

## Chapter Seven

### EPITAPHS

In letter no. 60, which he wrote when he was recuperating from a serious illness, Ignatios the Deacon tells his good friend Nikephoros in jest that, had he died, his friend would have been obliged to compose poems in his honour: “(...) for then you would have had to scan for me a funerary elegiac poem and fashion epic verses in hexameter, and weave the major ionic in due measure with the minor, and so sing to me a burial song. Even as I was near Hades I was hoping that you were devoting to such matters your friendship toward me. But complete thanks be to God who (...) has spared your fingers from the toil of composing verses for a dead man”<sup>1</sup>. In his commentary on the passage, Mango writes: “The enumeration of three types of meter (elegiac, hexameter, ionic) is merely for effect, and the third, in any case, was hardly ever used in the Byzantine period, except in the refrain of anacreontics”<sup>2</sup>. It is certainly true that Ignatios is often quite pedantic and likes to show off his metrical expertise, as any reader of the *Life of Tarasios* will know: there he wants us to believe that the patriarch “initiated (him) in the best examples of the trimeter and the tetrameter, both trochaic and anapestic, and in dactylic verse”<sup>3</sup>. But is what he says in his letter to Nikephoros “merely for effect”? Or does he in fact allude to certain conventions of the funerary genre?

Let us look at the Greek text: ἡ γὰρ ἂν ἐπιτυμβίους ἐλέγους ἡμῶν ἐπεμέτρῃσας καὶ στίχον ἐπικὸν ἐξάτονον ἔτεμες <καὶ> ἰωνικῶ μείζονι συμπλέξας ἐμμέτρως ἐλάττονα μέλος ἦσας ἡμῖν ἐπιτάφιον. The sentence is divided into three main clauses. In the first clause Ignatios the Deacon mentions a certain funerary genre: the sepulchral elegy. In the second clause he refers to a particular meter: hexametric verse. In the third clause he first refers to the anacreontic, and he then mentions another kind of funerary poetry: the burial song. The first two clauses form a sort of *hendiadys* (“genre and meter”), just as the latter part of the sentence is divided into a participle construction (“meter”) and a main clause (“genre”). What we have here is a chiasmic figure: “genre and meter” versus “meter and genre”. As the manuscript in which the letters of Ignatios

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<sup>1</sup> MANGO 1997: 146–147.

<sup>2</sup> MANGO 1997: 202.

<sup>3</sup> MANGO 1997: 8.

are found, Athous Vatop. 588 (s. XI), offers many incorrect readings (see, for instance, the connective καὶ which the editor rightly supplements), I would suggest to read: (...) ἡμῖν ἐπιμετρούσας σίχον (...). Whatever the case, there can be little doubt that Ignatios the Deacon does not “enumerate three types of meter” as Mango affirms, but two kinds of funerary poetry: sepulchral elegies and burial songs.

Ignatios’ remarks are certainly not pedantic humbug. For we have three sepulchral elegies and one burial song from his pen, and these poems follow the generic rules he laid down in his letter to Nikephoros.

The burial song is a monody on the death of a young man by the name of Paul, who may have been one of Ignatios’ students<sup>4</sup>. The poem is written in Byzantine anacreontics: the stanzas in the ionic dimeter, the *koukoulia* in the ionic trimeter. As I shall explain in the second volume of this book, the oldest Byzantine monodies to have come down to us, such as those by Sophronios of Jerusalem, Ignatios the Deacon, Constantine the Sicilian and Leo Choirosphaktes<sup>5</sup>, invariably make use of the anacreontic meter. Thus we see that Ignatios, far from being a stuffy old schoolmaster, in fact states what was obvious to his contemporaries: for the composition of a burial song (that is, a monody) the anacreontic is the appropriate meter.

The generic term “sepulchral elegies”, which Ignatios the Deacon uses in his letter to Nikephoros, is not a piece of pedantic humbug either. In fact, Ignatios’ own collection of epitaphs is similarly entitled: ἐπιτύμβιοι ἔλεγοι. The collection itself is lost, but the *Souda* provides the title and the Greek Anthology contains three epitaphs that derive from it (*AP* XV, 29–31)<sup>6</sup>. These three epitaphs are all in elegiac, but it cannot be excluded that the collection contained epitaphs in hexameter as well, for the term ἔλεγχος does not refer to the meter itself (which is called ἔλεγεῖον in Byzantine Greek), but to the genre. Anyway, the Byzantine elegiac and the Byzantine hexameter are not substantially different. They both belong to the category of the dactylic meter and they both make use of pseudo-Homeric gibberish.

In his letter to Nikephoros, Ignatios the Deacon clearly distinguishes two kinds of funerary poetry: the “sepulchral elegy” in dactyls<sup>7</sup> (either the elegiac or the hexameter) and the “burial song” in anacreontics. The former is written on the tomb, the latter is performed during the burial rites. This is really a

<sup>4</sup> Ed. CICCOLELLA 2000a: 42–55.

<sup>5</sup> Sophronios no. 22: ed. GIGANTE 1957; Constantine the Sicilian: ed. MONACO 1951; Leo Choirosphaktes no. 1: ed. CICCOLELLA 2000a.

<sup>6</sup> See chapter 3, pp. 111–112.

<sup>7</sup> Notice the pun in the phrase: “God who (...) has spared your fingers (δακτύλους)”, which obviously refers to the dactylic poetry Nikephoros (“thanks be to God”) did not have to write.

crucial difference. It is for this reason that the genre of the “burial song”, or monody, will be treated elsewhere (in the second volume of this book). This chapter deals with the “sepulchral elegy”, that is, the epitaph.

Despite the inscriptional connotation of terms like ἐπιτύμβιος or ἐπιτάφιος, it is often difficult to determine whether an epitaph was really inscribed on a tomb or not. Only a few epitaphs have been discovered *in situ*. In sharp contrast to the urban civilization of antiquity with its thousands of epitaphs in prose and verse, Byzantium appears to have been a society with little public interest in memorials and written records of death. The reason for this dearth of epigraphical material is a combination of widespread illiteracy and upper-class snobbery. As the majority of the Byzantine population was illiterate, it is hardly surprising that most cemeteries provide little material evidence<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the few people who could read, the Byzantine upper classes, did not find the epitaphs commemorating the deaths of their peers in public cemeteries, but in private burial sites that were located inside monasteries or churches founded by illustrious Byzantine families<sup>9</sup>. Regrettably, most of these private burial sites have been destroyed along with the monasteries or churches where they were once to be found<sup>10</sup>. It is reasonable to conjecture that some of the epitaphs we find in literary sources originally served as verse inscriptions for these private burial sites. Some epitaphs clearly do not. And a third category may or may not have been inscribed. In order to determine whether an epitaph is a genuine inscription or not, one can only rely on common sense, intuition and intelligent reading.

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### *The Voice of the Dead*

Epitaphs can be divided into three types: epitaphs that make use of the first, the second, or the third person<sup>11</sup>. In a first-person epitaph, the deceased usually confesses his sins, professes his sincere regrets and expresses his hope that God may forgive him. In the case of the second person, the epitaph is

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<sup>8</sup> On the lack of funerary inscriptions, see MANGO 1991: 239–240.

<sup>9</sup> On private burial sites, see MANGO 1995.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, the sixteenth-century list of tombs and epitaphs in the Pammakaristos (nowadays Fethiye Camii): ed. P. SCHREINER, *DOP* 25 (1971) 217–248. These tombs and their epitaphs no longer exist.

<sup>11</sup> See PAPADOGIANNAKIS 1984: 70–88.

usually a lament that expresses the sentiments of bereavement the next-of-kin experience. And if the epitaph makes use of the third person, it usually commemorates the excellent virtues and qualities of the deceased. In the following I shall discuss these three types of the epitaph, beginning with the ones that say: “I”.

In the San Giorgio in Velabro, a beautiful church in Rome, we find two marble slabs which once belonged to the same sepulchre. These two slabs are inscribed with an epitaph in acrostic; the first slab even bears a heading that points out what the inscription is about: “birth and life of John the Archipresbyter in acrostic”<sup>12</sup>. As far as the text is still legible, John indeed speaks about his “birth and life”. He was born during the papacy of John VIII (872–882) and was educated by his wise and learned father, he passed on to others the knowledge he had acquired, and his mother was called Theodoule. At the bottom of the second slab, where the text unfortunately becomes rather fragmentary, he prays to God that He may please forgive him for his many wrongdoings. In the preceding verses he probably confessed to having fallen prey to really awful sins: “living (...)”, “sluggish (...)”, “defiling (...)” and “lusting, woe’s me (...)”.

There are more verse inscriptions written in the first person, in which the deceased confesses his sins from beyond the grave: for instance, the epitaphs commemorating the deaths of Eustathios the Tourmarch and Thomas. The epitaph to Eustathios begins as follows: “Knowing but all too well, poor me, that man is puffed up (by pride) and then is laid to rest (in the grave), I call upon thee, creator of all things: Save me from the burden of my transgressions, O thou who art immaculate and hast the power to loosen thine ordinances and to pardon my numerous sins”<sup>13</sup>. In the epitaph to Thomas we read the following plea to God:

λύσον τὰ δεσμὰ τῶν ἐμῶν ὀφλημάτων  
 ἃ μοι προσῆξεν ἡ δεινὴ κακεξία  
 καὶ ἡ τοῦ βίου ὀλεθροτόκος ζάλη  
 καὶ σύνταξόν με χορῶ τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν σου.

