

## Chapter Four

### A SHORT HISTORY OF THE BYZANTINE EPIGRAM

While it is often difficult to date anonymous epigrams with absolute certainty, it is not difficult at all to establish whether an epigram was written before or after the year 600, as Byzantine and late antique epigrams differ in many respects<sup>1</sup>. In fact, it is so easy that no one, not even the proverbial Homer occasionally nodding off, will be mistaken. And there is no excuse, therefore, for confusing the two.

First of all, most Byzantine epigrams make use of the dodecasyllable (the Byzantine equivalent of the iambic trimeter, but without metrical resolutions, with a strong caesura and with an obligatory stress accent on the penultimate)<sup>2</sup>. In late antique epigrams, on the contrary, the elegiac distich is the norm, the dactylic hexameter an option, and the iamb an exception. This rapidly changes in the early seventh century. Whereas Sophronios still clings to the traditional elegiac, Pisides clearly prefers the iamb. The dodecasyllable becomes the norm after Pisides. In the ninth century some poets attempt to reinstate the iambic trimeter by allowing an occasional metrical resolution, but without any success. In the ninth century, too, a number of classicizing poets revive the elegiac distich and the dactylic hexameter from non-existence, and with considerable success too – if one overlooks the horrific prosodic errors most of these poets allow themselves. This vogue for elegiacs and dactylics, however, does not substantially change the overall picture. For even at the peak of the classicizing movement, in the ninth and early tenth centuries, the dodecasyllable is the usual meter for the composition of an epigram. The popularity of this meter continues unabated throughout the next centuries, until 1453, if not later.

Secondly, there is a change in contents. Although the poets of the *Cycle* (compiled by Agathias) are without exception devoted Christians, their epigrams are not particularly orthodox. In their epigrams they fantasize about luscious girls, bring offerings to the ancient gods and commemorate the dead without even so much as a cursory reference to the life hereafter. There is no

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<sup>1</sup> On late antique epigrams in general, see ROBERT 1948, KEYDELL 1962, KAMBYLIS 1994–1995 and, especially, GALLI CALDERINI 1987. On the *Cycle* of Agathias, see MATTSON 1942.

<sup>2</sup> See MAAS 1903.

reason to believe that this kind of literature has anything to do with real life, genuine sentiments or particular persuasions. It is mere fiction, an exercise in the art of literary discourse. After the year 600 the concept of *mimesis* (literary imitation) remains as crucial as it was in late antiquity, but the freedom to express ideas that seem to be pagan or at least look rather controversial, ceases to exist in the seventh century. Poets still imitate the ancients, but they no longer dare to put on paper literary concepts that may seem offensive to the church, his royal majesty or other bigoted elements among the population. Erotic and anathematic epigrams disappear altogether. The bacchic epigram (the drinking song) vanishes as well. The satirical epigram turns into the genre of the personal invective. Epitaphs are christianized and gnomic epigrams express monastic wisdom. Book epigrams do not celebrate the pagan authors, but the church fathers, the evangelists and David the Psalmist. And epigrams on works of art no longer deal with Myron's celebrated statue of a heifer (*AP IX, 713–742*), but with the venerated images of the saints and the martyrs. It all becomes very Christian. It is the victory of reality over literature. In contrast to Agathias *cum suis*, Pisides, Sophronios and other seventh-century poets express the true feelings of Christendom at large, describe devotional customs and rites as they really were, and appeal to divine authority as the ultimate source of authentication.

Thirdly, the function of the epigram itself changes radically. It is no longer a literary genre that occasionally harks back to its remote origins as verse inscription, but it becomes instead a purely inscriptional genre that only rarely aspires to become grand literature. Whereas practically none of the verses published in the *Cycle* of Agathias serve any functional purpose, nearly all epigrams by Sophronios and Pisides are meant to be inscribed or at least clearly imitate authentic verse inscriptions. Around the year 600 the epigram basically becomes what it used to be before Callimachus and Asclepiades changed the rules: a practical text. In the early seventh century the epigram is a mere shadow of its former hellenistic self, protracting its abysmal existence in the margins of literary discourse. The epitaph turns into a written memorial, the book epigram into a colophon text, the gnome into a *memento mori* carved in stone, and the descriptive epigram either into a caption to a miniature or into a text inscribed on a mosaic, icon or artifact. In short, what we see is that the epigram becomes an ἐπιγραμμά in the Byzantine sense of the word: a verse inscription or a book epigram.

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*Ex Oriente Lux*

Between c. 640 and 790 the literary genre of the epigram ceases to exist altogether. There are a number of verse inscriptions, mostly unprosodic and in fairly simple language; but these ἐπιγράμματα have no literary pretensions whatsoever. This is obviously related to the so-called dark age crisis: the collapse of urban civilization as well as the social upheavals and fragmentation of traditional power structures, imperial and otherwise, in the seventh and early eighth centuries. The epigram flourished as long as there were people equipped with the necessary breeding and educational background to understand it, people who enjoyed enough leisure time to spend it on reading and who shared the same elitist, basically nostalgic cultural ideals as the poets who indulged in the composition of epigrams. But when the educated elite, eddying into the maelstrom of political and social turmoil, was swept away and vanished along with the culture it represented, the epigram immediately lost its rationale. There are no epigrams because there was no longer a public for them.

This does not mean the end of civilization, though. It merely indicates that there is a shift in literary interests. The school system remains unaltered and rhetoric continues to be as important as it was in late antiquity. Atticistic Greek is replaced by literary Koine. The style becomes less elitist, the narratives more popular<sup>3</sup>. Hagiography and folkloristic tales are in great demand. The genre of homiletics flourishes as never before. Hymnography reaches new heights with the canon. And in the field of theology we have marvelous authors, such as Maximos the Confessor, Anastasios Sinaites and John of Damascus<sup>4</sup>.

