

Medieval Greek inscriptions at Mount Athos: relics and other objects of minor arts.

Paschalis Androudis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Brad Hostetler, Kenyon College, USA

MOUNT ATHOS is one of the most important sites for inscriptions of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine periods. As a center of cenobitic monasticism since at least the tenth century, Athos benefitted from the patronage of emperors and aristocrats who financed buildings and precious objects. Many of these works of art and architecture were adorned with inscriptions, some of which are still visible today. This vast epigraphical material includes inscriptions written primarily in Greek, but also Serbian, Bulgarian, Latin, and Arabic.

In the early twentieth century, Gabriel Millet, Jules Pargoire, and Louis Petit, under the auspices of the Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, attempted to catalogue this enormous amount of data, but their ambitious project was understandably never finished. Their only publication, *Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de l'Athos*, vol. 1 (1904), documented 570 inscriptions found at the Protaton and twelve of the twenty sovereign monasteries. A second volume, which would have included inscriptions from the eight other monasteries as well as the kellia and skete communities, was planned for the following year but various circumstances prevented its publication. The first volume, while incomplete, continues to serve as an indispensable resource for historians, philologists, archaeologists, art historians, and epigraphists. It would therefore be a great benefit to students and scholars if this project was completed and revised in a more systematic manner.

Today Byzantine studies is better equipped to handle the epigraphic data. The surge in publications and exhibitions over the last twenty years that focus on the art and architecture of Mount Athos have brought to light many works of art that were previously unknown and inaccessible. Recent studies in Byzantine epigraphy, the corpus of Byzantine epigrams edited by Andreas Rhoby, and the project *Inscriptiones Graecae Aevi Byzantini* (IGAB) sponsored by the



Fig. 2. The Cross of Helena Palaiologina, Dionysiou Monastery. After *Le Mont Athos et l'Empire byzantin* (Paris, 2009), 170.

Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften have provided scholars with fundamental tools and methods for analyzing and presenting Byzantine inscriptions.

Our project is the first step in creating a new systematic study of the inscriptions at Mount Athos. Rather than adopt the broad scope of Millet et al, this project focuses on a more manageable corpus: Greek inscriptions that date to the Byzantine era and that are found on the so-called minor arts. This category includes such objects as reliquaries and patens, but excludes icons and textiles, which require their own independent studies. While objects of minor arts have been illustrated in recent publications, their inscriptions have been largely neglected or inadequately documented. We follow the standards set forth by the IGAB, which includes classifying an inscription's function, location, and medium, producing a transcription, edition, and translation, and commenting on the paleographical, philological, and art-historical features.

Our corpus includes a great many objects from all twenty sovereign monasteries as well as the Protaton. While the oldest objects date to the ninth century, the majority can be firmly dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The type of objects represented in our corpus include reliquaries, panagiaria, enkolpia, processional crosses, book covers, patens, and chalices.

The inscriptions can be grouped according to three main functions. Dedicatory inscriptions, the largest group in our corpus, name the donor. Ekphrastic inscriptions describe some aspect of the object that they accompany. The third function of inscriptions includes those that are



Fig. 3. The "Jasper" Chalice, Vatopedi Monastery. After *Le Mont Athos et l'Empire byzantin* (Paris, 2009), 157.

quotations from the Bible or some other literary source. An example from this last group is the 14th-century steatite enkolpion at the Vatopedi Monastery (fig. 1), which features an image of John the Baptist, inscribed with his words as recorded in Matt. 3:10: "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Concerning the material and visual features of the inscriptions, a few general remarks can be made in this stage of our research. The inscriptions are executed in a variety of materials, but the largest group is by far those in metalwork, comprising nearly three-quarters of the corpus. Metalwork inscriptions can be further subdivided into those that are repoussé and those that are chased. An example of the latter is the votive inscription incised at lower end of a processional cross that was donated to the Dionysiou Monastery by the Empress Helena Palaiologina between 1392 and 1425 (fig. 2). Other media represented in our corpus include enamel, steatite, ivory, and wood.

Nearly all the inscriptions in our corpus are written in majuscule script, which is expected. Monograms represent another important category of inscriptions, especially for objects coming from the imperial family. One well-known example is the so-called Jasper Chalice at the Vatopedi Monastery (fig. 3). Its base features four monograms that identify the patron as Manuel Kantakouzenos Palaiologos, the Despot of Mystra, 1349–80. In most cases, the placement of an inscription was carefully coordinated with the object's form, function, and/or associated imagery. One such example is the 14th-century panagiaria, known as the Pulcheria Paten, at the Xiropotamou Monastery (fig. 4).

The circular inscription at the center of the panagiaria quotes a liturgical prayer that describes the celebrants as representations of angels in the heavenly court. On the panagiaria, we find the inscription lining the feet of an angelic procession who are shown performing the very same liturgical rite in which this prayer was recited.

We are also developing an index that includes examples of each letter from each inscription found in our corpus. This will provide scholars with a convenient table with which to compare inscriptions from other sites and collections for the purposes of dating, identifying common production centers, and tracing the developments of letterforms across media and techniques.



Fig. 4. The "Pulcheria Paten," Xiropotamou Monastery. After *Treasures of Mount Athos* (Thessaloniki, 1997), 325.

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Fig. 1. Enkolpion, Vatopedi Monastery. After Ikonomaki-Papadopoulos et al, *Enkolpia* (Mount Athos, 2000), 125.



Kontakt | contact details:
Paschalis Androudis, pandroudis@hist.auth.gr
Brad Hostetler, bradhostetler@gmail.com

For more information visit the project website,
www.athosinscriptions.org.

