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Messages from a Sacred Space: The Function of the Byzantine Sanctuary Barrier Inscriptions (9th–14th centuries)

In medieval Byzantium, the church came to be the place where almost all the inscriptions intended for public viewing were exposed. Except for a small amount of texts inscribed on the outside of the church's walls,¹ the majority of the inscriptions occur at the interior, chiefly in the nave, usually on mosaics and frescoes,² as well as on vessels and embroidery.³ But there are also several texts carved on the sanctuary barrier or templon screen. It is on this particular kind of inscriptions that the present paper focuses, through the examination of the surviving examples, which dated to the period from the 9th to the 14th centuries. This study expands my recently published in the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* research, where I collected cases of this kind dated from the 9th to the 12th centuries, from the whole Byzantine territory;⁴ here I am trying to outline the exact function and impact of the texts appearing on templon screens.

1 The Byzantine Sanctuary Barrier or Templon Screen

First of all it would be necessary to establish what exactly the Byzantine sanctuary barrier was. The barrier or templon screen was a fragile architectural structure that

I am thankful for the invitation to participate in the meeting of “Writing Matters”. I would like also to thank the Byzantine and Christian Museum at Athens, the 5th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Dr Aggeliki Katsioti and Professor Emeritus Panayotis Vocotopoulos, Member of the Academy of Athens, for their kindly permission to publish photographs of objects from their collections and archives. At last I owe many thanks to my colleague Dr Alexandra Constantinidou for her valuable comments on the language of the following text.

1 The most notable examples are found at Panaghia Skripou, Orchomenos, dated to 873/4 (Papalexandrou 1998, 111–155), the North Church of Lips Monastery at Constantinople, 906/7 (C. Mango/E.J.W. Hawkins, Additional Notes, Macridy 1964, 300–301 figs. 1) and the funerary chapel of Pammakaristos at the same city, ca. 1310 (Talbot 1999, 77–78 fig. 1–3).

2 On the practice of inscribing all the painted figures and narrative scenes in the post-iconoclastic Byzantium see Maguire 1996, 100–106, Boston 2003 and Nelson 2007.

3 Rhoby 2010.

4 Pallis 2013.

separated the nave from the altar area.⁵ It was made of marble and the front face was usually decorated in low relief; wooden barriers also existed, especially in areas poor in marble, such as in northern Greece and the Balkans, but almost none of them is preserved. Depending on the size of the church, a templon could be tripartite, with independent parts corresponding to the prothesis, the central bema, and the diakonikon. Its structure was simple: colonettes hold a horizontal architrave or epistylon; some of the interposing spaces were left open, to be used as gates to the sanctuary, while the others were closed with low slabs, leaving their upper part unfilled. Until the 11th–12th century, icons were standing on the architrave and the rituals inside the sanctuary were visible to the faithful; from that moment on, icons and curtains began to fill these gaps and the templon was gradually shaped as the iconostasis that hides the major part of the service from the eyes of the congregation.

The barrier was the most elaborate and lavish work of sculpture in the Byzantine church. To decorate it, sculptors combined diverse patterns from different traditions, including crosses and christograms, floral and geometrical motifs, fighting animals and even mythological creatures of Greek or oriental origin, such as griffons, centaurs, senmurvs. The use of the human figures seems to be limited: the Deesis scene or selected saints are rarely represented on the architrave,⁶ which may be seen, hence, as a forerunner of the icons that later occupied the spaces between the beams. All this decoration overlooked the nave and the congregation; the internal face of the barrier, visible only by the priests, was usually left unfinished and rough.

But beyond an architectural element and piece of decorative art, the templon screen played an important role in the liturgy and it was dressed with multiple symbolic meanings.⁷ The barrier was the boundary of the most sacred space of the church and separated the clergy from the laymen, who could not access it. Behind the barrier, all around the altar, the holy rituals took place: the clergy performed the unbloody sacrifice and other church mysteries. The gates of the templon were used for the ceremonial appearances and the processions of the liturgy. It was in front of the central holy gate, where the communion was given. A theological interpretation of the screen began to develop as early as in the 8th century, by Patriarch Germanos of Constantinople, to reach its most sophisticated form in the early 15th century, when the hesychast bishop Symeon of Thessaloniki wrote the interpretation widely known as *de Sacro Templo*. Besides the well-educated elite cycles, the laity was also aware of the screen's prominent sacredness; everyone in the church was in position to perceive the symbols portrayed on the richly decorated screen that stood between them and

⁵ Philippides-Bouras 1991, 2023–2024 (with earlier bibliography). Walter 1993; Walter 1995; Gerstel 1999, 5–14; Gerstel 2006.

