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THE PRESENCE AND IMPORTANCE OF BEAUTY IN THE BYZANTINE EPIGRAMS ABOUT THE CROSS AND THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS CHRIST: SOME BASIC OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract: Scholar poetry, particularly the epigram, has been a literary means of expression not only of ideas and attitudes about life but also of religious sentiment and profound religious faith. Delving into the epigrams of the second category, particularly those related to the Cross and the Crucifixion, our attention will be focused on the presence of beauty, its meaning, and the role it played within the category of Byzantine epigrams. The aim of this article is to identify relevant epigrams (by anonymous or known writers), make some basic observations and reach certain conclusions regarding the issue of beauty.

Keywords: Byzantium, Byzantine scholar poetry, Byzantine epigram, Cross, Crucifixion, Christ, Cross wood, Byzantine MicroArt, Staurotheke, Valuable Material, Beauty, Body of Christ

... και τὴν ρυπωθεῖσαν εἰκόνα
εἰς τὸ ἀρχαῖον ἀναμορφώσας,
τῷ θεῷ κάλλει συγκατέμειξεν ...

Kontakion of the feast of the triumph of Orthodoxy

The concept of beauty was held in high regard by the Greeks and Romans of classical antiquity, and it was thus the subject of various debates.¹ The ancient conception of beauty can easily be observed in the form of ancient Greek and Roman statues.² Over time, the concept of beauty³ which is linked with what is beautiful to look at according to scholastic philosophy in the Western Medieval world was adopted by the eastern part of the Medieval world into the Byzantine conceptual

¹ Plato would say that beauty is the brightness of the true (See more Ευδοκμῶφ 1980, 11). In the work *Ἰππίας μείζων* (Hippias Major), one of Plato's early dialogues (circa 390 B.C.), Socrates and Hippias set out to find a definition for "beauty".

² Νοῦς ὑγιής ἐν σώματι ὑγιῖ / *Mens sana in corpore sano*. (A healthy mind equals a healthy body).

³ Of course, the concept and importance of beauty would be the focus of many philosophers, poets, and scientists later on. Albert Einstein, for example, thought that beauty hides in mystery and the emotion that this creates in a person (see Fadiman 1990, 6). John Keats, furthermore, wrote that truth is beauty and this is the only thing that man needs to know on earth (see Keats 1953, vol. II, 282–284).

sphere, after having been further influenced by the Aristotelian thought⁴ that beauty is not only an aesthetic reality but a supernatural one because it can be deceitful and can lure people away from truth and goodness by masking immorality.⁵

According to Byzantine thinking, people's inherent longing for beauty⁶ is manifested through the absolute Beauty of God⁷, in particular of Jesus, who is the human face of God and thus constitutes the absolute divine beauty.⁸ It is exactly this total Beauty of Christ that can be observed in artistic portrayals⁹ such

⁴ Worth mentioning is Aristotle's idea about the problem of artistic truth, where an artist does not simply reproduce the tangible world around him; the artist has the ability to reveal the deeper nature of things and to decode unrevealed aspects of being. In a nutshell, he believed that art must not totally resemble things and their outward appearance, underlying the real task of a poet (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 9: [1451a36–38] φανερόν δὲ ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ὅτι οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τοῦτο ποιητοῦ ἔργον ἐστίν, ἀλλ' οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. [1451b1–4] ἂν τὰ Ἡροδότου εἰς μέτρα τεθῆναι καὶ οὐδὲν ἦττον ἂν εἴη ἱστορία τις μετὰ μέτρου ἢ ἄνευ μέτρου· ἀλλὰ τοῦτω διαφέρει, τῷ τὸν μὲν τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τὸν δὲ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο).

⁵ At this point, it is worth clarifying the ambiguity that comes with the concept of Beauty since this is manipulated evilly to lure the human heart, which in turn is transformed into a battlefield between Good and Evil. A fine example of this is the biblical passage regarding the tree with the forbidden yet visually tempting fruits (ἐφύτευσεν ὁ Θεὸς καὶ ἐξανάτειλεν ἐκ τῆς γῆς πᾶν ξύλον [tree] ὡραῖον εἰς ὄρασιν καὶ καλὸν εἰς βρώσιν. *Gen.* 2, 8–14). Regarding the general question of Evil in western and eastern medieval (theological) thought, see Ματσούκας 2017 and Γιανναράς 2009².