It is worth noticing, however, that most literature was produced by authors who either lived in the Middle East or had migrated from there to other places<sup>5</sup>. In late antiquity the production of literature was closely connected with urban centres throughout the Roman empire. In the seventh and eighth centuries, on the contrary, it is concentrated in the milieu of eastern monasticism, in places such as Edessa, Damascus and Jerusalem, and in monasteries such as Mar Sabas and St. Catherine's. It is an indisputable fact that when we speak of Byzantine culture during the dark ages, we are actually referring to the kind of culture that continued to exist under Arab rule in the former eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire.

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<sup>3</sup> See P. SPECK, in: *Varia VII (Ποικίλα Βυζαντινά 18)*. Bonn 2000, 75–112.

<sup>4</sup> On the kinds of literature produced in the “Dark Century” (c. 650–775), see KAZHDAN 1999: 137–165.

<sup>5</sup> See C. MANGO, in: *Scritture, libri e testi nelle aree provinciali*, ed. G. CAVALLO. Spoleto 1991, 149–160; M.-F. AUZÉPY, *TM* 12 (1994) 183–218; and G. CAVALLO, *BZ* 88 (1995) 13–22.

It is in the East, too, that we find the first signs of a renewed interest in forms of high-brow literature. In chapter eight (pp. 263–265) I shall discuss a corpus of monastic gnomes composed in Syria or Palestine in the seventh century. These epigrams, like all Byzantine ἐπιγράμματα, obviously serve a practical purpose as admonitions to young neophytes, telling them how they should behave themselves in order to become good monks. From a purely aesthetic point of view, however, these gnomes are much better than what we usually find in poems dating from the seventh and eighth centuries. The style is elevated, the prosody correct and the language quite elegant; the dodecasyllables run smoothly, enjambment is avoided, and the ethical concepts are neatly compressed in well-balanced periods and metrical units. This seventh-century corpus of monastic epigrams was one of the major sources of inspiration for Kassia, who regularly imitates these verses in her own collection of gnomes.

There are more indications that the cultural revival of the ninth century, incorrectly called “the Macedonian Renaissance”, is deeply rooted in the fertile soil of Syro-Palestinian culture of the dark ages. I will give a few examples of eighth-century attempts to revive or to re-invent cultural traditions in the field of Byzantine poetry and metrics. To begin with, according to Eustathios of Thessalonica, John of Damascus wrote an “Euripidean” drama on the biblical subject of Susanna and the Elders<sup>6</sup>. Eustathios quotes the following two verses in which chaste Susanna bewails her misfortune (she was first sexually harassed and then slandered by the lascivious Elders): ὁ ἀρχέκακος δράκων / πάλιν πλανᾶν ἔσπευδε τὴν Εὐάν ἐμέ, “the serpent, the origin of evil, once again hastened to deceive me like Eve”. The word ἀρχέκακος (with the rare prefix ἀρχε- instead of ἀρχι-) is an Homeric quote: *Il.* 5. 63, where it refers to the commencement of the problems for the Trojans, but here it is used in a Christian sense, indicating that the devil is the root of all evil. The inveterate metrician will be delighted with the oxytone stress accent in the second verse and the anapestic resolution at the end of the first verse (-χεκακος- forms the fifth foot), but will surely be offended by the inexcusable hiatus between ὁ and ἀρχέ, which suggests that Eustathios of Thessalonica either quoted from memory or deliberately changed the text. What is of particular interest here, is that John of Damascus composed a play, entitled “The Drama of Susanna” (τὸ δράμα τῆς Σωσάννης), in

<sup>6</sup> Eustathios refers to this play in his commentary on the *Pentecostal Hymn* by John Arklas (*PG* 136, 508b) as well as in his commentary on Dionysius Periegeta (*Geographi Graeci Minores*, ed. C. MÜLLER, Paris 1861, vol. II, 387, lines 17–19). In the first source we find the two verses quoted (see the main text), the reference to the “Euripidean” character of the play, and the attribution to John Mansour (=John of Damascus); in the second source Eustathios tells us that the form Τίγριδος (instead of Τίγριος) is used by ὁ γράψας τὸ δράμα τῆς Σωσάννης, οἷμαι ὁ Δαμασκηνός, ὡς ἐκ τῆς ἐπιγραφῆς φαίνεται.

a period that is thought to be poetically barren. Some fifty years later, around the year 790, Stephen the Sabaite wrote a biblical play in verse, entitled “The Death of Christ” (ὁ θάνατος τοῦ Χριστοῦ), of which we know nothing apart from the title<sup>7</sup>. Since theatrical performances ceased to exist in late antiquity, it is out of the question that these two texts, *Susanna* and *The Death of Christ*, were genuine theatre plays. These two “plays” will have been poetic dialogues. In the early ninth century we have a poem by Ignatios the Deacon, *Adam and Eve*<sup>8</sup>, which treats a biblical theme in dialogue form and is replete with literary references to Euripides and Sophocles<sup>9</sup>. It is reasonable to assume that Ignatios the Deacon composed this “play” in direct response to eighth-century Palestinian experiments in the field of dramatic poetry, such as the poems by John of Damascus and Stephen the Sabaite.

Then we have the problem of the iambic hymns ascribed to John of Damascus. In two sources, Eustathios of Thessalonica and John Merkouropoulos (both dating from the late twelfth century), the *Pentecostal Hymn* is attributed to a certain John Arklas<sup>10</sup>. Seeing that so many texts, in prose or verse, are incorrectly ascribed to the famous John of Damascus, and taking into account the fact that no one would come up with the name of the obscure John Arklas unless there was some truth to it, it is reasonable to assume that Eustathios and Merkouropoulos had access to more reliable information than we have. Thus I see no reason to doubt that the *Pentecostal Hymn* (and in all likelihood also the two other iambic canons attributed to John of Damascus, which are quite similar to the *Pentecostal Hymn*) is in fact the work of John Arklas. But when did the poet live? Merkouropoulos informs us that John Arklas lived in the monastery of Mar Sabas, which clearly suggests an eighth-century date. Ronchey, on the contrary, avers that Arklas dates from the second phase of iconoclasm (815–843), because, according to her, Eustathios suggests by implication that his nickname (ἀρξαλᾶς = cabinetmaker) is some sort of anti-iconoclastic slur<sup>11</sup>. As I fail to discover even the vaguest innuendo of this kind in Eustathios’ treatise, I see no good reason to doubt that Arklas lived in eighth-century Palestine. The iambic hymns incorrectly attributed to John of Damascus, but in fact the work of one John Arklas, were imitated by many celebrated authors, such as Methodios, Photios and Anastasios Quaestor, in the ninth and

<sup>7</sup> See KRUMBACHER 1897b: 645.

<sup>8</sup> Ed. MÜLLER 1886: 28–3.

<sup>9</sup> See BROWNING 1968 and BALDWIN 1985: 134–141.

<sup>10</sup> See KAZHDAN 1999: 87–88.

<sup>11</sup> See S. RONCHEY, *DOP* 45 (1991) 149–158; eadem, in: *Novum Millennium. Studies on Byzantine History and Culture dedicated to Paul Speck*, eds. C. SODE & S. TAKÁCS. Aldershot 2001, 327–336. Cf. KAZHDAN 1999: 88.

early tenth centuries<sup>12</sup>. Here then we have another form of classicizing poetry composed in eighth-century Palestine, which was subsequently imitated during the so-called Macedonian Renaissance.

The iambic hymns are of great importance for a number of reasons. First of all, it is a metrical tour de force to combine the complicated rhythmical patterns of hymnography with the prosodic demands of classicizing poetry. Arklas fully succeeds in this difficult task. With the exception of Pisides perhaps, there are hardly any dodecasyllables as prosodically correct as the verses of John Arklas. The prosodic perfection he achieved is the main reason why his iambic hymns were imitated by the following generations and became the subject of many learned commentaries in the Comnenian age. Secondly, as if this metrical tour de force was not enough, Arklas forced his verses into the straitjacket of acrostic. His iambic canon *On the Birth of Christ*, for instance, bears the following metrical acrostic:

Εὐεπίης μελέεσσιν ἐφύμνια ταῦτα λιγαίνει  
 υἷα θεοῦ, μερόπων εἵνεκα τικτόμενον  
 ἐν χθονὶ καὶ λύοντα πολύστονα πῆματα κόσμου  
 ἀλλ', ἄνα, ῥητήρας ῥύεο τῶνδε πόνων.

“In euphonic chant these hymnic verses sing of the Son of God, who was born on earth on behalf of men and who dissolved the mournful misery of the world. O Lord, save thy singers from these sorrows”<sup>13</sup>. This text falls into the category of the Byzantine book epigram (see chapter 6, p. 197). It is the first experiment after the early seventh century to revive the elegiac distich from the abyss of oblivion – a metrical experiment that apparently met with much approval, for it was enthusiastically embraced by many poets in ninth-century Constantinople, such as Ignatios the Deacon. And thirdly, the iambic hymns of Arklas are replete with strange compounds, the most notorious one being ἀκτιστοσυμπλαστουροσύνθρονον σέθεν, “thine uncreated co-creator sharing the throne”<sup>14</sup>. In his commentary on the *Pentecostal Hymn* (PG 136, 716), Eustathios of Thessalonica rightly notes that this monstrous neologism disrupts the rhythmical verse structure and calls this kind of compound disparagingly τὰ πινακηδὸν ἀποτεινόμενα ἔπη, “words stretched out like ship-timbers”<sup>15</sup>. He also

<sup>12</sup> Methodios: ed. PITRA 1864–1868: vol II, 363–364; Photios: ed. A. LAURIOTIS, *Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ Ἀλήθεια* 15 (1896) 220; and Anastasios Quaestor: ed. PAPAPOPOULOS-KERAMEUS 1900: 45–51 and 53–59.

<sup>13</sup> Ed. CHRIST & PARANIKAS 1871: 205–207.

<sup>14</sup> For this and other compound words, see KOMINIS 1966: 80–81.

<sup>15</sup> Eustathios obviously refers to Aristophanes, *Ranae* 823–825: (Aeschylus) βρυχώμενος ἦσει / ῥήματα γομφοπαγῆ, πινακηδὸν ἀποσπῶν / γηγενεὶ φυσήματι. The ῥήματα γομφοπαγῆ are the sesquipedalian compound words of Aeschylus. In his commentaries on Homer, *Il.* Z 168 and *Od.* A 141, Eustathios refers to the same Aristophanic passage.

quotes another equally horrific example: ψευδοσεμνοκομπομυθοπλασσία. In a book epigram dedicated to Leo VI we find an almost identical twin: τὰς σεμνοκομψοψευδομυθοπλασσίας<sup>16</sup>. In poetry dating from the ninth and tenth centuries, complex compound words are extremely popular: for anacreontics, see Leo Choirosphaktes, *De Thermis*, vv. 186–187: ἀναρχοφωτόμυστον / ἀρρητοληπτόπνευστον, and *On the Bath of Leo VI*, v. 14: ἀκροβλαστοχρυσομόρφους; for dodecasyllables, see the book epigram dedicated to Sisinnios of Laodikeia (c. 870–880), v. 6: θησαυροπλουτόχρηστον ἐσθλοφωνίαν, the tenth-century encomium on a Calabrian youth, v. 25: τοὺς πεντανευροχορδολεπτοσυνθέτους, and Constantine the Rhodian, who in his two satirical poems presents no less than thirty-seven examples: for instance, καὶ ψευδομυθοσαθροπλασματοπλόκε<sup>17</sup>. Since most of the examples quoted are not used in a satirical context (with the exception of Constantine the Rhodian, of course), it is reasonable to conjecture that the sudden vogue for such colourful words goes back to the poetry of Arklas rather than directly to the arch-father of bizarre neologisms, Aristophanes.

