Content

Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art:
Crossing Borders, Exploring Boundaries .................................................................11
Emmanuel Moutafov, Ida Toth

Words and Images in Early Christian Inscriptions
(3rd–7th Century) ........................................................................................................39
Antonio E. Felle

“Das Licht Christi leuchtet allen” – Form und Funktions von Kreuzen mit Tetragrammen in byzantinischen und postbyzantinischen Handschriften.................................................................71
Andreas Rhoby

Between Princes and Labourers: The Legacy of Hosios Christodoulous and his Successors in the Aegean Sea (11th–13th Centuries.) .........................91
Angeliki Katsioti

Essay on a Visual Perspective of Medieval Writing .................................................129
Vincent Debiais

The Inner Portal of St Mark’s Basilica in Venice
between East and West ..............................................................................................151
Valentina Cantone

Images and Texts across Time:
The Three Layers of Mural Paintings
in the Church of St George in Sofia .........................................................................171
Elka Bakalova, Tsvetan Vasilev

The Balkans and the Renaissance World .................................................................193
Jelena Erdeljan

Panagia Eleousa in Great Prespa Lake:
A symbolic artistic language at the Beginning of the 15th Century .....................209
Melina Paissidou

Un cycle hagiographique peu étudié
de la peinture extérieure moldave:
La vie de saint Pacôme le Grand .............................................................................231
Constantin I. Ciobanu
Post-Byzantine Wall Paintings in Euboea:
The Monastery of Panagia Peribleptos at Politika ....................................................249
Andromachi Katselaki

A Unique 15th Century Donation to Vatopedi:
A Pair of Wood-carved Lecterns....................................................................................265
Dimitrios Liakos

Between Loyalty, Memory and
the Law: Byzantine and Slavic Dedicatory Church Inscriptions
Mentioning Foreign Rulers in the 14th and 15th Centuries ........................................303
Anna Adashinskaya

The Illustrated Slavonic Miscellanies
of Damascenes Studite’s Thesauros –
a New Context for Gospel Illustrations in the Seventeenth Century....................325
Elissaveta Moussakova

Jovan Četirević Grabovan – an 18th-Century Itinerant Orthodox Painter.
Some Ethnic and Artistic Considerations .................................................................349
Aleksandra Kučeković

Painters of Western Training Working
for Orthodox Patrons – Remarks on the Evidence
of Late-medieval Transylvania (14th–15th Century) ................................................369
Dragoș Gh. Năstăsoiu

The Scene of the Road to Calvary
in St George’s Church in Veliko Tarnovo .................................................................391
Maria Kolusheva

Костадин Геров-Антикаров – даскал и зограф.........................................................411
Владимир Димитров

Religious and National Mythmaking:
Conservation and Reconstruction of the Social Memory ............................................427
Antonios Tsakalos

List of Contributors ........................................................................................................446
**Words and Images in Early Christian Inscriptions (3rd–7th Century)**

*Antonio E. Felle*

*The University “Aldo Moro” of Bari, Italy*

**Abstract.** The use of both words and images in the epigraphic medium is already attested in the very first Christian inscriptions (mid 2nd century). This inscriptive habit continued uninterrupted until the end of Late Antiquity (7th century) providing us with an important insight – also corroborated in the works of contemporary historians and Church Fathers – into the transformation of the notion of ‘exposed writings’, associated with inscribed texts that were intended to be seen rather than read.

**Key words:** Late Antiquity, Epigraphy, Early Christianity, Rome.

In Greek and Roman Antiquity, both words and images appeared as elements of an organized joint communicative stream. In funerary monuments, epitaphs and portraits of the deceased are used together in order to create a long-term memorial of the dead. On painted vases, inscribed words gave identity and voice to the people.

---

1 Antonio Enrico Felle is Associate Professor of Christian and Medieval Epigraphy at the University Aldo Moro of Bari. He is also Visiting Professor of Christian Epigraphy at the International Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum (Holy See), Corresponding Member of the Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, Corresponding Member of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Secretary of the Board of the Italian National Academic Council of Post-Classical Archaeology, and Scientific Director of the ‘Epigraphic Database Bari’ (http://www.edb.uniba.it).

represented on them. In public buildings and monuments, as well as in reliefs and statues, monumental inscriptions display the provisions of the foundation by their texts and by the arrangement and materiality of their writing. From Classical Greece to the height of the Roman Empire in 2nd century AD, inscribed letters and sculpted or painted images each played their respective roles. Although they complemented one another, they still tended to occupy their own distinct space.

In Rome, the funerary settlement found under the basilica of St Sebastian, along the Via Appia (the ancient Basilica Apostolorum), preserved the very first examples of epigraphs by Christians of Rome still in their original places: they are dated between the middle of 2nd

---

and the beginnings of 3rd century. Some of these epitaphs display texts closely associated with images in a manner that differs greatly from the rest of their contemporary epigraphic milieu.

The most ancient inscription in the complex is the epitaph that Μάρκος Ούλπιος Καλόκαιρος dedicates to his mother Σεμπρωνία Ἀγαθούς (Fig. 1,a). In the space below the text, where we cannot detect any Christian reference, a fish is sculpted as swimming through the sea waves. Regardless of the possible meanings of this image, the composition as a whole follows the classical tradition of separating text and image, although only in form; indeed, the presumable relation between the deceased and the image of the fish is not made clear at all.

