

⁴⁰ Schneider 1929, 139 (no. 12); a new edition by Rhoby 2014, no. GR106; cf. Papalexandrou 2001a, 280–281; Papalexandrou 2007, 179; Lauxtermann 2003, 271–273; Rhoby 2012, 743. English translation based on Papalexandrou.

⁴¹ Rhoby 2014, no. GR79; cf. Rhoby 2011b, 72–73.

⁴² Mango 1966; new edition by Rhoby 2014, no. TR57.

answer. We may suppose that the oral performance of such inscriptions created a dramatic note that captured the attention of the audience. In this context, we may also mention that tomb inscriptions from Antiquity onward were sometimes composed in dialogue form.⁴³

(2) Turning now to the second possible way that inscriptions were perceived in Byzantium, we must acknowledge that in most cases inscriptions were encountered at times when no one was there to read them aloud. Was it possible for semiliterates or people of average literacy—or people with “functional literacy,” to use Margaret Mullett’s term⁴⁴—to interact with a text even if they were not fully able to decipher or understand it? It is my impression that some Byzantine inscriptions used signal words that made their content more understandable than we would imagine at first sight. In previous publications⁴⁵ I have dealt with the famous hexameter dedicatory inscription of the Skripou church, dated to the year 873/74, at Orchomenos in Boeotia (fig. 3).⁴⁶

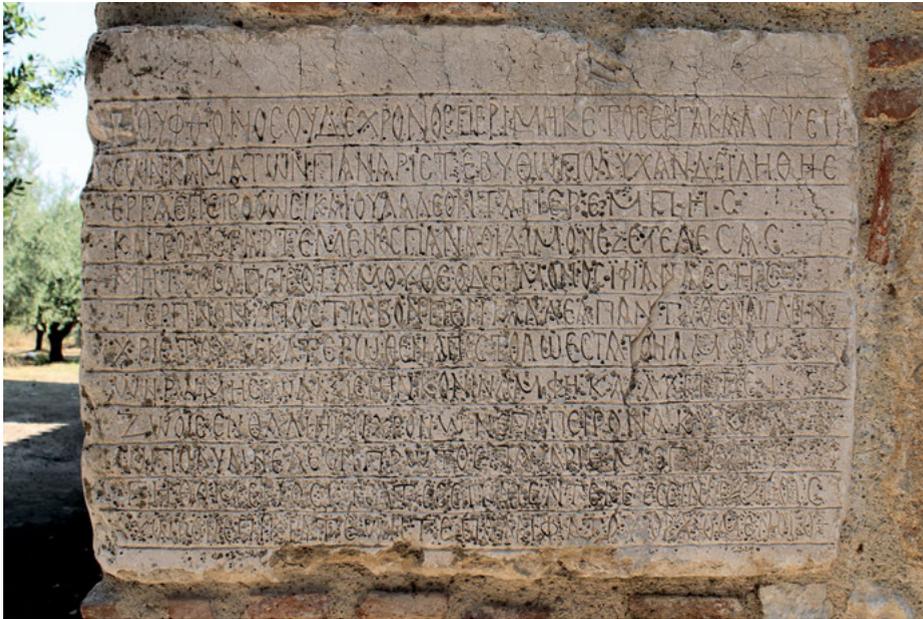


Fig. 3: Orchomenos, church of Skripou, dedicatory inscription © Andreas Rhoby.

⁴³ Alexiou 2002, *passim*. See also Peek 1960, 242–255.

⁴⁴ Mullett 1990, 163.

⁴⁵ Especially Rhoby 2012, 737–738.

⁴⁶ Oikonomidès 1994; new edition by Rhoby 2014, no. GR98; cf. Prieto-Domínguez 2013.

