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Verses on paper, verses inscribed?

*A case study, with epigrams of John Geometres*¹

It is a well-known fact that only a very small number of Byzantine literary epigrams transmitted in manuscripts can also be found as verse inscriptions *in situ*. Famous examples include the charioteer epigrams on the marble bases of statues in the Hippodrome at Constantinople transmitted in the Planudean Appendix to the Palatine Anthology.² These verse inscriptions date from the 5th century AD and became literary epigrams after being copied from stone onto paper. Unfortunately, we rarely find such happy pairings.

The epigrams of John Geometres, a prolific poet of the second half of the 10th century, are no exception to this rule: as far as we know, only one of his epigrams transmitted in several manuscripts is also found *in situ*. It is a beautiful epigram on the forty martyrs painted (with orthographical errors) on an equally beautiful fresco in the Church of the Panagia Phorbiotissa in Asinou in Cyprus (cf. fig. 1). In this case, the literary epigram dating from the 10th century precedes the verse inscription, which dates from 1105/6 AD.³

Χειμῶν τὸ λυποῦν, σὰρξ τὸ πάσχον ἐνθάδε·
προσῶν ἀκούσεις καὶ στεναγμὸν μαρτύρων.
εἰ δ' οὐκ ἀκούῃ, καρτεροῦσι τὴν βίαν
πρὸς τὰ στέφη βλέποντες οὐ πρὸς τοὺς πόνους.

*Here, winter means pain and flesh means suffering:
if you pay attention you will even hear the moaning of the martyrs.
But if you do not hear it, they still stand the violent cold
by looking at the crowns and not at their toils.*

But what about the other epigrams written by John Geometres which were only transmitted in manuscripts? The majority seems to have been purely literary compositions on well known topics such as iconographical scenes, showing no direct relation with the tangible world. Written on paper, they were meant to be read from the pages of the manuscript and to be meditated upon by the reader or the listener, without being ever inscribed in stone, iron or ivory. But some of these epigrams seem to have been intended as real verse inscriptions, referring in a more explicit way to a specific object or image, by their title, by using deictic pronouns or by mentioning its patron. When talking about epigrams that have been transmitted only in manuscripts, how much room do we have for interpretation or speculation about their function?⁴

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to my friend Lotte Jonk for correcting my English.

² Discussed extensively by A. CAMERON in his book *Porphyrius: the charioteer*. Oxford 1973.

³ On the basis of its language and its presence in manuscripts containing other epigrams of Geometres, this epigram (S. 8 = ed. Sajdak number 8) is convincingly attributed to John Geometres by M.D. LAUXTERMANN, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres*, vol. I (WBS XXIV/1). Vienna 2003, 149–50.

⁴ For different views on epigrams as verse inscriptions, see LAUXTERMANN, *Byzantine Poetry* 151: “In my view, the majority of epigrams on works of art should not be regarded as genuine verse inscriptions, which by some unlucky quirk of fate can no longer be found *in situ*, but rather as purely literary poems.” On pages 338–52 the author adds a list of Byzantine verse inscriptions on objects. But see W. HÖRANDNER, *Zur kommunikativen Funktion byzantinischer Gedichte*, in: XVIII^e International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Moscow 1991, 415–32, p. 419: „[G]enerell werden wir wohl recht daran tun, in weit höherem Maße, als dies bisher geschieht, für Gedichte [sc. epigrams] eine ganz konkrete Funktion anzunehmen [sc. as verse inscriptions].“ The Viennese project “Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung” of the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, directed by Wolfram Hörandner (collaborators: Andreas Rhoby and Anneliese Paul) will probably add a number of interesting parallels of epigrams found *in situ* as well as in manuscripts. It should be noted that some verses found in

I will discuss four cases (I–IV) which I found during the preparation of my edition of a number of poems of John Geometres,⁵ and which in my opinion are of particular interest to illustrate the problem. I will offer some hypotheses as to their function, based on textual evidence and on art history, although I confess I am a philologist and not an art historian.

First of all a brief sketch of the transmission of the poems by John Geometres: the main bulk of his poems (with a total amount of 300) is transmitted in one manuscript only, dating from the 13th century (Paris. suppl. gr. 352). They have been edited in 1841 by Cramer,⁶ who used only the Parisian manuscript and made a lot of errors, often neglecting the separation marks in the margin and gluing poems together. The presentation of the poems in the manuscript is not systematic: they are neither ordered by metre, nor by subject (e.g. Christian, profane) or genre (e.g. prayer, monody, epigram). Among them there are many epigrams in dodecasyllables, hexameters and elegiacs. We can safely assume that John Geometres wrote for an educated audience in the second half of the 10th century, consisting of the elite at the court, friends of the poet, or monks of the monastery τὰ Κύρου, to which John retired at the end of his life.⁷ In short, an audience educated enough to read and appreciate the less current “high brow” metres (that is: hexameters and elegiacs) and to grasp at least some of the literary allusions to Homer, Gregory of Nazianzus and the Greek Anthology.