⁶ Sodini 1980; Stoufi-Poulimenou 2011.

⁷ Taft 2006; Conostas 2006.

the altar. The faithful used to stand in front of it during holy services or while their personal prayers.

2 The Inscribed Sanctuary Barriers

In this respect, the importance of the inscriptions appearing on the sanctuary barrier was de facto incontestable; their content was a word that came from the church's more sacred space and addressed the congregation. To study this practice and its function, we have to look upon the surviving examples and their content. To my knowledge, there are seventy two cases of inscribed templon screens from the entire territory of the Byzantine empire, dating to the period from the 9th until the 14th centuries.⁸ In addition, twenty six examples may correspond to barriers, but this is uncertain, given the obscurity of their original use—some of them are lost, while others still await publication.⁹ The aforementioned examples are found scattered in modern Turkey, (especially in west Asia Minor and all along its coastline), in the Aegean islands, in central and mainly in southern Greece (many of them in the secluded Mani peninsula), and in south Italy. The lack of examples from northern Greece and the Balkans could be interpreted as a result of the restricted use of marble in these areas, in favour of wood. The fact that only one case of inscribed templon—that cannot be dated with accu-

⁸ Pallis 2013, 775–801, for a catalogue of inscriptions dated to the middle Byzantine era. Four new examples from Turkey should be added to the list: a) an architrave fragment from Yavaşlar (Moxeanoi), 10th–11th c. (<http://mama.csad.ox.ac.uk/MAMA-XI-159.html> (access 23.6.2014)), b) an architrave fragment from Akçaşar (Kidyessos), 10th–11th c. (<http://mama.csad.ox.ac.uk/monuments/MAMA-XI-174.html> (access 23.6.2014)), c) an architrave fragment preserving the date 1009, at the Milas Archaeological Museum (Özyurt Özcan 2012, 429 fig. 3a) and d) a templon capital from Tire (Ödekan 2007, 273–274 (Zeynep Mercangöz)). The publisher of the last one transcribes the inscription as ωΠΙΟC, but this is evidently part of the name Γεώργιος. To my knowledge, the examples dated to the Paleologan era have as follows: a) part of a templon epistyle at Manisa Archaeological Museum, 13th c. (M. Grünbart, in: Niewöhner 2008, 296–297 and 342, Kat. 58, Abb. 62) b) a reused lintel at the church of the Virgin at İkis Ada, Latmos, second half of the 13th c. (Wiegand 1913, 35, 38, 40 Abb. 48–49. Buchwald 1995, 259, n. 10 c) Part of a templon architrave from Edirne (Adrianoupolis), Turkish Thrace (Asdracha 1989–1991, 296–298, n. 82, pl. 108a. Lequeux 2001.); Asdracha dated the inscription after 976 to the 11th c., but, to my opinion, the style of the letters is Late Byzantine (cfr. the cited above Pammakaristos chapel sculpted inscription) d) Templon architrave from Panaghia Koulourdou, near Athens, now at the Christian and Byzantine Museum (Sklavou-Mavroeidi 1999, 119 n. 158, with earlier bibliography). The style of the scripture ascribes this architrave much probably to the 13th c. e.) Templon architrave from the church of Aghioi Theodoroi, Mystras, dated shortly before 1296, now at the Museum of the site (Evans 2004, 81–82 n. 37 (Emilia Bakourou), with earlier bibliography).

⁹ Pallis 2013, 801–810.

acy—comes from Constantinople is rather puzzling. This may be due to the fact that the churches of the imperial capital have lost their marble sanctuary barriers.

The texts are usually inscribed on the architrave that crowns the templon structure. The most preferred location is the thin undecorated band that runs over the front, bevelled surface of the stone (figs. 1 and 2).



