

# Introduction

## I.

Among the select number of Byzantine images of the Virgin that, upon their transfer to Western Europe, came to be attributed to the paintbrush of the evangelist Luke is a delicate, small icon now housed in the Diözesanmuseum at Freising (Plate 1, Figure 0.1).<sup>1</sup> Measuring no more than 27.8 × 21.5 cm, the icon shows a half-length figure of Mary turned slightly to the right, with her hands raised in prayer, gently gazing out at the spectator. The figure’s halo and background are covered by a silver-gilt revetment that, apart from the standard abbreviated appellation Μήτηρ Θεοῦ (“Mother of God”), bears an additional label identifying the compassionate mediatrix as ἡ Ἐλπίς τῶν Ἀπελπισμένων (“the Hope of the Hopeless”). A series of ten enamel medallions, symmetrically and hierarchically arranged, adorn the icon’s broad frame, also made of gilded silver. Those at the top depict the *Hetoimasia*, the throne prepared for the Second Coming of Christ, flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. The apostles Peter and Paul and the great martyrs George and Demetrios are at the sides, while the doctor saints Cosmas, Panteleimon, and Damian – the latter’s figure now missing – occupy the bottom. Alternating with the medallions are ten plaques containing a poetic inscription lettered in enamel.

Ψυχῆς πόθος, ἄργυρος καὶ χρυσὸς τρίτος  
 σοὶ τῇ καθαρᾷ προσφέρονται παρθένω·  
 ἄργυρος μέντοι καὶ χρυσοῦ φύσις ὄντως  
 δέξαιτο ῥύπον ὡς ἐν φθαρτῇ οὐσίᾳ·  
 5 ἐκ δὲ ψυχῆς ὁ πόθος ὦν ἀθανάτου  
 οὔτ’ ἂν σπίλον δέξαιτο οὔτε μὴν τέλος·  
 κἂν γὰρ λυθῇ τὸ σῶμα τοῦτ’ Ἀίδου τόπῳ,

<sup>1</sup> The icon is still displayed as a centerpiece of an elaborate seventeenth-century *Altarbühne*, originally installed in the cathedral at Freising. On the Freising *Lukasbild*, see Kalligas 1937; Wolters 1964; Grabar 1975b, 41–43 (no. 16); Baumstark 1998, cat. no. 84 (M. Restle); Buckton 2000, esp. 97–99; Vassilaki 2005b; *BEIÜ* II, no. Ik12.



Figure 0.1 Icon of the Virgin *Elpis tōn Apelpismenōn*, third quarter of the fourteenth century, Diözesanmuseum, Freising (photo: Diözesanmuseum, Freising). For the colour version, please refer to the plate section.

τοῦ τῆς ψυχῆς οἴκου σὲ δυσωπῶν μένει.  
κανστρίσιος ταῦτά σοι προσφέρων λέγει  
10 Μανουὴλ Δισύπατος τάξει λεβίτης·  
καὶ ταῦτα δέξαι συμπαθῶς, ὦ παρθένε,  
τὸν ρευστὸν τοῦτον ἀντιδιδοῦσα βίον  
ταί[ς σαῖ]ς διελθεῖν ἀνώδυνον πρεσβείαις  
ὥς ἡμέρας δείξειας καὶ φωτὸς τέ[κνον].

The desire of my soul, and silver, and thirdly gold are <here> offered to you, the pure Virgin. However, silver and gold could be stained since they are of perishable material, whereas the desire, coming from the immortal soul, could not be stained nor come to an end. For even if this body should dissolve in Hades, it [i.e., desire] will continue to entreat you for the mercy of my soul. Thus speaks the *kanstrisios* Manuel Dishypatos of the order of Levites [i.e., deacon] offering these <gifts> to you. Receive them compassionately, O Virgin, and grant in return that through your entreaties I may traverse this ephemeral life free from pain, so that you may show me as a child of the day and light.<sup>2</sup>

As revealed by X-radiography, underneath the paint surface of the Freising *Lukasbild* lies an earlier image of the Virgin which, hardly a product of the apostolic age, seems to be the work of an eleventh- or twelfth-century artist.<sup>3</sup> The sensitive, painterly brushwork of the second, visible layer, most evident in the manner in which expressive highlights are applied to Mary's face, suggests a mid- to late fourteenth-century date for the overpainting, a chronology that well accords with the formal, technical, and paleographic features of the revetment. As it would appear, the *kanstrisios* and deacon Manuel Dishypatos – probably to be identified with an official of the metropolis of Serres of the same name and rank, mentioned in a document of 1365<sup>4</sup> – had an older icon of the Virgin restored and further enhanced with the addition of a luxury adornment.<sup>5</sup> Given its intimate scale, the icon most likely served as Dishypatos' personal devotional image.

