

Manifestations of Authorship Artists' signatures in Byzantium

Maria Lidova
(Wolfson College, Oxford; The British Museum, UK)

Abstract This paper is dedicated to the problem of artists' signatures in Byzantium and, more specifically, to the question of anonymity, which is often considered to be a basic characteristic of Eastern Christian art. Declaration of authorship is traditionally seen as a sign of sinful vanity, antagonistic to the religious spirit of the Middle Ages. However, work on this material reveals numerous traces of authorship left by Byzantine artists on their work in the form of epigraphical records. Through a selection of the most insightful examples, based primarily on mosaics, murals and icon painting, this paper demonstrates that the tradition of creating inscriptions bearing the names of masters was a phenomenon neither limited to a particular chronological period of Byzantine history nor influenced by specific historical or cultural transformations. On the contrary, it represents a continuous tradition developing from the period of late antiquity right up to the end of the Middle Ages. The range of surviving evidence, the variability of linguistic forms and paleographic aspects, as well as the array of creative approaches taken to the placement of signatures and dedicatory inscriptions, help to reveal a concern for the preservation of memories of individual involvement within the world of the Medieval Christian masters. Whilst not always in line with a contemporary understanding of the role of artists' signatures, these testimonies nevertheless call for a reevaluation of the question of complete anonymity and the personality of the artist in Byzantine art.

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Keywords Authorship. Byzantine artist. Signature. Byzantine epigraphy. Artists' names. Anonymity.

1 The Problem of Anonymity in Byzantine art

A common perception of Byzantine art often settles on the idea that one of its basic features is the anonymity of the artists. The profound religiosity of the Eastern Christian culture with its presupposed canonical restrictions and adherence to tradition and visual conformism has led to the general belief that the Byzantine culture was too backward in comparison with the Western Middle Ages and Renaissance to allow the figure of an artist with a conscious mental outlook to emerge.¹ Popular definitions, such as the one in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, exemplify the standard viewpoint on this subject:

Byzantine art is almost entirely concerned with religious expression and, more specifically, with

the **impersonal** translation of carefully controlled church theology into artistic terms. Its forms of architecture and painting grew out of these concerns and remained uniform and **anonymous**, perfected within a rigid tradition rather than varied according to personal whim.²

This is echoed by scholars writing on Eastern Christian and Medieval Russian art and producing general theoretical works. For example, in an influential study by Leonid Ouspensky on *The Theology of the Icon* we find the following statement: "The artist had to purify his art of all individual elements; he remained anonymous (the works were never signed) and his first concern was to pass on tradition" (1992). These views are partially inspired by the centuries-long theological tradition, which ever since the iconoclastic disputes in the 8th and 9th centuries promot-

1 In memory of Prof. Maria Monica Donato who introduced me to the world of medieval signatures and was a great source of inspiration, both as an academic and as a person.

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On signatures and artists in Western art: Barral i Altet 1986-90; Donato 2000; Castelnuovo 2004; Castiñeiras 2017 (all with further bibliography).

2 The bold is mine. s.v. "Byzantine art", *Encyclopedia Britannica* [online] URL <https://www.britannica.com/art/Byzantine-art>.

ed the concept of a true religious image being created mainly through divine not human intervention. Particularly relevant in this respect are the works by John of Damascus (675/6-749) who produced a theological substantiation of the complex interrelationship of art with the divine in a situation involving the destruction of images and ardent iconoclastic disputes (2003). It is appropriate to cite his judgment on the question of the ownership and affiliation of an artwork decorated with a figurative image: "As the coin bears the likeness of Caesar, it is his, and you should give it to Caesar. So the image bears the likeness of Christ, and you should give it to Him, for it is His". Based on these theological texts and later historiography, it became common knowledge that there was no room for the manifestation of the artistic personality in Byzantine culture. Furthermore, this assumption was strengthened by a conviction that recognition of one's authorship was a sign of sinful vanity, essentially antagonistic to the Eastern Christian tradition.

A closer analysis of the extant artistic heritage, however, reveals ample testimony of the names of Byzantine masters engaged in every sphere of the arts from architecture, painting and sculpture to illuminated manuscripts, jewelry and luxury items.³ The *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* provides a good selection of names of artists who are known to have been active in Byzantium, even though the relevant entry does not claim to be comprehensive and its range of craftsmen and architects merely covers the tip of the iceberg (Kazhdan 1991, 1: 196-201). The evidence of artists' involvement in various projects has come down to us both in historic sources and in artists' signatures, i.e. in epigraphy, which represents the best possible expression of one's sense of authorship. Cyril Mango placed signatures at the end of his tentative classification of Byzantine epigraphy, and this kind of written

evidence still awaits proper systematization and comprehensive research of all known variations and the contextual framework (711-13).