Three different prose inscriptions on the walls of the church inform the reader in a very unpretentious way about its dedication by the protospatharios Leon.⁴⁷ The hexameter epigram, by contrast, is written in a very erudite language (because of the nature of the meter) and, interestingly, the stonemason responsible for it did not manage to adjust the lettering to the high literary quality of the text. As Papalexandrou has pointed out, the visitor to the church ideally was meant to circulate around the building, starting with the prose inscriptions and ending with the hexameter epigram.⁴⁸ By the time he came to the hexameter epigram, the average literate visitor would already have had an idea about Leon's foundation of the church. For those not able to understand the sophisticated language of all the verses in the epigram, the text was prepared to tell the most important things right at the beginning. It begins, "Neither envy (φθόνος) nor time (χρόνος) eternal will obscure the works of / your (i.e., the founder, Leon's) efforts, most wonderful one, in the vast depths of oblivion." Since the destructive force of envy was omnipresent and widely known in Byzantine everyday life, as Martin Hinterberger has recently demonstrated in his monograph on this emotion,⁴⁹ it sufficed to read the first two verses of the epigram with the words φθόνος and χρόνος to be fully informed about the central message of the text: even envy and time will not manage to destroy the founder Leon's deeds in the future.

The use of signal words in Byzantium was by no means restricted to inscriptions. In Byzantine documents issued by the Patriarchate, too, such code words were used to provoke an immediate reaction by the familiar addressee of the text.⁵⁰ For the Skripou church there is another aspect of inscriptionality that must not be forgotten: as in many other Byzantine churches, an extensive reuse of ancient spolia can be observed.⁵¹ Some of these spolia bear inscriptions that were certainly visible to the Byzantine beholders regardless of whether they were literate, semiliterate, or illiterate. Especially in the Skripou church, which was founded in part for "hellenizing" propaganda reasons, spolia with inscriptions could have acted as an obvious visual reminder of language, history, and culture.⁵² In addition, one must also consider the respect with which inscriptions were approached, especially those that were not understood and seen instead as powerful magical signs in the sense that the "Herrschaft des 'Buchstabens'" was described by Herbert Hunger.⁵³ This magical and occult function of inscriptions on spolia was even more important in non-Greek settings, such as in medieval Islamic architecture, as was recently shown by Julia Gon-

⁴⁷ Cf. Papalexandrou 2001a.

⁴⁸ Papalexandrou 2001a, 267.

⁴⁹ Hinterberger 2013.

⁵⁰ On such an example Gastgeber 2013, 197.

⁵¹ On the phenomenon Saradi 1997.

⁵² Papalexandrou 2003, 72; see also Papalexandrou 2001b.

⁵³ Hunger 1984.

nella.⁵⁴ This leads us to the third dimension of the perception of Byzantine inscriptions.

(3) How were they perceived by illiterates who were confronted with them without the opportunity to become part of an oral performance? At the beginning of this article I touched on the phenomenon of the symbolic impact of the inscriptional word: even if a text is not understood, even if the inscribed words are no more than an incomprehensible accumulation of letters, the dimensions and composition symbolize that something important has been set down. One may recall, for example, the long conciliar edict of 1166 that was inscribed on several marble plaques in the narthex of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (fig. 4),⁵⁵ or other legal texts that—as in ancient tradition—were displayed in more or less public places, such as the imperial documents granting privileges to monasteries that were painted in their churches.⁵⁶



Fig. 4: Constantinople, Hagia Sophia, conciliar edict of 1166 (replicas) © Andreas Rhoby.

54 Gonnella 2010.

55 Mango 1963b.

56 Kalopissi-Verti 2003.

Due to the extreme length of these texts, no one was reading them—not even the literates—but the impressive scale of the text symbolized the importance of the content. The same is true for inscriptions that were set up at places where they were not decipherable even by literate readers, as in the dome of a church or at the top of a city wall; even when they were illegible inscriptions were not useless because they attracted the beholder with their already mentioned magical power.⁵⁷ In addition, inscriptions like those attached to the outer walls of the Skripou church may have served as a kind of a frame for the building for the illiterate viewer.⁵⁸

Another method of facilitating communication between object and beholder was to reduce inscriptions to the most essential content. Churches and city walls are sometimes equipped with monograms of the ruling dynasty: these combinations of letters are less a text than an ornament, and due to their wide dissemination they were a known cipher that was also accessible to the illiterates.⁵⁹ The same is true for the depiction of crosses traditionally accompanied by the combination of four letters or four pairs of letters. These “tetragrams,” found in all media (city walls, church walls, icons, frescoes, etc.), are also widespread, especially the well-known IC XC NI KA (= Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς νικᾷ, “Jesus Christ conquers”). Other combinations, such as ΦΧΦΠ, XXXX or EEEE, were also very widespread, not so much letters as signs that belong to the artistic composition of crosses (fig. 5).