⁶ Basil the Great says that “φυσικῶς ἐπιθυμητικοὶ τῶν καλῶν οἱ ἄνθρωποι” (*Ὅροι κατὰ πλάτος*, PG 31, 912AB). I should also mention *Φιλοκαλία* (*Philokalia* = love for beauty), an ascetic collection with the works of Origen, co-authored by Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzos which intends to show that a spiritual eremite does not only have to be good but also beautiful, carrying divine beauty within him in other words. After all, as noted by Gregory of Nazianzos, God made human a carrier of His radiance (Γρηγορίου Θεολόγου, *Βίβλος Β΄, Ἔπη Ἱστορικά*, PG 37, 1327). On the works of Origen, one of the founders of Alexandrian School alongside Clement of Alexandria, see Ματσούκας 2001 104–106, Koetschau 1899–1959 and *ΘHE* 12, 573–595, while for *Φιλοκαλία* see *ODB* III, 1656–1657.

⁷ Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite mentions that one of the names attributed to God is also Beauty (*Εκκλησιαστικὴ Ἱεραρχία*, PG 3, 436). It should also be remembered that Orthodox Theologians always saw the cognitive function of icons on the language of the beauty in God's personal revelation, surpassing, in this way, the objectification of concepts in the use of common language features. Thus, they reached the identification of the knowledge of God with the experience of the ‘mental beauty’ theory of God (see, Ψευδο-Διονύσιος, *Εκκλησιαστικὴ Ἱεραρχία*, PG 3, 473 B).

⁸ A beauty that is shown to us through the Grace of the Holy Spirit (see Ευδοκιμῶφ 1980, 20). On the divine beauty of God, Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit (Ὁ μὲν Υἱὸς ἐν τῷ Πατρὶ, ὡς τὸ ἐπὶ τῆς εἰκόνας κάλλος ἐν τῇ ἀρχετύπῳ μορφῇ· ὁ δὲ Πατὴρ ἐν τῷ Υἱῷ, ὡς ἐν τῇ εἰκόνι ἑαυτοῦ, τὸ πρωτότυπον κάλλος: Grerory of Nyssa, PG 45, 448· τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ὡς ἢ ἐν τῷ Υἱῷ ἐρχομένη βασιλεία τοῦ Πατρὸς, ἢ πλήρως ἀποκαλύπτουσα τὸ τριαδικὸ κάλλος: Maximos the Confessor, PG 91, 701) and in general on the relation between God and beauty see Καρδαμάκης 2007, 51–91.

⁹ Throughout the Byzantine era (with a small interval during Iconoclasm), language and image are intertwined since language is evidence and image is illustration. Iconography can be characterized as visual theology since image seems to carry an iconographic task, the static and depictive representation of the Divine Plan. On the development of iconography, see Ευδοκιμῶφ 1980, 131–

as icons,¹⁰ various pieces of Byzantine microart, as well as different literary works, including the sacred religious epigrams that are the focus of this article.

Through the analysis of Byzantine epigrams about the Cross and the Crucifixion (from the 4th to the 15th century), a fascinating idea regarding the beauty of Christ on the Cross during His time of passion emerges in four epigrams dating back to the 10th and 11th centuries. As regards the beauty of the crucified and dead Christ, the epigram that was found on the staurotheke of Limburg says¹¹ “Ὁὐ κάλλος εἶχεν ὁ κρεμασθεὶς ἐν ξύλῳ, / ἀλλ’ ἦν ὠραῖος κάλλει Χριστὸς καὶ θνήσκων”.¹² This is the 8-line, 12-syllable epigram¹³ engraved on the front part of the reliquary,¹⁴ and judging by its content, it was embellished following an order by (πρόεδρος) Basil Lekapenos,¹⁵ one of the most prominent and interesting figures of 10th century Byzantium.