In the meantime, fragmentary and inconsistent work on this material has resulted in general assumptions and claims that seem logical at first but do not adequately reflect the richness of the tradition. Although acknowledging the existence of certain artists' names, in specialized studies the phenomenon of signatures is predominantly associated with the gradual transformation and even evolution of Byzantine society. Scholars often argue that Byzantium only started to pay attention to the identity of artists and broke with the essential anonymity in art at a later stage of its development, above all in the Palaeologan period. For example, Charles Diehl remarks in his *Main problems of Byzantine History* that only at the time of the major transformation of the 14th and 15th centuries did the mentions of artists' names appear, superseding the anonymity (*au lieu de l'anonymat*) of the previous centuries.⁴ On the contrary, Cyril Mango associated the promulgation of artists' personalities and the rising spread of signatures with the middle or second half of the 12th century: "It is also in this period that the personality of the individual artist begins to emerge somewhat from its previous anonymity. Artists' names are recorded in inscriptions, e.g. those of Ephraem and Basil in the church of Nativity at Bethlehem (1169) or that of Theodore Apeudes in the humble cell of St. Neophytos in Cyprus (1183). The painter Eulalios was highly esteemed at the court of Constantinople and took the unprecedented liberty of including his own portrait in a New Testament scene".⁵

In contradiction with these views, systematic work on artists' signatures has revealed that the tradition of executing inscriptions bearing the names of masters was a phenomenon not limited to a particular chronological period or influenced

3 For some general thoughts on Byzantine artists, see papers in: Barral i Altet 1986-90, 1: 151-72; 2: 79-97; Bacci 2007; Kalopissi-Verti 1994a; 1994b.

4 "Enfin le XIVe et le XVe siècles montrent l'art byzantine sous un aspect presque nouveau où il semble comme transformé. [...] des écoles distinctes s'y rencontrent pour la première fois peut-être dans l'art byzantine, et, au lieu de l'anonymat qui est la règle dans les ouvrages des siècles précédents, des noms de peintres sont mentionnés, dont quelques-uns restés illustres". Diehl 1943, 153-4. See also in almost in exactly the same terms: Djurić 1971, 233 and many others.

5 Mango 1972, 183. On another occasion, he remarks in relation to the appearance of 'signatures': "none before the 11th century and rarely thereafter", Kazhdan 1991, 1: 713. On intriguing case of Ephraem's and Basil's signatures in the church of Nativity at Bethlehem: Kühnel 1984; Cutler 1986-7; Folda 1995, 347-57. On Theodore Apeudes and his decoration of the hermitage of St Neophytos near Paphos on Cyprus: Mango; Hawkins 1966. On Eulalios and other Byzantine artists known to have been active in the period from the 12th to 14th century, see the chapter by Ivan Drpić in Spingou (forthcoming).

by specific historical or cultural transformations in Byzantium.⁶ On the contrary, it represents a continuous tradition developing from the period of late antiquity right up to the end of the Middle Ages. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate this continuity through a selection of the most revealing examples, based primarily on mosaics, frescoes and icon painting, and argue that the phenomenon of artists' 'signatures' was intrinsic to the Byzantine visual culture even though its appearance was at times regularized and conditioned by a number of cultural peculiarities and the specificities of the commission.

2 Signatures of Artists in Late Antiquity

Numerous manifestations of authorship in the form of signatures left by artists and mosaicists' workshops can be seen in the churches of the Early Byzantine period (4th-8th c.) (for an overview: Darmon, Balmelle 1986). The largest group of artists' names came down in the form of epigraphical evidence surviving on the surface of Eastern mosaic floors.⁷ The exact number of these testimonies has still to be determined. Among the existing statistics based on the overall legacy of ancient floor mosaic decorations, encompassing both non-Christian and Christian monuments, more than 100 cases of artists' signatures have been recorded, but this number may be significantly greater if all regions of the late antique Roman empire are considered holistically and the analysed inscriptions are not limited just to one particular language group.⁸ Most of the surviving evidence comes from the Eastern part of the empire where the monuments of this period are better preserved. On the one hand, the initial recorded number of artists' names is relatively small and these testimonies might seem scarce and insignificant

in relation to the large and variegated tradition of the ancient floor mosaic production, usually free of declarations of authorship. On the other hand, such epigraphic evidence cannot be treated merely as occasional and consisting of exclusively singular attestations purely irrelevant to the general tradition and problem of authorship, since it clearly represents a well-acknowledged and developed practice.

In some cases, the names of artists are mentioned in the dedicatory inscriptions together with the names of the donors who paid for or enabled the decoration and/or construction of the church building. Several significant examples are found in Madaba, possibly indicating a common practice of late antique workshops operating in the region in the sixth century. The centre of the floor in the Church of the Apostles is occupied by a famous allegorical representation of Thalassa, or the Sea, within a medallion (A.D. 578).⁹ (fig. 1) Surrounding this image is an inscription which includes a reference to the mosaicist responsible for the decoration:

O Lord God who has made the heavens and earth, give life to Anastasius, to Thomas and Theodora and [this is the work] of Salaman the mosaicist [Σαλαμανίου ψυφ(οθέτου)].

Another interesting example from the old diakonikon-baptistery on Mt Nebo mentions the work of several artists collaborating on the decoration in a two-line inscription placed at the entrance to the chapel and welcoming the gaze of the entering worshippers (fig. 2):

Lord Jesus Christ, remember the cleric and monks and [all the] others who [rest] here [in peace]. Lord, remember Soelos, Kaiumas and Elias, the mosaicists and their whole family (Piccirillo 1993, 146).