Apart from the iambic canon and the dialogue in verse form, there is a third kind of poetry which we know migrated from eighth-century Palestine to ninth-century Constantinople: the classicizing anacreontic, composed κατὰ Σωφρόνιον, “à la Sophronios”<sup>18</sup>. Elias Synkellos of Jerusalem (s. VIII)<sup>19</sup> makes no secret of the fact that his own anacreontic poetry owes a great deal to Sophronios. At the end of his *Lamentation on Himself*, he urges the pious congregation listening to his song to join in and lament along with him:

μερόπων εὐσεβέες, συμπαθὲς ἄλγος  
ἐπ’ ἐμοὶ Σωφρονίου δείξατε θρήνοις,

“Pious men, show your compassion by pitying me with Sophronian laments”<sup>20</sup>. What we see in the poetry of Elias Synkellos as well as that of one of his successors, Michael Synkellos of Jerusalem (761–846), is a deliberate attempt to revive the anacreontic and to follow in the footsteps of Sophronios. Michael Synkellos was sent on a diplomatic mission to Constantinople in 813,

<sup>16</sup> Ed. MARKOPOULOS 1994b: 33 (v. 4). P. LAMBECK, *Commentariorum de Augustissima Bibliotheca Caesarea Vindobonensi liber IV. Editio altera studio et opera A.F. KOLLAR. Vienna 1776, 399–402, prints: [...]μυθοπλασσίας.*

<sup>17</sup> Leo Choirosphaktes, *De Thermis*: ed. GALLAVOTTI 1990: 89; *On the Bath of Leo VI*: ed. CICCOLELLA 2000a: 94. Sisinnios: see below, Appendix IX, no. 17. Calabrian encomium: ed. MERCATI 1931: 364. Constantine the Rhodian: ed. MATRANGA 1850: 624–625 (vv. 5–28) and 626 (vv. 13–25).

<sup>18</sup> See GALLAVOTTI 1987: 57–59, CRIMI 1990: 9–11, and CICCOLELLA 2000a: XXVI–XXVIII.

<sup>19</sup> For the date of Elias Synkellos, see LAUXTERMANN 2003b.

<sup>20</sup> Ed. CICCOLELLA 2000a: 31 (vv. 91–92).

but never returned to his native soil. People such as Michael Synkellos, the Graptoi and other Palestinian émigrés, probably brought to the capital the cultural baggage of the East, the eternal *lux ex oriente*. In connection with the iambic canon and the dialogue in verse form, I have already mentioned Ignatios the Deacon as the first Constantinopolitan to imitate Palestinian authors of the eighth century. It is hardly surprising, then, that the same Ignatios the Deacon was also the first Constantinopolitan author to write a poem in anacreontics, not so much κατὰ Σωφρόνιον, but rather in the manner of Elias Synkellos, whom he repeatedly plagiarizes<sup>21</sup>.

The metrical treatise by Elias Monachos, another Palestinian author living around the year 800, is also worth noticing<sup>22</sup>. Not only is it the first metrical treatise written after the sixth century, but it is also remarkable for its attempt to teach ancient metrics by using examples taken from Byzantine authors. The difficult rules of the iamb are taught by citing verses of Pisides as examples and the proper use of the anacreontic is illustrated with Sophronian quotes only. It is beyond doubt that Elias Monachos influenced the school curriculum and thus the literary canon of the Byzantines: by using the poetry of Pisides and Sophronios as didactic material, he enhanced their literary status enormously. What this means in practice, is that no author after c. 800 can afford to neglect these two authors because they have become almost classic. If you write a poem in dodecasyllable, Pisides is the source to turn to; if you compose an anacreontic, it is a good idea to first check your Sophronios.

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### *The Rediscovery of the Epigram*

In the same period that we witness all sorts of burgeoning experiments in the field of poetry and metrics in Palestine, Constantinople is deeply asleep. It is almost as if it hibernates, in order to recover from the shock of seeing its glorious empire reduced to a few territories and the barbarians standing before the gates of the holy city. When the Byzantine empire finally awakes from its protracted winter sleep, it finds itself in a culturally inferior position in comparison to the Carolingians in the West and, especially, the Abbasids in the

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<sup>21</sup> Ed. CICCOLELLA 2000a: 40–55. For Ignatios' debt to Elias Synkellos, see *ibidem*, XLIII.

<sup>22</sup> Ed. G. STUEMUND, *Anecdota Varia Graeca et Latina*, vol I. Berlin 1886, 170–184. See L. VOLTZ, *Dissertationes Philologicae Argentoratenses* 11 (1894) 7–14; C. MANGO, in: *Scrittura, libri e testi nelle aree provinciali*, ed. G. CAVALLO. Spoleto 1991, 156–158; and LAUXTER-MANN 1998b.



East. The Carolingians are reclaiming the legacy of the Roman Empire and the Abbasids even dare pretend that the cultural heritage of the ancient Greeks is now rightfully theirs. As Paul Speck amply demonstrated in various publications<sup>23</sup>, the Byzantines react to these challenges by denying the impact of the dark age crisis, by consciously attempting to revive the literary legacy of late antiquity, and by blaming the iconoclasts for Byzantium's cultural inferiority. In the mythical self-image of ninth-century Byzantium the key word is continuity. Nothing has fundamentally changed in the course of time; true enough, culture has fallen to a remarkable low, but that is just a temporary setback due to the barbaric iconoclasts. It is in the context of this nostalgic irredentism that the epigram, along with many other kinds of highbrow literature, will be rediscovered in the course of the ninth century.

