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Byzantine Greek Inscriptions and Urban Context

When I was invited to give a talk at the colloquium on "Urban Decline in the Byzantine Realm", I was asked to say something about inscriptions as indicators of the development of urbanization in Byzantium. This is an interesting, though rather complex, issue which has to be addressed carefully and from many fronts. Clearly the epigraphic evidence from any period is frequently indicative of changes in urban space, but it is also evident that the material presence or absence of inscriptions in any civic community is not automatically proportional to the level of urbanization. A lot depends on the nature and type of the epigraphic evidence as well as on the social, historical and physical context in which inscriptions were produced.

Some years ago, I wrote a brief account of the development of Latin epigraphy in the period from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages.[1] My general conclusion was that there was no abrupt break in the epigraphic culture. Various documents were still inscribed, though it all took place in new contexts and, sometimes, in dramatically changed conditions which certainly had an effect not only on the quantity of epigraphic products but also on their quality and type. My impression is that, in spite of some significant differences, the role of inscribing was, along general lines, similar in the Byzantine world.

I am not Byzantologist and I must say that my expertise on archaeology or the urban development in Byzantium is very limited. Instead, I feel myself somewhat more familiar with literature and epigraphy, and so the following is best taken as a collection of some general observations and personal impressions on inscriptions and their role in Byzantium.

1 Kajava 2003, 9-14. See now Sannazaro 2006.

A brief survey of the known epigraphic materials may be useful. What kinds of inscriptions were produced in Byzantium? Where, when and why were they set up, and by whom? While the Graeco-Roman cities all over the Mediterranean had produced an enormous amount of both lapidary and other inscriptions through the centuries, the number of preserved inscriptions shows a remarkable drop in Late Antiquity. Nonetheless, except for the agonistic documents, all major epigraphic categories endured until about A.D. 600. Decrees continued to be inscribed, honorific texts on statue bases still existed, and inscribed tombstones continued to be erected. Though the contents and style of inscriptions naturally changed along with the development of society – and with the emergence of Christianity – this made little impact on the art and culture of writing itself. Inscribed documents and messages were still an important feature of city life in Late Antiquity. There was no dramatic break in what is usually called the "epigraphic habit".

By contrast, what we know about epigraphy in the Byzantine period seems to show a very different picture.[2] Imperial and other decrees were very rarely put up. Honorific inscriptions, at least in their traditional form, died out as statues ceased to be erected. Inscribed boundary stones became almost non-existent. Epitaphs were no longer set up for ordinary people. In Constantinople, the latest datable epitaph of an ordinary person is of about A.D. 610. From then onwards, common people were buried in anepigraphic graves which at best might be marked by the cross alone.

The decline of epigraphy may be illustrated by the evidence coming not only from Constantinople but also from other cities which we know continued to flourish throughout the Byzantine period. In absolute numbers, the disappearance of the epigraphic evidence from cities such as Thessalonike, or Aphrodisias in Asia Minor, is truly dramatic.

However, some categories of inscriptions did survive, like the aristocratic epitaph and the building inscription. While the former now appeared

2 For the evidence and more detailed information, see Mango 1991 and 2008.

in churches and in the context of family monasteries, building inscriptions could be seen in fortifications, on city walls as well as in churches.

Such are the basic facts and numbers, and they would indeed suggest that Byzantine epigraphic culture was quite different from what preceded. While in many respects this is accurate, the reality is surely more nuanced.

What do the changes mean, and what do they tell us? It is true, in quantitative terms, the production of inscriptions in Byzantium would seem to correlate with the degree of urbanization, but this relationship is not always unequivocal. Attention needs to be paid to other issues as well, such as architecture and decoration, epigraphic techniques, or the various methods of communication in Byzantium which involves not only the role of inscribing but also that of reading inscriptions and listening to them. Attitudes and mentalities could also play a decisive role.

While it is evident that the presence of inscriptions did not necessarily require the existence of an urban context in any period, the absence of lapidary and other inscriptions would hardly have been conceivable in a Graeco-Roman city. This is simply because of how these cities were administered, how city life was generally organized, and how the bodies communicated with each other and with the inhabitants, and it also tells about the ways people were either honoured or commemorated. In Byzantium, cities continued to exist and people continued to live in them, but many of the old institutions were either abandoned or replaced by others. New ways of communicating with people were introduced, and inscriptions were frequently concentrated in totally new contexts. This was a gradual process beginning in Late Antiquity, the results of which are clearly seen from the seventh century onwards.

In some respects, the impact of the new conditions was dramatic. For example, while imperial edicts and decrees had been published in stone or bronze throughout the centuries, this administrative practice vanishes almost completely in the Byzantine period. Of course, imperial legislation continued to exist, laws and edicts being now distributed to provincial gov-

ernors and other officeholders in manuscript form. However, the decrees were no longer publicly displayed on durable materials.[3] This was a drastic change for a culture and society in which, for centuries, laws and various administrative information had been distributed to citizens, whether they could read or not.

Some of these changes in the epigraphic habit are probably symptomatic of changes in mentality, yet if this were the case, there was nothing new about it. In terms of both quantity and type, the methods of epigraphic communication between people and communites, and within societies, had undergone considerable changes at various periods throughout antiquity.

What deserves to be stressed is that the coming of Byzantium did not mean any interruption in the epigraphic culture. It is true that increasing analphabetism and lack of education among the population had an effect on literacy and written culture, but the art of writing never vanished completely. It rather manifested itself in new forms and in new contexts. The new ways of communication were evoked by internal changes in city life and by the gradual disappearance of suitable space for the exposition of lapidary inscriptions. Writing began to be concentrated in churches and monasteries.

While the inscriptions on temples, altars and public buildings had always constituted an essential feature of urban architecture in ancient cities, now the texts – whatever their type – were accumulated in sacred places of the Christian religion. Considering that churches were of prime importance for the gathering of the devout, the role of writing also included a pragmatic and visual dimension, and it is also relevant that alphabetism and literacy were more and more confined to the functionaries of church.

The disappearance of commemorative epitaphs in the seventh century is a remarkable phenomenon which is to a large extent paralleled by what happened in the West. People began to be buried inside churches and monasteries, but it was only the bishops and the rich and noble who could af-

3 Mango 1991, 240; Feissel 1995, *passim*.

ford to have a funerary monument erected, yet even persons of importance seem to have been only occasionally commemorated on tombstones. The rest of the population, the common people, were most frequently buried in unmarked tombs in graveyards. There should be no doubt that the majority of these people were illiterate, which means that they could not be reached by written information. Anepigraphic funerary memorials are also, of course, a well-known phenomenon in Graeco-Roman antiquity, but their presence becomes very prominent in Byzantium. Passing away without any written commemoration became the normal way, so that an inscribed epitaph might have appeared to many ordinary Byzantines as something of an oddity. This means that the probability of knowing the epitaphs of a few upper-class people is considerably higher than for other sections of society.

On the whole, the distribution and location of Byzantine epitaphs as well as the existence of various types of burial practices, are very much dependent on socio-economic and cultural factors, including literacy, but they also reflect mentalities and ideologies. This development is often concomitant to changes in physical environment and in urban structures, but it naturally also results from traditional institutions dying out. Cities survived – frequently in a new shape – but city life began to be organized in a new way. This, in turn, had an influence on the place and position of individuals within the city structure. The role of written communication was surely also affected by the general decrease in the literacy rate. The consequence of all this seems to have been that inscribed documents were no longer the primary method of communication. Commemorating the deceased with no written record of their names was considered to be quite normal.

In this context, one may refer to graffiti, as they were reportedly used for commemorative purposes as well. The most important series is that on the columns of the Parthenon in Athens (which served as the local cathedral in the Middle Ages): in addition to the numerous pious invocations, about one-fourth of the c. 230 graffiti are dated obituaries of local bishops (late 7th to 12th centuries) and of members of the clergy. It might be that the

absence of tombstones was partly compensated for by such graffiti, as if a new method of commemorating the dead had been gradually introduced to substitute for the lapidary memorials. However, this evidence may be geographically biased since our knowledge of commemorative graffiti largely comes from Athens (besides the Parthenon, they are attested elsewhere on the Acropolis as well as in some sacred buildings). Moreover, it appears as if numerous graffiti in the Parthenon had been consciously placed so that they were immediately visible to the faithful visitors upon entrance into the narthex.[4] Thus the Parthenon's case may be atypical, as a considerable number of the graffiti were produced with the primary aim of generating a particular visual reppresentation.

