MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF LATE ANTIQUE AND MEDIEVAL GREEK AND LATIN INSCRIPTIONS IN ISTANBUL

A REVISED AND EXPANDED BOOKLET

THE SUMMER PROGRAMME IN BYZANTINE EPIGRAPHY
THE KOÇ UNIVERSITY’S RESEARCH CENTER FOR ANATOLIAN CIVILIZATIONS
ISTANBUL, 3-9 SEPTEMBER 2018

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OXFORD AND VIENNA 2020
THE SUMMER PROGRAMME IN BYZANTINE EPIGRAPHY WAS FUNDED BY KOÇ UNIVERSITY’S STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION CENTER FOR LATE ANTIQUE AND BYZANTINE STUDIES (GABAM). IT WAS HOSTED BY KOÇ UNIVERSITY’S RESEARCH CENTER FOR ANATOLIAN CIVILIZATIONS (ANAMED)

ORGANISED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

THE INTER-FACULTY OF LATE ANTIQUE AND BYZANTINE STUDIES
THE OXFORD CENTRE FOR BYZANTINE RESEARCH
(OXFORD UNIVERSITY)
THE INSTITUTE FOR MEDIEVAL RESEARCH, THE DIVISION OF BYZANTINE RESEARCH (THE AUSTRIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES)

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Byzantine Epigraphy Programme

With our special thanks to

Engin Akyürek and Chris Roosevelt for their encouragement and generous support; Mustafa Sayar and Ivana Jevtić, our fellow-concepteurs, for their judicious guidance and good humour; Buket Coşkuner and her team at ANAMED, for providing a welcoming home to us all during our stay in Istanbul; David Hendrix, Ingela Nilsson, Meriç Öztürk, Brigitte Pitarakis, Alessandra Ricci, and Roman Shliakhtin, for their insights, hospitality, and, when necessary, presbeia, which secured access to some rare and unpublished inscriptive material; all our participants – our colleagues and friends – for the memorable week of inspiring seminar presentations, lively discussions, and vigorous walking-and-talking site visits. We look forward to our next epigraphic venture!

ISBN 978-3-200-06987-9
How to cite:


Cover image: Inscription on Tower 13, Blachernai walls (© Andreas Rhoby)
Byzantine epigraphic material transcends the commonly discussed categories of monumental epigraphy. It also involves a large number of inscribed small-scale items. These can include objects of everyday use as well as extremely valuable and unique artifacts. They all can also convey different levels of social situations spanning the marking of small objects by official and imperial authorities at the most formal level and inscribing items of everyday use by craftsmen or common people, whose own level of literacy was very low. This variety also applies to the nature of texts that can range from eloquent epigrams to simple personal notes. This epigraphic evidence is often very difficult to discern among the endless archaeological material coming from modern excavations; it is even more difficult to include it in official epigraphic corpora. Not to mention the limitations set by the state of evidence itself: as the majority of informal inscriptions were etched or painted on organic matter, they seldom survive the test of time (and soil).

The excavations of the Theodosian Harbor of Constantinople (mod. Yenikapi, Istanbul) have offered a unique wealth of such inscribed items. Although most of this material is still in the process of documentation and has not yet been published, two extant exhibition catalogues allow us to take a first glance at these objects and their accompanying texts.

In this essay, I present four items from the Yenikapi excavation, each exemplifying a larger group of inscribed small finds from an archaeological record. These can often be items that carry coterminous inscriptions conveying an additional message to information on the user/wearer. These ‘small-finds’, as they are categorized in the archaeological record jargon, besides their obvious materiality reveal a vibrant world of words and texts beyond the official epigraphic habit. They offer a wealth of information on Byzantine society and its members, but also on occasional writing, very often only of contemporary and ephemeral relevance, closely linked to the moment of its production.

1) Inscribed golden ring (6th c.)

A 5th/6th-century golden ring found buried in the Theodosian harbor features an inscription invoking the Lord to protect the wearer, who is also explicitly named. Such items are very common in the archaeological record of early Byzantine sites, and they are often made of humbler material. Gold rings are much more exceptional, and, as such, they also testify to the wealth of certain individuals residing in the capital city. This is exactly the reasoning behind naming the individual wearing this protective ring, rather than using the generic formula (‘the one wearing’) as is mostly the case (Kızıltan Zeynep et al). So, the gold ring from Yenikapi was destined for a specific person, a member of the Constantinopolitan elite, who, as we are informed in the inscription, is called Undila(s). This proper noun is obviously non-Greek: it designates a person (male or female) of Gothic or Germanic ethnic origin. We know from the Prosopography of the Late Roman Empire of a 6th-century Gothic commander by the name of Unilas (PLRE vol. IIIB 1392,
mentioned by Procopius, *De Bellis* 5.16). This provides a clue for the identification of the person from the Yenikapi ring.

The ring from Yenikapi with a circular discoid bezel carrying a Greek inscription in five lines.

Text

+|KYP|E BOHθ| OYNΔΙΑΑ
Κύριε, βοήθι οὖνδίλα

Bibliography


For a catalogue of bronze rings with generic name references, see: Yangaki, A. (2012), A Byzantine ring from ancient Messene bearing the inscription 'Κ(YΠ)Ε <B>ΟΗΘΘΑΝΑ’ – A contribution to a group of rings with the same inscription, in Sioumpara, E. and Psaroudakis, K. (eds) ΘΕΜΕΛΙΟΝ: 24 μελέτες για τον Δάσκαλο Πέτρο Θέμελη από τους μαθητές και τους συνεργάτες του, Athens, 281-303.

2) Inscribed wooden shoe (5th-7th c.)

The second example shows again a utilitarian item inscribed with a personalised message. A much humbler than the gold ring discussed above, it is just a wooden shoe sole of a female sandal or shoe. It has been loosely dated to the time between the 5th and the 7th centuries. The sole features a skilfully executed inscription around the edge of the sole invoking wellbeing of the shoe wearer and an enjoyable use. The inscription is accompanied by the depiction of a pair of birds and some floral motives. The whole composition is strikingly decorative, but it is difficult to say if it featured on the lower or the upper side of an actual shoe, or even, if it was a votive/token symbolizing a shoe. Also, the text is generic enough, not referring to a special owner but rather to a Κυρά Καλή, a Fair Lady, suggesting that the wooden item could also be part of “mass” production to be used by/for the fair ladies of early Byzantine Constantinople. Writing on shoes seem to have had a considerable tradition in the Roman and post-Roman world, although surviving examples are very scarce, mainly because these texts would have been written on perishable materials such as leather.

It is uncertain if the inscribed shoe from the Theodosian Harbour attests to a unique practice or a distinct identity of the wearer. There is a small corpus of evidence of female
Roman (2\textsuperscript{nd}/3\textsuperscript{rd} c.) shoe remains or clay replicas, all inscribed with short texts on their soles with the hobnails mentioning the word ἀκολούθ(ε)ι (follow me). These have been interpreted as shoes of prostitutes communicating an enticing message to possible clients (G. W. Elderkin). On the other hand, the writing of wishes for wearers on the soles of shoes brings to mind some anthropological parallels, such as Christian weddings whereby brides would wear special shoes with custom-made texts, or write them themselves. It is interesting to note that writing on leather, usually on shoe soles, is also attested in some early Islamic sources. (S. Mirza)

Inscribed wooden shoe sole (semelle), 5\textsuperscript{th}-7\textsuperscript{th} c. [SEG 60-746]

Text

ΥΓΙΕΝΟΥΣΑ ΧΡΩ ΚΥΡΑ ΚΑΛΕΙ ΗΛΑΡΙ ΥΠΑΡΧΟΥΣΑ ΕΠΕΝΙΣΕ

ὑγιένουσα χρῷ Κύρα Καλεί, ἡλαρί υπάρχουσα ἐπένισε (= ἐπένδυσα;)?

