Introduction: Methodologies for the Study of Donor Portraits

In Byzantium and lands under Byzantine influence, those who had constructed, repaired, decorated or redecorated a church, or commissioned a manuscript or an icon, often had themselves represented in or on that object, together with the holy figure to whom the commission was dedicated.[1] In many of these images, the patron presents the holy figure with a model of a church building or a manuscript; thus Theodore Metochites in the Kariye Camii (Church of the Chora) in Istanbul offers his church to Christ (1316–21, Fig. 0.1).[2] Similarly, Leo, in the frontispiece to his famous Bible, offers his book

[1] For a general listing of monumental donor portraits, see T. Velmans, *La peinture murale byzantine à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1976), chapter 2, "Un témoignage sur la société: les images des contemporains." A comprehensive listing of manuscript donor portraits can be found in I. Spatharakis, *The Portrait in Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts* (Leiden: Brill, 1976); special credit must be given to this work, which, although limited to manuscripts only, constitutes the single most detailed study of donor portraits yet published. Although we will have occasion to dispute several of Spatharakis's conclusions, the book itself is a monumental accomplishment that maps out many of the key issues pertaining to such scenes. For donor portraits in specific geographic locations see the following: A. and J. Stylianou, "Donors and Dedicatory Inscriptions, Supplicants and Supplications in the Painted Churches of Cyprus," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 9 (1960): 97–127; S. Kalopissi-Verti, *Dedicatory Inscriptions and Donor Portraits in Thirteenth-Century Churches of Greece* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992); L. Rodley, *Cave Monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); C. Jolivet-Lévy, *Les églises byzantines de Cappadoce: le programme iconographique de l'abside et de ses abords* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1991). For icons with donor portraits at St. Katherine's Monastery in Sinai, see G. and M. Sotiriou, *Icônes du Mont Sinai*, 2 vols. (Athens: Institut Français d'Athénes, 1956–58). Other significant publications that deal with these portraits are J.-M. Spieser and E. Yota (eds.), *Donation et donateurs dans le monde byzantin; Actes du colloque international de l'Université de Fribourg (13–15 mars 2008)* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer,2012); N. Ševčenko, "The Representation of Donors and Holy Figures on Four Byzantine Icons," *Deltion tes Christianikes Archaiologikes Etaireias* 17 (1994): 157–64; N. Ševčenko, "Servants of the Holy Icon," in C. Moss and K. Kiefer (eds.), *Byzantine East, Latin West: Art Historical Studies in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 547–56; A. W. Carr, "Donors in the Frames of Icons: Living in the Borders of Byzantine Art," *Gesta* 45 (2006): 189–98; D. Mouriki, "Portraits de donateurs et invocations sur les icônes du XIIIe siècle au Sinaï," *Études balkaniques* 2 (1995): 103–35; and K. Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons: Between Reality and Spirituality in Byzantine Art* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

[2] P. Underwood, *The Kariyeh Djami*, 4 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), vol. I, 14–16. See also N. Ševčenko, "The Portrait of Theodore Metochites at Chora," in J.-M. Spieser

Figure 0.1: Theodore Metochites before Christ, mosaic in inner narthex, Kariye Camii, Istanbul, 1316–21.

to the Virgin (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, Reg. gr. 1, fol. 2v, 930–40, Fig. 0.2).[3]

However, it is not always the case that patrons make an offering of this sort; often, they are simply shown in a gesture of reverence toward the holy figure. Sometimes such figures will appear standing with hands raised in prayer, as do Constantine and Maria Akropolites in the lower left and right corners of the revetment of a Hodeghetria icon in the State Tret'iakov

and E. Yota (eds.), *Donation et donateurs dans le monde byzantin: Actes du colloque international de l'Université de Fribourg (13–15 mars 2008)* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2012), 189–206, and R. Nelson, "The Chora and the Great Church: Intervisuality in Fourteenth Century Constantinople," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 23 (1999): 67–101.

[3] *Miniature della Bibbia Cod. Vat. Regin. Greco. 1 e del Salterio Cod. Vat. Palat. Greco 381*, Collezione Paleografica Vaticana 1 (Milan: Hoepli, 1905); S. Dufrenne and P. Canart, *Die Bibel des Patricius Leo,* facsimile with introductory volume (Zurich: Belser, 1988); P. Canart (ed.), *La Bible du Patrice Léon. Codex reginensis graecus 1: Commentaire codicologique, paléographique, philologique et artistique*, Studi e testi 436 (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2011); T. Mathews, "The Epigrams of Leo Sacellarios and an Exegetical Approach to the Miniatures of Vat. Reg. Gr. 1," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 43 (1977): 43–133; Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 7–14.