Regarding the Byzantine (aristocratic) epitaphs,[5] they appear to have been sometimes inscribed not on the tomb (or sarcophagus) itself but somewhere in close proximity, on architraves, within an archway, or elsewhere on nearby walls. Moreover, the images of the deceased with accompanying inscriptions could be displayed in mosaics or paintings. This may suggest that the direct relationship between text and monument would lose in importance, but it also means that if the epitaph or the mosaic is not preserved, one could well think that the burial was never marked by an inscription. A consequence of the separation of text from monument may have been that those having a look at a given monument were no longer able to recognize its relationship with any written text. A related phenomenon is provided by those cases where the inscription could not be seen at all, being placed inside a monument (to what extent such instances are attested in Byzantium, I cannot say, but there is evidence for them in the Latin West[6]). A number of parallel cases are known from antiquity, such as a sarcophagus with the epitaph carved on the inside, but they were extremely rare and quite uncharacteristic of ancient commemorative practices. Though this phenomenon was

4 Papalexandrou 2007, 172 (with fig. 41 on p. 174).
5 Mango 1995.
6 Cfr. C. D'Angela, 'Due tombe altomedievali scoperte a Troia (Foggia)', *Vet. Christ*. 25 (1988) 653-9.

perhaps marginal in the Middle Ages, it may suggest a more pronounced focussing on the internal at the expense of the external. Moreover, one may remember that anonymous sarcophagi are not an unknown phenomenon in Byzantine churches (though many of them may have been identified by separate inscriptions which are no longer preserved), and since obviously the aristocratic epitaphs, like those set up in monasteries, were and could be seen by only a few visitors, it appears as if commemoration was becoming more and more a private issue. There is a huge contrast between such tombs and those placed along the roads outside of earlier Graeco-Roman cities. The epitaphs of the latter were meant to be read and looked at, and they could even converse with the passers-by. It is true that mid-Byzantine poetry shows a number of epigrams in which expressions of grief were composed in dialogic form, but this style probably draws on ancient funerary inscriptions.

If the notion of the internal and private character of epitaphs holds true, it seems, on the other hand, that not only the magical aspect of letters and writing but also the decorative and ornamental function of inscriptions increases in relevance during the Byzantine period.[7] This does not mean that the visual aspect of written documents would have been unimportant in Graeco-Roman antiquity – think of the inscriptions on bronze, or those with gilt letters on monumental arches, and many others. However, while in the Graeco-Roman period, the inscription and the monument usually constituted two essential parts of a balanced unity, in the Byzantine period, the epigraphic text could be detached from the background, thus becoming an autonomous decorative element which could be given conspicuous prominence within the architecture of sacred buildings. Thus, in a sense, the inscription might assume the role earlier played by architectural elements of a temple or of any public building. However, in addition to the visual aspect there was also the auditive one. Monumental texts variously displayed in churches were not only inspected but they were also read aloud

7 Many interesting remarks in James 2007.

in the presence of a public audience. This issue has been duly underlined in recent research, and surely it is important to understand its significance for communication.[8] We know that the phenomenon existed in the Greek world from early times, but I have the impression that the reading aloud of inscriptions in public, and listening to the reading, was perhaps even more important in Byzantium than it had been before.

Finally, let it be noted that aristocratic epitaphs were sometimes accompanied by the founders' inscriptions. Therefore, the glory and immortality of the rich could be eternalized not only by laudatory epitaphs listing their names, titles and attributes but also by inscriptions recording donations and foundations of sacred buildings. In a sense, such texts begin to assume the role of honorific inscriptions, which had been so typical of Graeco-Roman city spaces.