In his *Refutation* of the iconoclast epigrams on the Chalke as well as in a letter to one Litoios<sup>24</sup>, Theodore of Stoudios proudly states that his own verses are superior to those of the iconoclasts, because he puts the mesostich (the acrostic in the middle of the verse) exactly at the beginning of the seventh syllable, and not somewhere in the middle as the iconoclast poets inadvertently do. The iconoclasts are not only bad theologians, but they are also bad poets. In the *Life of Michael Synkellos*<sup>25</sup> we read that the iconoclast emperor Theophilos, when he had to deal with the obstinate iconophile monks Theodore and Theophanes (the Graptoi), supposedly ordered that scurrilous iambs should be branded on their foreheads – quite an achievement if one reckons that the poem in question consists of no less than twelve verses! Theophilos allegedly told the poet, a certain Christodoulos, that he should not worry whether his verses were correct or not<sup>26</sup>, at which point someone else, guessing what the emperor meant to say, exclaimed: “My lord, these persons do not deserve that the iambs should be any better”. The hagiographer also states, almost in parenthesis, that the emperor feared that the Graptoi might ridicule the verses, as they were widely celebrated for their metrical expertise and poetical skills. The story about Theophilos and the Graptoi is a legendary tale, of course, but it is particularly interesting because it clearly shows both the concerns of ninth-century Byzantium and the mechanisms of the iconophile propaganda

<sup>23</sup> See SPECK 1998: 73–84. On p. 75, n. 9, Speck refers to his earlier publications on the topic.

<sup>24</sup> PG 99, 437; FATOUROS 1992: no. 356 (II, p. 490).

<sup>25</sup> Ed. M.B. CUNNINGHAM, *The Life of Michael the Synkellos*. Belfast 1991, 84–86 and 160–161. The story is of course an iconophile myth, see SODE 2001: 86–89 and 127–131. Equally legendary is the story about an exchange of flattering epistles in verse form between the Graptoi and Methodios (ed. I. SAKKELION, *DIEE* 2 (1885–1889) 586 and S. VAILHÉ, *ROC* 6 (1901) 624); see SODE 2001: 272–273.

<sup>26</sup> As noted by BALDWIN 1985: 142 and 144, there is indeed a serious metrical error in the third line.

machine. Poetry has to be prosodically correct. Metrical errors are inexcusable because of the potential danger that they may undermine and blow to pieces the myth of an uninterrupted cultural tradition linking Byzantium to late antiquity. For the idea of continuity presupposes, of course, that Byzantine poets follow in the footsteps of their late antique colleagues and compose their verses exactly as they did – that is, without any prosodic flaws. However, as it unfortunately cannot be denied that Byzantine poetry often presents metrical blunders, there must be a culprit responsible for allowing such gross errors. As always, the iconoclasts serve as scapegoats. They are the ones who allow poetic licences that are absolutely unheard of, they are the ones who commit metrical errors on an unprecedented scale. It goes without saying that the iconophiles, true heirs to the cultural heritage of the ancients, never err and never commit the metrical atrocities the hideous iconoclasts are guilty of. The myth of political correctness in matters of theology and metrics, which we find in iconophile sources of the later ninth century, is already in the making at the time of Theodore of Stoudios. Theodore already suggests that his own impeccable epigrams are much better than those of the iconoclasts, not only because they tell the plain truth, but also because they are ingeniously constructed, whereas the iconoclasts are not even capable of producing a decent acrostic according to the rules of the art. Theodore of Stoudios is the first Byzantine poet after the seventh century to stress the importance of artistic form and to judge the quality of poetry, not only on the basis of content, but also from an aesthetic viewpoint.

However, despite Theodore of Stoudios' interesting comments on the formal aspects of the acrostic, it is incorrect to attribute to him the rediscovery of the epigram. Theodore wrote many verses that belong to the genre of the Byzantine ἐπιγράμμα, but he certainly did not endeavour to rediscover the rules of the literary epigram nor to link up with the cultural traditions of late antiquity. His verses have nothing in common with the epigrams of Agathias or Paul the Silentiary, but basically hark back to the literary experiments of the seventh and eighth centuries: to Pisides, Sophronios and others. Theodore of Stoudios' epigrams are ἐπιγράμματα in the Byzantine sense of the word – verses that serve a practical purpose, such as epigrams on works of art, epitaphs, book epigrams and gnomes. It is worth noting that his epigrams were published only after 886 (see chapter 2, p. 70), whereas most of Theodore's literary works appeared on the market much earlier. The reason for this remarkable editorial delay is simply that until the late ninth century no one considered Theodore of Stoudios' verses, however brilliantly written, to be worth copying. As his epigrams served a purely practical purpose, they did not have any literary status or intrinsic value other than the fact that they had been composed by the great Theodore of Stoudios. His epigrams languished in editorial limbo for so long because they were not considered to be literature.

This changed when the epigram as a literary genre became fashionable once again as a result of the revived interest in the Greek Anthology. It can hardly be a coincidence that Theodore of Stoudios' epigrams were published in exactly the same period Constantine Cephalas was strenuously involved in compiling the anthology of ancient and late antique epigrams that bears his name. The Stoudite movement reacted to the fashionable revival of the epigram by claiming that their own Theodore, too, had excelled in this kind of literature, as proof of which they produced a somewhat belated edition of his epigrams. What we see is that the literary status of Theodore of Stoudios' verses was upgraded in the course of the ninth century. Initially they were just ἐπιγράμματα. Only in the late ninth century did they become literary epigrams.