The enameled verses encircling Mary's figure pass over the restoration of the original painted panel in silence, drawing attention instead to the much more substantial gift of costly vermeil for the icon's revetment, if only to decry its worth. For silver and gold, valuable as they may appear, are found lacking when compared with *pothos* – love in the sense of desire, longing, or yearning – which the donor brings forth as an offering to the Virgin in

<sup>2</sup> Trans. Talbot 1999, 82 modified. Following Andreas Rhoby's proposal, presented at the conference, *Das Lukasbild – Strahlkraft über tausend Jahre* in Freising (21 April 2016), I read the final, damaged word of the inscription as τε[κνον]. The concluding line echoes 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

<sup>3</sup> Wolters 1964, esp. 87–88, 90. <sup>4</sup> *Actes de Lavra*, 3: 90–92 (no. 143). See also Laiou 1998, 209.

<sup>5</sup> In this, I follow the argument advanced by the late Titos Papamastorakis at the Twenty-Eighth Symposium of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Archaeology and Art of the Society for Christian Archaeology in Athens on May 17, 2008. Most previous discussions of the Freising *Lukasbild* unquestioningly accept the identification of the donor with Manuel Opsaras Dishypatos, a mid-thirteenth-century metropolitan of Thessalonike (*PLP*, no. 5544), first proposed by Kalligas 1937, 506. Attempts to reconcile the chronology resulting from this identification with that suggested by the stylistic features of the icon's metalwork, enamels, and overpainting have led to several erroneous reconstructions of the icon's history. See above n. 1.

its own right.<sup>6</sup> Unlike these precious yet perishable metals, Dishypatos' gift of *pothos* is as pure and immortal as his own soul. Aligned with this emphasis upon the constancy of desire is the motif of the perpetuity of prayer. Not even death, the verses declare, could silence the donor's *pothos* and put an end to its pleas for salvation. The voice of this *pothos* that will continue to pray even after the physical dissolution of the donor's body is, of course, that of the inscription – quite literally, I should add, as the verses record Dishypatos' address to the Virgin spoken in the first person. Perpetually enacted through the medium of text, this petition complements the silent intercession of the Mother of God continually praying on the donor's behalf through the medium of painting.

The kind of cohabitation and synergy between inscribed verses and visual forms that we see at work in the Freising *Lukasbild* was common in the Byzantine world. Countless objects, pictures, and monumental structures – things that we nowadays consider under the rubric of “Byzantine art” – featured poetic inscriptions, what the Byzantines would call *epigrammata*, or epigrams. In modern usage, the term *epigram* refers to “a short poem ending in a witty or ingenious turn of thought.”<sup>7</sup> Yet neither brevity nor witticism is a defining feature of a Byzantine epigram. Derived from the preposition ἐπὶ (“on” or “upon”) and the verb γράφω (“to write”), *epigramma* in Greek literally means “inscription.” Perfectly in accordance with this etymology, the epigram in Byzantine usage is defined primarily by its real or potential inscriptional use. It denotes a poetic text either written on an object or attached to another text as an introduction, dedication, colophon, or title.<sup>8</sup>

Despite irretrievable losses of monuments and artifacts, the number of Byzantine epigrams that can still be seen *in situ* is considerable. A recent assessment gives the figure of some twelve hundred verse inscriptions preserved from the period between 600 and 1500.<sup>9</sup> Complementing this sizable corpus are hundreds of epigrams that have been transmitted in manuscripts. Taken together, the inscriptional and manuscript evidence leaves no doubt that inscribed verse was a common, if not ubiquitous, sight in Byzantium. The range of objects that the Byzantines deemed worthy of poetic amplification is vast. Epigrams appear on icons and reliquaries, frame book illuminations, ornament sacred vessels and ecclesiastical

<sup>6</sup> To distinguish it from other kinds of love, I translate *pothos* as “desire.” The term's semantics are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

<sup>7</sup> *OED*, s.v. ‘epigram’. <sup>8</sup> Lauxtermann 2003, 26–34, 131–32; *BEIÜ* I, 37–45.