Fig. 1: Templon architrave from Panaghia Koulourdou, Athens, probably 13th c., Byzantine and Christian Museum © Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Byzantine and Christian Museum.



Fig. 2: Part of a templon architrave from Aghioi Theodoroi, Mystras, shortly before 1296, Mystras Archeological Museum © Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 5th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities.

The inscription is carved in a single, long line. In a few cases the text covers the whole front surface, replacing the decoration or a part of it (fig. 3). Here the big capital letters have an ornamental function too. The architrave of the great church of Saint John Theologos at Ephesos (fig. 4) bears inscriptions on both sides, the front face and the one looking into the sanctuary. On another early example from Corinth the text is almost hidden in a roundel at the underside of the epistyle.



Fig. 3: Templon architrave from Panaghia at Mentzena, Peloponnese, third quarter of 10th c., Archaeological Museum of Patras © Professor Panayotis Vocotopoulos, Academy of Athens.



Fig. 4: Templon architrave of Aghios Ioannis Theologos basilica, Ephesus, early 11th c. © Dr Aggeliki Katsioti.

Few inscriptions are carved on the closure slabs and their tops. On a slab from Samos, a rectangular surface is left undecorated for this purpose. In other cases, long texts are written on the vertical sides of the frame that surrounds the relief (fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Pair of templon closure slabs from Aghios Ioannis Mangoutis, Athens, 12th c. Byzantine and Christian Museum © Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Byzantine and Christian Museum.

The masons working at Mani are fond of interlacing letters within the decoration. More unusual are the cases of placing texts on colonettes, as on a couple of them from Nestani, Peloponnese, and a capital from Tire, Turkey.

The form of the letters gives insight on the evolution of script in the Byzantine era. The tradition of capital letters seems to remain strong until the beginning of the 11th century, with various types and occasional revivals of ancient forms. From this time onwards, cursive letters and abbreviations appear and their number gradually increases, resulting in a complicated and more illegible script style.¹⁰

On the basis of their content, the sanctuary barrier inscriptions can be divided in three main categories. The first category includes the dedicatory texts, which commemorate acts of donation and express the donors' concern for salvation. The second includes inscriptions reproducing quotations from the holy scripts and hymns or inspired from them; they may be considered 'instructive', given that they aim to remind basic dogmatic points or feasts. Finally, the third category is represented by two cursing inscriptions from Mani, whose very peculiar character is striking.

3 The Dedicatory Inscriptions

To begin with, the dedicatory inscriptions memorialise the donation or the renovation of a barrier or a church building. The texts do not always help verifying what was exactly donored: many donors chose not to refer to it, either because it was obvious (the tempon or the church) either because they preferred to concentrate to the invocation for holy protection and salvation. In the same way, they do not always state their profession, but they only cite their first name. The eponymous ones are usually church officials, monks, laymen acting alone or in coalitions, and few members of the state administration, mostly of a middle or lower rank. Bishops are mentioned in some ten inscriptions, wherefrom it may be deduced that their role was as prominent as their position in local society. Lower office clergymen took the initiative alone or in collaboration with the local parish. The monks act privately or in the name of a fraternity. The participation of women is rather limited, represented merely by three recorded cases—two of them mentioning an abbess and a nun.

In their simplest form, dedicatory inscriptions mention the name of one or more donors next to their invocation to Lord or a certain saint for intercession and remission of their sins. Their request for holy protection is rendered with various expressions: a) the donor can underline the pains he tastes—“*bring to an end the bitter sufferings*”¹¹

¹⁰ Mango 1991, 242–246.

¹¹ Pallis 2013, 784 n. 22.

b) he can use the three verbs “*watch over, save, guard*”¹² and their variations, originally coming from the service of Ypapante c) he can recite all the possible accidents that may happen to him: “*save me of every need and dangers of trouble and misfortune of the life*”.¹³ Other texts concentrate on emphasising the initiative of the donor, especially if he is a significant person. On the excellent marble templon from Sercikler, Byzantine Sebaste, in Phrygia, it is declared that bishop Eustathios “[...] *prudently puts new ornament in the cornices, mostly embellishing with gold and marble and other brilliant and transparent material*”.¹⁴ Emphasis is given to the common in all kinds of dedicatory inscriptions Πόθος, *the desire or devotion* that motivates the donors, as many inscriptions state.

The use of poetry to express dedications was very popular during the Byzantine period, in almost every artistic field. Several epigrams seem to have been composed especially for some newly erected sanctuary barriers, in dodecasyllabic verses. The composers of these epigrams use widespread motifs of this kind of literature. At Notion, where a bishop asks Theotokos to accept the gift of his donation, the verses begin with the common in dedicatory inscriptions verb δέξαι, *accept*.¹⁵ The term *gift*, δῶρον, referring to the offering, is widespread too. Another common motif is the accent of the contrast between the donation’s finery and the donor’s modesty; in an inscription from Antalya, *Ioannis the humble*, dedicates an *excellent work*.¹⁶ The use of poetry can be seen as an indication of the donors’ culture, taste and acquaintance with literary cycles. At any rate, misspellings abound, even in cases of carefully carved inscriptions on quality sculptures.

On several dedicatory inscriptions the exact date of the donation occurs—in the chronological system beginning from the date of the Creation (5508 B.C.), or through the mention of the reigning emperor. The name of the emperor appears in four examples, co-existing with the name of the local bishop in two of them. Despite the small number of the respective examples, it is notable that the imperial authority is demonstrated together with that of the local church head. On the other hand, no ruler’s name is to be found among the numerous templon inscriptions from Mani. Sophia Kalopissi interprets this absence as an indication of the loose links between this wild and secluded area and the central Byzantine administration.¹⁷

At Mani two masons proudly signed their works. There are two more examples of this kind, from Arcadia and Izmir.¹⁸ They are all rare exceptions to the general rule of anonymity of Byzantine marble carvers.

¹² Pallis 2013, 778, n. 5, and 798–799, 59.

¹³ Pallis 2013, 799, n. 60.

¹⁴ Pallis 2013, 783, n. 20.

¹⁵ Pallis 2013, 779, n. 8.

¹⁶ Pallis 2013, 777, n. 1.

¹⁷ Kalopissi-Verti 2003, 346.

¹⁸ The μαῖστρω mentioned on another architrave fragment from Yavaşlar (Moxeanoi) could possibly

4 The ‘Instructive’ Inscriptions

‘Instructive’ inscriptions include various excerpts from the Old Testament, liturgical texts and the hymnography. A lengthy extract from David’s Psalter overruns the front face of the architrave in the Theologos’ church at Ephesos, and makes allusion to the gifts of salvation: “*I will satisfy her poor with bread. I will clothe her priests with salvation; and her saints shall greatly exult*” (Ps. 131, 15–16).¹⁹ The invocation “*Remember Lord those who bring offerings and create fair works in your holy churches*”, from Saint Basil’s Liturgy, is found on an architrave and a closure slab from Asia Minor.²⁰ A monastic fraternity from the area of Afion Karahisar chose to reproduce on the templon architrave the phrase “*We offer you Lord, your own, of what is your own*”, marking the high point of Saint John the Chrysostom’s Liturgy.²¹ Verses from hymns were reproduced without change or they merely influenced the content of several inscriptions; such is the case of the epigram “*Save me, o you the wholly venerable, from the most evil men and break ...*” from Panagia Mentzena in Peloponnese, which uses a theme taken from the Psalter.²² In the same group the verses found on a closure slab from Akhisar should be added: “*Attend the holy liturgy tremblingly*”.²³ This commandment, directly addressing the worshipers, belongs to a group of poems that share similar characteristics; these poems are written on paintings and vessels, and, according to Marc Lauxtermann, come from the Mega Horologion book.²⁴ This category of texts does not lack misspellings and one could logically assume that it was not only the illiterate craftsmen that made these mistakes; it is possible that they were given incorrectly written texts to copy.

5 The Cursing Inscriptions

Finally, the two cursing inscriptions from Mani come next.²⁵ The first one was found on the closure slab of a templon that also bears a dedicatory inscription; the unknown donor warns that if one felt jealous of the saint’s goods (meaning the marble equipment of the chapel), one would confront the saint himself. The second example

be added to the few references to sculptors’ names (<http://mama.csad.ox.ac.uk/monuments/MAMA-XI-159.html>) (access 23.6.2014).