In the same context, there are also other epitaphs – produced within the first years of 3rd century – displaying the image of the fish, but this time consistently associated with the representation of an anchor (Fig. 1b-c-d). In these inscriptions, the images are not set in a distinct place on the slabs, as was the case with the epitaph of Σεμπρωνία Ἀγαθούς: here the figures share with the text all the available space, constraining the written text to alternate its normative articulation. Evidently, here the images are considered a structural part of the epitaph, whose message is thus expressed by both the words and the figures. This particular feature also occurs among other early Christian funerary inscriptions in Rome: I here refer to the epitaph of Licinia Amias (Fig. 2a), with the unquestionable connection between the representations of two fishes on each side of an anchor and the unique – and somewhat odd – Greek expression Ἰχθὺς ζώντων; and to the two similar inscriptions of Iulia Calliste and Valeria Fotine (Fig. 2b-c), whose Latin texts seem to be in some way “completed” by the final combination of Greek letters and images, the precise meaning of which continues to elude

---

4 ICVR, V 12905 [EDB 4294]: Μ(άρκος) Οὐλπ(ίος) Καλόκαιρος Σεμπρωνίᾳ Ἐυσεβηστάτῃ ἐποίησεν ἕνεκε μνείας ((piscis in undis)).
5 Also considering the epitaph of Τολλία Ἀσκληπιακή, found nearby the Roman catacomb of Hermes, along the via Salaria vetus (ICVR, X 26971 [EDB 13438]), it is really hard to establish an immediate relation between the mentioned deceased woman and the largely prevailing image of the shepherd, bearing the sheep on his shoulders.
6 They are the epitaphs of the Augusti verna Atimetus (ICVR, V 12892 [EDB 781]); of Ancotia Auxesis (ICVR, V 12891 [EDB 780]) and of her mother Ἀγκωτία Ἰρήνη (ICVR, V 12900 [EDB 791]).
7 ICVR, II 4246 [EDB 8818]; now cfr. also Carletti, Carlo. ΙΧΘΥΣ ΖΩΝΤΩΝ. Chiose a ICVR, II 4246 – Vetera Christianorum, 1999, No. 36, 15-30.
modern scholars⁸. Another meaningful case in point is the single – and at first glance inexplicable – word ἰχθῦς roughly scratched on a wall in the lowest room in the mausoleum of the Innocentiores, in the same complex of St Sebastian (Fig. 3), in front of the epitaphs discussed above⁹. In this graffito, the image of a crux (in the shape

---

⁸ Respectively see EDB 41832 and EDB 9815.
⁹ ICVR, V 12889 [EDB 778]. Longenecker, Bruce W. The Cross before Constantine. Minneapolis,
of the letter *tau* is positioned *inside* the word itself, between the first two letters\(^{10}\). Other examples, from Asia Minor\(^{11}\), Greece\(^{12}\) – or from Roman Africa as in the *Hadrumetum* funerary mosaic panel found in the area of the so-called catacomb of *Hermes* (Fig. 4) – illustrate that a shared language, made by both words and images, was used in other 3rd century Christian communities outside of Rome\(^{13}\).

2015, 84-85 and footnotes 14-15 mentions there *two* graffiti with the word *ἰχθύς* but, actually, there is only one. It seems that Longenecker never saw the monument he mentions.

10 Similar to the discussed inscriptions of *Iulia Calliste* and *Varronia Fotine*, the graffito makes a direct reference to the passage of the *Epistle of Barnabas* 9, 8: λέγει γάρ· καὶ περιέτεμεν Ἀβραὰμ ἐκ τοῦ οἴκου αὐτοῦ ἄνδρας δεκαοκτὼ καὶ τριακοσίους. Τίς οὖν ἡ δοθεῖσα αὐτῷ γνῶσις; μάθετε, ὅτι τοὺς δεκαοκτὼ πρῶτος, καὶ διάσθημα ποιήσας λέγει τριακοσίους. Τὸ δεκαοκτὼ ἱωτὰ δέκα, ἦτα ὀκτώ· ἔχεις Ἰησοῦν. ὅτι δὲ ὁ σταυρὸς ἐν τῷ ταῦ ἤμελλεν ἔχειν τὴν χάριν, λέγει καὶ τοὺς τριακοσίους. Δηλοῖ οὖν τὸν μὲν Ἰησοῦν ἐν τοῖς δυσὶν γράμμασιν, καὶ διὰ τοῦ ἑνὶ τὸν σταυρόν. “For it (the Scripture) says: “Abraham circumcised eighteen and three hundred men of his household”. What knowledge, then, was given to him? Notice that first he mentions the eighteen and then, after a pause, the three hundred. The number eighteen consists of an iota (10), and an Eta (8). There you have Jesus (IHCOYC). And because the cross was about to have grace in the letter Tau [‘T’], he next gives the three hundred Tau. And so he shows the name Jesus by the first two letters, and the cross by the other” (English text from *The Apostolic Fathers*, II ed. and transl. by B. D. Ehrman [Loeb Classical Library, 25], Cambridge (USA) – London, 2005(2), 44-45). The *Epistle of Barnabas* is dated between the last thirty years of 1st century and the first thirty years of 2nd century AD.

11 MAMA VI, 224 from *Apamea* in Caria (Turkey).

12 See for example *Feissel*, Denis. Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de Macédoine du III\(\textsuperscript{e}\) au VI\(\textsuperscript{e}\) siècle. Paris, 1983, no. 80 (from *Nea Chalkedon*, near Thessaloniki); nos. 116, 118, 119 (from Thessaloniki).

The shared language of words and images is noted as a typical feature of Christian practices in the *Octavius* by Minucius Felix, written between the end of 2\(^{nd}\) century and the beginning of 3\(^{rd}\) century—the same period as our inscriptions. The text by Minucius explicitly states that the Christians “*occultis se notis et insignibus noscunt*” (“recognize each other by secret marks and insignia”)\(^1\). Among the *notae et insignia* recalled in the *Octavius*, we could identify not only figures as fishes, anchors, doves, shepherds (according to the well-known list given in the contemporary *Paedagogus* by St Clemens of Alexandria\(^2\)), but also combinations of words and single letters: obscure to

---

\(^1\) Min. Fel. *Octavius* 9, 2 (cfr. CSEL 2, 13).  
\(^2\) Clem. Alex. *Paed.* 3, 11, 59-60 (SC 158, 123; GCS p. 270): Αἱ δὲ σφραγίδες ἡμῖν ἔστων πελειάς ἢ ἰχθύς ἢ ναῦς συρόδεμους ἢ λύρα μουσική, ἢ κέχρηται Πολυκράτης, ἢ ἀγκυρά ναυτική, ἤν Σέλεοκος ενεχαράττετο τῇ γλυφῇ καὶ ἁλιεύων τις ἀποστόλου μεμνήστηκαί καὶ τῶν εἰς ὕδατος ανασπωμένων παιδίων. “And let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship scudding before the wind, or a musical lyre, which Polycrates used, or a ship’s anchor, which Seleucus got engraved as a device; and if there be one fishing, he will remember the apostle, and the children
a common audience. These notae et insignia – recurrent on Christian gems, even before Constantine – must have been clear signs to initiates of the same religious identity.