<sup>9</sup> *BEIÜ* I, 51. This figure does not include epigrams on seals.

textiles, run along church façades and punctuate monumental cycles of mosaic and fresco decoration. They are found on city walls, gates, and bridges. In the form of epitaphs, they grace tombs and funerary portraits.<sup>10</sup> Within a more intimate sphere of personal accouterments, they are displayed on headgear, staffs, articles of clothing, and especially on rings. An inkwell<sup>11</sup> may bear a verse inscription as well as a sword,<sup>12</sup> an astrolabe,<sup>13</sup> or a flask with antidote against a poisonous bite.<sup>14</sup> And a great many lead seals disclose the names of their owners in compressed poetic statements and invocations.<sup>15</sup> Depending on the setting and the materials used, epigrams may be executed in a range of techniques – painted or worked in mosaic, nielloed, incised, enameled, cast, hammered, carved in relief, or embroidered. Their length also varies. While couplets and quatrains are fairly common, poems running to more than fifty lines are not unattested.<sup>16</sup> Depending on the context and occasion, epigrams assume a variety of roles. Some function simply as identifying labels. Dedicatory epigrams, of which the poem on the Freising icon is an example, record acts of piety and munificence, mark ownership, praise the commissioner or the recipient of the dedication, or vocalize prayers to divine and saintly figures. Epitaphs commemorate the dead while giving solace to the living. Epigrams that come closest to a form of art criticism *avant la lettre* typically dramatize the act of viewing or describe, interpret, and evaluate the works they accompany. Others may offer moral exhortation, provide spiritual instruction, emotionally stir, or simply entertain.

<sup>10</sup> On Byzantine epitaphs, see especially Papadogiannakis 1984; Mango 1995; Lauxtermann 2003, 213–40; Rhoby 2011b. See also Brooks 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Grassi 1995; *BEIÜ* II, nos. Me71–Me72.

<sup>12</sup> *BEIÜ* II, nos. Me78, Me103, Me104, Me107; Prodromos, *Carmina historica*, no. LII, with De Gregorio 2010b; Philes, *Carmina* I, 114–15 (nos. CCXIV–CCXVI). See also van Opstall 2008b, 57–58.

<sup>13</sup> *BEIÜ* II, no. Me52.

<sup>14</sup> Philes, *Carmina* I, 370–71 (nos. CCIII–CCV); *Carmina* II, 186–87 (nos. CL–CLV); *Carmina inedita*, no. 4.

<sup>15</sup> For epigrams on seals, see Wassiliou-Seibt 2011; Feind 2012–13. See also Hunger 1988; Seibt and Wassiliou 2005.

<sup>16</sup> The expansive surfaces of buildings were, naturally, best suited to accommodate these lengthier poems. The well-known epigram (*AP* 1.10) carved around the walls of the sixth-century church of Saint Polyeuktos in Constantinople was 76 lines long. See Connor 1999; Whitby 2006 with earlier bibliography. Still longer, comprising 87 verses, was an epigram of c. 1389 in praise of Theodore I Palaiologos, despot of the Morea, inscribed on five pillars of the now destroyed church of the Virgin at Parori near Mistra. See Millet 1899, 150–54; Loenertz 1955; *BEIÜ* III, no. GR99. In all likelihood, an epigram encompassing no fewer than 145 verses was once displayed at the monastery of Christ *Pantokratōr* in Constantinople. See Chapter 1.