6 For recent studies and projects exploring the significance and work of Byzantine artists: Vassilaki 1997; Pontani 1999; Bacci 2007. See also the section on "Artists and Patrons" in the forthcoming volume Spingou Foteini, *Texts on Byzantine Art and Aesthetics*, vol. 3. In recent years, the study of these issues and related epigraphical material was conducted extensively by Sophia Kalopissi-Verti: 1994a; 1994b; 1997; 2007. See also some primary considerations made in: 1992, esp. 26. And a big project currently in progress: Kalopissi-Verti 2014.

7 For a general and most recent discussion of this material, see: Talgam 2014. On the inscriptions with the names of mosaicists: Donderer 1989, 47. For a concise and very informative list of signatures: Hachlili 2009, 244-50. See also the next note.

8 For the comprehensive study of this material: Donderer 1989. See also: Dunbabin 1999, with her remarks on craftsmen and workshops on pages 269-78. According to the author (270): "the anonymity of the craftsmen is sometimes broken by the occasional practice among mosaicists of signing their work". See also the discussions in: Donceel-Voûte 1988, 470-1; Sweetman 2013, 116-36, with a short overview of the vocabulary featuring in Roman and late antique signatures on page 117. For a more general discussion of Roman artisans and workshops see the papers in: Kristensen, Poulsen 2012.

9 Bikai et al. 1996, 39-40; Donderer 1989, 76; Piccirillo 1993, 106, fig. 78;.



Figure 1. Salaman mosaicist, *Thalassa*. 578. Floor mosaic. Jordan, St Apostles church in Madaba. ©Tiffany Chezum/Manar al-Athar



Figure 2. Soelos, Kaioumas and Elias mosaicists. 530. Floor mosaic. Jordan, Old Diakonikon-Baptistery, Mt Nebo. © Piccirillo 1993, fig. 183.

A counterpart case to Palestinian examples can be found on the Greek mainland, for example in the church in Thebes, the so-called building at 6 Ploutarchou Street, dated to the early 6th c.,¹⁰ which mentions the rarely recorded collaboration of two artists responsible for different phases in the execution of this mosaic:

Demetrios and Epiphanes made this mosaic, Demetrios conceived of the inscription,¹¹ while Epiphanes was its most skilled executioner,

Pavlos is responsible for all good things, a priest and a teacher of divine wisdom.¹²

The early signatures of the mosaicists acquired various linguistic forms and could be found in different locations within the church. However, what unites them is visibility since these texts, being part of the donour inscriptions, were placed in prominent positions, framed in *tabula ansata* or cartouche shapes or simply integrated into the geometrical design of the mosaic, run-

¹⁰ Assimakopoulou-Atzaka 1987, tav. 264c; Assimakopoulou-Atzaka, Parcharidou-Anagnostou 2009, 30-1; Foschia 2004, 23-5.

¹¹ In this context γραφήν should not be taken literally to mean inscription, but more as referring to the design of the decoration.

¹² Δημήτριος Ἐπιφάνης τε τὸ μουσίον ποιῆ / Δημήτριος μὲν ἐννοήσας τὴν γραφήν / ταύτης δ' ὄπουργός Ἐπιφάνης εὐνούστατος / Παῦλος δὲ πάντων αἴτιος τῶν εὐπρεπῶν / ἱερεὺς τε καὶ θεῶν λόγων διδάσκαλος. English trans. by Rebecca J. Sweetman: Sweetman, *The Mosaics of the Roman Crete*, 339, note 38. For the image of the inscription: Assimakopoulou-Atzaka 1987, tav. 264c; Assimakopoulou-Atzaka; Parcharidou-Anagnostou 2009, 7.

ning around medallions or along the margins of the rectangular outlines of individual compartments of the program.¹³

In cases such as these, the mention of artists often formed part of the sequence of names related to a particular religious site and made reference to craftsmen including them among the range of people involved in the enterprise and equally deserving of remembrance, which besides historical memory presupposed a liturgical commemoration. In other instances, the autographs of mosaicists appear separately, detached from all other inscriptions and their word formula accentuated the fact that the execution of the work was to be attributed to them. Whether these signatures always had to be coordinated with the donors, or whether craftsmen had a certain liberty allowing them to leave a personal epigraphical record, remains unknown. The best way to describe the situation surrounding the use of artists' names in late antique mosaic floors would be to say that although 'signing' was not obligatory or indispensable, craftsmen could leave a textual memory of their involvement in the decoration. In some cases, however, the mention of their names is clearly predetermined by the patron's desire to highlight the artists engaged in the project.