A second such case, also focused on in this article, concerns a 10th century epigram as well, also engraved on a staurotheke¹⁶ which deals with κάλλους τὸ τερπνὸν¹⁷ that gushes out of Ὑλης τὸ λαμπρὸν καὶ σοφὸν τὸ τῆς τέχνης,¹⁸ since

137, while on Iconoclasm see e.g. Ευδοκιμῶφ 1980, 151–156· Anastos 1954· Barber 1993· Barber 2002· Brubaker 2014· Brubaker/Haldon 2001· Cormack 1988· Lawler 2004, 156–157· Θεοχάρης 2016, 265–289.

¹⁰ The view by Maximos the Confessor is indicative, according to which an icon is distinguished into three levels of knowledge, the *αἴσθησις* – sense – (the materiality of the icon), the *λόγος* – rationale (the logical power of the human to verbalize synesthetic information and transform it in epistemic knowledge) and the *νοῦς* – mind – (the realization of the truth). For more information, see Γιανναράς 2017⁸, 336–341.

¹¹ For more information on the “journey” of the staurotheke from the Byzantine imperial vault to the palace in Constantinople (probably the Pharos Church or Nea Ekklesia – New Church) until its transfer to the West after the fourth Crusade in 1204 by knight Heinrich von Ulmen and its establishment in the cathedral of the German town of Limburg, see Kuhn 1976· Kuhn 1984.

¹² Epigram 1, lines 1–2.

¹³ For more information about Byzantine dodecasyllabic verse and its characteristics, see Maas 1903 and Rhoby, 2011.

¹⁴ The reliquary of Limburg, a true masterpiece of Byzantine microart, contains a piece of the wood of the Cross and ten more pieces of remains of Jesus (part of the Swaddling Clothes, the Thorny Wreath, the Shroud, the Towel [*lention*], the Purple Garment and Sponge), of the Virgin Mary (part of the *maphorion* and two pieces of the waistband, one from the Diocese of Zila and the other from the Church of Chalkoprateia) and of John the Baptist (relics of his sacred hairs). For more information see Klein 2004, 105–112· Klein 2009, 13–30· Köder 1989, 165–184· Pentcheva 2008, 75–83· Rauch/zu Schweinsberg/Wilm 1955· Rhoby 2010, 163–166 (no. Me 8), 499 (im. 25)· Hostetler 2012· Talbot Rice 1994, 104, 107, 111.

¹⁵ For information on the family of Lekapenos see *ODB* II, 1203–1204 and for Basil Lekapenos as the order-placer of masterpieces see Μπούρα 1989. Re: the title πρόεδρος see Diehl 1924 and Oikonomides 1972, 299.

¹⁶ See Frolow 1961, 229 (no. 126).

¹⁷ Epigram 2, line 2.

¹⁸ Epigram 2, line 1.

the anonymous epigram-writer is trying to emphasize the importance and grandeur of the Cross through the staurotheke's valuable materials and the beauty that these exude¹⁹ — beauty that is only equivalent to the body of the crucified Christ and that can only be represented through the unprecedented art and craft of these valuable materials.²⁰ This is the reason why it can be safely assumed that in this case, much like the Limburg staurotheke, it must be an order by a prominent and powerful—though unnamed—figure in the epigram.

In the next epigram from the 11th century, the epigram maker explicitly mentions the beauty not only of the wood of the Cross (Ὠραῖον εἰς ὄρασιν ὀφθὲν τὸ ξύλον),²¹ but of the Christ Himself, who although crucified σαρκικῶς θανὼν ξύλῳ,²² maintains His original beauty owing to His divine essence (ὠραῖος ὦν κάλλει δὲ θείας οὐσίας).²³ This is yet another case of an epigram engraved on the cross (with enamel), an order by Romanos,²⁴ who, in his capacity as γῆς δεσπότης and ὠραιότησιν ἀρετῶν ἐστεμμένος,²⁵ had the cross embellished with precious gemstones,²⁶ leaving perhaps the impression that he can be compared to Christ Himself.²⁷ Consequently, it can be observed that once again the concept of beauty