“Release the bonds of my sins which the force of my evil disposition and the ruinous storm of life have imposed upon me, and join me to the band of your

<sup>12</sup> Ed. GUILLLOU 1996: no. 115 and no. 116. The two acrostics read: *ιωαννου αρχιπρεσβ* and *τυμβος ιωαννου αρχιπρεσβ*. Acrostic is not an uncommon feature of funerary verse inscriptions: see Appendix VIII, nos. 85 (*ευσταθιος τουρμαρχης*) and 95 (*θεοπεμπτου*); see also Theod. St. 117 (*ειρηνη πατριαια ταδε*). I suspect that the first seven verses of Theod. St. 116 also form an acrostic: *εηροτως*; see v. 4, where Theodore of Stoudios tells us that the deceased was “rightly” (*ειροτως*) called Eudokia.

<sup>13</sup> GRÉGOIRE 1927–28: 450.

chosen ones”<sup>14</sup>. The “storm of life”, ζάλη, is a *topos* in Byzantine poetry (see, for instance, *AP* I, 118 and Geometres, Cr. 293, 8, 293, 24 and 314, 18). It refers to the soul’s passage over troubled waters. The soul is a steersman guiding the body, its vessel, through the billowing tides of life to the safe haven of God. But alas, the waters are turbulent, the vessel is shipwrecked and the soul reluctantly drifts from its final destiny. The treacherous shoal on which the ship and its steersman run aground is sin, of course.

In the hermitage of Symeon, a monk who lived and died in tenth-century Cappadocia, we read a rather unusual epitaph: “I was created a child in the belly of my mother; for nine months I had no need of food, but was fed with maternal juices. From the moment I hastily rushed from (the womb of) my own mother, I came to know the world and recognized its creator. I was instructed in the divine writings and understood the [...] to me; [...] I came forth from Adam the first-created, (who I know) to have died, as did all the prophets. When still alive, I prepared for myself a rough-hewn tomb; receive me too, o grave, like the Stylite”<sup>15</sup>. The “Stylite” is doubtless Symeon the Stylite, with whom his namesake, Symeon the Hermit, will have identified himself. The description of the foetus and its nine-month existence within its mother’s womb is quite unique in Byzantine epitaphs<sup>16</sup>, but it goes back to a passage in the *Wisdom of Solomon* (7: 1–7), where we read: “Like everyone else I am a mortal man and descend from the earth-born first-created one. In the womb of my mother I was moulded into flesh, within the period of ten months, compacted with blood, from the seed of man and the pleasures of bed. When I was born I inhaled the air we all breathe (...). All men have the same entrance into life and pass through the same exit. Therefore I prayed, and prudence was given to me; I implored, and the spirit of wisdom came to me”. Here, just as in the epitaph of Symeon, Solomon sketches the pedigree of sin, which starts with Adam, then passes on from generation to generation, and inevitably leads up to his own conception. He knows that he is born a sinner. He also knows that

<sup>14</sup> Edition and translation by DREW-BEAR & FOSS 1969: 75 (vv. 4–7). The inscription reads καεξία instead of καχεξία; ὀλεθροτόκος is a rare, poetic word: see, ibidem, p. 82: καὶ τὸ ὀλεθροτόκον ἔλυετο πῆμα (Niketas David Paphlagon), and see *Lampe*, s.v.

<sup>15</sup> Ed. JERPHANION 1925–42: I, 2, 580 (no. 111). The inscription reads εἰξουυστησα in v. 4. Grégoire, ibidem, suggests the reading: ἔξω λύστησα, a hapax which he connects with the Modern Greek verb γλυστράω, “to glide”; I would suggest to read: ἔξ οὗ οἴστησα [οι and υ are pronounced the same, /y/ until the tenth century, /i/ after c. 1000; οἴστησῶ (intransitive) is rare, but it is at least recorded (whereas Grégoire’s λυστρώ is not); εἰξον instead of εἰξου may be a mistake of the stonemason or Jerphanion himself].

<sup>16</sup> But see a prose epitaph found in Bithynia: ἐκ σοροῦς ἐν μήτρῳ μίᾳ γλυφέντες ἐξ παίδεσιν σὺν ἀδελφῇ (...): ed. F.K. DÖRNER, Bericht über eine Reise in Bithynien ausgeführt im Jahre 1948 im Auftrage der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Vienna 1952, 27, no. 40.

he has to die like all mortals. But knowing all these things, aware of his own mortality and sinfulness, he acquires from God prudence and wisdom. Symeon, too, recognizes that he descends from Adam, the ancestor of mankind, who was the first to sin and the first to die. As he acknowledges his own sinful mortality, Symeon prepares himself for death by constructing his own tomb and by writing his own epitaph<sup>17</sup>.

In Byzantine poetry, such as catanyctic alphabets and poems “to oneself”, the use of the first person usually entails a confession of sins. True enough, there are some exceptions to this rule, but in general one may say that the first person is the voice of the repenting sinner in Byzantium. This is why most of the epitaphs in which the deceased speaks to us in the first person, are poems of contrition. Among Ignatios the Deacon’s sepulchral elegies, for instance, we find an epitaph, entitled “on himself”, which is an almost classic example of the genre:

Ἰγνάτιος πολλῆσιν ἐν ἀμπλακίησι βίωσας  
 ἔλλιπον ἠδυφασοῦς ἠελίοιο σέλας·  
 καὶ νῦν ἐς δνοφερόν κατακεύθομαι ἐνθάδε τύμβον,  
 οἴμοι, ψυχῆ μου μακρὰ κολαζόμενος·  
 ἀλλά, κριτά (βροτός εἰμι, σὺ δ’ ἄφθιτος ἠδ’ ἐλεήμων),  
 ἴλαθι, ἴλαθί μοι ὄμματι εὐμένει.

“I, Ignatios, who lived in many sins, have left the brightness of the sweet sunlight, and here I am hidden in a dark tomb, my soul enduring, alas! long punishment. But, O Judge (I am a mortal and thou eternal and merciful), look on me graciously with benignant eye”<sup>18</sup>.

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### *The Voice of the Next-of-Kin*

The use of the second person is not a common feature in funerary inscriptions. One of the few examples I know of can be found in Rome, in the church of San Giorgio in Velabro. It is an epitaph to a certain Theopemptos, which dates from the ninth or tenth century. The epitaph begins as follows: “I write a [...] lament on your tomb, showing the sorrows of life [...]; for nothing in this

<sup>17</sup> Other Byzantines, too, built their own tomb and wrote their own epitaph: see, for instance, the funerary verse inscription in Carpignano, ed. A. JACOB, *RSBN* 20–21 (1983–1984) 103–122: τύμβον ὠρυξά πρὸς ταφὴν καὶ κηδεῖαν τοῦ σώματός μου τοῦ γηίνου πλαιοθέντος.

<sup>18</sup> *AP* XV, 29; translation by PATON 1918: vol. V, 137.

life is without sorrow; but he who clings to the commandments of God, [...]”<sup>19</sup>. The rest of the inscription is too fragmentary to make any sense, but it is reasonable to assume that the poem continued with the reassuring promise that the person who “clings to the commandments of God”, may eventually overcome “the sorrows of life” and reach the safe haven of paradise. Life is transient and full of sorrow, but if you abide by the ethical rules laid down by God in His ten commandments, there is surely hope that you, like Theopemptos, may enjoy the pleasures of heavenly beatitude. It is interesting to note the technical term employed by the lyrical subject to indicate the type of epitaph he has written on Theopemptos’ tomb: *θρήνος* (“lament”). This term is normally used for the monody, the funerary dirge at the tomb, in which the poet or one of the relatives directly addresses the dead in a highly emotional fashion. Given the fact that the use of the second person is exceptional in epitaphs, but quite normal in monodies, it is reasonable to assume that the few epitaphs that address the dead in the second person derive this unusual feature from the genre of monody.

In Byzantine monodies the relatives occasionally ask the deceased person not to forget them in the hereafter and to visit them in dreams<sup>20</sup>. In a few epitaphs we find a similar request to the dead: nocturnal appearances are not mentioned, but the next-of-kin do express their desire to be remembered. I will quote three examples. In an epitaph found in Rome we read: “John, remember [...] your loving [...], now that you have joined the choirs of the [...]”<sup>21</sup>. In the corpus of poems by the Anonymous Italian (c. 900), there is an epitaph to Sabas which ends with the desperate plea: “O father, remember your son, remember your child, now that you walk in the pastures of heavenly life”<sup>22</sup>. And Theodore of Stoudios begs his sister not to forget him in the epitaph he wrote in her honour: “Do not forget me and if you can speak to God, <pray> that I may pass through this unstable life with the help of Christ”<sup>23</sup>. Whereas the highly emotional word *μνήσο* in the epitaphs to John and Sabas emphasizes that the ties of blood and the bonds of love have not been cut off by death, Theodore of Stoudios asks for much more than simple remembrance. He desires his sister’s intercession on his behalf. Since the power to intercede at the heavenly court is normally reserved for figures of saintly stature, this is a

<sup>19</sup> Ed. GUILLOU 1996: no. 118. The first verse of the inscription reads: *θεογῶον θρήνον προσγράψω σοι τῷ τάφῳ*. *Θεογῶον* is nonsensical; should we emendate this into *θέσιμον*?

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Leo Choirosphaktes’ monody, vv. 13–14: ed. CICOLELLA 2000a: 68; and the second monody on Christopher Lekapenos, vv. 45–46: ed. STERNBACH 1898–99: 17.

<sup>21</sup> *CIG* 9865, vv. 11–13. The date of the inscription is not known.

<sup>22</sup> Ed. BROWNING 1963: 306 (no. 29, vv. 5–6).

<sup>23</sup> Theod. St. 105f, vv. 7–8, ed. SPECK 1968: 275. There is probably a lacuna between verses 7 and 8.

rather unusual request – unless we assume that Theodore of Stoudios truly hoped for his sister’s future canonization.

Geometres’ lament on the death of his father is a masterpiece of Byzantine poetry. The epitaph reads as follows:

Ὅς καὶ νοσοῦντα χερσὶν ἠγκαλιζόμεν,  
 ὃς καὶ θανόντα σὰς περιστεύλας κόρας  
 ἔλουσα λουτροῖς ἐσχάτοις, τὰ θρέπτα σοι,  
 καὶ φόρτον ἠδὺν μῆνα βαστάσας ὄλον  
 μακρὰς σε γῆς ἤνεγκα μυρίοις πόνοις  
 καὶ συζύγῳ δέδωκα καὶ τῇ πατρίδι,  
 ἔκρυσσα καὶ τύμβῳ δὲ καὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ,  
 Ἰωάννης, σῶν φιλάτων νεώτατος,  
 ἔγραψα καὶ νῦν τῷδε τῷ τύπῳ, πάτερ·  
 πάτερ, γλυκεῖα κλησὶς, ὄψις ἠδίων,  
 μικρὸν παρηγόρημα τοῦ πολλοῦ πόθου<sup>24</sup>.

“I who held you in my arms when you were ill, I who closed your eyes when you had died, I who washed your body for the very last time -the debt I owed you-, I who, carrying your sweet burden for a whole month, returned it to your wife and your native soil, I who buried you in your tomb as well as in my heart, I, John, the youngest of your beloved children, portrayed you now also in this picture, father; O father, a name so sweet, but a sight even sweeter, a small consolation for a great loss”. The precise meaning of the first six verses is elucidated by three other epitaphs (Cr. 280, 14; 280, 22; and 280, 26), in which Geometres recounts how he and his elder brother brought home the body of their father who had died somewhere far away in Asia Minor, where he carried out some civil or military duties as the “ready servant of the emperor”. The last three verses of this beautiful epitaph doubtless refer to some sort of picture, painted or in mosaic, that could be found inside the arcosolium where the body of Geometres’ father was laid to rest. In aristocratic burial sites in Byzantium, such as monasteries, it was customary to put the coffin inside a richly decorated arcosolium (a vaulted niche in a wall, usually that of the narthex) and to portray the deceased person above his tomb. It was also

<sup>24</sup> Cr. 329, 2–12. In v. 3 the ms. reads τὰ θρέπτα σοι (without accent); Cramer prints: τὰ θρέπτα σοι. The word is τὰ θρέπτα, cf. τὰ θρέπτρα (with phonetic dissimilation of the rho). Should we print τὰ θρέπτα σοι? At the verse ending of dodecasyllables we often find secondary accents on paroxytone words followed by enclitic personal pronouns (ἐνοσπαρέντά μοι, λαχόντά σε: see KOMINIS 1966: 67, n. 2); the same phenomenon can be observed in prose, see: Annae Comnenae Alexias, rec. D.R. REINSCH & A. KAMBYLIS. Berlin–New York 2001, 40\* (ἀποσταλέντά οἱ, etc.). For the last line, cf. Niketas Choniates, poem XVII, v. 7: μικρὸν παρηγόρημα τῶν μακρῶν πόνων (ed. C.M. MAZZUCCHI, *Aevum* 69 (1995) 213).



customary to inscribe epitaphs on these arcosoliums, either inside the niche itself or around it<sup>25</sup>. It is reasonable to assume that Geometres' epitaph was inscribed near the funerary portrait of his beloved father, whose memory it so eloquently and so poignantly evokes: see τῷδε in v. 10, "in *this* picture". Here, then, we have one of the few examples where an epitaph in the second person that we find in a literary source (in this case: the collection of Geometres' poems), was actually inscribed on the tomb of the dead person it addresses. For the majority of the epitaphs that make use of the second person are not authentic verse inscriptions, but purely literary compositions<sup>26</sup>.

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### *Commemorating the Dead*

Isaac, the military governor of the exarchate of Ravenna, died on the battlefield in late 642 or early 643 while defending the empire against the frequent attacks of the Lombards, who only one year later, in 644, succeeded in conquering Liguria. He was laid to rest in Ravenna. The original sarcophagus itself is lost, but the marble lid that covered the tomb can still be admired in the church of San Vitale. It bears the following inscription:

Ἐνταῦθα κείται ὁ στρατηγῆσας καλῶς  
 Ῥώμην τε φυλάξας ἀβλαβῆ καὶ τὴν δύσιν  
 τρις ἕξ ἔνιαυτοῖς τοῖς γαλιηνοῖς δεσπότηαις  
 Ἰσαάκιος, τῶν βασιλέων ὁ σύμμαχος,  
 ὁ τῆς ἀπάσης Ἀρμενίας κόσμος μέγας·  
 Ἀρμένιος ἦν γὰρ οὗτος ἐκ λαμπροῦ γένους.  
 τούτου θανόντος εὐκλέως ἢ σύμβιος,  
 Σωσάννα σώφρων, τρυγόνος σεμνῆς τρόπῳ  
 πυκνῶς στενάζει ἀνδρὸς ἐστερημένη,  
 ἀνδρὸς λαχόντος ἐκ καμάτων εὐδοξίαν  
 ἐν ταῖς ἀνατολαῖς ἡλίου καὶ τῇ δύσει  
 στρατοῦ γὰρ ἤρξε τῆς δύσεως καὶ τῆς ἕω.

<sup>25</sup> For numerous examples, see MANGO 1995. Apart from the epitaphs Mango adduces as evidence, see also Geometres, Cr. 327, 22 and 26; Arethas, *AP* XV, 33, 13–14; and the epitaph to Bardas, ed. ŠEVČENKO 1969–70: 191, vv. 11–12 (cf. Ševčenko's comments on p. 192).

<sup>26</sup> For instance, Geometres, Cr. 280, 22; 299, 2; and 312, 24 ff. The second-person epitaph to Gregoria Skleraina (Cr. 266, 1), however, appears to be an authentic verse inscription: cf. Cr. 327, 14.

“Here lies the brave general, who, during eighteen long years, preserved Rome and the West intact for his serene sovereigns, Isaac, the ally of the emperors, the great ornament of whole Armenia – for he was an Armenian, from a noble family. Now that he has died with honour, his wife, chaste Susanna, sorely wails like the virtuous turtle-dove, bereaved of her husband, a husband famous for his exploits in East and West – for he commanded the armies of the West and the East”<sup>27</sup>. This is probably the last epitaph ever written in the iambic trimeter: whereas later Byzantine epitaphs make use of the dodecasyllable, this one still has a few verses consisting of thirteen and even fourteen syllables<sup>28</sup>. The verses are prosodically correct, but the two instances of hiatus in verses 1 and 9 and the absence of a caesura in verse 4 are quite serious metrical flaws. The style is simple, the language unadorned – except for the pretentious word ἐνιαυτός (instead of the more familiar word ἔτος). The epitaph is neatly divided into two periods, each consisting of six verses and each ending with a causal clause headed by the connective γὰρ.

The epitaph begins with the standard phrase: “here lies (...)”. A classic *topos*, of course, but the poet immediately dashes our expectations by cleverly postponing the revelation of the deceased’s identity until the fourth verse. Instead, he explains why the unnamed person lying in the grave deserves to be commemorated: he was an excellent general, he served the emperors for no less than eighteen years, he protected their interests and defended Rome and Italy on the battlefield. Only then does he tell us who this hero is: Isaac, the ally of the emperors. The term σύμμαχος is rather unusual, for it implies that Isaac assisted the emperors as an ally and not as an ordinary general in their service. However, seeing that so many exarchs revolted in the seventh century and after, it is fair to say that the exarchate was a virtually autonomous province and that the exarchs, even if they sided with the reigning emperors, acted more or less independently. Then the poet adds another detail worthy of commemoration to the portrait of Isaac: he was an Armenian, the pride of his country. Despite the notoriously bad reputation of the Armenians in Byzantium, it is not surprising at all that the poet glorifies Isaac’s ethnic roots and considers them worth mentioning. For the Armenians held high functions in the military as well as in the civil administration: the reigning dynasty of Herakleios was of

<sup>27</sup> Ed. GUILLOU 1996: no. 109; see HÖRANDNER 1998: 313.

<sup>28</sup> Thirteen syllables: vv. 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11 and 12, fourteen syllables: v. 4. In the poetry of Pisides and his contemporaries, metrical resolutions are still allowed; but the number of resolutions in this particular verse inscription is exceptionally high [the poem on the Labours of Hercules (ed. B. KNÖS, *BZ* 17 (1908) 397–429), too, has many resolutions; but I would date that poem to the sixth, rather than to the seventh century]. Unusual is also the oxytone verse ending (in v. 1), a rhythmical pattern Pisides starts to avoid after ca. 620.

Armenian origin and the most influential general at the time, Valentinus Aršakuni, was an Armenian as well. Finally, in line six, at the end of the first sentence, we read that Isaac was born into a noble family. This element of praise recurs in numerous epitaphs to Byzantine aristocrats. Death is the great equalizer, of course; but some people are more equal than the rest, especially if they descend from a rich family and can afford the comfort of a luxurious tomb with a neatly written epitaph.

In the next six lines, in the second half of the epitaph, we first read that Isaac died honourably, on the battlefield, as is only appropriate for such a valiant general. Then we are told who commissioned the construction of the sarcophagus in which Isaac's body was laid to rest: his wife, Susanna. She is called *σώφρων*, "chaste", not only because of the biblical figure by the same name who was renowned for her chastity, but also because all Byzantine widows are chaste and never remarry (at least, if we are to believe Byzantine epitaphs)<sup>29</sup>. Her virtues are compared to those of the turtledove, a female bird which, according to legend, remains faithful to her spouse even after his death and never again builds a nest<sup>30</sup>. Then we have the sentimental part of the epitaph: chaste Susanna bewails the death of her loved one because she misses him so dearly. Isaac was someone special, the poet resumes, for he achieved fame both in the regions where the sun rises and the regions where the sun sets: in the East and the West. Solar symbolism is a common feature of panegyrics celebrating the emperor, especially when he is praised for his military feats: in Cr. 289, 15, for instance, Geometres writes that the emperor (probably Nikephoros Phokas) is so valiant a warrior that he outshines the sun with his brilliance and moves from East to West more swiftly than daylight itself. In the last verse the poet explains that Isaac commanded the troops not only in Italy, but also in the eastern part of the Byzantine empire. In other words, before his appointment as exarch in 625, Isaac held the function of *magister militum per Orientem* or possibly *per Armeniam*.

Epitaphs in the third person, such as the one I have just discussed, are always commemorative and praise the dead. The few texts that are not encomiastic, do not at all contradict this rule, but actually confirm its validity: see, for instance, Cr. 293, 2:

Ἐνθάδε τὴν μαρὰν κεφαλὴν κατὰ γαῖα καλύπτει,  
ἄρρενα καὶ θήλυν, εἰς τέλος οὐδέτερον.

"Here the earth covers a despicable figure, both male and female, but, in the end, neither of the two". In this epitaph, "on a eunuch" as the lemma

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Pisides St. 49, Theodore of Stoudios 117, vv. 5–10, and Arethas, *AP XV*, 33, 5–8.

<sup>30</sup> See PAPADOGIANNAKIS 1984: 103–104 and 220–221, n. 55.

correctly states, Geometres subtly inverts the rules of the genre by turning what should have been an encomium into its exact opposite, a lampoon. Geometres paraphrases a well-known epitaph to Homer (*AP* VII, 3), which begins as follows: ἐνθάδε τὴν ἱερὴν κεφαλὴν κατὰ γαῖα καλύπτει, “here the earth covers the sacred man”. This is a brilliant example of parody. Of course, it is the sort of literary parody that can only be savoured by the few; but we can be certain that the select group of intellectuals who were familiar enough with the classics to recognize the source immediately, will have roared with laughter. In the second line of this mock epitaph Geometres delivers another pun, which, once again, presupposes some familiarity with the school curriculum. For, when he mockingly refers to the ambiguous sexual identity of eunuchs (is a castrate a man, a woman, or neither?), he makes use of the grammatical terms that indicate gender: masculine, feminine and neuter<sup>31</sup>. The words εἰς τέλος form another pun. I know that good jokes are spoiled when you try to explain them, but anyway, here is the double entendre: in the end, “when you come to think about it”, a eunuch is neither male nor female; in the end, “when he has died”, a eunuch turns out to be neither of the two.

Byzantine epitaphs make use of stock motifs and clichéd metaphors. Generals are always courageous. Intellectuals are always learned. Monks are always pious. Women are always chaste. Children are always tender. In his excellent study of the epitaphs of Manuel Philes, Papadogiannakis sums up all those standard motifs: the wives as monogamous as the chaste turtledove; the children cut down prematurely like new shoots harvested before their time; the men, brave or wise, receiving their crowns from God above after their deaths; envious Charon, insatiable Hades; death as the debt that all must pay; etcetera<sup>32</sup>. It is rather surprising to see that in the early fourteenth century Philes uses exactly the same metaphors as Geometres, Pisides and other poets who were active before the year 1000. It is as if the rhetoric of death remains unaltered throughout the thousand-year history of Byzantine poetry. But when one reads between the lines and tries to retrieve the original contexts, it becomes clear that the funerary genre is not as static as it would appear at first sight. In fact, there are some subtle changes and some new concepts, by which we can gauge the gradual developments of the genre of the epitaph<sup>33</sup>. These changes are related either to new burial customs (for example, the arcosolium in private

<sup>31</sup> Note that οὐδέτερον does not agree with κεφαλὴν; rather than thinking of a *constructio ad sensum* (with an implied noun τὸν εὐνοῦχον), I would say that it refers to the grammatical term for “neuter”.

<sup>32</sup> See PAPADOGIANNAKIS 1984: 96–126 and 212–239.

<sup>33</sup> The study by LAMBAKIS 1989, on the “socio-political” dimension of Byzantine epitaphs, is rather disappointing because he does not pay enough attention to changes in mentality and social constructs.

religious foundations versus the sarcophagus in churches open to the general public), new ethical ideas (for example, the popularity of monastic ideals in Byzantium after c. 800, which explains why so many laics adopted the monastic habit on their death-bed), or new political ideologies (for example, the emphasis on martial qualities in the tenth century, when Byzantium went on the offensive in its struggle against the Arabs and the Slavs).

Let me give an example. If we compare the funerary inscription on the tomb of Isaac with the tenth-century epitaph to Bardas<sup>34</sup>, we may notice some striking similarities, but also some important differences. Bardas died from a serious illness on the island of Crete where he served in the military, either during the famous campaign of 961 or shortly afterwards when the island had been reconquered. His wife carried his dead body to Constantinople, washed it with her tears and then buried it in a painted arcosolium. And there he awaits the last trump that will sound on the Day of Judgment. In both these epitaphs, to Isaac and to Bardas, the wives play a prominent role: Isaac's wife, Susanna, "sorely wailed like the virtuous turtledove"; Bardas' wife "lit a torch of distress and washed him with her tears". But whereas chaste Susanna only laments, the wife of Bardas plays a much more active role by bringing his body home and burying him. Another fundamental difference is the burial site: Isaac is laid to rest in a sarcophagus, Bardas in an arcosolium. His arcosolium was decorated with "the venerable types of the images", which form "a symbol of salvation". In other words, the holy images depicted on Bardas' grave are supposed to intercede on his behalf and to save his soul from eternal damnation. In the epitaph to Isaac, on the contrary, the holy images and the concept of blessed salvation do not play any significant role. This is the difference between a pre-iconoclastic and a post-iconoclastic burial site. And thirdly, while both epitaphs stress that Isaac and Bardas were valiant soldiers, we may spot a significant difference: whereas Isaac defended the empire against its enemies, Bardas "fought against the barbarians and the passions". The "barbarians" are the Arabs, the "passions" are Bardas' basic instincts. Thus his fight is not directed only to an external threat, but also to something, equally threatening, which resides within himself: his own dire passions. Bardas is more than just a courageous soldier fighting the enemy. He is a Christian hero. That is why he eagerly awaits the "sound of the last trump" in his tomb, confident that he will enter paradise when the archangel blows the trumpet on the Day of Judgment.

This christianization of military virtues, which we find in the epitaph to Bardas, inevitably leads to the concept of "holy war", a martial ideal which the

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<sup>34</sup> Ed. ŠEVČENKO 1969–70: 191. The epitaph was probably composed by John of Melitene: see Appendix III, p. 314.

church officially rejected, but which, nonetheless, appealed to many soldiers – especially in the tenth century when the Byzantines began to reconquer former parts of the empire at the expense of the Muslims and other infidels<sup>35</sup>. See, for instance, the epitaph to Katakalon, the strategos of Thessalonica, who died on the battlefield in 945–946 when he was fighting against the Magyars:

Τὸ Θετταλῶν φῶς, μάρτυς ἢ στρατηλάτης,  
ὁ Κατακαλῶν, εἰ πάλιν τις σαλπῖσι,  
ἔτοιμός ἐστι προσβαλεῖν ἐναντίοις·  
τοσοῦτον ἦν πρόθυμος ἔχθρῶν εἰς μάχην.  
εἰ δ' αὖ βραδύνει, τύμβον αἴτιον νόει,  
μένοντα τὴν σάλπιγγα τὴν ἀρχαγγέλου.

“If one sounds the trumpet, Katakalon, the light of the Thessalians, general or martyr, is ready to attack the adversaries anew – so eager was he to fight the enemy. But if he is slow to respond, blame it on the tomb, which awaits the trumpet of the archangel”<sup>36</sup>. The poet of this epitaph, the Anonymous Patriarchian, plays with the ambiguous sense of the word σάλπιγξ, which denotes both the war-trumpet to which Katakalon was ever so quick to respond, and the last trump which he, like Bardas, awaits lying in his grave. In order to exonerate Katakalon from the blemish of possible slackness in responding to the sound of the war-trumpet, the poet says that it is the fault of the tomb if he does not show up. Note that the poet, so as to make his message clear and avoid any misunderstandings, writes that it is the tomb (and not Katakalon himself) which awaits the last trump – a splendid example of metonymy, of course. However, the most noteworthy feature of this epitaph is doubtless the cursory reference to Katakalon’s martyrdom in the first line. The poet obviously tries to avoid problems with the establishment by not passing a final verdict on the subject (was Katakalon just an ordinary στρατηλάτης, or was he in fact a μάρτυς?), but it is quite interesting that he poses the question. For, of course, this is the very same question Emperor Nikephoros Phokas attempted to answer when he suggested to the Church that soldiers fighting for the empire and the true faith should be declared martyrs if they died on the battlefield<sup>37</sup>. Polyeuktos the Patriarch adamantly rejected the proposal, as we all know; but vastly more important than this official rejection of the idea of the “holy war”,

<sup>35</sup> For the controversial concept of “holy war” in Byzantium, see A. KOLIA-DERMITZAKI, ‘Ο βυζαντινός “ἱερός πόλεμος”. Ἡ ἔννοια καὶ ἡ προβολὴ τοῦ θρησκευτικοῦ πολέμου στὸ Βυζάντιο. Athens 1991; T.M. KOLBABA, *Byz*: 68 (1998) 194–221; and J. HALDON, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565–1204*. London 1999, 13–33.

<sup>36</sup> Ed. LAMBROS 1922: 54, 12–17; cf. MERCATI 1927: 419. For Katakalon and the historical context of this epitaph, see Appendix IV, p. 321.