The fact that the mention of artists is not purely accidental and that artisans could acquire a certain social status to be worthy of tribute in the inscriptions is also confirmed by similar evidence in other media. For example, architects are regularly mentioned in sources and epigraphy.¹⁴ Zanini remarks that judging by the historic sources and early Byzantine epigraphy, certain architects and master-builders could be granted exclusive honors and achieve high ranks within society (2008, 393). A Syrian floor mosaic inscription found in Qubbet es-Shih in Syria, possibly from the early 5th c., keeps the memory alive of the church's architect, Kosma, who not only declared his profession and provenance from Aleppo but also his authorship

of the church building (Piccirillo 1981, 118). The inscription on the wooden ceiling beam from the Sinai monastery is particularly intriguing due to the material it was executed on; it mentions the name of Stephanus, believed to be the architect of the church, and indicates that he "was deacon and builder from Aila" (Ševčenko 1966, 257, 262). This inscription would not have been visible to the naked eye of a viewer standing in the *naos* as it was placed on the board attached to a beam. Nevertheless, the text was beautifully highlighted with red paint just like the nearby inscriptions commemorating Emperor Justinian and Theodora. These two examples demonstrate the possibility of autographs left by late antique architects who, in order to incorporate their names into the structure of the building, used not the stone material nor architectural elements but rather other *media* for this purpose.¹⁵ How the collaboration worked between craftsmen in these particular cases is unclear, but it is evident that master-builders sometimes had to rely on artists working in other materials in order to leave their signatures.¹⁶ This also means that some of the architects' names could have been lost together with the church decorations.

Judging by this very brief overview, it can be argued that in the Early Byzantine period the appearance of artists' names was not uncommon. On the one hand, this tradition built on the habits and word forms characteristic of the Roman world, and on the other it developed a new set of features, linguistic characteristics and norms of use. When discussing the signatures surviving in the mosaic floor we are talking about autographs that were clearly visible to the public and could easily have been read by the literate members of the congregation. Taking into account the lasting medium of the mosaic, when incorporating their names in the 'stone carpets' of the early churches, mosaicists were counting on both the long life of their work and the memory of their authorship. Self-promotion and the desire to stand out among other workshops in the region

13 On the question of visibility and viewing of the medieval inscriptions: Eastmond 2015.

14 On architects and master-builders in Byzantium: Ousterhout 1999.

15 However, an alternative way for builders and masons was to leave letter marks and various signs as indications of their workshops. See: Karagiorgou 2014 (with further bibliography).

16 We can compare this situation of collaboration with a compelling example of the visual narrative from the early Islamic period. The eighth-century decoration of the Umayyad palace of Qusayr 'Amra includes a detailed pictorial cycle of mason's work and building activity. This painted cycle could refer to the construction of the actual building, in which the murals are found, or be read in metaphorical terms as reflecting the building activity of the ruler or the "cosmogonic act of the Creation": Taragan 2008. I am very grateful to Ida Toth for this reference.



Figure 3. Ioannes (John) Tokhabi, *Last Judgment*, around 1100. Icon, tempera. St Catherine monastery on Sinai, Egypt. © Maria Lidova, reproduced by kind permission of archbishop Damianos and St Catherine monastery on Sinai

Figure 4. Ioannes (John) Tokhabi, *Last Judgment* (fragment), Georgian inscription below the throne of Christ. © Maria Lidova, reproduced by kind permission of archbishop Damianos and St Catherine monastery on Sinai

may also constitute reasons for the appearance of the artists' names. At the same time, in the early Byzantine period there were already signatures not intended for the general public, which may have been concealed or placed in difficult-to-reach locations, destined primarily to serve as a token of the artists' involvement and memory and in the hope of divine remuneration.

3 The Art of Signing in the Middle Byzantine Period

Signatures are often considered to be an expression of vanity, which stands in contrast to the religious aims and sacred environment of the medieval Christian church. The placement of authors' names on an artwork intended for worship is commonly perceived almost as sacrilegious and hardly appropriate. However, the existing examples indicate that profound religious concerns and cultic function did not exclude the appearance of artists' names. Autographs are found on objects of great religious value and appear in the most sacred zones of the church.

Images of saints executed on wooden panels are considered highly venerable objects in the Eastern Christian culture. They often acquired a role similar to or fully in line with that of relics. Destroying an icon was considered a terrible sin and even an attempt to harm the divine image, according to the sources, could provoke immediate punishment. This aura of sacredness associated with icons in the East, their miraculous manifestations, as well as the belief that certain images derive from holy prototypes, has led to the assumption that this category of artwork does not permit any manifestation of authorship. Nonetheless, although the absolute majority of medieval icon painters remain anonymous, from the post-iconoclastic period we encounter the names of artists inscribed on the surface of panel paintings.

The famous Sinai collection provides a number of such examples.¹⁷ Some scholars believe that two icons featuring the prophets Elijah and Moses (late 12th-13th c.) were executed by the

¹⁷ On the Sinai collection of icons: M. Soteriou, G. Soteriou 1956-8; Weitzmann 1976; Manafis 1990; Лидов 1999; Nelson, Collins 2006; Mourelatos 2009.

painter Stephanos.¹⁸ This name features in the verse prayer placed on the lower frame bands, reproduced twice in Greek and Arabic.¹⁹ We find a concise but very explicit signature of the painter Peter – Δέ(ησις) Πέτρου ζογράφου (Prayer of the painter Peter) – on the frontal side of several 13th c. icons: two with the Mother of God and one with St Procopius.²⁰ The most intriguing case, however, represents a set of six icons executed by the same person – a monk of Georgian origin working in the monastery around 1100.²¹ The back sides of six panels that must have originally formed part of a hexptych were decorated with beautiful Greek epigrams, each mentioning the work of a certain Ioannes (John). Since I have discussed these texts elsewhere I will only cite the inscriptions of one of the icons showing the Last Judgment. (fig. 3) The ‘verse signature’ on the reverse reads as follows:

As Daniel, who foresaw Thy terrible Last
 Judgment,
 O Almighty Abyss of Mercy, having it in mind
 And written on the tablets of his heart,
 The miserable among the monks Ioannes
 Has reverentially painted Thy Second Advent,
 Importunes Thee, o Maker of the Universe,
 To be merciful not wrathful Judge on that day.²²

The dodecasyllable epigram, most probably composed by the painter himself, evokes the subject represented on the panel. Ioannes makes a remarkable and very poetic comparison between his own work as a painter and the prophet Daniel’s textual description of the Second Coming, on which the iconography of the painted image was based. The epigram intentionally plays with the meaning of the Greek verb γράφειν, which could refer to both writing and painting.²³ Besides the Greek epigram on the reverse, the icon

of the *Last Judgment* bears another inscription on the obverse composed of seven lines in Georgian script *nuskha hutsuri* (fig. 4), which Zaza Skhirtladze (2014, 371) translates as:

Lord Jesus Christ, allow me to stay at your
 right hand at your Second Coming in glory,
 the desirous donor of an icon of your
 Second Coming and all saints, the humble
 hieromonk
 Ioane Tokhabi. Amen.

The text provides us with rare information on the surname of the painter and characterizes him as the donor of the panel. In order to leave a reminder of his involvement in the artwork, Ioannes made adjustments to the composition of the image and integrated a rather long text right in the center under the throne of Christ. The placement is well calculated both visually and semantically, since the Georgian prayer containing the request for mercy on the day of Judgment appears right at the feet of the Heavenly Judge whose mercy is sought not only in the Georgian but also in the Greek text on the reverse.

It is very tempting to consider Ioannes’ icons and epigrams as an exceptional case of no relevance to the general Byzantine tradition. However, when studied holistically it appears to be reflective of the wider practice of signing in the Middle Byzantine period and executing poetic texts intended specifically for the icons. The very choice of place could become part of the artistic concept indicating that leaving an autograph was seen as part of a creative process rather than an issue of mere practical concern. This is confirmed by another signature surviving in the decoration of the ossuary in the monastery of the Mother of God Petritzonitissa at Bachkovo in Bulgaria (1083) (Bakalova 2003). The founder of the mon-

18 Пятницкий 2004; Parpulov, in Nelson, Collins 2006, 190-3 (with further bibliography). For an alternative dating of the icons to the second half of the 11th century see also: Parpulov 2013. However, this dating has not found wide support.

19 On Greek inscriptions confirming the later dating of the icons: Rhoby 2010, 47-50.

20 M. Soteriou, G. Soteriou 1956-8, 2: 138-9; Mouriki 1988.

21 Most recently: Lidova 2009; Galavaris 2009; Skhirtladze 2014 (all with previous bibliography).

22 Ὁς Δανιὴλ προεῖδε φρικώδη κρί(σιν)
 ὃ παντάναξ ἄβυσσε τῆς εὐσπλαχνίας
 εἰς νοῦν βαλὼν γράψας τε πλαξὶ καρδίας
 Ἰω(άννης) δύστηνος ἐν μονοτρόποις
 σεπτῶς ἀνιστόρησε σὴν παρουσίαν
 αἰτῶν δυσωπῶν σοῦ τυχεῖν παντεργάτα
 οἰκτίρμονος μάλιστα μὴ κριτοῦ τότε.

23 See the discussion in Drpić 2013.



Figure 5. Ioannes (John) Iviropoulos, *Signature*. Late 11th-12th c. Mural on the arch above the door to the ossuary. Bulgaria, Ossuary Bachkovo monastery. © Maria Lidova

astery, Gregory Pakouriani, was Georgian by birth, and it is not surprising that a Georgian painter was invited to produce the decoration of the small funerary church. His name was John Iviropoulos and he was most probably trained in Constantinople before coming to Bulgaria. The parallelism in the destinies of two painters from Georgia is spectacular and intriguing in itself, involving two Johns, both exceptional artists who worked far from their homeland executing exquisite painted cycles for the monastic community and leaving their signatures, which can be taken as testimony of their self-esteem. In the case of the Bachkovo ossuary, the painter placed his autograph in the lower chamber, in the passage between the narthex and the funerary space. It would only have been visible at the moment of entry with the viewer's gaze oriented vertically towards the semicircular band of the arch framing the passageway. The space was decorated with the representation of the Last Judgment and

the painter's autograph appears right below the throne of Christ, in exactly the same location as the Georgian inscription on the icon of Ioannes Tokhabi from Sinai. (fig. 5) It reads:

This most noble church was decorated above and below by the hand of the Master painter John Iviropoulos. You, who are reading this, pray to the Lord for me.²⁴

Besides the visual coincidence with the Sinai icon, the signature also interacts with the representation of Paradise painted in direct proximity and appears within the Deesis composition (fig. 6) – the moment of supplication of St. Mary and John the Baptist on behalf of humanity, with the Forerunner possibly being the heavenly patron of painter John.