¹⁹ At this point, I would like to point out that gold, being the clearest and most valuable of all metals given its anti-oxidation quality, cannot be decomposed or damaged and was thus used extensively by Byzantine artists to establish the transcendental nature of God as well as His spirituality, a recurring element in Byzantine art in general. For more information on the beauty of valuable materials in Byzantine art and their timeless attraction to Byzantine people, see Cameron 2015, 153–182· Robinson 2011. For general information on the use importance of gold and other valuable metals in Byzantine art, see Franses 2003· Πανσελήνου 2000, 276 and 83–84 (regarding the particular interest of Byzantine artists in using valuable materials, like gold and silver, on their mosaics) Cormack 1985· Sendler 2014, 211–213 (on the use of gold)· Durand 2004· Grabar 1975· Holmes 1934 (on valuable stones in medieval art in general). Regarding the role and importance of the colors see James 1996, 74, 83, 85, 88, 108–109, 114–115, 125–127· Πανσελήνου 2000, 267–279· Sendler 2014, 179–201· Pentcheva 2007, 128–129· Michelis 1957, and Sendler 2014, 208–213 (on the theory of Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite on the light, colors and gold in Byzantine iconography) Meyerson 1957· Portal 1975· Itten 1975· Gage 1993.

²⁰ On the role and symbolism of colors, light and embellishment with precious stones and gold to portray divine beauty in Byzantine art, see Πανσελήνου 2000, 267–279· James 1996 and Cameron 2015, 157–158, on byzantine and western art see Eco 2018 a, 99–129. On the representation of the passion and suffering of Christ on the cross (in western art), see Eco 2018 b, 49–55.

²¹ Epigram 3, line 1.

²² Epigram 3, line 4.

²³ Epigram 3, line 3.

²⁴ This could possibly refer to Romanos III Argyros (1028–1034) [see *ODB* III, 1807 and *HΘE* 10, 923] or Romanos IV Diogenes (1068–1071) [see *ODB* III, 1807 and *HΘE* 10, 923–924]. For more information, see Rhoby 2010, 303–305 (no. Me 111), 521 (im. 86).

²⁵ Epigram 3, lines 5–6.

²⁶ Epigram 3, line 7 (χάρισιν ὠραῖσε τιμίων λίθων).

²⁷ For general information on art in the service of impressionism, lecture and emotion in Byzantine and western art, see Γιανναράς 2010⁴, 138–156.

of the crucified Christ corresponds with the beauty of the valuable materials used for the embellishment of the cross.

The final epigram, created by John Mauropous (11th century), deals with the lost beauty of Christ on the Cross. The epigram maker depicts the mourning of the Virgin Mary and His student John through his lyrics.²⁸ The poet mentions the lost beauty of the crucified Christ²⁹ in order to emphasize his mental collapse, since Christ is seen *vñn òs kakou̅rgon eĩs àrās xùlon*.³⁰

Considering these four epigrams, some observations can safely be drawn regarding the idea of beauty of the crucified Christ. The first of these observations concerns the dating of these epigrams, which spans only two centuries—the 10th and 11th. These are the only two centuries that produced this particular idea in engraved epigrams on crosses and staurotheke. This brings us to the second observation, one that might shed some light on why these two centuries were productive of the idea of the (divine) beauty of Christ’s body on the Cross. Historically, this is a period during which there were ongoing attacks on the eastern border(s) of the Byzantine Empire by the Arabs³¹—attacks which were successfully fought off by the Byzantine army³² with the divine help of the staurotheke and the crosses carried by the troops for protection,³³ much like what happened with the Limburg staurotheke. On top of all these facts is the actual placing of the orders for the creation of such valuable objects and their engraved epigrams by prominent and powerful figures holding key positions in the Byzantine hierarchy; people who did not hesitate to compare themselves to Christ or ask for His help in realizing His divine plan as His representative on Earth.³⁴ As a result, this

²⁸ Epigram 4, lines 8–9 (*μήτηρ δὲ θρηνεῖ καὶ σὸς ἡγαπημένος, / μόνοι παρόντες τῶν πρὸ μικροῦ σοι φίλων*).

²⁹ Epigram 4, line 7 (*ἀπῆλθεν εἶδος· κάλλος οὐκ ἔχεις ἔτι*).

³⁰ Epigram 4, line 6.

³¹ On the Arabs’ domination in the Mediterranean basin from the 7th century and on, and on their conflicts with the Byzantines and the consequences see indicatively Gallina 2016, 75–116· Frale 2018, 112–113 and 117–122 for the 9th century. On relationships, peaceful and warring, between the two worlds, Islam and Byzantium, see Ahrweiler-Glykatzki 1962, 28–32· Σαββίδης 1990²· Σαββίδης 2004³· Canard 1964· Canard 1966· Canard 1973· Miles 1964· Vasiliev/Canard 1968.