<sup>37</sup> See KOLIA-DERMITZAKI, ‘Ο βυζαντινός “ἱερός πόλεμος”, 132–141.

which was only to be expected because of its blatantly unorthodox nature, is the fact that the question was posed at all. For it means that some people at least played with the idea that dying in combat would secure a place in heaven<sup>38</sup>. In tenth-century sources, such as the *Taktika* of Leo VI and the liturgical hymn commemorating “generals, officers and soldiers dying in combat or in captivity”<sup>39</sup>, there is a clear tendency (although it is hardly ever expressed openly) to turn dead soldiers into martyrs who died for their faith. What we see in the tenth century, and this in sharp contrast to earlier periods, is a sort of warrior culture in military circles, especially amidst the powerful and belligerent clans of central Anatolia. Bellicose actions are good. Fighting the infidels is laudable. And killing Arabs is a definite plus. It is against this background of martial ideals that we should view the possible martyrdom of Katakalon, who died on the battlefield fighting the pagan Hungarians. He died fighting for the emperor, he died fighting for Christianity. Is such a hero not a martyr? Or is he just a general like all the other generals fighting for the empire? The poet does not provide an answer<sup>40</sup>, but the mere fact that the question is put forward indicates an uncertainty typical of tenth-century Byzantium, when the canonical ideas about warfare clashed with certain “grassroots” sympathies for the army and its brilliant accomplishments against the infidel. The epitaph to Katakalon is very much a product of its time, for it raises a question typical of tenth-century Byzantium at war: does death on the battlefield amount to martyrdom or not? The official answer is: no. The unofficial answer is: possibly.

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<sup>38</sup> *Pace* N. OIKONOMIDES, in: *Peace and War in Byzantium*, eds. T.S. MILLER & J. NESBITT. Washington, D.C., 1995, 63–68.

<sup>39</sup> For the *Taktika*, see G. DAGRON & H. MIHAESCU, eds., *Le traité sur la guérilla (de velitatione) de l'empereur Nicéphore Phocas (963–969)*. Paris 1986, 284–286; for the hymn, see TH. DÉTORAKIS & J. MOSSAY, *Le Muséeon* 101 (1988) 183–211.

<sup>40</sup> In another epitaph to Katakalon, however, the poet is less cautious and makes no secret of what he thinks: there he urges other generals “to fight for the faith of the Christians” and to follow the example of Katakalon, “the glorious martyr of God”, whose courage earned him “a myriadfold wreath” (ed. LAMBROS 1922: 54, 1–4 and 7–8, cf. 53, 27–29). This “heretical” epitaph was certainly not inscribed on the tomb of Katakalon (in contrast to the more cautious version, the epitaph treated in the main text, which probably was).

*The Hereafter*

There is no comprehensive study of death in Byzantium<sup>41</sup>. After hundred-odd years of Byzantinology, we still know remarkably little about burial customs, funerary rites, death-related mentalities, etcetera. This is strange because, as we all know from personal experience, death marks a significant turning point in the lives of all human beings. For it belies our trivial expectations, derides our self-image, and undermines the bonds of love and friendship we cherish. It is the moth eating into the garment of our earthly existence.

It is neither my purpose nor within my competence to cover the tremendous gaps in our knowledge of the subject of death in Byzantium. But it is perhaps useful to show what Byzantine poets thought about the hereafter<sup>42</sup>. What precisely happened to the departed of blessed memory?

In ms. Vat. Pal. gr. 367, immediately after an epitaph to Bertha of Provence († 949), we find a text entitled: ἄλλα παραινετικά<sup>43</sup>. There we are told that if you look at a corpse, it is obvious that beauty and riches do not count for much, because in death we are all alike. As the poet tells us in vivid detail, every bit of the human body putrefies in the grave: bones, joints, sinews, arteries, tendons, muscles, flesh and blood, curls and brows, eyes, nose and mouth. It all inevitably decays. “It is just dust, soil, rot – until man as a whole resurrects at the Last Judgment. For then he shall arise from the earth [his grave] and be united to the earth [his body]; he [that is: his soul and his body] shall be lifted from the earth and run to heaven; and in the end, he shall be deified, turning to God only. For, at the sound of the last trump, the dead shall come to life again; bones shall be joined to bones, sinews to sinews (...)”. In the rest of the poem, the poet maintains that the pleasures of this world are ephemeral and admonishes the faithful to prepare themselves for death and to try to live a pious life. However, vastly more important than the moralistic lesson to be learned from a ghastly excursion to the churchyard, is the poet’s

<sup>41</sup> For a select bibliography, see *ODB*, s.v. Death. What we need in the field of Byzantinology are studies like those of J. HUIZINGA (*Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen*. Leiden 1919), A. TENENTI (*Il senso della morte e l’ amore della vita nel Rinascimento (Francia e Italia)*. Turin 1957) and P. ARIES (*Essais sur l’ histoire de la mort en Occident du Moyen Âge à nos jours*. Paris 1975; *L’ homme devant la mort*. Paris 1977). The last issue of *DOP*, no. 55 (2001), dedicated to the topic of death in Byzantium, forms a promising start, but we urgently need to know more about what death meant to the Byzantines and about how it was represented in art and literature.

<sup>42</sup> For the theological implications of the issue of the life hereafter, see M. JUGIE, *EO* 17 (1914) 5–22, 209–228 and 401–421; *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, s.v. Jugement, cols. 1782–1793; H.G. BECK, *Die Byzantiner und ihr Jenseits. Zur Entstehungsgeschichte einer Mentalität*. Munich 1979; and N. CONSTAS, *DOP* 55 (2001) 91–124.

<sup>43</sup> Ed. LAMBROS 1922: 41, 19–42, 19; see the corrections by MERCATI 1927: 408–409. Read ληθθέν in 42, 4 (not ληθθείς), cf. νεῦον in 42, 6: the subject is πᾶν τὸ πλάσμα (42, 3).



upbeat description of the fate of mankind when the trumpets shall sound on Judgment Day. Then man shall become whole again, body and soul united, just as he was before he died. However, there is one significant difference: he will be “deified” (θεοῦται). Deification means that man regains the purity and fullness of his humanity, which he once possessed in paradise before he committed the primal sin. He becomes “like God”, because man is created after His image and likeness. Of course, this blessed deification is granted to the righteous only, and not to those who persist in their acts of sinfulness, as the poet implicitly tells us by his admonition to live a pious life. When the last trump has sounded, the just shall rise from their graves, body and soul, and ascend to heaven to meet their divine Creator.

All this is perfectly orthodox. It is beyond doubt, however, that apart from the Last Judgment which will take place at the end of all time, there is also a provisional tribunal at which the souls of the departed will be judged immediately after their death. For there are numerous texts, such as hymns, hagiographic tales and epitaphs, that plainly state that the dead already reside in heaven or hell. See, for instance, the epitaph to Theophylaktos Magistros, which begins as follows: “The tomb holds the mortal part of Theophylaktos, but Christ above holds Theophylaktos himself. Here he rests, delivered from his illnesses, while he waits for the sound of the trumpet of resurrection”<sup>44</sup>. This epitaph combines two conflicting views on the hereafter, referring on the one hand to the last trump, the resurrection and the dead corpse in the grave, and emphasizing on the other hand that Theophylaktos, or at least his soul, already resides in the kingdom of heaven before the last trump has sounded. In numerous other Byzantine epitaphs, too, we read that the dead have joined the heavenly choirs where they dance and rejoice, certain of the redemption of their souls, even though the Last Judgment has yet to take place. Ignatios the Deacon, for example, writes in his epitaph to Samuel, deacon of the Great Church: “Here lies Samuel hidden in the womb of earth, having left all the possessions he had to God; and now he has entered the bright court of the pious to receive glory for his great labours”<sup>45</sup>. In his epitaph to Photios, Leo Choiosphaktes states with confidence that the patriarch’s soul dwells in heaven: “(Photios) whose body the tomb, but whose spirit the heaven bears”<sup>46</sup>. And in his epitaph to Stephen, Photios’ successor as patriarch, Leo Choiosphaktes uses almost the same reassuring phrase: “(Stephen) whose body the tomb, but whose soul the heaven holds”<sup>47</sup>. Stephen had been appoint-

<sup>44</sup> Ed. LAMBROS 1922: 42, 20–43, 3; cf. MERCATI 1927: 409. See Appendix IV, p. 318.

<sup>45</sup> *AP* XV, 31. Translation by PATON 1918: V, 139.

<sup>46</sup> Leo Choiosphaktes, ed. KOLIAS 1939: 130 (no. 1, v. 12).

<sup>47</sup> Ed. KOLIAS 1939: 131 (no. 2, v. 11). Read αὐτόν, “himself” (not αὐτόν, “him”) in v. 7; replace the question mark in v. 6 with a comma, and put the question mark after v. 8.

ed to the post by his brother, Leo VI, for purely political reasons. He died at the age of twenty-five and had accomplished absolutely nothing worth commemorating in the few years he played the part of patriarch. While no one, not even his catholic opponents, will question that Photios played an important role in the history of the Church, Stephen is so insignificant that there is no reason why he should have been granted entrance to the kingdom of heaven before the end of time. And yet, “the choirs of the redeemed rejoice” at his arrival in heaven, “because he sees the triune light of the Lord” (vv. 15–16). Of course, this is exactly what the Macedonian dynasty wanted to hear from the poet, but the fact that Choïrosphaktes could say it openly, indicates that no one at court apparently objected to the idea of Stephen’s premature admittance to heaven. In fact, most Byzantines went straight to heaven after their demise, at least if we are to believe the eulogies written in their honour. Although the orthodox church never developed a systematic theory on the life hereafter, except for the belief in the Last Judgment which goes back to the gospels and other texts of early Christianity, it is obvious that most Byzantines, rightly or not, assumed that God would pass judgment on them as soon as they had died.