I. After these general remarks, I start with my first example, consisting of a poem on an icon of Christ.⁸

εἰς εἰκόνα ἀκριβῆ

Οὐρανοῦ ἐγκατέπαλτο καὶ ἔμπνοον ἐνθάδε εἰκὼ
Χριστὸς ἐὴν ἔθετο, † μητέρος. ὡς δὲ φίλων, †
ὡς νοερός χορός <ἐστι> περισταδὸν ἄλλοθεν ἄλλος·
χειρ βροτέη μεγάλα ψεύσατο τούσδε τύπους.

On an accurate icon

*Christ jumped out of heaven and placed his
animated icon here, † of his mother. Like of his friends, †
like an intelligent choir stand around him:
a human hand magnificently invented these images.*

In spite of the textual problems (which I will not discuss here), the general meaning of the epigram is clear. The title (added either by the author himself or by the scribe) indicates that the epigram is written on an icon (the word εἰκὼν is repeated in v. 1). But one has to bear in mind, of course, that the preposition εἰς can mean literally “on”, or “on the subject of”, “in praise of”.⁹ The deictic adverb ἐνθάδε (v. 1) and the deictic pronoun τούσδε (v. 4) both indicate that we have to look at a concrete object close at hand, unless the

manuscripts containing poetry collections are re-used in other manuscripts, as can be the case with book-epigrams. Furthermore, a dodecasyllable of John Geometres, taken from the introduction to the first of his *Metaphrasis of the Odes* is re-used as a decoration in a Berlin Psalter, which is discussed in the present *Acta* by Wolfram Hörandner (p. 32).

⁵ Jean Géomètre. *Poèmes en hexamètres et en distiques élégiaques*, diss. University of Amsterdam 2006 (published in 2008 by Brill, Leiden). The epigrams in elegiacs discussed in this paper are edited in this book with a critical apparatus, translation, commentary, and notes.

⁶ J.A. CRAMER, *Appendix ad excerpta poetica: codex 352 suppl.*, in ID., *Anecdota Graeca e Codd. Manuscriptis Bibliothecae Regiae Parisinae*, vol. IV. Oxford 1841 (repr. Hildesheim 1967).

⁷ For the most complete biography of John Geometres, cf. M.D. LAUXTERMANN, *John Geometres, Poet and Soldier*. *Byz* 68 (1998) 356–80.

⁸ Poem no. 265 in my edition, cf. CRAMER, *Appendix* 330, vv. 22–26.

⁹ Some editors do not translate this kind of lemma literally, but give an interpretation based on the verses that follow. To give an example: J. Henderson, the editor of the Greek Anthology in the Loeb edition, interprets AP XV 252 εἰς Ἄρτεμιν and 253 εἰς Ἑρμῆν as respectively “On a picture of unarmed Artemis”, and “On a statue of Hermes by the Roadside”.

poet invites us to evoke our own mental picture, a very common practice in Hellenistic epigrams. The verses describe the craftsmanship of the artist (cf. ἀκριβῆ¹⁰ in the title and μέγαρα in v. 4) who has painted an image of Christ, his Mother and his “friends”, i.e. the angels or saints around him (or around his Mother?). Is it an icon of Christ Pantocrator, or of the Ascension, often depicted in the dome of middle-byzantine churches? The epigram could refer to the type of image depicted on the mosaic in the dome of the Saint Sophia of Thessalonica, dating from around the year 885 AD (fig. 2), where Christ is being lifted in a mandorla by two angels, while the Virgin, the archangels and apostles are standing around, in a circle.¹¹ Another possibility is the Koimesis of the Holy Virgin: on an icon dating from the second half of the 10th century (fig. 3) she is lying on a bed and Christ stands beside her, lifting her soul up to heaven, in the presence of the apostles and angels. But the indications in Geometres’ epigram are rather vague, and one can think of various other possibilities. It is possible that these verses were intended not only to be read on the pages of a manuscript, but also as a verse inscription on an icon. The purpose of a verse inscription would then be to complete the imagination of the beholder, i.e. to underline the miracle of the incarnation of Christ. Moreover, the educated owner of this kind of icon that was accompanied by a verse inscription could also appreciate the references to Homer and Gregory of Nazianzus (οὐρανοῦ ἐγκατέπαλτο reminds the reader of Hom. II. 19, 351, where the goddess Athena jumps out of heaven to pay a short visit to Achilles; περισταδὸν ἄλλοθεν ἄλλος evokes Hom. II. 13, 551: ... Τρῶες δὲ περισταδὸν ἄλλοθεν ἄλλος; or Gregory of Nazianzus, Carm. I 2. 15, 37: οὐ γοεροῖς μελέεσσι περισταδὸν, ἄλλοθεν ἄλλος, Carm. II 1. 1, 188: κλῶνας ἀφαρπάζουσι περισταδὸν ἄλλοθεν ἄλλος or Carm. II 2. 1, 79: οὐδ’ ὑπόεικε λιτῆσι περισταδὸν ἄλλοθεν ἄλλων).