But this was possible only after the epigram had been rediscovered. Theodore of Stoudios did not re-invent the genre, despite claims to the contrary by Stoudite monks stepping into the breach in his defence. The Byzantines themselves at least were not fooled by these ludicrous attempts to present Theodore of Stoudios in a more favourable light, as a lone ranger standing at the forefront of the literary movement that was to rediscover the epigram as a genre in its own right. The fact that none of his epigrams can be found in the Greek Anthology says it all. In the eyes of the Byzantine scholars to whom we owe this marvelous compilation, Theodore of Stoudios cannot be ranged among the ninth-century authors who rescued the legacy of the ancient epigram from oblivion.

If we are to believe Paul Speck, there was a sort of literary rivalry between Theodore of Stoudios and Ignatios the Deacon, both trying to score points off each other by reviving literary traditions that had become extinct during the dark age crisis<sup>27</sup>. As for the epigram, there can be little doubt that if such a rivalry existed, Ignatios the Deacon must have gained a sweeping victory over his opponent. While Theodore had to wait some seventy years to see his epigrams published, Ignatios himself produced an edition of his collected epitaphs, entitled "*Sepulchral Elegies*". And once again in contrast to poor Theodore, Ignatios managed to obtain a place in the literary gallery of the Byzantines, the Greek Anthology, where we find three of his epitaphs (*AP* XV, 29–31). It is not difficult to understand why the scholars who compiled the Greek Anthology appreciated the epitaphs of Ignatios the Deacon, and viewed them as prime examples of the Byzantine epigram. The metre is the elegiac, the language is Homeric, the style is elevated. It all looks distinctly ancient, although it is difficult to pinpoint any direct literary influences. The connoisseur of the epigrammatic genre will immediately recognize that Ignatios' epi-

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<sup>27</sup> See P. SPECK, in: *The 17<sup>th</sup> International Byzantine Congress. Major Papers*. New Rochelle 1986, 555–576; and idem in: *Varia 2 (Ποικίλα Βυζαντινά 6)*. Bonn 1987, 253–283.

taphs are thoroughly Byzantine, but will surely rejoice at seeing so much effort invested in creating the deceptive patina of things old. The literary epigram comes to life again in the poetry of Ignatios the Deacon. Although his epitaphs still serve a practical purpose as written memorials and therefore belong to the category of the Byzantine ἐπίγραμμα, it cannot be denied that Ignatios adds a new dimension to the genre by writing in a highbrow style and that he attempts to re-establish a connection with the late antique epigram.

In the field of Byzantine poetry Ignatios the Deacon holds a place of honour. He is the first Constantinopolitan poet to pay attention to the poetry produced in Syria and Palestine during the dark ages. He imitates the anacreontics by Elias Synkellos and the dialogues in verse form by John of Damascus and Stephen the Sabaite, and he is initiated into the metrical mysteries of the elegiac by John Arklas. He is also the first ninth-century author to consciously revive the rules of the literary epigram. It all begins with Ignatios the Deacon.

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### *Redefining the Byzantine Epigram*

In the years between c. 840 and c. 900, starting with the enigmatic figure of Leo the Philosopher, we have a number of classicizing poets and scholars who prepare editions of ancient epigrams and write poetry themselves. In the third chapter I dealt with this scholarly movement in extenso, so there is no need to repeat here what happened during those years of effervescent classicism. It is interesting to note, however, that the scholar-poets of the Greek Anthology went much further in their reappraisal of the epigrammatic genre than Ignatios the Deacon was willing to do. However innovative he may have been, Ignatios the Deacon meticulously clung to the codes of the Byzantine ἐπίγραμμα, which he merely made fashionable as a literary genre in its own right by adroitly using the metre and the stylistic register of the ancient epigram. But he did not feel the urge to revive the erotic or the epideictic or the satirical epigram. And why should he? Why resuscitate a dead corpse, if there are so many other interesting things to write about, all very much alive in the conceptual world of the Byzantines? In the Greek Anthology, however, we find a number of ninth-century poems that do not fall into the category of the ἐπίγραμμα – which indicates that some people at least tried to redefine the margins of what constituted, properly speaking, a Byzantine epigram. Theophanes the Grammarian, one of the students of Leo the Philosopher, composed an erotic epigram (*AP* XV, 35), which is the first of its kind after the sixth century. Constantine the Sicilian, another student of Leo, is the first to

compose an epideictic epigram after the dark ages (*AP XV*, 13). This text was ridiculed by Theophanes the Grammarian in an amusing poem (*AP XV*, 14), which is the first satirical epigram to be written after the period of Agathias and his friends. Leo the Philosopher himself wrote an *eis heauton* (“a poem to himself”), which despite its thoroughly Byzantine title has nothing to do with other examples of the genre. Instead of repeating the stock motives of religious penitence, which is a characteristic feature of the Byzantine *eis heauton*, Leo the Philosopher expresses his wish to live peacefully, without a care in the world, and at a safe distance from the madding crowd (*AP XV*, 12). Although Leo’s verses are without parallel, it should probably be viewed as an epideictic epigram – compare, for instance, an epideictic epigram by Ptolemy, also entitled εἰς ἑαυτόν (*AP IX*, 577), in which the poet expresses the sentiments of sheer delight and ecstasy he experiences when he stares up at the starry firmament. The epigrams by Leo the Philosopher, Theophanes the Grammarian and Constantine the Sicilian are deliberate attempts to pump new life into the genre of the epigram and to revive the legacy of the ancients as another phoenix from its ashes.

However, the generic classification system of the scholar-poets of the Greek Anthology is occasionally at variance with that of the ancients. There are, for instance, three Byzantine poems in the Greek Anthology that would not have seemed particularly epigrammatic to the ancients: a prayer to Christ (ἐὺκτικὰ, *AP I*, 118), a paraphrase of chapter 11 of the *Gospel according to John* (*AP XV*, 40) and an invective directed against a stupid doctor<sup>28</sup>. For the ancients these poems constitute a hymnal invocation, a rhetorical metaphrasis and a psogos, respectively. They are definitely not epigrams. The scholar-poets of the Greek Anthology, on the contrary, appear to be willing to accept any poetic text as an epigram, as long as it is dignified enough to pass for something the ancients could have written. They are so thrilled with their rediscovery of the epigram that they occasionally forget what exactly it was they rediscovered.

It is worth noticing that Dionysios the Stoudite, the scholar who shortly after 886 put together the collection of “*Iambs on various subjects*” by Theodore of Stoudios, also tries to extend the boundaries of the Byzantine epigram. Living in the same age as Constantine Cephalas, Dionysios is as anxious as the scholar-poets of the Greek Anthology to rediscover the epigram, even where nothing specifically epigrammatic can be found. Dionysios is really fond of the word ἐπίγραμμα. Sure enough, most of the texts he publishes are authentic ἐπιγράμματα, but he also includes a poem no other Byzantine would ever have called an epigram: Theod. St. 97. This is a catanyctic poem in which Theodore

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<sup>28</sup> Ed. WESTERINK 1986: 200. The poem is to be found in the *Sylloge Euphemiana*, a collection of epigrams that derives from the anthology of Cephalas: see pp. 114–115.

of Stoudios admonishes his own soul to be aware of the proximity of death and to prepare itself for the last judgment, when it will be brought to account for its misconduct<sup>29</sup>. The poem bears the curious title: ἐπίγραμμα εἰς ἑαυτόν. The title is a conflation of two different generic terms: “epigram” and “eis heauton”. There are numerous catanyctic texts that are quite similar to the poem by Theodore: hymns, anacreontics, longer poems, short lyrical effusions and contemplative musings. These various catanyctic texts are usually entitled: εἰς ἑαυτόν, just like the poem by Theodore of Stoudios. None of these poems, not even the shorter ones, are ever called ἐπίγραμμα. By Byzantine standards, then, the catanyctic poem by Theodore of Stoudios does not constitute an epigram, but is simply an *eis heauton*.

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### *Re-redefining the Byzantine Epigram*

Despite all their efforts to link up with the literary tradition of the epigram as it existed before the dark age crisis, the scholar-poets of the late ninth century met with remarkably little success in the end. They managed to convince Dionysios the Stoudite, not one of Byzantium’s brightest lights, to search for the epigrammatic even in an *eis heauton* written by the champion of Byzantine monasticism, Theodore of Stoudios. But apart from this meagre success, there is not the slightest trace of evidence that they succeeded in convincing their fellow Byzantines to venture beyond the traditional limits of the ἐπίγραμμα and to rediscover the *terra incognita* of the ancient epigram. As soon as Theophanes the Grammarian rediscovered the erotic epigram, it disappeared altogether never to return again. Epideictic and satirical epigrams, such as we find in the Greek Anthology, continued to be written after the late ninth century, but the Byzantines no longer regarded such texts as epigrams. And the same goes for the prayer, the metaphrasis, the invective and the *eis heauton* – all these kinds of poetry the scholar-poets of the Greek Anthology attempted to redefine in the light of the rediscovery of the epigram. They continue to exist, but not under the brand name of “epigram”. They are just poems. In order to understand what constitutes a Byzantine epigram, the Greek Anthology is not a very reliable guide, as it merely forms a failed experiment to reshape the hazy outlines of the epigram in the context of a short-lived vogue for anything classical.

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<sup>29</sup> See the excellent commentary by SPECK 1968: 258–261.

The tenth century is the period in which the literary legacy of the Byzantines themselves is rediscovered. Shortly after 919, an anonymous scholar put together a collection of anacreontics and alphabets, the *Anthologia Barberina*, which is marked (to put it in a negative way) by a total lack of interest in the classical. This anthology is constructed so as to provide a survey of the Byzantine anacreontic, which begins with Sophronios and other Palestinian authors, then moves on to Ignatios the Deacon, and from there to the literary circle of Leo the Philosopher, and finally culminates in the poetry of Arethas and Leo Choirospaktes. True enough, the anthology also contains a number of sixth-century anacreontics and a selection from the ancient *Anacreontea*, but it presents these poems merely as the prelude to the authentic Byzantine anacreontic. Among the alphabets in unprosodic meters we find a great number of ceremonial poems that were performed at the court of the Macedonian dynasty. The remaining alphabets also appear to date from the ninth and early tenth centuries. In this section of the *Anthologia Barberina* there is not a single poem dating from the period of late antiquity. It is not difficult to note the differences between this collection of anacreontics and alphabets and the famous Greek Anthology, although only twenty years have passed between Constantine Cephalas and the anonymous scholar who compiled the *Anthologia Barberina*<sup>30</sup>. I think that these obvious differences are related to a fundamental changeover in mentality and literary predilections, which dates from the early tenth century. It is then, I would say, that the classicizing vogue gradually recedes into the background, while a “byzantinizing” trend, equally gradually, comes to the fore instead.

It is worth noticing, for instance, that Leo Choirospaktes, an author who can often be caught red-handed in the act of wilfully “classicizing”, occasionally writes poems that look typically Byzantine. His epigrams are a good example. The style is elevated, there are hardly any metrical or grammatical errors, and the metaphors and figures of speech bear proof of much poetic versatility. But whereas it is fairly easy to point to Byzantine parallels, it is rather difficult to trace these epigrams back to any classical antecedent. Let us look, for instance, at the epitaph he wrote for his beloved teacher, Leo the Philosopher:

Θεωρίας ὕψωμα, γνώσεως βάθος,  
 πλάτος λόγων, φρόνησις, ἀπλότης, πόνος,  
 θρηνοῦσιν, οἰμώζουσιν· οὐ γὰρ ἐν βίῳ  
 Λέοντα νῦν βλέπουσιν· ὦ τῆς ζημίας!