Figure 0.2: Leo before the Virgin, Leo Bible, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, Reg. gr. 1, fol. 2v, 930–40.

Gallery in Moscow (late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, Fig. 0.3).[4] Often, too, these giftless figures bow in *proskynesis* – for example, the monk Manuel, now barely visible at the base and slightly to the right of the Virgin's throne, in the apse fresco of the Church of the Panhagia Mavriotissa in Kastoria in Greece (thirteenth century, Fig. 0.4).[5]

As the inscriptions that accompany many of these images make clear, the lay figures in the scenes always have one thing in mind above all else: salvation on Judgment Day. The inscription of Leo is overt in this respect: "I . . . present as a profession of faith to God and to the Mother who gave birth and Theotokos only this Bible . . . in remission for my sins."[6] Many other inscriptions express the same idea in the more laconic forms of *deesis tou doulou sou*: "this is the request (or petition, or entreaty) of your servant," and *Kyrie boethie doulou sou*: "Lord help thy servant."

These images are well known within the Byzantine corpus, yet they have not been the subject of intensive examination. This is no doubt largely because they seem, at first sight, to be entirely transparent. We understand what the supplicant wants (salvation), and how it can be obtained (by giving a gift or by entreaty). However, this study seeks to demonstrate that almost all of the ways in which the images seem to make sense to us are, at best, misleading, and that other, more complex, issues are always afoot. The book presents an argument for a new understanding of the images themselves.

These scenes are unusual in the Byzantine repertoire in that they show an interaction between contemporary figures, real characters living their lives at the time that the scenes were executed, and the hallowed spiritual figures so familiar to us from the rest of Byzantine art. If, to use a modern analogy, we think of the painted surface as a screen on which the images are projected, then donor portraits appear as though the audience has clambered into the picture, to engage with the holy figures in the scene.[7] It is this

[4] I. Bruk and L. Iovleva (eds.), *Gosudarstvennaia Tret'iakovskaia galeria: Katalog sobraniia*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Skanrus, 1995), vol. I, no. 166; H. Evans (ed.), *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 28–30.

[5] S. Pelekanides and M. Chatzidakes, *Kastoria* (Athens: Melissa, 1985), 66–83; A. Wharton Epstein, "Middle Byzantine Churches of Kastoria: Dates and Implications," *Art Bulletin* 62 (1980): 202–57, at 202–06.

[6] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 10.

[7] This thought is inspired by, but not identical with, Nancy Ševčenko's opening of her "Close Encounters: Contact between Holy Figures and the Faithful as Represented in Byzantine Works of Art," in A. Guillou and J. Durand (eds.), *Byzance et les images: cycle de conférences organisé au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel du 5 octobre au 7 décembre 1992* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1994), 257–85, at 257–59, in which she makes reference to the Woody Allen film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985). There, in a "film within a film" sequence, an actor steps out of the "inner film" into the "outer film." This is the reverse of what I have in mind, where the audience "in reality" steps into the diegetic space of the image.

Figure 0.3: Constantine and Maria Akropolites in the lower left and right corners of revetted icon of Hodeghetria, State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow, late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.

interrelationship between contemporary, lay supplicants and holy figures, as represented in the pictures, that forms the primary thematic focus of this book.

Figure 0.4: Monk Manuel before Virgin and Child and Angels, painting in apse, Church of the Panhagia Mavriotissa, Kastoria, thirteenth century.

The significance of this interaction, and the uniqueness of the images, can be gauged in several different respects. Unlike, say, icons of holy figures, donor portraits are not dogmatic, loaded with theological content and proclaiming eternal truths. Yet neither are they like the narrative scenes that we find elsewhere in Byzantine art, as for example, representations of Christ's life, purporting in some measure to retell a historical event as sanctioned by scripture or long tradition. They are perhaps best described as economic, in the sense that they deal with the contingencies of the way in which specific lay individuals interact with the world of the spirit. They thus pose one of the fundamental questions of religion, which concerns not just theology as a description of the spiritual world, but of how theology plays out at the level of the single human individual. These scenes speak not in the third person, as do narrative or dogmatic ones, but in the first person. They imagine an encounter from the viewpoint of the person within the picture, and it is this perspective that we will be pursuing.