It is truly remarkable that the same terms notare and signum appear one century later in the De mortibus persecutorum by Lactantius, in a well-known passage about the caeleste signum appeared to Constantine in order to be displayed on the shields of his soldiers before the final battle with Maxentius. Although the “heavenly sign” actually consists of two letters, Lactantius’ passage does not refer to it as a word: consequently, it is not written on the shields, it is delineated as a mark in order to evoke not only the name of Christ, but also Christ himself (“Christum in scutis notat”: notare is not a synonym of scribere).

Later on, in the passages of Eusebius’ Vita Constantini about the mystical vision of the future emperor, the letters are mentioned not as making up words but as creating a sign. Rather than referring to writing as such, the words represent visual communication describing the inscription τούτῳ νίκα strictly connected (συνήφθαι) with the τρόπαιον that appeared to the emperor, in the sky, over the sunlight. Following his vision, Constantine commands that an im-

16 Lact. de mortibus persecutorum 44, 5: Commonitus est in quiete Constantinus, ut caeleste signum Dei notaret in scutis atque ita proelium committeret. Facit ut iussus est et transversa X littera <I>, summo capite circumflexo, Christum in scutis notat. Quo sigillo armatus exercitus capit ferrum. “Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the heavenly sign to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top, being the cipher of CHRIST. Having this sign, his troops stood to arms” (English text from Roberts, Alexander, Donaldson, James (eds.). The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325. Vol. 7. Buffalo (NY), 1905, 318. Here the annotations about this passage by the editor, J. Moreau, in Lactance, De la mort des persécuteurs, II [SC 39, 2, 433-436]: “Caeleste signum, employé seul, ne peut, en effet, signifier monogramma Dei [Altheim, Franz. Literatur und Gesellschaft im ausgehenden Altertum, I, Halle, 1948, 145, no. 13). Mais le verb notare a un sens très particulier: il signifie exprimer un mot, une idée, au moyen d’une abbreviation, en une ou deux lettres; notare signum, c’est signicare nota (cfr. Christum notat et SERV. Ad Aen. III, 44: la Sybilline fait connaître ses prophéties par des sigillum ce qui veut dire notas litterarum, ut per unam litteram significet aliquid… dans le cas qui nous occupe, signum est déterminé par Dei, et signum Dei notare signifie Deum nota significare, inscrire le nom de Dieu au moyen d’un signe, d’un monogramme”.

age (εἰκών) of the heavenly sign is made, consisting of the initials of the sacred name “Christ” and a cross-shape trophy (σταυροῦ τρόπαιον). It is remarkable that Eusebius here no longer mentions the words of inscription ‘τοῦτῳ νίκα’.

The “heavenly sign” appeared to Constantine was very probably the Chi/Rho monogram. It should be included among the ancient “secret marks and insignia”, because it has been attested among Christian artifacts (such as papyri, gems and some inscriptions) that predate the references by Lactantius and Eusebius. It appears used essentially as an abbreviation meaning the nomen sacrum of Jesus, the Christ, a compendium scripturae: we find it in some gems

---

18 Eus. Vita Const. I, 30: τοῦ σημείου τὴν εἰκόνα φράζει… “… Then he summoned goldsmiths and jewelers, sat down among them and explained the shape of the sign, and gave them instructions about copying it in gold and precious stones”. (English translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.). Eusebius. Life of Constantine. Oxford, 1999, 81).

19 Eus. Vita Const. I, 31: Ἦν δὲ τοιῷδε σχήματι κατεσκευασμένον. ὑψηλὸν δόρυ χρυσῷ κατημφιεσμένον κέρας εἶχεν ἐγκάρσιον σταυροῦ σχήματι πεποιημένον, ἄνω δὲ πρὸς ἄκρῳ τοῦ παντὸς στέφανος ἐκ λίθων πολυτελῶν κατεστήρικτο, καθ’ οὗ τῆς σωτηρίου ἐπηγορίας τὸ σύμβολον δύο στοιχεῖα τὸ Χριστοῦ παραδηλοῦν ὄνομα διὰ τῶν πρώτων υπεσήμαινον χαρακτήρων, χιαζομένου τοῦ ρῶ κατὰ τὸ μεσαίτατο. “It was constructed to the following design. A tall pole plated with gold had a transverse bar forming the shape of a cross. Up at the extreme top a wreath woven of precious stones and gold had been fastened. On it two letters, intimating by its first characters the name ‘Christ’, formed the monogram of the Saviour’s title, rho being intersected in the middle by chi” (English translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.). Eusebius. Life of Constantine, 81).

20 For example, see the epitaph of the bishop Aurelios Glykonides, found in Eumeneia in Phrygia (Isikli, Turkey): SEG 6, no. 201 [ICG 1049] and a ring, found in Brigetio (O-Szoeni, Hungary), now in Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (cfr. Spier, Jeffrey. Late antique and early Christian gems. Wiesbaden, 2007, no. 114).


22 The Chi/Rho monogram appear still used with this specific meaning in the graffiti scratched on the so-called “wall g” near the believed tomb of saint Peter under the basilica Vaticana (see their only edition until today: Guarducci, Margherita. I graffiti sotto la confessione di s. Pietro in Vaticano. Città del Vaticano, 1958). Because of their positioning, these graffiti are to be dated within 320–330: more or less contemporary to Lactantius and well before the Vita Constantini by Eusebius. One of them (Guarducci. I graffiti, No. 2) displays in Latin just the same words that
and inscriptions, as in some graffiti scratched on the so-called “wall g” near the believed tomb of St Peter, under the Vatican basilica in Rome (Fig. 5).

After its adoption as an “official sign” of the Roman imperial power, justified and protected by the God of the Christians\(^{23}\), the Chi/Rho monogram with its different variations – a former secret Christian mark – became the Sign par ex-

---

**Fig. 5.** Rome, Vatican necropolis. (a): some of the graffiti scratched on the so-called “wall g” (from Guarducci 1958); (b): gem (drawing from Spier 2007, no. 151: Perugia, Archaeological Museum – maybe lost)

---


23 The “Sign”, as φυλακτήριον, was placed “in the principal apartment of imperial palace itself”, according to the text of Eus. *Vita Constantini* III, 49: τοσοῦτος δὲ θεῖος ἔρως τὴν βασιλέως κατειλήφει ψυχήν, ὡς ἐν αὐτοῖς τοῖς ἀνακτόροις τῶν βασιλείων, κατὰ τὸν πάντων ἐξοχότατον ὄικον τῆς πρὸς τῷ ὀρθῷ κεχυρωμένης φατνίωσεις κατὰ τὸ μεσαίται τοῦ πάνικος ανθρωπομοιότατος μέσον ἐμπεπῆχθαι τὸ τοῦ σωτηρίου πάθους σύμβολον ἐκ ποικίλων συγκείμενον καὶ πολυτελῶν λίθων ἐν χρυσῷ πολλῷ κατειργασμένων. φυλακτήριον δὲ δοκεῖ τοῦτο αὐτῆς βασιλείας τῷ θεοφιλεῖ πεποιηθαί. “So great was the divine passion which had seized the Emperor’s soul that in the royal quarters of the imperial palace itself, on the most eminent building of all, at the very middle of the gilded coffer adjoining the roof, in the centre of a very large wide panel, had been fixed the emblem of the saving Passion made up of a variety of precious stones and set in much gold. This appears to have been made by the Godbeloved as a protection for hs Empire” (English translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.). Eusebius. Life of Constantine, 140).

About this notion of the Chi/Rho monogram, see also Eus. *Vita Constantini*, I, 29: ἔνθα δὴ ὑπνοῦντι τὸν Χριστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ σὺν τῷ φανέντι κατ’ οὐρανόν σημείῳ ὀφθῆναί τε καὶ παρακελεύσασθαι, μίμημα ποιητέον τοῦ θεοφιλεῖ τούτῳ σημείῳ πάντων τῶν πολεμίων συμβολαίς ἀλεξήματι χρῆσθαι (“Thereupon, as he slept, the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which had appeared in the sky, and urged him to make himself a copy of the sign which had appeared in the sky and to use this as protection against the attacks of the enemy”). English translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.), Eusebius. Life of Constantine, 1999, 82. Furthermore, see Eus. *Vita Constantini*, I, 31: τούτω μὲν οὖν τῷ σωτηρίῳ σημείῳ πάσης αντικειμένης καὶ πολεμίως δυνάμεως αμυντήριῳ διὰ παντὸς ἐξοχοῦ βασιλείας, τῶν τε στρατοπεδῶν ἀπαντῶν ἠγειρεῖ τα τούτου ὀραματὰ προσέτατεν (“This saving sign was always used by the Emperor for protection against very opposing and hostile force, and he commanded replicas of it to lead all his armies”). English translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.). Eusebius. Life of Constantine, 82. For other significant passages making reference to the notion of the “Sign”, see Eus. *Vita Constantini*, II, 7; II, 9; II, 16,2.
Fig. 6. (a): Rome, catacomb of Apronianus. Now in Rome, church of St Sabina (4th cent.): ICVR, VI 15602 [EDB 5390]. (b): Cherchel (Algeria). Now in Algeri, Archaeological Museum (4th cent.): CIL, VIII 9591

Fig. 7. (a): Rome, catacomb of St Pancratius: ICVR, II 4298 [EDB 16938]; (b): Aquileia, Museum: CIL, V 8580; (c): Tebessa (Algeria): CIL, VIII 9591; (d): Madrid (Spain), Museo Arqueologico; (e): Trier (Germany), Rheinisches Landesmuseum
cellence, signifying both the Deity and the Empire. From the first decades of 4th century onwards, it ceased to be read as a monogram indicating a sacred word – the name of Christ – but instead it represented an ideogram, immediately recognisable in spite of its complex meaning. The earlier Christian in-group language, from the Constantinian age onwards, was transformed into a publicly legitimised code.

Indeed, in these same decades, the synergy between writing and visual languages found other examples, from the very sophisticated “lettered art” by Optatianus (continued in the long series of the Early Medieval carmina figurata, starting from Venantius Fortunatus) to the common type of Christian funerary inscriptions (Fig. 6). The joining of images and figures with words or their embedding within texts strongly increase in the course of the 4th century, no longer in order to hide, but with the aim of clearly displaying both the religious and social identities of the deceased.

Around twenty years ago, Armando Petrucci, an Italian historian of writing culture, identified the insertion of images, figures and symbols within the space usually reserved only for writing as a feature peculiar to Early Christian inscriptions. According to the data stored in the Epigraphic Database Bari, one quarter of ca 40,000 inscriptions from Christian catacombs in Rome display images or generic non-alphabetical signs. From this evidence, we cannot deduce that using images in inscriptions was a typical and characteristic feature of all Early Christian epigraphs, as suggested by Petrucci, but the fact remains that such an occurrence was very widespread: in Rome (Fig. 7a), Italy (Fig. 7b), Roman Africa (Fig. 7c), and also elsewhere in the West (France, Spain, Germany: Fig. 7d-e).