¹⁹ Pallis 2013, 778–779, n. 7.

²⁰ Pallis 2013, 807, n. 2c, and 808–809, n. 2g.

²¹ Pallis 2013, 784, n. 23.

²² Pallis 2013, 789, n. 36.

²³ Pallis 2013, 781, n. 14.

²⁴ Lauxtermann 2003, 247.

²⁵ Pallis 2013, 790–791, n. 39 and 792, n. 42.

includes a curse invoking Holy Trinity to stand against anyone who would harm the gifts—the donation; the name of the donor has been erased. These maledictions follow a long tradition already established in the Early Christian era, with curses on churches and houses.²⁶

6 Notes on the Function of the Sanctuary Barrier Inscriptions

Which was the function and role of written evidence on Byzantine templon screens? Let us begin from our last case, the curses. Here, the maledictions serve in an obvious preventive purpose: they aim to warn possible thieves or vandals, in order to escape divine anger. The recycling of sculpted material, some of them maybe stolen, is attested in Mani since the 14th century,²⁷ but we may suppose that it was common even earlier. Consequently, there was a particular local need to take precautions and nothing could be more effective than curses themselves.²⁸

The instructive inscriptions have an obvious purpose as well: they edify the congregation, reminding basic dogmatic points of the unbloody sacrifice and salvation and citing excerpts of hymns.²⁹ The fact that several inscriptions of this kind are carved in big capital letters, which cover the whole front face of the architrave may not be incidental; presented this way, they are clear and legible even when viewed from a long-distance. Furthermore, the persons who ordered them, church officials or well-educated laymen, might like that these texts be easily and directly read by the faithful.

Things get more complicated when dealing with the dedicatory inscriptions. The donors found on the templon barrier a sacred and predominant place to commemorate their initiative. Their offering is a personal—rarely a collective—act, addressed to the Lord, the Mother of God and certain Saints, to whom they plead for personal salvation and remission of sins.³⁰ The inscription reveals and immortalises the identity of the donor, his offer, as well as his demand. Poetry is at times used to underline the beauty of the gift, the faith of the donor, his desire for salvation. At first place,

²⁶ Ntantes 1983, 81–83.

²⁷ Militsi-Kehagia 2012.

²⁸ Maledictions occur frequently in Late Byzantine churches' inscriptions, in order to protect land donations to holy institutions (Kalopissi-Verti 1992, 77, n. 24b, where she collects numerous examples).

²⁹ This kind of inscriptions reminds us of the inscribed scrolls of prophets and several saints in Byzantine iconography: in both cases, there is an obvious teaching purpose, through the reproduced sacred word.

³⁰ On the anxiety for salvation in lay piety see Gerstel/Talbot 2006, 97–99.

the role of the written text is to publicly confirm all these facts. Moreover, it represents the effort to establish a dialogue, where God was expected to answer through his holy protection. And, as in every deal, this needs a written and public statement, too. When this statement appears in the church, and especially on the sacred barrier, it gains strength and eternal value.

Another significant element is the material on which the texts are carved or incised and it should not be overlooked. Marble was highly appreciated throughout the middle ages, and it continued to express power and prestige.³¹ It was a pure material, most appropriate for the particular symbolic nature of the templon screen. Furthermore, word written on marble acquired an everlasting character, similar to that of the earlier inscriptions that the Byzantines gazed as meaningful or even magical messages.³² It is not difficult to imagine that many donors would perceive their dedications on marble as eternal.³³

However, there is a crucial defect from 'technical' aspect. The letters in this category are usually of a rather small size, overshadowed by the imposing and much bigger decorative relief under them; this, next to the superimposed icons, would make any such inscription difficult to see and read, especially in a church lacking sufficient lighting. It seems much probable that a worshiper had to approach the screen in order to distinguish such an inscription. Although displayed in public view, most of the dedicatory inscriptions remained hidden, enhancing their personal, almost private character. So what was their exact purpose? The text concerned primarily the donor and the holy person to whom it was addressed. As Liz James has proposed about epigrams written on church buildings and other artworks, it seems that, above all, these prayers were there to be read by God.³⁴ And this could be regarded by the donors as certain, because the invocation was placed on the sacred barrier that protected the Holy of the Holies. The congregation played here a minor role.