The destiny of the departed soul prior to the Last Judgment is an intriguing secret, not only to us, but also to the Byzantines themselves. It is a mystery the Church never ventured to solve officially, but which was obviously of great concern to ordinary believers. Since there is no official doctrine, we find all sorts of popular beliefs in Byzantine sources: the soul passing through various “toll-houses” in its ascent to heaven; angels guiding the soul to its final destiny; the soul dwelling in the limbo of Hades; and so on. Since the epitaph is a rather traditional genre with a long history stretching back in time all the way to archaic Greece, it is not surprising at all that Byzantine poets make use of certain concepts that do not seem particularly orthodox<sup>48</sup>. Take, for example, the separation of body and soul. The Church accepts this idea, but with the proviso that the separation is only temporary, for body and soul will be reunited at the Last Judgment. In many epitaphs, however, there is no indication whatsoever that the separation of body and soul will be undone at some moment in the future: the body sinks into the grave, the soul ascends to heaven, and that is the end of it<sup>49</sup>. This idea borders on heresy. It is a concept that ultimately goes back to the Platonic dichotomy of body and soul. But since it was expressed in so many ancient and late antique epitaphs, Byzantine poets felt no scruples in using the pagan idea of an eternal separation. Geome-

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<sup>48</sup> See R. LATTIMORE, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs*. Urbana, Illinois 1942, 301–340, and KEYDELL 1962: 554–559.

<sup>49</sup> See REINSCH 1998.

tres' epitaph to Empress Helen, for instance, reads: "Whereas the sun hides the moon with its brightness, the tomb has now hidden Helen with its gloom. But Charon will not prevail for long! For while her lifeless body inevitably gravitated downward beneath its burden, she herself turned to the spiritual Sun and radiated her light towards Him, like the moon towards the skies above"<sup>50</sup>. Just as emperors are compared to the sun, so empresses are likened to the moon: the moon receives its light from the sun, and the empress her imperial splendour from her spouse. But there is a "spiritual sun" that outshines his royal majesty with its splendid beams of divinity: God above, to whom Helen after her earthly demise ascends, displaying all the splendour of her imperial moonlight. While her soul is beamed up to the abodes of divine brightness, her lifeless body -alas!- sinks into the grave because of the laws of nature. Will the two, body and soul, ever be reunited? Geometres is silent on the subject. He probably kept silent about this difficult question, because he, like all other Byzantines, did not know the answer. Where does the soul go to after it departs from the body? If you play it safe, the answer is: to the tomb or to Hades. If you venture to make a guess, you will say: to heaven, or possibly: to hell<sup>51</sup>. But what about the Last Judgment? When will body and soul resurrect together? Since the Last Judgment looked more and more like a thing of the distant future as time went by, many Byzantines understandably viewed the separation of body and soul either as a quasi-permanent condition stretching to infinity or at least as a deplorable situation that would last for many aeons to come. And since neither the dead nor the living can wait for ever, the need arose to turn the intermediate period between death and resurrection into something more than a mere waste of time; it had to become part of the divine scheme of things, a stage of redemption or damnation before the last trump would sound. This is why in Byzantine epitaphs so many souls dwell in heaven, near their divine Creator, although the Last Judgment has not yet taken place. Is this impatience? Perhaps, but it is human. For it is an understandable longing to make sense of senseless death.

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<sup>50</sup> Cr. 327, 14–20. Read *στροφείσα* in line 4; cf. Cr. 266, 15–19. Empress Helen is either the wife of Constantine VII (she died in 961) or possibly the wife of Constantine VIII (she died in the 980s).

<sup>51</sup> For the latter option, see John of Melitene, ed. HÖRANDNER 1970: 115, where we are told that Emperor John Tzimiskes burns in hell because he has murdered his predecessor on the throne.

*Epitaphs to Emperors*

There are a few epitaphs, mostly fictitious, to empresses and other people of imperial lineage: the famous elegy to Constantina, the wife of Maurice<sup>52</sup>; the epitaph to Stephen the Patriarch, the brother of Leo VI, which I mentioned above; an epigram commemorating the saintly death of Theophano, the wife of Leo VI<sup>53</sup>; an epitaph to Bertha of Provence / Eudokia, the first wife of Romanos II<sup>54</sup>; the verses on the death of Empress Helen translated above; and an epitaph in which Stephen, the son of Romanos I, confesses his sins from beyond the grave<sup>55</sup>. There are also a number of epitaphs to emperors: two fictitious epitaphs to Nikephoros Phokas, an equally fictitious epitaph to John Tzimiskes, and two funerary verse inscriptions commemorating Tzimiskes and Basil II, respectively<sup>56</sup>.

The number of imperial epitaphs is fairly restricted. Whereas there are dozens of epitaphs to Byzantine aristocrats and even to people of lower social status, the emperors and their next-of-kin apparently do not need to be officially commemorated in metrical eulogies. The reason for this is that in the two mausoleums built next to the church of the Holy Apostles, where until the year of 1028 most of the emperors and their relatives were buried, it was not customary to inscribe epitaphs on the tombs<sup>57</sup>. As the Byzantines were able to identify the graves<sup>58</sup>, it is beyond doubt that the imperial tombs bore texts indicating who was buried where; but these texts were obviously not in verse, for otherwise we would expect to find numerous epitaphs to emperors in

<sup>52</sup> Ed. STERNBACH 1900: 293–297; see also CAMERON 1993: 215–216. As the epitaph is fictitious, it does not necessarily date from the early seventh century. The text was known to writers of the second half of the tenth century: see Nikephoros Ouranos, letter 18 (ed. J. DARROUZÈS, *Épistoliers byzantins du X<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris 1960, 226): ἀντὶ μέντοι τῶν ἐπὶ τῇ Μαυριζίου συζύγῳ καὶ αὐτῷ καὶ παισὶν ἐλεγείων (...), and John Geometres, Cr. 326, 5–6: ἔρνος ἔμὸν (...) ὄλεο Θρηζικίων ἐξ ἀνέμων ἀπίνης (=ἐξἄπίνης), cf. line 12 of the epitaph: ῥίζα γὰρ ἐκλάσθη Θρηζικίους ἀνέμους.

<sup>53</sup> Ed. ŠEVČENKO 1978: 127.

<sup>54</sup> Ed. LAMBROS 1922: 41. See Appendix IV, p. 318.

<sup>55</sup> Ed. VASIL'EVSKIĬ 1896: 577–578.

<sup>56</sup> For the fictitious epitaph to Tzimiskes, see above, footnote 51. For the other epitaphs, see below, the main text. In LAUXTERMANN 1998d: 360, I assumed that Geometres' epitaphs to Constantine (Cr. 303, 18 ff.) were written for Constantine VII, but I was mistaken; these texts deal with a civil servant.

<sup>57</sup> See MANGO 1995: 115–116. As Mango points out, the epitaph to Emperor Julian was not to be found in the church of the Holy Apostles, but in Tarsos, where Julian was buried before his corpse was brought to Constantinople; and the metrical text inscribed on the tomb of Maria, the daughter of Theophilos, was not an epitaph, but an imperial edict granting asylum to those who fled to her tomb (see Theophanes Cont. 108).

<sup>58</sup> See the list of imperial tombs in: P. GRIERSON, *DOP* 16 (1962) 1–63.

Byzantine sources. As we shall see below, the only two imperial epitaphs that were definitely inscribed, those commemorating Tzimiskes and Basil II, were not located in the church of the Holy Apostles, but in private burial sites.

If only for this reason, the interpolated text in Skylitzes (282, 62–63) stating that the tomb of Nikephoros Phokas in the church of the Holy Apostles bore a verse inscription looks rather suspect, for it would be the only instance known to us of an epitaph in the Holy Apostles. In fact, there are more reasons for discrediting this story as untrustworthy. In the *History* of Leo the Deacon (91, 8–13; cf. Skylitzes, 281, 52–55) we read that the decapitated corpse of Phokas was buried in stealth and without the proper ceremonies in one of the sarcophagi at the Mausoleum of Constantine. It is highly unlikely that after such an ignominious burial, the imperial court or the staff of the Holy Apostles would have put an official verse inscription on the tomb where Nikephoros Phokas had been disposed of in secret. As the epitaph refers in plain terms to the slaughter of Phokas, it is out of the question that his murderer, John Tzimiskes, would have given permission for such a text to be inscribed inside an imperial monument, unless he wanted to be regularly reminded of the crime he had committed. Similarly, the epitaph cannot have been inscribed on the tomb of Phokas after the reign of Tzimiskes, for it openly criticizes Theophano, the mother of Basil II and Constantine VIII, and these two would never have allowed a text which informed the rest of the world that their mother was the equivalent of an evil monster.

If we read the text of the epitaph carefully, it is clear that it was not composed straight after the murder of Phokas, but twenty years later, in 988–989. The following translation of the epitaph is based upon the edition I provide in Appendix III, pp. 308–309: “He who used to be sharper than a sword to other men, succumbed to a woman and a sword. He who through his power used to wield power over the whole earth, settled for a tiny part of the earth as if he were tiny himself. Even animals, I think, once stood in awe of him; but his wife, supposedly his other half, killed him. He who did not allow himself even a short moment of sleep at night, now sleeps the long sleep in the grave. What a bitter sight! But now, my emperor, stand up and marshal the infantry, the cavalry, the archers, the phalanxes, the troops – your own soldiers. For the Russian panoply rushes headlong at us, the Scythian tribes eagerly long for bloodshed, and the very persons who were once frightened when they saw your image depicted on the gates of Byzantium, are violently plundering your beloved city. Please do not overlook these wrongs, but throw off the stone that covers you, and chase away the beastly peoples with stones and provide us with rocks for our defence, an unbeatable stronghold. But if you do not wish to arise a little from your tomb, at least let the enemies hear your battle cry from the earth: maybe that will suffice to frighten them and scare them off. If this is not possible either, welcome us all in your tomb. For even

as a dead man, you are all that is needed to save all the folks of Christendom, O Nikephoros, victorious in all respects but defeated by a woman”.