Images are placed next to the text, at its beginning or its end, but

---

24 The celebratory inscription in the figural mosaic on the floor of the Basilica of St Maria, mentioning the bishop of Aquileia Theodorus (who attended the Council of Arles in 314), is one of the first examples of the use of the Christogram in public spaces. The monogram – used absolutely, not as a compendium scripturae – placed in a prominent position as the incipit of the epigraph, dates to the time around 320. About the use of the Chi/Rho monogram on imperial coins, see Carletti, Carlo. Il “monogramma” di Costantino, 240-254.

also *inside* the text, breaking the well-ordered and established ancien
t pattern: these hybrids force their viewer to change dynami
cally their reading strategies, switching between the written and
the visual code of communication. The *bulla* of the empress Maria,
Stilicho’s daughter and the first wife of the emperor Honorius (she
dead in 408), is a clear example of an established synergy between
written and visual codes (Fig. 8). The visible composite monogram
(made up of an alphabetical Christogram and a figured Stauro-

---

26 “One of the elements of great significance in the graphic texture of the earliest paleo-Christian
epigraphy is the insertion by the stone carver of figurative symbols within and in connection with
the text sometimes to break it up and sometimes to give it visual rhythm, as it were. (...) These
symbols sometimes stand as marginal comment on, or conclusion to, the text, and are sometimes
internal to it, with the result that they break the *consecutio*, split it into different and contrasting
portions, and give it spatial and formal movement. The outcome is a new and extremely lively
complex of signs, no longer arranged in a linear schema, one line above the next, but centering on
groups of letters and signs linked in a variety of ways and laid out in deliberately chaotic fashion
within a space no longer firmly bounded by a cornice, as in the traditional formal model, but left
free, and hence freely occupied. (...) The phenomenon was certainly widespread and uniform
throughout the western provinces... What strikes one as the real novelty here is the intrusion
into the writing space of an iconographic element made up of densely packed and highly mean-
ingful religious symbols. They helped constitute a wholly religious and self-referential funerary
epigraphy, the purpose of which was to give voice to the chorus of the living and the dead, of
the witnesses (the martyrs) and the *fratres*, of God and man”. English text reprised from: *Petrucci,
Armando. Writing the Dead: Death and Writing Strategies in the Western Tradition* (translation
gram), is made up of engraved letters spelling out the names of the Empress’s family members, who were at the same time the intended readerships of the text written within the gem.

The shared space between words and images can be also explained by spatial reasons: for example, the funerary slabs covering the loculi in the catacombs (Fig. 9a) have only their obverse side to display both the written and the visual memorials of the deceased (not only their portraits, but also other images, for example related to their occupation or age); on portable objects (Fig. 9b), the amalgamation of words and images can be caused by their own small dimensions.

These reasons do not apply to monumental inscriptions in public.

Fig. 9. (a): Rome, catacomb of Domitilla. Epitaph of Creste (4th century): ICVR, III 6618 [EDB 22533]; (b): Goldglass from Rome catacombs. Rome, Vatican Library (4th century)
spaces: there, the blending of words and images is, naturally, slower and more gradual, although the theory of such a habit can be found elucidated in the works of some Church Fathers. The *incipit* of the very first known official Christian inscription in Rome, the now-lost dedicatory epigraph from the Vatican basilica, *quod duce te mundus surrexit ad astra*, completely omits the essential data about the identity of the said *dux*28: evidently, the text was intended as a complement to the image, with which it also shared space and context. A further, now lost, commemorative inscription in the *Basilica Vaticana* is fully understood only by considering the accompanying images: the ambiguous phrase “father and son” could be made clear only in conjunction with the portraits of Constantine – the founder of the building – and his son Constantius – the patron, who completed the building work29.

The direct link between words and images finds a clear and explicit definition in the first decades of the 5th century, inside the sanctuary for the martyr Felix in Nola (Southern Italy), by the patron of the Martyrium, the bishop Paulinus: according to his own words, both letters and images are explicitly considered as elements of only one language30: the figural representations are in the service of “explain-

---

27 Basil. Caes., *Hom. 19* in quadraginta martyres Sebastenses, 2 [PG 31, coll. 508D-509A]: Ἐπεὶ καὶ πολέμων ἄνδραγαθῆματα καὶ λογογράποι πολλάκις, καὶ ζωγράφοι διασημαίνουσιν, οἱ μὲν τῷ λόγῳ διακοσμοῦντες, οἱ δὲ τοῖς πίναξιν εγχαράττοντες, καὶ πολλοὺς ἐπήγειραν πρὸς ἀνδρίαν ἑκάτεροι. Α γὰρ ὁ λόγος τῆς ἱστορίας διὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς παρίστησι, ταῦτα γραφικὴ σιωπῶσα διὰ μιμήσεως δείκνυσιν. “When often both historians and painters express mainly deeds of war, the one embellishing them onto tablets, they both arouse many too to bravery. The facts which the historical account presents by being listened to, the painting silently portrays by imitation” (English text from Leemans, Johan; Mayer, Wendy; Allen, Pauline and Dehandschutter, Boudewijn. ‘Let us die that we may live’. Greek homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. AD 350 – AD 450), London – New York, 2003, 68). Cf. also Greg. Nyss. *De Sancto Theodoro* [PG 46, 737D]; Nyl. Sinaiit., Ep. IV, 61 [PG 79, 557D].

28 ICVR, II 4092 [EDB 17047]: Quod duce te mundus surrexit in astra triumphans / hanc Constantinus victor tibi condidit aulam. (“Because with you as leader, the world triumphant arose to the stars / victorious Constantine dedicated this hall to you”): English translation by Dale Kinney, reprised from http://www.learn.columbia.edu/ma/htm/kd/ma_kd_discuss_osp_inscript.htm). Indeed, we can only speculate about the identity of the *dux* and about the correct interpretation of the term *mundus*, which can be understood as either a noun (as in the translation by Kinney) or an adjective describing Constantine himself (I agree with the latter interpretation).