This book explores the multifaceted relationship between art and epigrammatic poetry in Byzantine culture, taking as its focus the realm of personal piety and its artistic and literary manifestations. The book examines the corpus of epigrams produced during the last centuries of the Byzantine Empire, roughly from the rise of the Komnenian dynasty in the late eleventh century to the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. For the sake of convenience, I shall refer to this period as “Later Byzantium.”<sup>17</sup> My investigation engages with a wealth of visual and textual material. I explore an array of works – icons and icon veils, reliquaries, liturgical textiles, church buildings, and others – that still feature verse inscriptions. Aside from epigrams preserved *in situ*, I also examine a number of poems transmitted in manuscripts. These include the collections of epigrams by Byzantine literati such as Nicholas Kallikles, Theodore Prodromos, the so-called Manganeios Prodromos, Theodore Balsamon, Maximos Planoudes, Manuel Philes, and Nikephoros Kallistou Xanthopoulos. In addition, I examine poems transmitted anonymously, most notably the impressive collection of unattributed epigrams, primarily dating from the twelfth century, which is preserved in the *Anthologia Marciana* (Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Ms. Marc. gr. 524).<sup>18</sup> The book’s geographical framework is equally broad. While Constantinople as the uncontested center of power and cultural production claims the lion’s share of the material discussed, I also investigate artifacts, monuments, and texts created in or associated with other locales and regions, from Ohrid and Mistra to Cyprus. In attending to a vast corpus of poems composed to mark, enhance, comment upon, or complement an object, this book is to a large extent concerned with the perennial questions of the relationship between image and word, art and text, the visual and the verbal. Yet the purview of my inquiry is much broader. Proceeding from close readings of later Byzantine epigrammatic poetry and from a detailed analysis of objects still bearing inscriptions in verse, this study aims to offer a fresh account of the interplay between art and devotion in the last centuries of Byzantium.

<sup>17</sup> The qualifier “Later” highlights the difference from “Late Byzantium,” a designation commonly used in scholarship in reference to the final period of Byzantine history, whether that period is taken to begin with the conquest of Constantinople by the forces of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 or with the reconquest of the city by the Byzantines in 1261.

<sup>18</sup> This anthology – arguably our key source on the artistic patronage of the twelfth-century aristocracy – was compiled by an anonymous scholar-scribe probably in the years between 1280 and 1290. See Spingou 2012, 8–71; Spingou 2014. See also Odorico and Messis 2003; Rhoby 2010c, 199–201.



Recent years have witnessed a veritable surge of interest in Byzantine epigrammatic poetry, especially among philologists and literary historians. Following the fundamental contributions of scholars such as Wolfram Hörandner,<sup>19</sup> Marc Lauxtermann,<sup>20</sup> and Andreas Rhoby,<sup>21</sup> the study of this important, yet long-neglected, genre of Byzantine literature is now on a secure footing.<sup>22</sup> The monumental *Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung*, a corpus of Byzantine verse inscription published under the direction of Rhoby, has made a huge amount of material easily accessible to researchers.<sup>23</sup> The much-needed work on critical editions of individual authors and manuscript anthologies of epigrammatic verse is also gaining momentum.<sup>24</sup> Yet, despite these significant advances, the symbiosis of art and poetry and its broader socio-cultural ramifications in Byzantium still remain insufficiently explored. We have yet to fully integrate the evidence of epigrams in the study of Byzantine art and, more broadly, Byzantine material and religious culture. The present book takes a step in this direction.

## II.

Verse inscriptions displayed on the surfaces of Byzantine artifacts and edifices are not self-contained literary texts, and their semantic and communicative potential cannot be reduced to their verbal message. Like all

<sup>19</sup> See especially Hörandner 1987; Hörandner 1989; Hörandner 1990; Hörandner 1994; Hörandner 1996; Hörandner 2003; Hörandner 2007b.

<sup>20</sup> See especially Lauxtermann 1994; Lauxtermann 2002; Lauxtermann 2003.

<sup>21</sup> See especially Rhoby 2010a; Rhoby 2010b; Rhoby 2010d; Rhoby 2011a; Rhoby 2011b; Rhoby 2011c; Rhoby 2011d; Rhoby 2012a; Rhoby 2015.

<sup>22</sup> In addition to the publications cited above nn. 19–21, the relevant bibliography includes Talbot 1994; Maguire 1996b; Talbot 1999; Papalexandrou 2001; Papamastorakis 2002; Paul 2007; Pietsch-Braounou 2007; van Opstall 2008a; Stefec 2009; Braounou-Pietsch 2010; Stefec 2011; De Gregorio 2010a; Spingou 2012; Belcheva 2013; Bernard 2014; Zagklas 2014; and the studies collected in Hörandner and Rhoby 2008. James 2007a and Bernard and Demoen 2012 include several important studies dealing with epigrams. To this select bibliography must be added Vassis 2005. The first systematic work on Byzantine epigrammatic poetry by Komines 1966 retains its significance.