The poet, John of Melitene<sup>59</sup>, overtly states that Nikephoros was victorious (νικηφόρος) in all respects but his taste in women; he prevailed over all other men in combat, but he was no match for his cunning wife. Since “it is shameful for a commander and a ruler to be defeated by women”, at least according to Photios<sup>60</sup>, this assessment can hardly be called a flattering compliment to Nikephoros Phokas – which, once again, indicates that this is not an authentic epitaph. It is interesting to note that Theophano gets all the blame for her husband’s murder. In contemporary sources, such as the poems of John Geometres, there is a tendency to exonerate Tzimiskes<sup>61</sup> and to put the blame exclusively on Theophano. In his epitaph to Nikephoros Phokas, for instance, Geometres first sums up his splendid military feats and then writes that he “was slain inside the palace and did not escape the hands of (his) wife, oh wretched febleness!” (Cr. 290, 10–11). And in his monody on the death of Tzimiskes (Cr. 267, 23), he portrays the murderer of Phokas as a valiant warrior who, alas, committed a tragic crime, which he felt ashamed of ever after: a righteous man after all, not a monster<sup>62</sup>. There is doubtless a strain of misogyny in the portrayal of Theophano as the sole perpetrator of the murder. It is treacherous Eve all over again, with Phokas and Tzimiskes in a double role as ingenuous Adam unable to resist her sex appeal.

In the epitaph to Phokas, the poet urges him to rise up from the grave and to defend his empire against its enemies. There are two interesting parallels to this remarkable appeal to a dead emperor to stand up and fight. The first is a poem by Geometres (Cr. 283, 16) dealing with the threat posed by the κομητόπουλος, that is: Samuel, the future tsar of the Bulgars, whose rise to power, according to Geometres, coincided with the appearance of a comet (κομίτης). Unfortunately, we cannot date this poem with any accuracy. Samuel became a threat to the empire after the death of Tzimiskes, and especially after the battle at Trajan’s Gate in 986, where he crushed the Byzantine armies<sup>63</sup>; but since there are so many reports of ill-boding comets in this period (the most

<sup>59</sup> For this poet, see Appendix III. He should not be confused with John Geometres. For a different interpretation of the epitaph, see CRESCI 1995: 37–40.

<sup>60</sup> *Epistulae*, vol. I (ed. B. LAOURDAS & L.G. WESTERINK): no. 1, line 1043.

<sup>61</sup> See E. PATLAGEAN, in: *Media in Francia. Mélanges K.F.Werner*. Paris 1989, 345–361, esp. 355–356.

<sup>62</sup> In Cr. 295, 10, an *ethopoia* in which the dead emperor complains that his pictures have been removed from the palace, we read that “the lord of darkness seized power with his bloodstained hands”. This is the only passage in Geometres’ poems where Tzimiskes is openly criticized. But it is interesting to note that the words of criticism are put in the mouth of Phokas. The poet himself refrains from making any comment.

<sup>63</sup> See W. SEIBT, *Handes Amsorya* 89 (1975) 65–100.

famous one being Halley's Comet in 989)<sup>64</sup>, it is impossible to establish a secure date for the poem. However, of one thing we can be absolutely certain: it cannot have been written before 976, and it may even be as late as 989. And yet, Geometres addresses a desperate plea to Nikephoros Phokas, an emperor long dead, to "arise a little from the grave and roar, O lion, so that the foxes [the Bulgarians] learn to stay on their rocks [the mountainous regions of the Balkans]". The second parallel is a passage in the *Chronicle* of Theophanes (ed. de Boor, 501), where we read that some soldiers, disappointed with the military failures of the iconophile establishment, broke into the tomb of Constantine V in the Holy Apostles in 813, which they did so craftily that the gates of the mausoleum appeared to open as if by a divine miracle. They then rushed to the tomb, crying out: "Arise and help the State that is perishing". They even spread the rumour that Constantine had mounted his horse and was setting out to fight the Bulgarians<sup>65</sup>. In both sources, Geometres and Theophanes, we find an appeal to an emperor long dead to rise up from his grave and defend the empire against the threat of its enemies: in both cases, the Bulgarians (Krum in 813, Samuel in 976 or later). This strongly suggests that, in his epitaph to Nikephoros Phokas, John of Melitene does not address the emperor shortly after his death, but in fact calls for a miraculous resurrection long after his demise.

In corroboration of this, it suffices to read lines 12 to 16 attentively. There is a Russian threat, the Scythian tribes (the Bulgarians) are bloodthirsty, and the enemies are pillaging the holy city of Byzantium. In the traditional interpretation of the epitaph, based upon the interpolated passage in Skylitzes, only the Russian threat is accounted for: that is, Svjatoslav and the Rus', who invaded the Byzantine territories soon after the death of Nikephoros Phokas. But what about the Bulgarians? And what about the plundering enemies? As the Bulgarians had been annihilated by Svjatoslav's armies in 968–969, they could hardly have constituted a serious threat to the Byzantines. And neither the Bulgarians nor the Russians are reported to have been inside the city in 969 or shortly afterwards, causing havoc to the population of Constantinople. However, all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place when we look at the historical situation in 988–989. For in the years after 986, the battle at Trajan's Gate, the Bulgarians were certainly "eager for bloodshed", and in late 988 the Russians were inside the city of Constantinople. In 988 Basil II, facing the dangerous rebellion of Bardas Phokas, resorted to the desperate decision of calling on the belligerent Rus' for help, in reward for which he offered the hand

<sup>64</sup> See V. GRUMEL, *Traité d' Études Byzantines*. I. La Chronologie. Paris 1958, 472.

<sup>65</sup> The *Chronicle* of Theophanes Confessor, ed. C. MANGO & R. SCOTT. Oxford 1997, 684. See P. J. ALEXANDER, *The Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople*. Oxford 1958, 85–101. See also L.R. CRESCI, *Koinonia* 19 (1995) 77–82.

of his sister Anna to Vladimir, the Russian prince; this alliance was sealed by the baptism of the Rus'. In the year after, the Russian troops duly complied with the emperor's request and defeated Bardas Phokas, first at Chrysopolis and then at Abydos. While the help of the Russians may have secured the throne for Basil II, it is arguable whether the Byzantine population was very pleased with the presence of foreign soldiers in the streets of Constantinople<sup>66</sup>. To many Byzantines, and especially to those who supported the cause of Bardas Phokas, the Russian mercenaries must have seemed a menace to their lives and possessions. Since John of Melitene writes that "the Russian panoply rushes headlong at us", there can be little doubt where he stands politically, namely, at the side of Bardas Phokas. This is hardly surprising since the revolt of Bardas Phokas began in Melitene, the city of which John was the metropolitan. By laying the blame for the murder of the emperor entirely on the mother of Basil II, Theophano, and not on Tzimiskes who was related to the Phokas clan, the poet clearly shows a bias against the Macedonian dynasty. And by invoking the vengeful spirit of Nikephoros Phokas to avert the onslaught of the Rus' and the Bulgars, the poet suggests that, had the Phokades been in power, such a catastrophic situation would never have occurred and that it is all the fault of Basil II, the son of evil Theophano. In short, what we have here is plain propaganda for the cause of Bardas Phokas. Since it canvasses support for the usurper by appealing to his imperial ancestor, the epitaph must have been written in the few months between the arrival of the Russian troops in Constantinople in the summer of 988 and the subsequent defeat of Bardas Phokas in April 989.

If we want to know what an imperial epitaph looked like, we should turn to texts that were most certainly inscribed on the tombs of emperors (and not to fictitious epitaphs, such as the one by John of Melitene). In the history of Pachymeres (ed. Failler, 175), we read that the soldiers of Michael VIII discovered the tomb of Basil the Bulgar-slayer in the dilapidated church of St. John the Theologian in the suburb of Hebdomon in 1260, shortly before Constantinople was reconquered. The soldiers were able to identify the tomb of Basil II because it bore an inscription. The text of this inscription can be found in a number of Byzantine manuscripts dating from the Palaeologan period:

Ἄλλοι μὲν ἄλλους τῶν πάλαι βασιλέων  
 αὐτοῖς προαφώρισαν εἰς ταφὴν τόπους·  
 ἐγὼ δὲ Βασίλειος, πορφύρας γόνος,  
 ἴστημι τύμβον ἐν τόπῳ γῆς Ἑβδόμου

<sup>66</sup> For a splendid account of the events between 986–989, see A. POPPE, *DOP* 30 (1976) 211–224, who at p. 217 rightly states: "the behavior of foreign allied troops is always troublesome for the host country, and the visiting Russian warriors were no exception". Poppe is the first to have dated the epitaph to Nikephoros Phokas correctly.



καὶ σαββατίζω τῶν ἀμετρήτων πόνων  
οὓς ἐν μάχαις ἔστρεγον, οὓς ἐκαρτέρουν.  
οὐ γὰρ τις εἶδεν ἠρεμοῦν ἐμὸν δόρυ,  
ἀφ' οὗ βασιλεὺς οὐρανῶν κέκληκέ με  
αὐτοκράτορα, γῆς μέγαν βασιλέα,  
ἀλλ' ἀγρυπνῶν ἅπαντα τὸν ζωῆς χρόνον  
Ῥώμης τὰ τέκνα τῆς νέας ἐρουόμην  
ὄτε στρατεύων ἀνδρικῶς πρὸς ἐσπέραν,  
ὄτε πρὸς αὐτοὺς τοὺς ὄρους τοὺς τῆς ἔω,  
ἰστῶν τρόπαια πανταχοῦ γῆς μυρία.  
καὶ μαρτυροῦσι τοῦτο Πέρσαι καὶ Σκύθαι,  
σὺν οἷς Ἀβασγός, Ἰσμαίλ, Ἄραβ, Ἰβηρ.  
καὶ νῦν ὄρων, ἄνθρωπε, τόνδε τὸν τάφον  
εὐχαῖς ἀμείβου τὰς ἐμὰς στρατηγίας.

“The emperors of old allotted to themselves different burial-sites: some here, others there; but I, Basil the purple-born, erect my tomb in the region of Hebdomon. Here I rest, on the seventh day, from the numerous toils I bore and endured on the battlefield, for from the day that the King of Heaven called upon me to become the emperor, the great overlord of the world, no one saw my spear lie idle. I stayed alert throughout my life and protected the children of the New Rome, valiantly campaigning both in the West and at the outposts of the East, erecting myriads of trophies in all parts of the world. And witnesses of this are the Persians and the Scyths, together with the Abkhaz, the Ismaelite, the Arab and the Iberian. O man, seeing now my tomb here, reward me for my campaigns with your prayers”<sup>67</sup>.

The epitaph is perhaps not a masterpiece of Byzantine poetry, but its message is so crystal clear that anyone will understand it immediately. At the risk of explaining what is perfectly clear as it is, I will still offer a few comments on the text. The verb σαββατίζω, “to rest on Sabbath’s day”, obviously refers to Basil II’s burial site in the suburb of Hebdomon: Sabbath is the seventh day of the week and the Hebdomon is the seventh district of Constantinople. It also refers to the concept that the emperor is Christ’s representative on earth: just as God, after a tiresome week of creating the universe, reposed from His labours, so does Basil II rest from the numerous toils he endured for the sake of the Byzantine empire<sup>68</sup>. The idea that Basil II is following in the footsteps of

<sup>67</sup> Ed. MERCATI 1921b and 1922b; see also C. ASDRACHA, *Ἀρχαιολογικὸν Δελτίον* 47–48 (1992–93) 309–316 (no. 102).

<sup>68</sup> Cf. the famous passage in Theophanes (ed. de Boor, 327–328; the source is probably a lost panegyric by Pisides) stating that Herakleios returned to Constantinople in the seventh year, after six years of campaigning, in order to repose from his toils, just as God, having created the world, rested on the seventh day.

Christ, is elaborated upon in vv. 8–9, where we read that he became emperor, because God Himself appointed him to this elevated post. All the fighting that ensued, against the many enemies of the empire, Basil II carried out as God's own deadly weapon, ruthlessly but piously, because he merely did what he was asked to do. Since Basil II's relentless efforts to save the empire corresponded to God's merciful designs for the fate of Christianity, the visitor to Basil II's tomb is asked to show his gratitude by praying on his behalf. As he has done so much for the empire on God's orders, Basil II surely deserves to be redeemed in the hereafter. The fighting took place in the West and in the East. The enemies in the West were the Scyths (the Bulgarians) and in the East the Persians (perhaps the Buyids), the Arabs, the Ismaelites (the Kurds or the Turks?), the Abkhaz and the Iberians (the Georgians). Given the fact that, at the time of Basil II's death, the West had been pacified (albeit at the expense of many lives) whereas the East was still the scene of much turmoil and bloodshed, the emphasis on bellicose peoples at the Eastern borders hardly comes as a surprise. Interesting is also the verb μαρτυρῶ, which indicates that what we have here is the political "legacy" of Basil II, to which his conquered enemies "testify" by admitting their defeat and recognizing his overlordship.

But for the present purpose the most interesting feature of this text is doubtless the use of the first person for an imperial epitaph. As I explained above, first-person epitaphs are usually poems of contrition – poems in which the deceased confesses his sins to God and prays that he may be forgiven. This is clearly not the case here. Seeing that the visitor to the emperor's tomb is asked to pray for the salvation of his soul, it is obvious that Basil II has not yet entered the Kingdom of Heaven. However, it is interesting to note that Basil II does not do the pleading himself, but leaves it up to others to pray on his behalf. There is no humility on his part. And there is not the slightest trace of remorse either. On the contrary, Basil II proudly sums up his splendid victories, boasts about his military prowess and asserts that God has always been on his side, from the day of his investiture until the very moment of his death. The tone is already set in the first verses where we find a classic example of the *priamel*, a figure of speech that leads to a rhetorical climax. Of the emperors of old, some chose this, and others that resting place; but I, Basil II, preferred to be buried in the church of St. John the Theologian at the Hebdomon. In a *priamel*, the last option mentioned is always significantly better than the other possibilities, to which it implicitly is compared. In other words: even in the choice of his final resting place, Basil II was by far superior to all the emperors who had reigned before him. This is the voice of a proud man, self-assured, convinced of his own qualities and perhaps even certain of his posthumous fate. It is not the voice of a repenting sinner, although one would expect from an epitaph written in the first person that it would show more modesty and contain at least some signs of deep remorse.

However, the epitaph to Basil II is certainly not the only one of its kind. In the church of Christ Chalkites, built by Romanos I and reconstructed on a larger scale by John Tzimiskes next to the Chalke (the vestibule of the Great Palace), there used to be a verse inscription, of which an eighteenth-century traveller to Constantinople, a certain Thomas Smith, deciphered one line: κατὰ Σκυθῶν ἔπνευσας θεομὸν ἐν μάχαις<sup>69</sup>. Since we know that Tzimiskes was buried in the church of Christ Chalkites, it is reasonable to assume that this is a fragment of the epitaph that once adorned his tomb, especially as it seems to refer to Tzimiskes' battles against Svjatoslav and the Rus' (the Σκύθαι)<sup>70</sup>. It is beyond any doubt that Thomas Smith did not read the text of the inscription correctly, for the seventh metrical syllable is long (ἔπνευσας θεομὸν) whereas it should be short. It is out of the question that such a metrical error would have been permissible in an epitaph to an emperor, seeing that the imperial ideology of the Byzantines is based on the concept of continuity – continuity, not only of institutions, laws and customs, but also of the very ideal of *paideia*. This is why mistakes in grammar, vocabulary, stylistic register and metre are not allowed in texts written for the emperor, for such mistakes undermine the very basis upon which his imperial authority rests. Seeing that there is apparently something wrong with the text provided by Thomas Smith, the most easy solution is to assume that he mistook a darkish blot for a sigma and that we should read: κατὰ Σκυθῶν ἔπνευσα θεομὸν ἐν μάχαις, “I breathed fire in my battles against the Scyths”. Here then we have another epitaph written in the first person, in which a dead emperor brags about his heroic feats.

There is a third piece of evidence: a fictitious epitaph to Nikephoros Phokas composed by John Geometres, who used to be the poet laureate at his court and had therefore every reason to lament his untimely death. The epitaph is divided into two parts: an encomium of Phokas' glorious military achievements (vv. 1–8) and a moralistic meditation on the feeble nature of mankind, exemplified by the weakness Phokas displayed in dealing with his treacherous wife (vv. 9–12). As Phokas himself is the narrating voice, the reflection on man's feebleness which we find in the last four verses does not come as a surprise, for to confess one's sins is of course a feature typical of first-person epitaphs; besides, the less than heroic manner of Phokas' death at the hands of his wife (the role of Tzimiskes is passed over in silence) certainly called for some comments on the topic. In the first eight verses, however, just as in the epitaphs to Basil II and Tzimiskes, we find an enumeration of the emperor's heroic feats – and please note that it is Phokas himself who sums up, with

<sup>69</sup> See C. MANGO, *The Brazen House. A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople*. Copenhagen 1959, 166–167.

<sup>70</sup> See MANGO 1995: 116.

obvious pride, what he has done for the empire. “During the six years that I held the reins of God’s people, this is what I did. I engaged the Scyths in fierce battle. I wholly devastated the cities of the Assyrians and the Phoenicians, and even subjugated unassailable Tarsos. I cleansed the islands and drove off the barbarian host from vast Crete and vaunted Cyprus. East and West shrunk back, bliss-giving Nile and rugged Libya fled before my threats” (Cr. 290, 2–9).

In this fictitious epitaph, just as in the two verse inscriptions on the tombs of Basil II and John Tzimiskes, we see that emperors are allowed to boast of their military prowess *propria voce*, speaking to us from beyond the grave. It is highly likely that the fictitious epitaph by Geometres and the two genuine verse inscriptions, all three of which present dead emperors bragging about their heroic feats, ultimately go back to a common source. In order to determine what this common source may have been, there are two important clues. Firstly, bragging emperors are not laid to rest in the mausoleums of the Holy Apostles, but in private burial sites. And secondly, the emphasis on military prowess presupposes not only that there are heroic feats to brag about, but also that there is an ideological climate in which such boasts receive a warm welcome: that is, the warrior culture of tenth-century Byzantium. Taken in conjunction, these two clues strongly suggest that we are dealing with the tomb of Emperor Romanos I, who was buried in 948 in the Myrelaion, a monastery he had rebuilt and designated as the final resting place for himself and his next-of-kin. It is reasonable to assume that there was an epitaph inscribed on the tomb of Romanos Lekapenos in the Myrelaion. And since no other tenth-century emperor, except for Lekapenos, Tzimiskes and Basil II, was buried in a private burial site instead of the church of the Holy Apostles, it is very likely that this epitaph was the hypothetical common source that Geometres and the two anonymous poets imitated.