Translation

May you use (this) in good health, Kyra Kale, be happy in wearing (it)

Bibliography

Elderkin, G. W. (1941) The Hero on a Sandal, Hesperia 10, 385, fig. 2.

3) Inscribed jug (graffiti) (6\textsuperscript{th}-7\textsuperscript{th} c.)

Our third example provides completely different epigraphic evidence: it is a small 6\textsuperscript{th} or 7\textsuperscript{th}-century jug, with an inscription and a sketch of a human individual scratched onto it. It is almost certain that the graffiti were incised into the pot at some point during its use. Although the text cannot be fully transcribed from the photographs of the catalogue, it
might contain an acclamation, marking both the ownership of the jug and also containing a humorous element. The inscription’s beginning might be the wish βιβας, a Hellenization of the Latin vivas (may you live!), which is not an uncommon feature in simple epigraphic formulas of the Greek-speaking world, echoing the Hellenization of the Latin acclamation tu vincas into του βινκας used in the imperial acclamations. However, as argued by A. Rhoby, ΒΑΡΗΛΗ at the beginning could also mean ‘vessel’ (cf. βαριλλιον, which is attested in later texts). Although the rest of the text is not completely legible, we can recognize with some certainty additional words το πογόνο Ιωάννου, which, I believe, should be translated as the beard of Ioannes. It might be that this text humors the owner Ioannes by mentioning his trademark beard. The same person is probably depicted in the rough sketch below, which shows an outline of a male human form with special attention given to his pointy beard and his reproductive organs. Besides the personal and humorous character of the graffiti, it is worth noting that a section of the text in the lower left section seems to have been deliberately erased, showing the ephemeral nature of these texts that can be constantly written and re-written or corrected.

Inscribed jug (graffiti) (6th-7th c.)

Text
+ΒΙΒΑΡΗΛΗΤΟΥchristogram
ΕΙΣΑΝΑΚΙΟΥΤΟΠΟΓΩΝΙΟ
[rasura] ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ

Bibliography

4) A (middle Byzantine?) inscribed roof tile with a personal note listing names of at least one ναύσκηρος of a boat

The fourth example belongs to a generic and quite common Byzantine epigraphic category of graffiti on easily available media like bricks or roof-tiles. These surfaces commonly carry all kind of different messages, and are not rare to find in any excavations of post 7th-century layers. The roof tile from Yenikapi seems to be intentionally reshaped
into a smaller square; it dates probably to the middle Byzantine period, and it features four lines of incised Greek text. The inscription poses the usual problems due to the informal and unusual nature of such graffiti material. It contains a list of names, probably of individuals engaged in some sea-fearing or harbor-based occupations. Among the names we read that of a Nikephoros, son of Karelos, whose patronymic opens a window to the multi-ethnic environment of Constantinople and its ports. Karelos (or Karilos) is a Gaulish name, more commonly found in the Latin-speaking provinces of the western Merovingian world. (B. Fourlas) One of the persons from the list is a να(υ)κλιρος, a ship owner, a captain or a merchant of a ship, possibly one of the people named in the same text, and perhaps himself active in the Constantinopolitan port of Theodosius.

Text and Restoration (revised)

ΝΙΚΗΦΟΡΟΣΤΟΥΚΑ
ΡΕΛΟΥΠΑΠΑΣΑΘΗ
ΜΟΣΝΑΚΛΙΡΟΣΤΟΥ
ΚΟΗΔΟΒΡΟΥΛΗΧΟΑΝΟΥ

Νικηφόρος τοῦ Καρέλου, Παπάς, Ἀ<ν>θημος να<υ>κλιρός τοῦ | ΚΟΗΔΟΒΡΟΥΛΗΧΟΑΝΟΥ

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