Georgian medieval art provides a great number of artists' names, present in different spheres of art. Multiple autographs found on metal re-

24 Ανιστορήθη ὁ πάνσε[πτος] να[ὸς] τὸ ἄνω κ[αὶ] τὸ κάτω διὰ χειρὸς Ἰω[άννου] ἱστοριογ[ράφου] Ἰβηροπούλου κ[αὶ] οἱ ἀναγινώσκοντες εὐχε[σθε] διὰ [μὲ] τ[ὸν] Κ[ύριον]. Bakalova 2003, 109.



Figure 6. Ioannes (John) Iviropoulos, *Last Judgment*. Late 11th-12th c. Crypt of the ossuary, narthex. Bulgaria, Ossuary of the Bačkovo monastery. © Maria Lidova

poussé icons and church decorations are particularly relevant in this respect.²⁵ Unfortunately, this evidence is often omitted or ignored in specialized studies on Byzantine epigraphy due to the difference in language and traditional geographical and scholarly divides.²⁶ However, some cases are capable of shedding light on the general practice of signing. The most spectacular among them is found in the Svaneti region where several monuments testify to the activity of a particular painter working at the end of the 11th c.-early 12th c.²⁷ Four churches situated in different villages, not far from one another, are attributed to this painter: Quiricus and Julitta (Lagurka), the church of Archangels in Iprari, St George in Nakipari, and Saviour in Tsvirmi (fig. 7).²⁸ The

signatures of the painter Tevdore (Theodor) are found in three of these churches while the fourth remains without an autograph perhaps due to the subsequent transformations of the church.²⁹ In autographs the painter defines himself as a royal painter and provides precious information on the dates of the cycles, as for example in Iprari where it reads:

Christ, this sacred church had been painted and adorned [for pray of aznaurs] of this ravine, all minors and majors, for their children and for souls of their deceased. Saint Archangels grant mercy in both lives. Amen. It was adorned with paintings in 1096 by hand of Tevdore, King's painter, holy Archangels grant forgiveness.

25 For Georgian medieval repoussé works and inscriptions: Чубинашвили 1959; Akhalashvili 1987; Chichinadze 2008.

26 For some general discussion on the importance of Georgian art in relation to Byzantine tradition, see most recently: Mourelatos 2014; Thunø 2016.

27 Аладашвили 1966; 1983. For inscriptions see also: Silogava 1988, 29-41, 70-1, 73-5. I would also like to thank Temo Jojua for the consultation on Tevdore's inscriptions.

28 For more general recent discussions of medieval painting of Svaneti and individual programs, see: Kenia 2010; Kevkhisvili 2013; 2016. For some older overviews, see for example: Thierry 1979.

29 The church in Tsvirmi has lost its original chancel screen, which apparently was the painter's preferred place for the signature.



Figure 7. Tevdore, *Signature at the top of the chancel screen*. 1096. Murals. Georgia, Iprari, Upper Svaneti, Church of Holy Archangels. © Maria Lidova

The designation “King’s artist” might be taken as an indication of Tevdore’s service at the court of David the Builder (1089-25). In Lagurka, the painter placed his signature on the western wall right above the entrance door to the church; however, in two other instances the texts are very similar in form and content and appear in a very prominent location – at the top of the chancel screen.

The place where Tevdore chose to sign his work was not random and is actually fully in line with contemporary Byzantine tradition. Recent research has demonstrated that in the Middle Byzantine period the architraves and cornices of chancel barriers were very often used for the placement of dedicatory inscriptions (Pallis 2013). Numerous texts of different quality and length were executed on altar screens immortalizing the names of the people responsible either for the building and decoration of the church or the execution of the marble structure in front of

the altar. Only a few cases of artists’ signatures survive today, but they still demonstrate the conscious artistic activity of Komnenian sculptors and marble carvers.³⁰ Most remarkable is the case of the marble carver Niketas who worked in Mani (Peloponnese) in the 11th c. and left his signature on the architraves or cornices crowning the front side of the altar screens in three different churches (Drandakes 1972; Pallis 2013, nos 45-7, 793-4). Just like Tevdore in Georgia, Niketas and his skills were actively engaged in a particular region and he felt the freedom and need to make his authorship known to the members of the small congregations attending these churches. He chose a prominent location for his signature at the top of the screen, taking spiritual advantage of the border location between two liturgical zones, floating between the earthly dimension of the *naos* and the heavenly realms of the altar space.

³⁰ Pallis 2016, 399. In his paper, Bouras provides a comprehensive list of 58 known names of Greek builders and masons from the post-Iconoclastic period: Bouras 2010. I would like to thank Georgios Pallis for his consultation and for directing me to further bibliography on the topic.