The book poses one key question of the portraits: what do they mean? However, this question itself is subdivided into two additional, overlapping questions: what do they mean, in the conventional sense of the word "meaning"; and, further, what do they do? In reference to the first of these, as mentioned above, the scenes are much more complex than they initially appear to be, and our investigations will reveal several new features in this respect. In addition to this question of meaning, however, the book argues that the images themselves force on us a further distinction, which concerns the issue of the particularly active role that they play.

Whatever questions art history typically poses of the pictures that are the subjects of its inquiry – for example, history, development, influence, iconography, relations to society and religion – one aspect that was, until recently, not much studied is the way in which pictures might be active, performative agents. Perhaps the most straightforward illustration of this idea may be found in the Gregorian dictum of pictures as books for the illiterate. From the point of view of iconography (which is one of the standard art-historical ways of thinking about meaning), a picture of the Anastasis, for example, refers to a sequence of events that happened after Christ's death. A detailed analysis of different representations of the scene might demonstrate different conceptions of those events, and might, for example, bring out different aspects of the relationships of the component figures to each other; this would form a good part of the meaning of the scenes in question.[8] In addition to this, however, and unrelated to it, would be their function in instructing the faithful about what happened – "unrelated" here in the sense that all of the features of meaning are taken to be properties of the images themselves, as though inhering within them, irrespective of whether they are being used for instruction or not.

It is no doubt true of all images that they are active beyond what has conventionally been considered meaning, and this in ways that are much more complex than simple instruction. However, within the world of religious imagery, the active role is particularly prominent. There has not been much discussion of this distinction between meaning and doing in relation to Byzantine art; however, it is fair to say that in recent times a shift has occurred in scholarship away from the former and toward the latter, often in the form of viewer response. As an example of this, we may take Charles Barber's work on icons, where he investigates what an icon

[8] For the "books of the illiterate" discussion, see C. Chazelle, "Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate: Pope Gregory I's Letters to Serenus of Marseilles," *Word and Image* 6 (1990): 138–53. For the Anastasis, see A. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

does, in terms of what effects it produces for the viewer; it is a "directed absence" that "maintains [the] desire" of the beholder.[9] In other words, the images are also functional, have real consequences in the world.

Even within this universe of activating images, however, the argument is made in this book that donor portraits are unusual in the degree to which they are dynamic and operational. They play complex roles within the much larger economy of overall religious belief systems. The stress here is thus on the productive, functional role of these images, conceived of not as passive bearers of meaning, but as active proponents within a larger field of endeavor.

As we will discover, however, what the image means (in the conventional sense of the word) is an essential component in how it goes about doing what it does. The book thus studies the images from both angles. The first is the attempt to understand what they mean in that conventional sense; here we might say that the images are the end-point of the mode of inquiry. The second, however, reverses the model, and investigates what effects the images have; here the images stand at the beginning of the mode of inquiry. Both are essential in attempting to arrive at an understanding of the portraits, and the book makes the argument for expanding the sense of the meaning of the images beyond the conventional passive sense, to include this active function as well. Indeed, this active role, in several different contexts, must be highlighted as the most distinctive feature of the images, and the most important component of their meaning.

In relation to the conventional sense of the meaning of the images, the aspect of contact between human and divine to which this book is dedicated has received very little attention.[10] Primarily, it has been the lay figures themselves who have been the main focus of attention, considered from two different perspectives. One of these, following a dominant model of art history over the last several decades, has investigated the figures in relation to their status within society. The portraits have thus been studied for their witness to social evolution and changing patterns of patronage.[11]

Yet it is also the case that the lay figures have been the focus of attention in another sense as well – not in their function as representatives of a social group, but simply as individuals. In the scholarship on these images, there is an endless fascination with the person of the lay figure. The reason for

[9] C. Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 121; C. Barber, "From Transformation to Desire: Art and Worship after Byzantine Iconoclasm," *Art Bulletin* 75 (1993): 7–16, at 15.

[10] A notable exception here is Nancy Ševčenko, in "Close Encounters."