³² At this point it is worth noting that these attacks by the Byzantine army against peoples of other religions such as the Arabs in the 10th century were done under a heavy feeling of religious righteousness and they bore similarities to the crusades with slogans such as *Ὁ Χριστός νικά* – Christ wins (see Αρβελέρ 1989, 2 and Κόλια-Δερμιτζάκη 1989, 39–41).

³³ Hostetler 2016, 74–75· Καραγιάννη 2010, 66–67.

³⁴ An indicative example is the case of Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (See in detail Αρβελέρ 1989). Generally, in Byzantium the idea that the Byzantine emperor was imitator of God and particularly of Christ (see Angelov 2007, 79) was not uncommon; we can also see this in public documents that attempt to emphasize imperial generosity (see Hunger 1964, 228–230). Moreover, this idea is quite clear in Byzantine art (see Grabar 1936, 112–122· Magdalino/Nelson 1982, 132–133).

specific type of beauty of Christ is incorporated in this rationale and in this self-interest ideology (this is evidence for the simultaneous use of valuable materials and their connection to the representation of the beauty of the crucified Christ).

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that this idea of divine beauty was not an idea unusual or unfamiliar to epigram-makers in Byzantium. On the contrary, they were aware of the corresponding sacred passages, such as the one in *Genesis* about the ζύλον ὠραῖον εἰς ὄρασιν,³⁵ the one in *Isaiah* (Ἡσαΐα) about the mishaps and the cathartic atonement of human kind through the sacrifice of Christ, where οὐκ ἔστιν εἶδος αὐτῶ οὐδὲ δόξα· καὶ εἶδομεν αὐτόν, καὶ οὐκ εἶχεν εἶδος οὐδὲ κάλλος,³⁶ and finally, the ones in the *Psalms* of David.³⁷ A number of theologians also refer to divine beauty in their writings starting with the acknowledgment of God as the καλλοποιός αἰτία (= the reason that creates beauty) of the essence of all beings, life, *Logos* (thus Christ) and His visual realization³⁸ and connect it to the light and the ἐκστατικό θεῖο ἔρωτα (= ecstatic love of God).³⁹ This never-ending beauty and light characterizes Christ,⁴⁰ the Son of God, who is surrounded by admiration and bewilderment (πῶς οὖν θεωρῶ, δημιουργε Χριστέ μου, / σταυρούμενόν σε; φεῦ· τι τοῦτο; ...⁴¹), in expectation of the saving of the world⁴² ἡττῶν δι' αὐτοῦ δαίμονας καὶ βαρβάρους,⁴³ and who expresses the love of the faithful flock towards this beauty.⁴⁴ What is observed is the particular

³⁵ *Gen.* 2, 9 – Ὁραῖον εἰς ὄρασιν ὄφθην τὸ ζύλον (Epigram 3, line 1).

³⁶ *Is.* 53, 2 – Οὐ κάλλος εἶχεν ὁ κρεμασθεὶς ἐν ζύλῳ, /... οὐκ εἶδος εἶχεν, ... (Epigram 1, lines 1 and 3).

³⁷ *Ps.* 44, 3 (Ὁραῖος κάλλει παρὰ τοὺς υἱοὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων).

³⁸ Gregory Palamas, *Πρὸς Βαρλαάμ Β'* 32, ed. Meyendorff (Ἦ μὲν ἐστὶν αὐτὸς οὐσία, ..., καὶ δύναμις καλλοποιός, καὶ νοεῖται καὶ λέγεται καὶ ἀποδεικνύεται).

³⁹ On beauty and light in Byzantine theology-philosophy see Ματσούκας 2001, 276–282. On the ἐκστατικό θεῖο ἔρωτα see Γιανναράς 1983¹, 107–115· Γιανναράς 2006², 124–140· Ευδοκίμωφ 1980, 18.