<sup>23</sup> Three volumes have appeared thus far: the first is devoted to epigrams on frescoes and mosaics, the second to epigrams on icons and objects of the so-called minor arts, and the third to epigrams on stone: *BEIÜ* I–III. A final fourth volume featuring epigrams found in manuscripts, either as poetic captions attached to miniatures or as *carmina figurata*, is in preparation.

<sup>24</sup> Particularly welcome are the forthcoming editions of *Manganeios Prodromos* by Elizabeth and Michael Jeffreys and the anonymous poetry from the *Anthologia Marciana* by Foteini Spingou. Also noteworthy is the on-line database of Byzantine book epigrams developed at the University of Ghent (URL: [www.dbbe.ugent.be](http://www.dbbe.ugent.be)).

inscriptions, epigrams have a strong, if not always recognized, visual and tactile dimension. Their textual content is inseparable from the material form in which it is embodied – witness the blue enamel letters on the Freising icon that make Dishypatos' poetic petition so powerfully present. On a fundamental level, then, the Byzantine epigram is a twofold entity, at once a literary composition and a material artifact. My inquiry engages with both of these aspects. Simply stated, I explore not only what epigrams talk about, but also how they appear and how they are experienced sensorially.

Paying close attention to epigrams as material artifacts prompts us to consider several important questions: What role does the visual presentation of a poetic text – the scale and shape of the letters, their material support, the physical arrangement of the lines and, in the case of architecture, their disposition in space – play in communicating or inflecting its message? How does the displayed text interact with its physical context – its spatial setting or the neighboring imagery, for instance? How does the act of reading structure in corporeal terms the viewer's handling of an inscribed object or his or her movement through an inscribed space? How might extralinguistic cues help an illiterate audience fathom the message of an epigram? Finally, which visual strategies, if any, did the Byzantines employ to differentiate epigrams from other kinds of inscriptions? The material embodiment of writing, however, is not the only means by which the text of an epigram acquires a forceful presence. In Byzantium, the viewer's experience of the inscribed verse often incorporated yet another dimension, that of performed speech. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, the Byzantines commonly read inscriptions and other kinds of texts aloud. Such oral delivery was particularly well suited to verse inscriptions due to their poetic form. On occasion, as we shall see, the recitation of an epigram might be staged as a more or less formalized performative event, whether this event involved a single viewer-performer or a group of participants listening to a reader. The voicing of the inscribed metrical lines does more than activate their message; it brings the written word to life and endows it with a powerful aural presence. In view of the performative dimension of epigrams, further questions emerge: How does the experience of reading audibly or listening to a poem affect the viewer's interaction with the object that bears it? Do epigrams exhibit a degree of self-consciousness by drawing attention to or engaging with their potential embodiment in speech? How might the oral performance of an epigram relate to its material form? And what might be the effect or contribution of such a performance in the context of the devotional and ritual use of the inscribed object?



While I acknowledge and interrogate epigrams as material and aural presences, the bulk of my inquiry considers them as texts and, more specifically, as an abundant resource – a category of what we might call Byzantine art literature. To put it metaphorically, just as the verses on the Freising *Lukasbild* frame the painted figure of the Virgin, so too in this study does epigrammatic poetry serve as a conceptual frame within which to examine Byzantine art and its place in Byzantine society. Taken as a whole, the epigrammatic genre constitutes a rich field of discourse that can be profitably mined to assess how the Byzantines, notably members of the elite, conceived of and experienced the works of art that surrounded them. Based upon this premise, the first step in my investigation is to identify key concepts, themes, perspectives, and attitudes articulated in epigrams, paying particular attention to the language, imagery, and rhetorical structure of these texts. To contextualize my findings, I rely upon the testimony of numerous other sources, from inventories and monastic foundation documents to theological treatises, chronicles, saints' *vitae*, and letters. In pursuing this mode of analysis, I attempt to reconstruct an historically and culturally specific frame of reference and thus to approach Byzantine art in terms that would have been familiar to its original audience. It must be stressed from the outset that my discussion will be selective, as many issues in regard to which epigrammatic poetry provides ample evidence will not be treated at any length. Thus, I will not address such fundamental topics as vision and sensory perception, animation and empathy, or the materiality of art.<sup>25</sup> My focus is upon a specific cluster of issues converging at the point where art, personal piety, and self-representation intersect. As a result of this focus, I will be concerned mainly with dedicatory epigrams designed to accompany religious objects.