II. The second example I would like to discuss is a series of five dodecasyllables on a sword, preceded by the title εἰς σπάθην κεκαλλωπισμένην (“On a decorated blade / sword”). In this case, the preposition εἰς can be understood literally, “Written on a decorated blade”. In Cramer’s edition, these five dodecasyllables are presented as a single poem – unusually repetitive and extremely dull. But the Parisian manuscript clearly shows separation marks in the margin at the end of each verse: two points and a horizontal stroke (fig. 4). It is clear that we are dealing with a series of five very simple one-line poems, each of them intended to be inscribed along the blade of a decorated sword. The word σπάθη / σπαθίον, is used for a long two-edged sword, used by the infantry and the cavalry and measuring between 85 to 115 cm.¹² Since Byzantine soldiers were not buried along with their weapons, we have very little evidence of swords and even less of swords carrying inscriptions. But the decorated sword of Geometres is possibly the type of sword owned by the rich and used as a diplomatic gift, a sort of “Prunkschwert”, just as the embellished swords, daggers, pistols, and other weapons of the rich over the centuries.¹³ Let us have a look at the verses:¹⁴

εἰς σπάθην κεκαλλωπισμένην

a) Ἐχθροῖς σιδηρᾶ τοῖς φίλοις χρυσῆ σπάθη.

b) Δεινὴ κατ’ ἐχθρῶν, τοῖς φίλοις καλὴ σπάθη.

¹⁰ The adjective ἀκριβής refers to the detailed execution of the icon. In one of his letters, Gregory of Nazianzus describes the work of painters as follows: μιμούμεθα τοὺς ζωγράφους, οἱ ταῖς σκιαῖς τὰ σώματα προχαράσσοντες δευτέρᾳ καὶ τρίτῃ χειρὶ ταύτας ἀπακριβοῦσι καὶ τελειοῦσι τοῖς χρώμασι (*Ep.* 230. 1, 2). Cf. also the opposition ἀκριβῶς to a nicety, precisely – τύπων in outline, roughly (*LSJ* s.v. II 1).

¹¹ For similar scenes, cf. A. CUTLER – J.-M. SPIESER, *Byzance médiévale 700–1204*. Paris 1996, 108–109, ill. 79–80: Christ in Majesty (first half 10th century) in the Haçlı Kilise and Christ in Majesty above the Apostles and the Virgin surrounded by bishops (mid 11th century) in the Eski Gümüş; cf. also pp. 118–119, ill. 89 et 90 and pp. 268–270, ill. 215–18 (12th century).

¹² Cf. *ODB* s.v. weaponry.

¹³ In his book on Byzantine weapons, T.G. KOLIAS gives some examples of swords with inscriptions (a.o. ΖΗ Ο ΕΙΣ ΣΕ ΕΛΠΙΖΩΝ ΟΥ ΑΠΟΤΙΧ(ΟΙ) on the blade of a sword found in Belgrade between the 12th–15th century), cf. T.G. KOLIAS, *Byzantinische Waffen. Ein Beitrag zur byzantinischen Waffenkunde von den Anfängen bis zur Lateinischen Eroberung (BV XVII)*. Wien 1998, 146–48. See also the encomiastic poem on a sword of Alexios Komnenos, bearing the image of Saint Theodore and Saint Demetrius by Theodore Prodromos, published by W. HÖRANDNER, Theodoros Prodromos. *Historische Gedichte (WBS XI)*. Wien 1974, 445f. (no. LII).

¹⁴ Poems nos. 245–49 in my edition, cf. CRAMER, Appendix 328, vv. 12–17.

- c) Σπάθη τέμνουσα¹⁵ καρδίας αὐτῆς πλέον·
 d) Σπάθη, τὸ ῥώμης δίστομον πάσης ξίφος.¹⁶
 e) Σπάθη τέμνουσα τῆς πολιτείας πάθη.¹⁷

On a decorated sword

- a) *Blade, for enemies of iron, for friends of gold.*
 b) *Blade, terrifying for enemies, beautiful for friends.*
 c) *Blade, cutting more than the heart itself.*
 d) *Blade, the sword which cleaves all force.*
 e) *Blade, cutting the sufferings of the empire.*

Each poem contains the word σπάθη and mentions a specific quality of the sword. The presence of σπάθη and its position (at the beginning or the end of the verse) makes it look like a wish of the owner to endorse the sword with a certain power: “Blade, <be> of iron for my enemies and of gold for my friends”. This kind of series of epigrams containing variations on a single theme could have been used as a kind of pattern book offered by the poet to interest a prospective client, a sort of “potential verse inscriptions”.¹⁸ Some of them may never have been used as actual inscriptions, lingering in the poet’s archives, waiting to be chosen by an interested patron, the owner of a decorated sword.

III. A short dialogue between Christ and John the Baptist will serve as a third example. Its interpretation as a verse inscription is quite speculative, but I would like to discuss it none the less. As is frequently the case with epigrams on works of art, it does not offer an accurate description, but it evokes a well known scene from the New Testament (esp. from the Gospel of Matthew), often represented on icons:¹⁹

εἰς τὴν βάπτισιν

Καὶ φρένα καὶ παλάμην τρομερὴν καὶ ἄψευα πάντα
 δέρκεο σοῦ θεράποντος· ἀπόστιχε, πