

CYRIL MANGO

Some Lessons of Byzantine Epigraphy

Abstract: Implicit in this paper is the wish that the projected corpus of Byzantine inscriptions should both constitute a compendium of available material and illustrate some broader trends in Byzantine culture. The following phenomena are mentioned: 1. The dramatic drop in all categories of lapidary inscriptions after the 6th/7th century, particularly the disappearance of epitaphs of ordinary people henceforth buried in unmarked graves. 2. Practically the only category of ‘public’ inscriptions to survive beyond the Dark Age records works of fortification and construction of churches. 3. The appearance in about the 11th century of what may be called the aristocratic verse epitaph often composed by professional poets. Such epitaphs single out the noble ancestry of the deceased, reflecting the values of Comnenian and Palaiologan society. 4. Plain capital letters are replaced ca. the 11th century by a script borrowed from manuscript headings, featuring abbreviations and ligatures, sacrificing legibility to decorative effect.

In the abstract I submitted to the Sofia Congress¹ I presented some rather obvious remarks about the ambiguity, not to say artificiality of the epithet ‘Byzantine’ as applied to the epigraphic heritage of the Eastern Roman Empire. I am sure that our Austrian colleagues, who have bravely embarked on the constitution of a corpus a century and a half after the publication of the only previous attempt to do so – I mean *CIG*, vol. IV of 1859 – are fully aware of the problems involved and have already established the boundaries of their enterprise in terms of chronology, language, geography and material support.

One further remark under the rubric of definition. Setting aside the enormous growth of available material, thanks to exploration and excavation, one of the most visible shifts in historical perspective of the past century has been the identification of Late Antiquity as a discrete period – a process in which epigraphy has played a part – I am referring to the famous study by Louis Robert in *Hellenica* IV (1948) about honorific dedications addressed to governors. But how is Byzantine Late Antiquity to be distinguished from medieval Byzantium? Even if we limit ourselves to Greek inscriptions produced between c. 300 and 600 AD in the eastern half of the Empire, we cannot deny that this material belongs to Antiquity rather than to the Middle Ages – that it continues established categories, such as decrees, dedications, epitaphs, records of building, indications of ownership, ex-votos, etc. It also continues to reflect an urban society whose literate class was accustomed to reading messages incised on stone and, indeed, appreciated literary refinement in them. But, if we remove from the ‘Byzantine’ sphere the inscriptions of Late Antiquity,² we are sacrificing nine tenths of the available material, including the most interesting items. Consider a few figures taken at random.

Aphrodisias, as we know thanks to Charlotte Roueché,³ has yielded nearly 1500 inscriptions of the early Empire, 223 of Late Antiquity and 7 for the whole medieval Byzantine period, which extends in that part of Asia Minor to the 11th or 12th century. At Laodicea Combusta in Phrygia,⁴ which has not been excavated, 285 inscriptions were recorded in 1928, of which 130 have been classed as Christian, an unusually high proportion. Of the 130 only 10 appear to have been later than the 6th century. For Thessalonica, the corpus of Ch. Edson⁵ lists 1020 items, of which c. 130 are Christian down to the 6th century. For the subsequent Byzantine period I have no published figure, except that those that have been selected by J.-M. Spieser⁶ as being of some historical significance number only 28. Such figures speak for themselves. True, the above statistics

¹ Proceedings of the 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies. Sofia, 22–27 August 2011. Vol. II: Abstracts of Round Table Communications. Sofia 2011, 59.

² As André Guillou has done in his corpus of medieval Byzantine inscriptions found in Italy: *Recueil des inscriptions grecques médiévales d’Italie*. Rome 1996.

³ Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity (*JRSI Monographs* 5). London 1989.

⁴ W. M. CALDER, in: *Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua* I (1928), xxiif.

⁵ *Inscriptiones Graecae* IX.2.1 (1972).

⁶ J.-M. SPIESER, *Les inscriptions de Thessalonique*. *TM* 5 (1973) 145–80; IDEM, ‘Supplément’. *TM* 7 (1979) 303–346. Only at Constantinople are the proportions radically different, but the capital is naturally a special case.

are limited to lapidary inscriptions, not those in other media, e.g. paint on plaster. It may also be argued that epitaphs were occasionally replaced by graffiti of the form “Ἐτελειώθη ὁ δούλος τοῦ Θεοῦ Χ” such as have survived, notably at Athens, scratched on the surface of antique marble columns and the ‘Russian’ church of Panagia Lykodemou. But even if we make allowance for such substitutions, the inescapable fact remains that what has been called the ‘epigraphic habit’, i.e. the conveying of information by means of the publicly displayed written word, had all but died out in medieval Byzantium. We shall presently suggest some reasons why this happened.

With regard to content, the only categories that survived in very limited numbers after the Dark Age – I am setting aside lead seals and other portable objects such as ivories – were building inscriptions and epitaphs. Medieval public buildings were limited to works of fortification (Fig. 1) and churches (Figs. 7–8), and it is on city walls that we find the most extensive sequences of inscriptions. Particularly noteworthy by their number if not their formulation are the c. 30 bearing the name of the emperor Theophilus (829–42) that have been recorded on the towers of the maritime walls of Constantinople (Fig. 1). What is significant here is his intention of claiming for himself the full extent of the restorations he undertook. It is also worth noting that the long sequence of succinct inscriptions of the form “Tower of Theophilus, emperor in Christ” is, as it were, prefaced by a 6-verse dodecasyllabic poem addressed to Christ, prominently displayed near the Acropolis Point.⁷ It is in the reigns of Theophilus and Michael III that the verse epigram re-enters Byzantine epigraphy, reviving, though on a lower cultural level (dodecasyllables instead of hexameter or elegiacs), a practice that had been current in Late Antiquity. Similar observations may be made, *mutatis mutandis*, about inscriptions commemorating the construction or restoration of churches, although the latter were often executed in paint or mosaic.

As regards epitaphs, we may start with an observation whose importance has not, I believe, been sufficiently appreciated. In the 6th century it was still common for ordinary people, such as petty traders, storekeepers, bakers, soldiers, textile workers, minor officials, to be commemorated by inscribed tombstones, giving the date of death by indiction and sometimes the native village of the deceased. At Constantinople the last such epitaph known to me, that of an African soldier in the army of Heraclius, dates from 610.⁸ After that the ordinary man, i.e. the great majority of mortals, sinks into total anonymity. The two medieval graveyards that have been excavated at Constantinople, that at St Polyeuktos and that next to the Kalenderhane mosque,⁹ have not yielded a single epitaph. But even with regard to more prominent people, such as members of the imperial service (Fig. 2) and ecclesiastical hierarchy, the number of preserved epitaphs is surprisingly small. In view of the fact that typically 90% of the epigraphic record consists of tombstones, the elimination of the common man goes a long way towards explaining the dramatic drop in numbers we have noted. But what of distinguished people? It may be of some relevance that they were usually buried not in the open air, as had been the norm in Antiquity, but in the narthexes and *parekklesia* of churches and monasteries, hence subject to the vicissitudes suffered by such monuments.

It was certainly in such a context that we should visualize a curious development in Byzantine epigraphy, that of the aristocratic verse epitaph.¹⁰ Preserved examples of this genre are few and date from the Palaiologan era (Figs. 3–4), but it can be traced back to the 10th/11th century in the literary production of named poets. Often excessively long (over 100 verses), such compositions dwell not so much on the vanity and transitoriness of life, the traditional themes of funerary inscriptions, as on the noble ancestry of the deceased and the honorific titles he bore, creating in the process a whole vocabulary of family epithets like Κομνηνοφύης, Δουκόβλαστος, etc. If such poems were actually inscribed, and some of them certainly were, we must ima-

⁷ R. DEMANGEL – E. MAMBOURY, *Le quartier des Manges et la première région de Constantinople*. Paris 1939, fig. 11. Written in a single line, the inscription is c. 20 m long.

⁸ C. ZUCKERMAN, ‘Épithaphe d’un soldat africain...’. *Antiquité Tardive* 6 (1998) 377–382.

⁹ R. M. HARRISON, *Excavations at Saraçhane in Istanbul*, I. Princeton 1986, 27–30; C. L. STRIKER – D. KUBAN, *Kalenderhane in Istanbul: the excavations: final reports on the archaeological exploration and restoration at Kalenderhane Camii 1966–1978*, II. Mainz 2007.

¹⁰ C. MANGO, *Sépultures et épitaphes aristocratiques à Byzance*, in: *Epigrafia medievale greca e latina. Ideologia e funzione*, eds. G. CAVALLO and C. MANGO. Spoleto 1995, 99–117.

gine them occupying not only the funerary box itself, but also the back wall and spandrels of the arcosolium in which the burial was placed.

Finally, a word about the evolution of the epigraphic script¹¹ in so far as it affects legibility. Down to about the 9th century it remained basically unchanged, a script of capital letters with few abbreviations and ligatures, that any moderately literate person could make out. Diagnostic features, not always decisive, that point to a later rather than an earlier date include the *beta* on a horizontal bar (Fig. 5), the *delta* on little feet (that survives in the Cyrillic alphabet) and the split *kappa* (Fig. 6). In the 10th century the script, still exclusively of capital letters, becomes more compressed and less distinct (Fig. 7), but it is in the 11th century that it is invaded by cursive forms (Fig. 8) borrowed from the realm of manuscripts, leading to ever greater stylization and a striving towards decorative effects, that demanded a higher standard of literacy on the reader's part. A laudable effort to chart the evolution of script on the basis of lead seals has been made by Nikos Oikonomides,¹² although the objects in question are too small to reflect the full variety of letter forms. A more nuanced approach would call for the constitution of palaeographic albums¹³ devoted to inscriptions such as have long existed in the case of dated manuscripts. It was to fill this gap that the late Ihor Ševčenko and myself put together a corpus of dated and independently datable inscriptions of Constantinople, eastern Thrace and Bithynia (Figs. 1–3, 6–8) (forthcoming). I hope that our lead will be followed by similar corpora devoted to other parts of the Empire.

¹¹ Cf. C. MANGO, Byzantine Epigraphy (4th to 10th centuries), in: *Paleografia e codicologia greca* (Atti del II colloquio internazionale, Berlino – Wolfenbüttel, 1983), eds. D. HARLFINGER and G. PRATO. Alessandria 1991, 235–249.

¹² *A Collection of Dated Lead Seals*. Washington, D.C. 1986.

¹³ Cf. now A. WEYL CARR – S. KALOPISSI-VERTI, Appendix. Inventory of Paleographic Forms in the Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Murals, in: *Asinou across Time. Studies in the Architecture and Murals of the Panagia Phorbiotissa, Cyprus*, eds. A. WEYL CARR – A. NICOLAÏDÈS (*DOS XLIII*). Washington, D.C. 2012, 371–385.