“The height of contemplation, the depth of knowledge and the breadth of reasoning, along with wisdom, sincerity and industry, lament and wail, for now

<sup>30</sup> For the *Anthologia Barberina* and its contents, see chapter 3, pp. 123–128.

they no longer see Leo alive. Oh, what a great loss!”<sup>31</sup>. Although one would expect that an epitaph to Leo the Philosopher, the leading figure of the classicizing movement in ninth-century Byzantium, should be as classicistic as Leo the Philosopher’s own poetry, this is not the case. The epitaph is certainly not the run-of-the-mill kind of thing one normally finds in Byzantine poetry, but it does not look particularly classicistic either. It makes abundant use of the metonymic figure of speech called personification: all the excellent qualities for which Leo the Philosopher was celebrated, lament because he is gone. This figure of speech is very common in Byzantine epitaphs: see, for instance, John Geometres’ epitaph to Theodore Dekapolites (Cr. 297, 29), where it is said that Lady Justice (Δίκη) wishes to be buried in the same grave as Dekapolites, who was noted for his expertise in legal matters. To express his sense of bereavement, Choirosphaktes adroitly uses harsh *asyndeta*, which sever the syntactical period into short, rapid clauses: it is almost as if he gasps for air and searches for the right words because he is overcome by grief. This is a stylistic device (called *gorgotes* by the rhetoricians<sup>32</sup>) which Byzantine poets often employ in moments of eloquent passion. Though grief-stricken, Choirosphaktes tries to assuage the emotional tension he has built up with all these *asyndeta* by making his verses as smooth and rhythmical as possible. The rhythm is invariably heptasyllabic and proparoxytone in the first, pentasyllabic and paroxytone in the second hemistichs. The two last verses of the quatrain have rhyme before the caesura: οἰμῶζουσιν – βλέπουσιν. Rhyme is not a feature of ancient poetry, but is very common in Byzantine rhetorical prose. The epitaph is in fact a splendid piece of Byzantine rhetoric, carefully constructed so as to convey to the readers the idea of deeply felt grief.

The first line of the epitaph is vaguely reminiscent of a late ninth-century book epigram celebrating an anonymous scholar who produced an edition of Plato or a commentary to the Platonic corpus (*AP* XV, 39b): τὰ τοῦ Πλάτωνος ἐξερευνήσας βάθη, τὰ τῶν λογισμῶν ἐξερίζωσας πάθη [note the rhyme], “by exploring the depths of Plato, you have uprooted the passions that disturb reasoning”. But the most interesting parallel is undoubtedly a Byzantine epigram dedicated to the Holy Virgin, which begins with almost the same *incipit* as the epitaph to Leo the Philosopher: θεωριῶν ὕψωμα, δογματῶν βάθος, “height of contemplations and depth of dogmatic truths”<sup>33</sup>. As the epitaph reveals close parallels with other Byzantine poems and is constructed according to the rules of Byzantine rhetoric, we can draw but one conclusion: it is not particularly classicizing. It has little in common with the ancient epigram nor

<sup>31</sup> Ed. KOLLAS 1939: 132.

<sup>32</sup> See LAUXTERMANN 1998b: 25–28.

<sup>33</sup> The epigram is still unpublished. It can be found in Athous 4418 (Ib. 288) [s. XVI], fol. 1<sup>r</sup>.



with the literary movement of Leo the Philosopher, even though he is the subject of the poem.

The literary vogue for anything classical did not die out all of a sudden by the year 900, but it gradually withered and then passed away, leaving no traces of any significance in subsequent stages of the Byzantine epigram. True enough, there are still a few poetic texts that obviously imitate ancient epigrams, but the feverish passion of the scholar-poets of the Greek Anthology has become something of the past. The epigrams of John Geometres and other tenth-century poets are usually not classicizing, but “byzantinizing”, just like the epitaph by Leo Choirosphaktes.

In sharp contrast to the literary experiments of Leo the Philosopher and his followers, the tenth-century epigram is basically a return to the tradition of the Byzantine ἐπίγραμμα, with only one significant difference, to wit: a dignified and manneristic literary style has become an absolute prerequisite. The highly rhetorical epitaph by Choirosphaktes is an example of this mannerism and fastidious refinement, and I could quote many other examples – but what would be the point of repeating the obvious? Vastly more important is the fact that all the epigrams by Leo Choirosphaktes are either epitaphs or epigrams on works of art. He does not write erotic or epideictic or satirical epigrams, like the literary circle of Leo the Philosopher. Instead, he favours the traditional kind of epigram, the Byzantine ἐπίγραμμα. The same can be said about other tenth-century poets, such as Constantine the Rhodian, the Anonymous Patrician and John Geometres, whose epigrams are composed in a highbrow style, and yet fit neatly into the category of the Byzantine ἐπίγραμμα.

To summarize, the history of the Byzantine epigram can be charted in the form of a diagram that presents a single, straight line with one dip and one peak. Imagine a line with three dots: Pisides, Ignatios the Deacon and Leo Choirosphaktes, all three of them at the same level. In the intervals between these equidistant dots the epigram first falls to a remarkable low during the dark ages, and then climaxes with the classicizing movement of the ninth century. After the third dot, Leo Choirosphaktes, the line runs straight on without any further curves, declivities or sharp rises. In retrospect, the history of the Byzantine epigram looks strikingly like a variation on the poetic theme of “paradise lost, paradise regained”. The epigram is lost, regained, redefined and re-redefined. In the tenth century, after a very chequered history, the epigram finally winds up being what it used to be in the time of Pisides: a literary ἐπίγραμμα. The genre has come full circle.