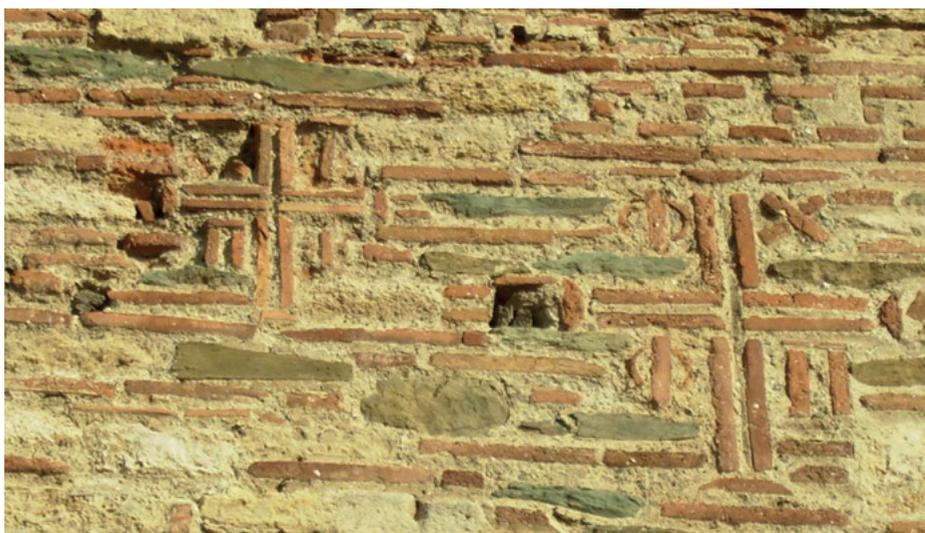


Fig. 5: Thessaloniki, city wall, tetragrams © Andreas Rhoby.

⁵⁷ Lauxtermann 2003, 272 f.; Rhoby 2012, 733; for the Latin West: Debiais 2009.

⁵⁸ Spingou 2012, 158.

⁵⁹ Seibt 2005; Feind 2010.

As Christopher Walter demonstrated some years ago, these tetragrams are mainly apotropaic in function;⁶⁰ they are magical, intended to repel the evil eye. In this respect, it is no coincidence that Byzantine magical formulas often require writing down such word combinations in order to avoid pain and disease. It seems clear that these tetragrams were not “secret messages” but rather known ciphers, regardless of whether they could be clearly identified by readers or not. It was not as important to decipher all of them correctly—and we may well wonder if a single and “correct” resolution existed for all of them—as to recognize their function as apotropaic and protective signs. In my view, tetragrams functioned like signposts in hard-to-understand inscriptions; they sometimes signaled the meaning of a text even for those who were not fully literate.⁶¹

Because these groups of letters also worked as ornaments, it seems to have been the norm to supplement crosses with these letters to enhance their artistic value. The widespread use of pseudo-Kufic letters in Byzantine decorative programs is further evidence for this practice. These pseudo-Arabic forms, lacking any meaningful sense, functioned to enlarge the artistic ensemble of the monument or object.⁶² Islamic art itself was sometimes equipped with pseudo-epigraphy that served as an ornamental device.⁶³ The same is true for Greek letters: one might think of the so-called “epigraphische Auszeichnungsmajuskel” (coined by Herbert Hunger)⁶⁴ and the so-called “maiuscola liturgica,” both used in manuscripts and inscriptions from the ninth to the eleventh centuries to increase the ornamental function of the text.⁶⁵ Greek letters also served as components of visual display in other writing cultures, as in Kievan Rus', where the main cultural function of Greek was as image rather than as language.⁶⁶ Text in the role of mere decoration is not an invention of the Byzantine period and the Middle Ages, however, as so-called nonsense inscriptions are already attested on ancient Greek vases. As a current research project at the University of Exeter has demonstrated, these inscriptions were not only produced by illiterate craftsmen—which one would suppose at first glance—but also by literate painters for iconographic purposes.⁶⁷