⁴⁰ On the body of Christ who as φωτός λυχνία ... ὑπὸ γῆν ὡς ὑπὸ μόδιον κρύπτεται, καὶ διώκει τὸν ἐν Ἄδι σκοτασμόν (Τριῶδιον, Μ. Σάββατον προί [ἐσπέρας Μ. Παρασκευῆς), Ἐγκώμια, Στάσις α') see Βασιλειάδης 2010, 198–202. On the idea of Christ as the source of light of the salvation for all the Christians see Αγγελιδάκης 2016, 17–21 and 53–61.

⁴¹ Epigram 4, lines 3–4.

⁴² Epigram 4, line 5 (σωτήρα κόσμου προσδοκῶν σε μακρόθεν).

⁴³ Epigram 3, line 8.

⁴⁴ “Ὁ ἐμὸς ἔρωτς ἐσταύρωται” writes Bishop Ignatios (Ἀρεοπαγιτικὸς Συγγραφεὺς, *Περὶ θείων ὀνομάτων* 4 XII, PG 3, 709 AB). Expectedly, it would be a neglect if the beauty of the resurrected Christ were not praised since ὠραῖος ἐκ τάφου ὡς νυμφίος ἐκ παστοῦ, πεπόρευσαι, θανάτου καταλύσας, τὴν τυραννίδα Χριστέ, καὶ τοῦ Ἄδου τοὺς μοχλοὺς, συνέτριψας δυνάμει θεϊκῇ, καὶ τῆς Ἐγέρσεώς σου, τῷ φωτὶ τῷ νοητῷ, καταυγάσας κόσμον (Πεντηκοστάριον, Κυριακὴ Σαμαρείτιδος, Κανὼν, Ψδὴ θ', Τροπ. β'). This beauty of the Christ figure is generally seen in His portrayal in churches and icons (see Καλλίνικος 1958², 264–265).

significance of the beauty of the crucified Christ⁴⁵ as this is conceptualized by the faithful people through its mapping on the concept of light, truth, benevolence⁴⁶ and finally, salvation; all manifested in the face of the crucified Christ.

Abbreviations

BZ = *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*
DOP = *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*
ΕΕΒΣ = *Ἐπετηρὶς Ἐταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν*
ODB = *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*
PG = *Patrologia Graeca*
RH = *Revue Historique*
ΘΗΕ = *Θρησκευτικὴ καὶ Ἠθικὴ Ἐγκυκλοπαιδεία*

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⁴⁵ This beauty has an impact on the hymn writer as well since he writes that ὁ ὄραϊος κάλλει παρά πάντας βροτούς / ὡς ἀνείδεος νεκρός καταφαίνεται, / ὁ τὴν φύσιν ὠραΐσας τοῦ παντός (*Ἐγκόμια στον Ὁρθρο τοῦ Μεγάλου Σαββάτου, Στάση α΄, Ἦχος πλ. α΄*. See Δετοράκης, Βυζαντινὴ Ὑμνογραφία 179), as well as ἡ ἀπείρανδρος ἀγνή Παρθένος, / ἔκλαιεν ὀρώς τὸ κάλλος σου / καὶ τὸ εἶδος τῆς μορφῆς σου σκυθρωπὸν (*Ἀνέκδοτα Μεγαλυνάρια τοῦ Μεγάλου Σαββάτου, Στάσις β΄*, 34. See Δετοράκης 1997, 227).

⁴⁶ Notable is the connection of the beauty element with light, truth and benevolence also seen in *Synaxaria*. The writers emphasize it extensively in their descriptions of the looks and personality of the female martyrs. Examples include the saint and martyr Catherine, who was ὠραία πολλὰ καὶ μεγαλόσωμος (see Νικόδημος 1989, II 182) and saint and martyr Kalliope, who διαλάμπουσα κατὰ τὸ κάλλος τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τὴν ὠραιότητα τοῦ σώματος (see Νικόδημος 1989, V 194).

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Appendix – Epigrams and Translations⁴⁷

1 (10th century, 920)

Οὐ κάλλος εἶχεν ὁ κρεμασθεὶς ἐν ξύλῳ,
ἀλλ' ἦν ὠραῖος κάλλει Χριστὸς καὶ θνήσκων
οὐκ εἶδος εἶχεν, ἀλλ' ἐκαλλώπιζέ μου
τὴν δυσθέατον ἐξ ἁμαρτίας θέαν
Θεὸς γὰρ ὢν ἔπασχεν ἐν βροτῶν φύσει
ὄν Βασίλειος <ὁ> πρόεδρος ἐξόχως
σέβων ἐκαλλώπ<ι>σε τὴν θήκην ξύλου,
ἐν ᾧ ταυνοθεὶς εἴκυσεν πᾶσαν κτίσιν.⁴⁸

5

Translation

*He did not have beauty, the one suspended on wood,
but Christ was complete with beauty even while dying;
he did not have form, but he beautified my
unprepossessing countenance caused by sin;
for being God, he suffered in the nature of mortals.
Worshipping especially him, Basileios the proedros
beautified the reliquary of wood,
on which having been stretched, (Christ) drew up all creation.⁴⁹*

5

2 (10th century ?)⁵⁰

Ἔγλης τὸ λαμπρὸν καὶ σοφὸν τὸ τῆς τέχνης,
κάλλους τὸ τερπνόν, σχήματος τὸ ποικίλον,
τῶν ἔνδον ἢ βλύζουσα θαυματουργία,
τοῦ δημιουργήσαντος ὁ ζέων πόθος
ὑπερφέρουσι τῆς κιβωτοῦ τῆς πάλαι
ὄσφ γὰρ αὐτὰ τῶν πρὶν ἐξηρημένα,
μείζων τοσοῦτ' ἢ πίστις ἢ Θεοφάνου[ς]
προσευκτικὸν σκῆνωμα τῶν αἰτημάτων
τεύξασα, καλλύνασα τοῦτο ἐπὶ πόθῳ
εἰς ψυχικὴν κάθαρσιν, εἰς βίου σκέπην.

5

10

Translation

*The gloriousness of the material and the wisdom of the art,
the pleasure of beauty, the versatility of the shape,*

⁴⁷ All the translations are by the author of this article except the first one.

⁴⁸ Rhoby 2010, 166–169 (no. Me 9), 499 (im. 26).

⁴⁹ For the translation of this epigram see Hostetler 2016, 164–165.

⁵⁰ According to A. Frolov (Frolov 1961, 229 [no. 126]) this epigram could possibly date back to the 9th century.

*the miracle that gushes out from within
 the fiery love from the one creating it
 surpass the old ark, 5
 because as long as these are superior to the old ones,
 the greater is the faith of Theophanes,
 which made a relic with the prayer in his plea,
 embellishing it with love
 for the atonement of his soul, the protection of his life. 10*

3 (11th century, 1028–1034 or 1068–1071)

Ὠραῖον εἰς ὄρασιν ὄφθ' ἐν τῷ ξύλῳ
 γέυσει με νεκροῖ τὸν Θεοῦ κατ' εἰκόνα·
 ὠραῖος ὢν κάλλει δὲ θείας οὐσίας
 ζωοῖ με Χριστὸς σαρκικῶς θανὼν ξύλῳ
 οὐ τήνδε θήκην Ῥωμανὸς γῆς δεσπότης 5
 ὠραιότησιν ἀρετῶν ἐστεμμένους
 χάρισιν ὠραῖσε τιμίων λίθων
 ἡτῶν δι' αὐτοῦ δαίμονας καὶ βαρβάρους.⁵¹

Translation

*The wood that looked beautiful
 killed me, the image of God, through pleasure (of the forbidden fruit)
 He who was beautiful because of the beauty of His divine essence
 Christ, who gives me life by deadening His flesh on the wood
 for whom this staurotheke, Romanos, sovereign of the earth, 5
 wreathed with the beauty of virtues
 embellished with the grace of precious gemstones,
 winning with this wood over demons and barbarians.*

4 (11th century, John Metropolitan of Euchaita / John Mauropous)

Εἰς τὴν σταύρωσιν
 Νῦξ ταῦτα· καὶ γὰρ ἥλιον κρύπτει σκότος,
 ἀχλὺς δὲ πληροῖ πάντα καὶ βαθὺς ζόφος.
 πῶς οὖν θεωρῶ, δημιουργὲ Χριστέ μου,
 σταυρούμενόν σε; φεῦ· τί τοῦτο; καὶ πόθεν 5
 σωτήρα κόσμου προσδοκῶν σε μακρόθεν,
 νῦν ὡς κακοῦργον εἰς ἀρᾶς ξύλον βλέπω;
 ἀπῆλθεν εἶδος· κάλλος οὐκ ἔχεις ἔτι·
 μήτηρ δὲ θρηνεῖ καὶ σὸς ἡγαπημένος,
 μόνοι παρόντες τῶν πρὸ μικροῦ σοι φίλων.
 φροῦδοι μαθηταί· καὶ πτερωτοὶ δ' οἰκέται 10

⁵¹ Epigram on cross made of enamel. Rhoby 2010, 303–305 (no. Me 111), 521 (im. 86).