Modern scholars have not always read dedicatory epigrams with a sympathetic eye. Poems of this type have traditionally been regarded as insipid and uninventive, full of *topoi*, stock motifs, and rhetorical clichés, and hence of limited interest to art history. The value of dedicatory verses has been seen to reside primarily in the factual data they may provide on past events, historical personages, or artifacts and monuments that no longer exist.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to this negative assessment, the present study

<sup>25</sup> For scholarly engagements with such topics, based on the evidence of epigrammatic poetry, see Kalavrezou-Maxeiner 1985, 79–85; Maguire 1996b; Pentcheva 2007; Pietsch-Braounou 2007; Pentcheva 2008; Pietsch-Braounou 2008; Braounou-Pietsch 2010; Pentcheva 2010, esp. 155–82; Pizzone 2013b.

<sup>26</sup> A pertinent example is Cyril Mango's assessment of Manuel Philes, the most prolific poet of the Palaiologan period, in his anthology of primary sources on Byzantine art in English

argues that dedicatory epigrams provide a critical source of information for elucidating the aesthetic and devotional parameters that conditioned the patronage, production, and reception of religious art in Byzantine society. Rather than trying to remove the veil of “convention” in order to uncover the core of historical “truth,” this study embraces the tropes of dedicatory poetry insofar as they reflect and reinforce shared cultural values, assumptions, and attitudes.

At this juncture, it would be instructive to return for a moment to the epigram running around the frame of the Freising icon. This is a typical dedicatory poem composed to commemorate a religious offering, in this instance the gift of a precious-metal icon revetment to the Mother of God. At first blush, the epigram seems to be of little art-historical import. With a mere allusion to the use of silver and gold for the revetment, its ekphrastic elements are minimal. There is no reference to the image or the experience of looking at it. But before we dismiss the enameled verses on account of their limited value as an art-historical source, let us consider what it is that the verses actually tell us, but also what they fail to mention, imply, or take for granted. To begin with, what does it mean to make a gift to a holy figure? How could Dishypatos possibly expect to receive Mary’s intercessory prayers in return for his offering? What is the logic behind such a startling exchange that brings together heaven and earth? Besides, why do the verses make no mention of the icon being repainted, but call attention instead to its adornment with silver and gold? Is it simply because of the related financial outlay, the fact that the donated bullion was more expensive than pigments? As will be demonstrated, many affluent Byzantines of

translation – a work that, not only in the English-speaking world, came to define the canon of Byzantine art literature: “Our chief literary source for the artistic production of the early 14th century, the poet Manuel Philes, poured out a stream of doggerel verse concerned with icons, liturgical and secular vessels, funerary portraits, etc., practically all of them commissioned by members of the aristocracy. The content of his poems is, however, seldom interesting to the art-historian, consisting as it does either of clichés or the praises and lineage of his noble patrons” (Mango 1972, 244). Note, however, that elsewhere in the same book Mango is more charitable. Writing about the revival of the epigrammatic genre in the centuries following Iconoclasm, he remarks: “They [i.e., epigrams devoted to works of art] are admittedly rather tedious, and many of them are buried in inaccessible publications; yet, starting with the poems of Christophoros Mitylenaios and John Mavropous, and continuing until those of Manuel Philes and Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos in the 14th century, they provide an abundant and almost unexplored source of information for art historians” (ibid., 183). Cf. also Lauxtermann 1994, 26–27: “Dedicatory epigrams are strikingly monotonous. It is not the type of poetry one reads with much pleasure. Its value is merely historical; on occasions it provides some new facts – pieces and shreds of information that may complete the art historian’s discourse of a fragmented reality.”