[11] See for example S. Tomeković-Reggiani, "Portraits et structures sociales au XIIe siècle," in Association internationale des études byzantines, *Actes du XVe congrès international d'études byzantines, Athènes, 1976*, 4 vols. (Athens: n.p., 1980), vol. II, 823–35.

this is not difficult to divine. In the first place, as portraits, they represent the individuals who inhabit history, single people emerging from the otherwise faceless wash of time. Everywhere, portraits personalize history, giving us a sense of privileged access to individuals, and apparently linking us back to the past with immediacy. Correspondingly, the standard practice when dealing with these images has been to attempt to augment this sense of individuality by identifying the supplicants, and to correlate the scene with as many other facts as are known about their lives. The inevitable pull of a portrait is always toward the historical identity of the person, and scholarship yields to this attraction as well.

This fascination is so great that examinations of these images often entirely ignore the fact that they show the presence of both lay and holy figures, and simply treat them as though they were single, individual portraits. These scenes thus come to be subsumed under the broader category of "The Portrait" in general, and examined in that capacity alone, rather than in their specificity as representations of an interaction between a set of characters. It is a striking fact that although there is no single study devoted to these images themselves, the studies that do exist on the portrait consist largely of examples drawn from their ranks.

In addition to this, however, there is another, more subtle, reason for the focus on the individual persona of the supplicant at the cost of any serious consideration of what is at stake in the relationship between lay and divine. It lies in the already-mentioned apparent transparency of the scenes themselves, where no complex problems of interpretation present themselves. The scenes thus appear entirely clear and comprehensible, the mechanisms in play within them barely requiring any comment. Further, within this apparent transparency, everything, once again, leads inexorably back to the supplicant; the images seem to be so assertively "about" the lay figure, about his or her motivations and desires. The meaning of the image thus seems to coalesce around the supplicant, and he or she appears to hold the key to its not-very-deep secrets, and to be the main bearer of signification in the scene. Any investigation of the picture is therefore inevitably drawn to a more profound excavation of the person's individual circumstances and intentions. The more that can be learned about who that person was, the more we believe the image to have been elucidated.

Although it is of course true that behind every commission lies the story of an individual life lived, one of the aims of this study is to put into abeyance our certainties about meaning. One of the key questions posed is how meaning comes to be located in an image in the first place, and Chapter 2 investigates in detail this concentration on the person of the

donor. The argument is made there that, although the exact role of the patron is highly complex, the most important factors determining meanings lie elsewhere, and the focus on the patron is misleading.

As an illustration of this point, we might regard the personal explanation of the images, the one that looks at individual circumstances, as a response to the question "Why is this particular supplicant asking for help? What has he or she done that assistance is needed?" But, as we will argue, there are other essential questions to be posed of the scenes. The first should be, "Help from what? What is the impending disaster?" And the second should be, "How can help be delivered, and what form might it take? What effect would it have?" Although the answers to these questions might seem self-evident – the answer to the first is "judgment," and to the second it is "forgiveness" – upon examination, the issues turn out to be anything but simple. And the nature of the answers in turn affects how we, or, more pertinently, supplicants themselves, understand the images. Thus, to give but one small example, a request for help "means" something quite different if it is addressed to a merciful God than if it is addressed to a vengeful one. What the scene means, therefore, will be different according to the nature of the specific scenario with which supplicants consider themselves to be engaging. What is more, that scenario is determined not by the supplicant, but by much broader, preexisting cultural and religious frameworks within which the supplicant is enmeshed. In this respect, it may be seen that the question of meaning transcends the individual, and the current study focuses instead on those broader frameworks that are the essential determinants of the scenes.

Once we escape the trap of the personal and start thinking of the larger issues that render meaning to these scenes, two principal areas emerge. The most important one, overarching all the others, is the broad, yet also very specific, religious context that sets up the parameters with which the portraits engage. Here, the single most influential factor is the Byzantine conception of the afterlife. In the first place, the afterlife is the place and time at which the supplication embodied in the portrait is aimed, in that it is there that the success or failure of that supplication will be played out. Even more than this, however, the afterlife is where the nexus of interlocking points formed around the ideas of salvation, sin, and sin remission, all elements of crucial importance to the dynamics (and hence the meaning) of the portraits, are given their fullest expression. It is in connection with the afterlife that we will discover the largest number of variants that inflect our understanding of the scenes.

In addition to these issues, which are strictly religious, a further key field underpins the main group of portraits we will be studying: those where