Figure 8. Eutybios and Michael, *St Prokopios with the name Eutybios featuring on the mantle*. 1294-5. On the southwestern pillar facing the west. Mural. Macedonia, Ohrid, The church of the Holy Mother of God Peribleptos. © Maria Lidova

4 Artists' Signatures in the Late Byzantine Period

The Late Byzantine period witnessed the rise of artists' names appearing in sources, dedicatory inscriptions and signatures (Kalopissi-Verti 1994a). Over time autographs acquired more sophisticated forms and the sheer number of surviving examples increased, which explains why this period is better recorded in existing scholarship on the topic. By far the most famous case is the workshop of Michael and Eutybios Astrapades who decorated a series of churches in the Balkans: St Clement, former St Mary Peribleptos in Ohrid (1294-5), Bogorodica Ljeviška at Prizren (1307-9), St George at Staro Nagoričino (1312-13) and St Nikita at Čučer.³¹ Their provenance from Thessaloniki has long been established, but scholars only very recently found another signature of Eutybios in the main church of the Protaton monastery on Mt Athos, proving the authorship

behind a program that had previously been only tentatively attributed to the same hand (Kanonides 2016, 41). As a result, the signatures left by the two artists, who were either related – father and son (Марковић 2010) – or had a close professional relationship with one another has become the most definite historical evidence for the role of artistic identity in the Palaeologan period, assisting in the reconstruction, with a great degree of precision, of the history of a particular workshop and exploring the scale of creativity that painters could apply to the art of signing their work.

In the Ohrid church of Panaghia Peribleptos, Michael and Eutybios left numerous initials and fully fledged signatures, which appear on the armor, elements of garments and representations of liturgical vessels. The most important are the metrical signature on the garment of St Demetrius and what seems to be a two-part inscription that opens on a sword of St Merkurios “by the hand of painter Michael” and ends on

³¹ Todić 2001; Марковић 2004; 2010; Drpić 2013 (with the discussion of other late Byzantine signatures); Papadopoulos 2016.



Figure 9. Michael Kalliegeris, Signature above the entrance door. 1315. Murals. Greece, Veroia, Church of St Saviour.
© Maria Lidova

the cloak of St Prokopios “and me Eutychios” (κάμου Εὐτυχίου). (fig. 8) Similar locations were chosen for autographs on other decorations, although the artists were never repetitive and always found a new context and different saints for the placement of their signatures. Their autographs can be categorized as hidden indications of authorship, since the painters integrated and almost dissolved their names in the form of acronyms or inscriptions in the colorful texture of the murals. They were visible but at the same time not obvious to a common worshipper, assimilating the form of an ornament or decorative motifs.

Although absolutely outstanding in terms of surviving evidence, the case of the Astrapades is not unique and epigraphy provides further attestations of the work of the same workshop migrat-

ing from one church to another, as for example the case of the Cretan painters and collaborators Theodor Daniel and Michael Veneris or Ioannes Pagomenos.³² In St Saviour church in Veroia, dated to the year 1315, Michael Kalliegeris boasts of being the painter in a dedicatory inscription placed above the entrance: “The painter is Kalliegeris, the best painter of all Thessaly, together with my good and decent brothers” (Kalopissi-Verti 1994a, 146) (fig 9).³³ Two signatures found in Prespa, one by the painter Alexios who specifies he is the disciple of another painter John, and that of Ioannikios, who left his autograph in the form of a prayer concluding with a mention of his profession as a painter and hieromonk, are much more modest in tone but well situated within the church space (Kalopissi-Verti 1994a, 141-2, 149; Bogevska 2010).

³² Their activity and signatures have been recently studied by in a PhD dissertation: Schmidt 2016. The same author is currently preparing a paper discussing the work of Cretan masters and artists’ signatures: Schmidt, forthcoming. See also the project on Cretan inscriptions which will cover many signatures and artists’ names: <http://www.byzanz-mainz.de/en/research/details/article/dokumentation-und-auswertung-der-griechischen-inschriften-kretas-13-17-jh/> (2017-08-17)

³³ See also the most recent discussion of the text by I. Drpić in Spingou (forthcoming).

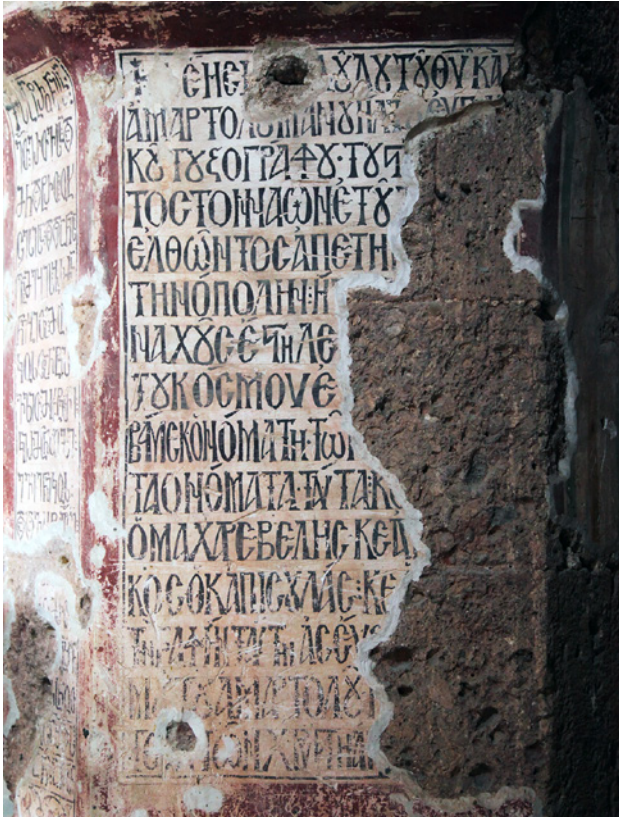


Figure 10. Manuel Eugenikos, *Dedicatory inscriptions in Greek and Georgian*. 1384-96. On the South-Western pillar facing the west. Murals. Georgia, Tsaledjikha, Church of Transfiguration. © Maria Lidova