The decorative programs of late Byzantine churches include the depiction of saints holding open scrolls.⁶⁸ These texts are either quotations from the Bible or the

60 Walter 1997.

61 Rhoby 2013.

62 On this subject consult the publications of Alicia Walker, e.g., Walker 2008.

63 Aanavi 1968; cf. also Blair 1998, *passim*.

64 Hunger 1977a; Hunger 1977b. Cf. also Stefec 2009; Stefec 2011.

65 Orsini 2013.

66 Franklin 1992, especially 81; Franklin 2002a, 101–106; cf. also Franklin 2002b.

67 <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/classics/research/projects/ancientnonsense/> (accessed 28.2.2017). Cf. also Osborne/Pappas 2007.

68 Gerstel 1994.

liturgy or texts, sometimes verses, that were composed according to their vitae. The post-Byzantine painter's manual of Dionysios of Phourna,⁶⁹ which was based on Byzantine models, offers detailed information not only about the accurate depiction of saints but also about the inscriptional layout of their scrolls. When we take a closer look at some of these scrolls, however, we see that quotations or similar texts on scrolls are not given in full. Sometimes they stop in the middle of a sentence or even in the middle of a word, as can be seen, for instance, on the scrolls depicted in the twelfth-century church of the Panagia tou Arakos at Lagoudera, Cyprus.⁷⁰ This shows that it was not important to include the whole inscription on the scroll in order to inform viewers about the saint and his deeds; rather, the text included for aesthetic reasons or simply because it was conventional for saints to be equipped with scrolls. For the illiterate viewer it was of no significance if the text on the scroll was fully cited or not. In his view, scrolls were part and parcel of the depiction of saints; they offered a spiritual and symbolic message that was sometimes communicated by the priest during liturgy.⁷¹

In addition, it is worth pointing out that inscriptions do not always consist of letters alone. Christian inscriptions begin with a cross, and, especially after about the year 1000, letters are equipped with accents and breathing marks.⁷² Punctuation is also inserted, especially in metrical inscriptions, where verses may be divided with signs that are more than mere dots and commas. Such signs as asterisks and stars expand the aesthetic value of inscriptions.⁷³

As I have attempted to demonstrate here and elsewhere, inscriptions should not be analyzed in isolation. They interact first with the surrounding to which they are attached; monumental inscriptions cannot function without relation to their architectural context. They are part of an artistic composition regardless of whether or not they could be deciphered by beholders. Depending on their viewers' degree of literacy, inscriptions could reach the public in different ways: perhaps only a tiny erudite elite was able to read and understand them fully. Other readers were attracted by keywords; and a third group was informed about the content of the inscription during reading performances in which they were sometimes invited to join the chorus of the presentation. In addition, simple letters sometimes worked as ciphers, recognizable even to those who were completely illiterate.

The function of inscriptions can range from accurate communication of the contents to performative contribution to the surroundings, but in each case the recipi-

⁶⁹ Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1909; cf. Kakavas 2008.

⁷⁰ Winfield/Winfield 2003.

⁷¹ Cf. Rhoby 2012, 738.

⁷² Mango 1991a, *passim*.

⁷³ This subject is treated in Rhoby (in print).

ent—literate, illiterate, or somewhere in between—was invited to join the interaction between word, image, and beholder. In the title of this article I included a question mark after “Text as Art,” but after analyzing the material in depth I prefer to delete the question mark. The statement “text as art” has two dimensions: first, as I have shown, the production of (versified) texts is sometimes defined as art (τέχνη) in Byzantine sources. And second, inscribed text is itself part of its accompanying art performance.

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