μάτην περιτρέχουσι μεστοὶ δακρῶν·
 οὐ γὰρ βοηθεῖν εὐποροῦσι τῷ πάθει.
 μέγας δ' ἄπεστι σὸς πατήρ παντοκράτωρ,
 μόνον λιπὼν σε ταῦτα πάσχειν ὡς λέγεις,
 καίτοι προεῖπες οὐχὶ λειφθῆναι μόνος, 15
 συνόντος αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰ νῦν πάσχοντί σοι·
 ἀλλ' οὐκ ἄπεστι· πνεῦμα σὸν γὰρ λαμβάνει,
 συνευδοκῶν τε καὶ συνών σοι, καὶ φέρων
 υἱοῦ τελευταῖον ἡγαπημένου βλέπειν.
 δεῖ γὰρ με, δεῖ, σοὶ συνθανεῖν, εὐεργέτα, 20
 ὡς συμμετασχῶ τῆς ἐγέρσεως πάλιν.
 οὕτως ἔδοξε· τοῦτο τῆς εὐσπλαγχνίας
 ὑμῶν πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἡ μεγίστη χρηστότης.
 εὐγνωμονοῦμεν· πλὴν τάχυνον ἐκ τάφου.
 σπεύσεις δὲ πάντως· ἥλιος γὰρ ἐνθάδε, 25
 ὁ πρὶν ζοφωθείς καὶ κρυβείς, εἰς σὴν χάριν
 ἔλαμψε φαιδρὸν αὐθις ἀνθ' ἑωσφόρου,
 σὲ τὸν μέγιστον ἥλιον προμηνύων
 ἐκ γῆς ἀνασχεῖν φῶς τε πέμψειν αὐτίκα.
 ἴδοιμεν οὖν λάμποντα καὶ σέ, Χριστέ μου, 30
 ὥσπερ τὸ σὸν ποίημα, τὴν νῦν ἡμέραν,
 δι' ἧς ὀρώμεν τούσδε τοὺς θεῖους τύπους,
 καὶ σοὶ συναστράφοιμεν ἐκ γῆς καὶ τάφων.⁵²

Translation

At the crucifixion
It is the night, since darkness covers the sun
the sea mist floods everything, and the gloom is thick.
How can I see you, my Creator Christ
crucified? Alas, what is this? Why
expecting you for a long time as the savior of the world, 5
I now see you as a villain on the cursed wood?
Your figure is lost, you no longer have beauty.
Your mother is mourning and so is your favorite student,
the only ones who are present from the ones you used to call your friends.
Your students have gone, and your winged servants (angels) 10
wander aimlessly full of tears,
since they cannot help you in your passion.
Your father, the great Almighty, is also gone
leaving you to suffer through all this on your own, as you say,
although you have said that you will not be left alone, 15
that he will be with you and suffer alongside you.
He is not absent, though, because he receives your spirit,
after approving, he is with you and tolerates
to witness his beloved son's death.
I must, then, I must, my benefactor, die with you, 20

⁵² De Lagarde/Bollig 1882 (= 1979), 5–6 (no. 7)· Πιτσινέλης, 1999–2000, 270.

to be a part of your resurrection.

*It seemed right, this is the utmost kindness
your mercy to us.*

We are grateful to you. Hurry to get out of your grave, though.

you will hurry, no doubt, because the sun here

25

that was dark before and was hidden, for your grace

is once again bright, instead of the morning star

announcing that you are again the brightest sun

you will rise from the earth and immediately send your light.

May we see you radiant, my Christ,

30

like your creation, this day,

through which we see these holy icons,

and may we shine with you arising from earth and from our graves.

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