The appearance of artists' names within large painted dedicatory inscriptions providing the list of donors responsible for the decoration of the church became a feature of the period, but at the same time it evokes the late antique tradition of similar epigraphical records. One of the most spectacular and informative texts can be found on the walls of the Transfiguration church in Tsaledjikha, Georgia.³⁴ (fig. 10) Long dedicatory inscriptions in two languages, Georgian and Greek, decorate the western pillars of the church and face the entrance, informing the reader that the paintings were executed by a Greek artist from Constantinople – Manuel Eugenikos – especially invited there for that purpose by the local patron at the end of the 14th century. This story is a counterpart to middle Byzantine ex-

amples of Georgian artists travelling abroad and leaving their mark in prominent Greek monasteries of the Byzantine Empire. Judging by this material, it becomes evident that some artists were famous and hired especially to execute certain commissions. Their status and role was acknowledged not only by the donors but also by the artists themselves, inciting them to leave a written record of their activity. In some cases the national identity and personality, as well as the cultural background of a particular historical period, are reflected in these texts. Not fully in line with a contemporary understanding of signatures, many of these inscriptions that are dedicatory or devotional in nature were executed by the painters themselves and hence can and should be considered fully-fledged autographs.³⁵

³⁴ Belting 1979. The Greek inscription reads: "Supplication of the servant of God and sinner Manuel Eugenikos, the painter, who painted this church and came from Constantinople. That is, (because of this) decoration (the prince) Vamek Dadiani, by name sent monks: their names are the following: Kopalias Makharebeles and Andronikos Kapisoulas. And may (whoever reads) this inscription pray for me and for all Christians, (amen)". (English translation from Kalopissi-Verti 1994a, 147).

³⁵ Different categories of late Byzantine inscriptions have been discussed by Kalopissi-Verti 1994a. In particular, the author rightly observes that artists' signatures are missing from grand-scale courtly and imperial artistic endeavors. Instead, they appear predominantly in monastic and in smaller scale commissions of local centres. However, the author's suggestion

5 Conclusions

The very brief overview provided in this paper aims to demonstrate that unlike the existing stereotypical perception, the idea of authorship was part of Byzantine visual art finding its best expression in epigraphy. The tradition of leaving a record of the artists was continuous and greater numbers of examples from the Palaeologan period should be understood as a consequence of the greater amount of surviving evidence rather than a radical change and break with previous tradition. The very concept of signature should be treated with caution when applied to Byzantine art, since most of the evidence primarily falls under the category of dedicatory texts or personal prayers. However, notwithstanding the unusual linguistic form, these texts can be considered as a particular kind of autograph that Byzantium developed to record artists' names. Often spiritual in their goals and aiming for heavenly remuneration, these textual records are still reflective of the artists' self-esteem and desire to inscribe their names in history and seal the memory of their life within their work.

As a consequence, the question of the anonymity of Byzantine art so often referred to in literature calls for a total reconsideration. The common idea of the Eastern Christian visual heritage as a territory without names, prominent masters and innovation inspired by individuals can no longer be accepted. Anonymity can only be claimed in the sense that an artwork or decoration did not require the 'signature' of the artist and personality of the 'author' and its record was of no importance for the religious function of the work.

Finally, the artists' records should not be studied separately from the contexts in which they appear, be they visual narratives or iconographic programs, historical periods or geographical zones. A lot of information can be obtained on the migration of artists, their level of literacy and social background, and their apprenticeship process and interrelationship within the workshops. The study of signatures cannot be exclusively limited to Greek testimonies and the range of languages should cover all others used in the empire. Finally, artists clearly considered the execution of

their signature as part of the creative process and were constantly experimenting with form, content, and placement. The latter is particularly important since the texts could acquire a new dimension and meaning once incorporated in the visual semantics of the program. Some artists preferred to hide their names in indiscernible or completely invisible locations, while others wanted to feature prominently in the dedicatory inscriptions together with the donors. Many painters appeared as humble and undeserving servants of God in inscriptions, whereas several used flattering adjectives and alluded to their high-rank and previous courtly commissions. What becomes clear is that the phenomenon of the Byzantine artist has to be rediscovered once again with signatures providing just one very concrete and accessible way into the world of outstanding masters and 'authors' whose artworks were destined to exceed the lifetime of their creators.

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that this might be connected simply to the low status of the painters and their social affinity with the donors from small communities is arguable.

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