That the alleged absence or invisibility of inscriptions in Byzantium is at least partly apparent may be suggested by other considerations as well. In particular, the role of painted inscriptions should be stressed because the majority of any writing produced in the early Middle Ages probably belongs to this category. Unfortunately, most of this evidence has disappeared with the destruction of churches and monasteries, but a great number of testimonies still survive not only on the walls of churches but also in copies as well as in literary sources.[9] Of course, the dipinti are not a Byzantine epigraphic novelty, painted incriptions being attested all over the Mediterranean from early times, and one has to emphasize that most of the epigraphic documents ever produced in antiquity consisted of dipinti and graffiti, which most frequently appeared on wood tablets.

There is a further epigraphic category which endured throughout the Middle Ages in both East and West, that is, texts placed on movable and portable objects. While previously this category was composed of bricks, seals, lamps, pottery, glassware and so on, now we have crosses, jewellery,

8 Papalexandrou 2007.
9 Durliat 1995, 191-3.

reliquaries, tapestries, etc. Such texts are naturally known if the objects themselves survive, and since many of them were not only precious but also sacred works of art, they frequently still exist. Like the dipinti, portable inscribed objects continue an ancient and flourishing epigraphic tradition, and their role remained important in the Middle Ages.

Regarding the epigraphic script in Byzantium, it appears as a natural continuation of earlier traditions. Symbols and letter forms remained roughly the same as before, though, of course, regional differencies may be observed. Major variation begins to occur in the eleventh century, when inscriptions assume a more ornamental form with extensive use of abbreviations, ligature, cursive forms, marked accents, etc. This tendency may have been partly influenced by Arabic calligraphy.[10]

While Byzantine building inscriptions, like those on the walls of Constantinople, commemorating the erection or the repair of fortification works, generally appear very laconic, the diction of the aristoratic epitaphs, or of the founders' inscriptions, can be relatively rich, using well-established formulas and expressions. Epigraphic language is frequently conservative, sometimes even fossilized, and it would also seem that in Byzantium, the text is generally fairly traditional in comparison to the monument. If the inscribed epitaph is usually related to a man and tells about the man, the monument with decorations, symbols and other references is more likely to present a reflection of the Christian universe.

The above considerations are enough to suggest that there was no interruption in the epigraphic culture after antiquity and that inscriptions were still both produced and respected in Byzantium. This conclusion seems to be corroborated by still further evidence. It is well known that stone materials from ancient buildings were frequently reused to build churches and monasteries. In such cases, it often happened that old stone blocks were consciously inserted into walls with the inscribed face on the outside. But a more remarkable testimony of the persistence of writing is provided by the

10 Mango 1991, 242-6.

copies of inscriptions preserved in compilations such as the *Palatine Anthology* and elsewhere. Many epitaphs in verse as well as other epigraphic documents are known from such sources. While a part of this evidence may never have been really engraved or painted anywhere, being instead newly composed literary epigrams, there are a number of pieces which evidently reproduce authentic inscriptions – some of the originals still exist. Considering that most of the documents preserved in copies have disappeared, one may suppose that many of them had originally been painted on walls. On the other hand, a great number of the ninth or tenth century epigrams in the *Palatine Anthology* seem to draw on church contexts (icons, liturgical objects and other decorations).

In conclusion, early Byzantine epigraphy appears as a logical continuation of ancient epigraphic culture. It frequently manifested itself in quite new forms but it never died out. Despite the considerable drop in the production of inscriptions, the culture of inscribing survived. The many novelties which we may observe probably often result from changes in mentality as well as from new ways of communication and interaction. As for the question of whether epigraphy can tell us something about early Byzantine cities, I should say that the number and type of preserved inscriptions probably suggest that considerable changes in city life were going on, but they can hardly be used to show that the Byzantine city was collapsing or heading towards decline.

Abbreviations used:

Durliat 1995 = J. Durliat, 'Épigraphie et société. Problèmes de méthode', in: G. Cavallo – C. Mango (a cura di), *Epigrafia medievale greca e latina. Ideologia e funzione* (Biblioteca del «Centro per il collegamento degli studi medievali e umanistici in Umbria» 11), Spoleto 1995, 169-196.

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