Was the human intervention necessary to vocally activate these prayers? Was it obligatory to read them in order to be effective? In many cases the dedications do not mention any participation of this kind. But several donors want to secure the eternal repetition of their demands, asking the priests, the readers or the chanters to help. "*Anyone who comes to celebrate the liturgy, commemorate me, for the Lord's name*", we read on an architrave from Banaz, Minor Asia,³⁵ which means that without the priest's involvement, the prayer remains inactive. The dedicatory inscription of Theo-

³¹ Sodini 1994; Greenhalgh 2009.

³² Mango 1991, 240–241.

³³ Cfr. the case of the dedicatory inscription at the katholikon of Aghia Moni at Nauplion, Peloponnese, dated in 1148/9: as Amy Papalexandrou has already marked, the text has been carved on a resplendent white marble, to make the patron's message distinguishable on a dark wall of bricks and poros stone (Papalexandrou 2007, 175 fig. 42).

³⁴ James 2007, 199.

³⁵ Pallis 2013, 782, n. 17.

logos' church at Ephesos is carved at the inner side of the architrave, so the clergy, who performed the eucharist would perpetually read and repeat it. The short, hidden text at the architrave from Corinth is carved in a direction that allowed only the clergy that was inside the sanctuary to read it; from outside, it would be really puzzling, an obscure mass of letters. It is likely that the donor did not care if any of the faithful would notice and decipher his prayer; he only cared to address the Lord, through his earthly servants, namely the priests.

The intervention of the readers and the chanters is frequently found at the area of Mani. Sanpatios for example, the donor of a church at Mani, asks the chanters to wish for him and his family day and night.³⁶ The local predilection for this expression could be interpreted as an effort of the donors to secure the perpetual reading of their prayers; it addresses the chanters and the readers, who were probably the only members of the local parishes that were able to read.

This point brings us to the critical question about the significance of the inscriptions for the illiterate worshipers, who constituted the majority of the faithful.³⁷ Modern scholarship has recently focused on this subject—the works of Liz James,³⁸ Marc Lauxtermann,³⁹ Amy Papalexandrou⁴⁰ and Andreas Rhoby⁴¹ and other scholars try to shed light on this topic. Even if they could not comprehend their content, illiterate laymen regarded the inscribed word as a meaningful codex of signs that transferred hidden information. To their eyes, letters possessed an almost supernatural, magical power. And when letters were written on the holy barrier, in a sacred context, one may suppose that this power could be naturally regarded just as positive. The templon inscriptions could not signify anything less than divine word and spirit, addressed to the faithful from the Holy of Holies.

In conclusion, the Byzantine sanctuary barrier offered an extremely advantageous location to inscribe personal dedications and spiritual demands, short excerpts of dogmatic value and even preventive maledictions, all of them obtaining automatically a sacred depth. As a consequence, we would expect that this practice became widespread throughout the Byzantine territory. But the amount does not support our expectations: from the medieval Byzantium, in a period of five centuries, we have no more than one hundred recorded cases of inscriptions on templon screens, a considerable part of them—about 30%—being uncertain in terms of their original use and scientific documentation. Comparing this number to that of the marble screens that were erected during the same period, estimated up to many hundreds, the proportion

³⁶ Pallis 2013, 791, n. 40.

³⁷ For a critical overview of the research on Byzantine literacy see Jeffreys 2008.

³⁸ James 2007, 199–200.

³⁹ Lauxtermann 2003, 271–273.

⁴⁰ Papalexandrou 2001.

⁴¹ Rhoby 2012, 733–734.

is beyond doubt rather low.⁴² This small number could at first be treated as a result and an indication of the disability of the public to communicate through written texts; but I think that the private character of the overwhelming dedicatory texts plays here a major role as well.

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⁴² The existence of painted inscriptions on templon screens should not be excluded, but, to my knowledge, no example of this kind survives. In general, the use of color on Byzantine sculpture has been attested in a very few and rather uncertain cases (Altripp 2002).

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