29 ICVR, II 4094 [EDB 14382]: Iustitiae sedes, fidei donum, aula pudoris. / Haec est quam cernis pietas quam possidet omnis / quae patris et filii virtutibus incluta gaudet / auctoreque suum genitoris laudibus aequat. (“Seat of justice, house of faith, hall of modesty / this what you see, which all pieti posses / which rejoices, renowned, in the virtues of the father and the son / and equals its author in the praises of his parent”): English translation by Dale Kinney, reprised from http://www.learn.columbia.edu/ma/htm/kd/ma_kd_discuss_osp_inscript.htm).

ing the writing” for the illiterate audience of the pilgrims: the faithful, according to the bishop’s recommendations, can understand the Holy by considering both the figured images and the written words

Only some years later, the pope Sixtus III (432–440) marked the dedication of his great basilica to the Virgin on the Exquiline Hill in Rome by two very different mosaic inscriptions. The first one – now lost – was placed on the inner wall of the church façade. It was a long metrical text about the dogma of the Theotokos, just stated by the Council in Ephesus in 431. The other epigraph is very short and simple: it is still today in its original place, in the middle of the former apsidal arch of the church. Despite its prominent position, the tabula ansata bearing the dedication of the pope to the plebs Dei (Fig. 10) is actually ‘drowned’ in a deep sea of images that completely enclose the written words. In the contemporary mosaic decoration of the baptistery of Albenga in Northern Italy (Fig. 11), the inscriptions, although positioned in front of the triumphal arch, appear eclipsed by the three-times reverberated, large and impres-
Fig. 10. Rome, basilica of S. Maria Maggiore, absidal arch. Inscription by pope Sixtus III (431–440): ILCV 975a

Fig. 11. Albenga (Liguria, Northern Italy), baptistery (5th century): ICI, IX, 40

Fig. 12. Kélibia (Tunisia). Now in Tunis, Bardo Museum (5th century): EDCS13500222
sive Christogram with alpha and omega placed on the vault of the building\(^{34}\).

This growing hybridization between words and images achieved by means of shared space, is vividly exemplified by a baptismal font from Kelibia, now displayed in the Bardo Museum in Tunis (Fig. 12), also datable to the 5\(^{th}\) century\(^{35}\), on which we see no distinction between written and figured space. Writing has become part of the image, and images do not consist only of figures, but also of letters and words – as we can see also in the use of different colors in the letters: they are all considered, unequivocally, signs (according to the proper meaning of the Greek term \(\gamma\rho\alpha\phi\eta\)).

The notion of the significance of words and images is well expressed by the meaningful change of the relic associated with Jesus preserved in the city of Edessa. The famous letter written by Jesus himself to the king Abgar, mentioned by both Eusebius and Ethe-ria\(^{36}\), in 5\(^{th}\) century Syriac \textit{Doctrina Addai} is substituted by an image: a painted portrait of Christ\(^{37}\). From the second half of 6\(^{th}\) century, according to Evagrius of Epiphania (Scholasticus), this man-made image of Christ was replaced by the so-called “Acheiropoietos”, the Holy Face miraculously imprinted on a cloth by the Lord Himself, as was later confirmed by the words of John of Damascus\(^{38}\): this was

\(^{34}\) See ICI, IX, no. 40.

\(^{35}\) See EDCS 13500222, with previous editions.

\(^{36}\) A Greek translation of the Syriac text of the Jesus’ letter is reported by Eusebius (Hist. Eccl. I, 13, part. 5-10); the epistula Domini is referred to as a powerful relic by Egeria in her report of her visit to Edessa on 19-21 April 384 (Ether., Peregr. 19, 8-19 [SC 296, Paris 1982, 206-213]).


\(^{38}\) Evagr. Schol. Hist. Eccl. IV, 27 (in PG 86, 2748C8-2749A2): Ως δ’ οὖν ἐς πᾶσαις ἀμηχανίαις ἡλθον, φέρουσι τὴν θεότευκτον εἰκόνα τὴν ἀνθρώπων μὲν χεῖρες οὐκ εἰργάσαντο, Αὐγαβὼν δὲ ἥρως ὁ θεός, ἐπεὶ αὐτὸν ἰδεῖν ἐπόθει, πέπομφε. Ταῦτα τοῖνοι τὴν παναγίαν εἰκόνα κατὰ τὴν εἰργασμένην (10) σφίσιν ἐσαγαγόντες διώρυγα ὑδάτι τε ἐπικλύσαντες. “They brought the divinely created image, which human hands had not made, the one that Christ the God sent to Abgar when he yearned to see Him”. Cfr. also John of Damascus, \textit{Expositio fidei}, 89 (= de fide orthodoxa, IV, 16 [see \textit{Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskus}, II, besorgt von P. Bonifatius Kotter OSB [Patristische Texte und Studien 12], Berlin, 1973, 206-208, part. 208, ll. 50-56]: Φέρεται
the well-known “Mandylion”, the relic which remained in Edessa until its transfer in Constantinople in 944.\footnote{According to the Narratio de imagine Edessena by Constantinus Porphyrogenitus (see PG 113, 423-454). The relic of the Holy Face is ignored by Egeria in her account of her visit in Edessa in 384. Evagrius of Epiphania (536–594) in his Hist. Eccl. IV, 27, provides the first mention of the Mandylion: Procopius (490–565), writing about the king Abgar of Edessa, makes note only of Jesus’ letter: cfr. Procop. De belis, II (de bello Persico), 12, 24-27. Maybe an earlier reference to the miraculous Image of the Face of Christ is the “Hymn on the Great Church of Urha”: see Du-}
But let us go back to Rome. In the first third of the 6th century, a commemorative metrical inscription was placed by the pope Felix IV (526–530) in the apse of the church dedicated to the Byzantine saints Cosmas and Damian40. The epigraph is constituted as an essential part of the communicative streaming that uses both images and words, still occupying separate space following conventions of classical epigraphy (Fig. 13). But, because of its placement along the curve of the apse, the inscription is actually readable only by a very limited audience that can view it in close proximity: that is, only by members of the clergy. The common faithful could perceive from afar the entire decoration, where the celebratory inscription works only as a kind of “written frieze”.

In the same decades, in Byzantine Ravenna, publically displayed writing was also used in churches, but essentially inside the images, mainly in order to identify some of the represented people (Fig. 14a-b): the donors – for example, in St Vitale, the bishops Ecclesius and Maximianus (546–556) – or single saints in the long sequences displayed along the aisles (as in St Apollinare Nuovo). But, in the apse mosaic of St Apollinare in Classe (Fig. 15a-b), the captions of the prophets Moses and Elijah, just as the two epigraphs (one in Greek, other in Latin) structurally related to the central Cross (the ancient ἰχθύς and the new salus mundi), are actually very hard to see and read. The only clearly legible inscription is the caption identifying the venerated martyr: sanctus Apolenaris.