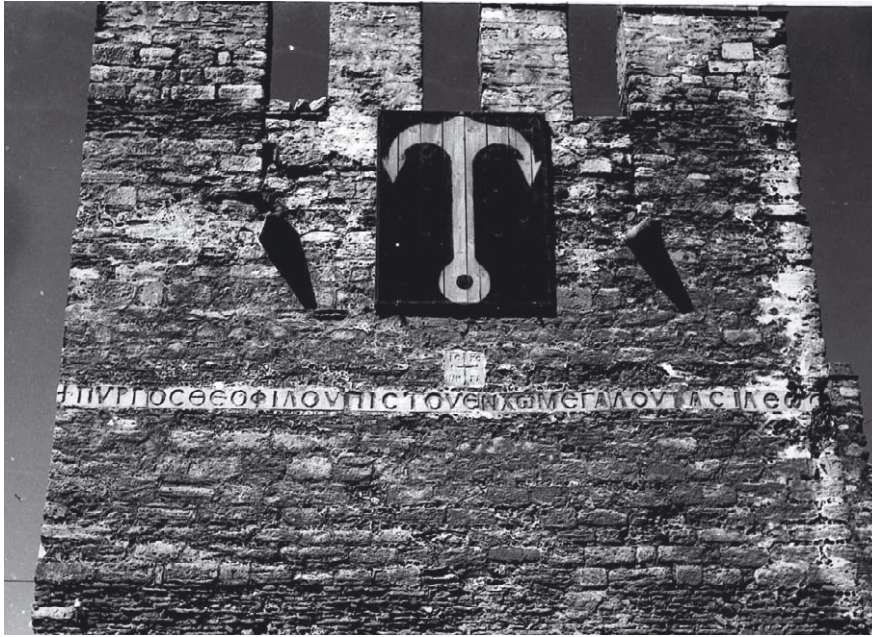


Fig. 1: Constantinople, Sea Walls, inscription of the emperor Theophilus, 829–842

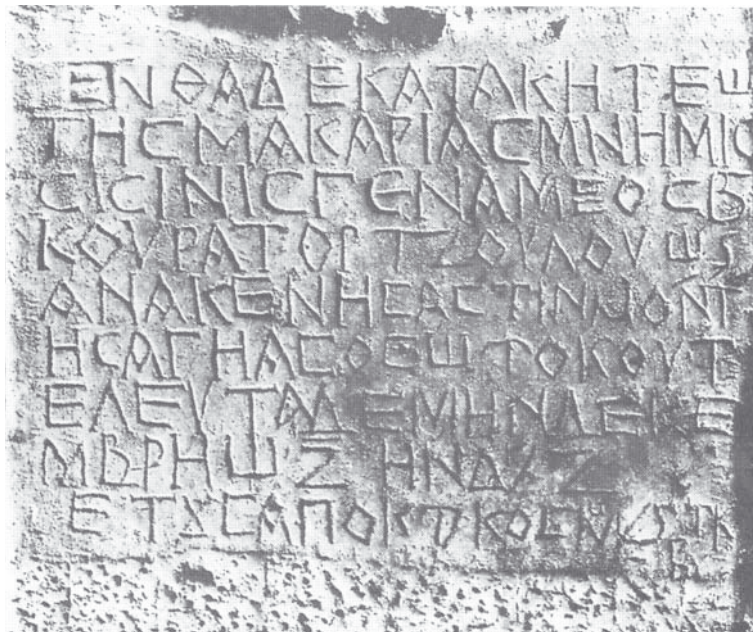


Fig. 2: Rodosto in Thrace, epitaph of Sisinius, curator, 813



Fig. 3: Constantinople, Kariye Camii, Tomb D, epitaph of Michael Tornikes, buried c. 1328



Fig. 4: Constantinople, of uncertain provenance, epitaph of Maria Palaiologina, 14th century



Fig. 5: Constantinople, St Sophia, apse mosaic, 867

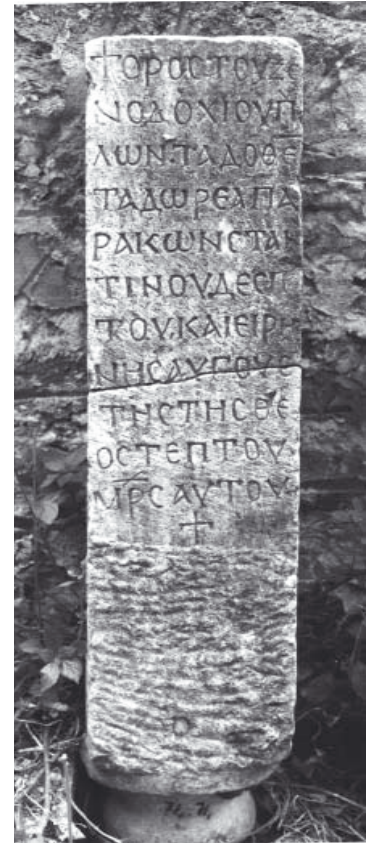


Fig. 6: Yalova (Pylai) in Bithynia, boundary inscription of xenodochion, c. 800



Fig. 7: Constantinople, Monastery of Constantine Lips (Fenari Isa Camii), north church, part of the founder's inscription, 907



Fig. 8: Thessaloniki, Panagia tōn Chalkeōn, built by Christopher, *katepano* of Longobardia, 1028