A century later, Rome we can observe the same phenomenon in the apse of the basilica built over the tomb of the martyr Agnes by pope


40 ILCV 1784: aula Dei claris radiat speciosa metallis / in qua plus fidei lux pretiosa micat. / martyribus medicis populo spes certa salutis / venit et ex sacro crevit honore locus. Optulit hoc Domino Felix antistite dignum / munus, ut aetheria vivat in arce poli. “With bright metals, the splendid hall of God shines, in which the precious light of faith flashes even more radiant. From the martyr-physicians’ unshakable hope of being healed to the people, and the place has grown by virtue of [its] sacred honor. Felix has offered to the Lord this gift, worthy of a bishop, that he may live in the highest heights of heaven” (English translation reprised from Thunø, Erik. Inscriptions on Light and Splendor from Saint-Denis to Rome and Back. – Acta ad Archaologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia, 2011, No. 24 (n.s.10), 139-159.
Fig. 14. Ravenna (Italy). (a): S. Vitale, apse. Mosaic panel with Justinian and the bishop Maximianus (546–556); (b): S. Apollinare Nuovo. Series of saints along the central aisle, detail (493–526)
Fig. 15. Ravenna (Italy). (a): S. Apollinare in Classe, apse (536–549); (b): detail of the central Cross with the inscriptions ΙΧΘΥΣ and Salus mundi
Honorius in the first half of 7th century (625–638). With its curved dedicatory/honorary inscription\(^{41}\) (Fig. 16) as an essential part of the decoration of the apse, the church seems to recall the 6th century basilica of the Sts Cosmas and Damian; but here the epigraph is hard to read also by the clergy in the presbytery, because it is too high, its text is 12 verses long, and its letters too small to be easily deciphered. As in the Byzantine church of St Apollinare in Classe, the only inscription immediately visible and readable in the decorative schema of the apse is the one positioned over the central image of the martyr: the caption s(an)c(t)a Agnes.

According to our common notion of writing as a tool to preserve and to transmit information, these epigraphs are not necessary at all: everyone could understand that the central figure in the apse was the martyr commemorated in the church. In contrast, in the Roman church of St Agnes the two represented donors – the popes Symmachus and Honorius – are not identified by any caption.

What is, then, the real raison d’être of these seemingly redundant inscriptions? Evidently these “unnecessary inscriptions” are not inscribed in order to identify the saints, rather, they serve as an essential part of their formal visual representation\(^{42}\). Here, the words have, because they have been written, an authoritative role\(^{43}\) and the

---

\(^{41}\) ICVR, VIII 20757 [EDB 9577]: \(\text{auræa concisis surgit pictura metallis / et complexa simul clauditur ipsa dies / fontibus e niveis credas aurora subire / correptas nubes roribus arva rigans} / \) vel qualem inter sidera lucem proferet irim / purpureusque pavo ipse colore nitens / qui potuit noctis vel lucis reddere finem / martyrum e bustis hinc reppulit ille chaos / / sursum versa nutu quod cunctis cernitur uno / praesul Honorius haec vota dicata dedit / vestibus et factis signantur illius ora / lucet et aspectu lucida corda gerens. “A golden picture arises from specks of metal and daylight itself, shut out [from here], embracing it in it enclosed. Dawn, you could believe, mounts over the gathered clouds as though from snowy fountainheads wetting the fields with dew. Or [you could believe] the sort of light that rainbow will produce among the stars and a purple peacock himself gleaming with color. He who was able to set the boundary of night or light has here beaten chaos back from the tombs of martyrs. Any who once casts an eye overhead sees these votive offerings the bishop Honorius has given. By his garments and offering, his works are signified, as also bearing light [inwardly] in his heart of hearts he shines [outwardly] to the beholder’s eye” (English translation taken from: Thunø, Erik. The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome. Time, Network and Repetition. Cambridge (USA), 2015, 25).


\(^{43}\) It is interesting that this notion of the captions of the saints’ images was not officially sanctioned in the East before the 8th century: “L’idée que l’image religieuse était sanctifié par le nom du prototype se propagea à partir du VIIIe siècle”: see Sansterre, Jean-Marie. La parole, le texte et l’image selon les auteurs byzantins des époques iconoclaste et posticonoclastes. In: Testo e immagine nell’Alto Medioevo. XLI Settimana di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo (Spoleto, 15 – 21 aprile 1993), Spoleto, 1994, 197-243 (quotation from page 201). The second
images are considered as texts, according to a common notion of *scriptura* and *figura* shared in both the West⁴⁴ and the East⁴⁵.

council of Nicaea in 787 rules that the written name of the saint with its own epithet ἅγιος makes unnecessary the prayer for the consecration of the image of the saint itself [see Mansi, XIII, 269E].


⁴⁵ Particularly significant the texts by John of Damascus: cfr. *Die Schriften des Johannis von Damaskus*, III. *Contra imaginum calumniatores orationes tres*, besorgt von. P. Bonifatius Kotter OSB [Patristische Texte und Studien 17], Berlin – New York 1975, 83 (I, 8); 86 (I, 13); 99, II. 57-60 (II, 10= III, 9a); 130 (III, 23); 159, II. 70-74 (I, 56= II, 52).

This chronological overview of early Christian inscriptions and of epigraphs, conceived as structural elements of the rich visual programmes in the early Byzantine churches, allows us to conclude that Christians adopted written and visual codes from the very beginning, using a complex but consistent language of signs created from letters, figures and symbols.

Since the period of Early Christianity, words as images, and images as words, were used together not only in order to describe, to define, and to indicate, as in the classical epigraphic habit. They acquired another aim: to evoke the Ineffable.
Epigraphic databases, corpora and editions

EDCS: Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss – Slaby [http://www.manfredclauss.de]
ICI: Inscriptiones Christianae Italiae, Bari, 1985-
SEG: Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum, Leiden – Amsterdam, 1923-

Primary sources

CSEL: Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum. Vindobonae – Lipsiae, 1866-
GCS: Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller. Leipzig – Berlin 1897-
SC: Sources Chrétienes, Paris – Lyon, 1942-
CChrSL: Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina, Turnhout, 1953-
Mansi: Mansi, J. D. Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio. Florentiae – Venetiis, 1757–1798 (1); Paris, 1899-1927 (2); Graz, 1960 (3).


Bibliography


Squire, Michael. Optatian and his lettered art. A kaleidoscopic lens on Late Antiquity. In: Michael Squire and Johannes Wienand (eds.). Morphogrammata / The lettered art of Opta-
tian. Figuring Cultural Transformations in the age of Con-

Tepper, Yotam, Di Segni, Leah. A Christian Prayer Hall of the
Third Century CE at Kefar ‘Othnay (Legio): excavations at the
Слова и образи
в раннохристиянските надписи
(III–VII век)

Антонио Е. Феле

От епохата на класическата гръцка древност до зенита на Римската империя през II в. сл. Хр. изписаните букви заедно със скулптирани или нарисувани образи играят съвкупно хармонично свързана роля, но обикновено в отчетливо обособени пространства. Някои от най-ранните християнски епитафи обаче представят текстове, ясно свързани с образи по начин, който се различава от настоящия, обичаен, епиграфски подход, като същевременно стават отражение на посоките, засвидетелствани в съвременната им християнска книжнина: напр. произведенията на св. Климент Александрийски, Минуций Феликс Октавий, но и по-късните текстовете на Лактанций и Евсевий, където писаното слово и образите се възприемат като две различни лица на един и същи език.

Често изображенията се поставят край текста, в неговото начало или край, но пък и вътре в него, нарушавайки добре установения древен комуникационен поток: подобни хибридни форми заставят зрителя да променя динамично ролите си, редувайки разчитането на буквени и визуални кодове на комуникация.

След император Константин и най-вече след Теодосий в монументалните християнски надписи по църкви и на публични места се наблюдава конкуриране между слова и образи, както се отбелязва от някои църковни отци, в целия orbis christianus antiquus. Представата за стойностната идентичност на словото и образа е добре формулирана от съдържателната подмяна на своеобразните Христови реликви в гр. Едеса – от буква, изписана от Исус, до самия му рисуван портрет, който впоследствие става „неръкотворен“ образ на Христовото лице, или т.нар. Убрус (Мандилион).

Епитафите, които все повече структурно се свързват с образите, стават трудни за гледане и разчитане, защото с времето надпи-
сите стават украса, а изображенията започват „да говорят“ на вярващите.

Веднъж написани, думите имат авторитетна/водеща роля, до-като изображенията постепенно започват да се възприемат като текстове според разпространените представи за *scriptura* и *figura*, съществуващи и на Изток, и на Запад.
List of Contributors

Andreas Rhoby, Ph.D, Associate Professor, University of Vienna (Austria)
adreas.rhoby@oeaw.ac.at

Andromachi Katselaki, Ph.D, Ministry of Culture and Sports (Greece)
archanes1315@yahoo.gr

Angeliki Katsioti, Ph.D, Ephorate of Antiquities of the Dodecanese, Head of the Department of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Sites, Monuments, Research and Museums (Greece)
gelikatsioti@gmail.com

Antonio Enrico Felle, Ph.D, Professor, University “Aldo Moro”, Bari (Italy)
ae.felle@gmail.com

Aleksandra Kučeković, Ph.D, Associate Professor, University of Arts, Belgrade (Serbia)
akucekovic@gmail.com

Anna Adashinskaya, Ph.D Student, Department of Medieval Studies of Central European University in Budapest (Hungary)
adashik@gmail.com

Antonis Tsakalos, Ph.D, Curator, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens (Greece)
antonistsakalos@gmail.com

Constantin I. Ciobanu, Dsc., Institute of Art History “G. Oprescu”, Bucharest (Romania)
costin_ciobanu@yahoo.com

Dimitrios Liakos, Ph.D, Ephorate of Antiquities of Chalkidiki and Mt. Athos, Ministry of Culture and Sports (Greece)
liakos712003@yahoo.gr

Dragoș Gh. Năstăsoiu, Ph.D Student, Medieval Studies at the Central European University in Budapest (Hungary)
dragos_nastasoiu@yahoo.com
Elka Bakalova, Corresponding Member of the BAS, Institute of Art Studies, Sofia (Bulgaria) elkabakalova@gmail.com

Elissaveta Moussakova, Ph.D, Professor, Institute of Art Studies, Sofia (Bulgaria) emoussakova@gmail.com

Emmanuel Moutafov, Ph.D, Associate Professor, Institute of Art Studies, Sofia (Bulgaria) moutafov1@gmail.com

Ida Toth, Ph.D, Senior Lecturer, Oxford University (United Kingdom) ida.toth@history.ox.ac.uk

Jelena Erdeljan, Ph.D, Associate Professor, University of Belgrade (Serbia) jerdelja@f.bg.ac.rs

Maria Kolousheva, Ph.D, Assistant Professor, Institute of Art Studies, Sofia (Bulgaria) m.kolousheva@gmail.com

Melina Paissidou, Ph.D, Associate Professor, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece), mpaisidou@hist.auth.gr

Tsvetan Vasilev, Ph.D, Assistant Professor, Sofia University (Bulgaria) cvetanv@gmail.com

Valentina Cantone, Ph.D, Adjunct Professor, University of Padua, Department of Cultural Heritage (Italy) valentina.cantone@unipd.it

Vladimir Dimitrov, Ph.D, Assistant Professor, New Bulgarian University, Sofia (Bulgaria) vladimirdim@gmail.com

Vincent Debiais, Ph.D, full researcher, Centre national de la recherche scientifique (France), Centre d'études supérieures de civilisation médiévale, University of Poitiers (France) vincent.debiais@univ-poitiers.fr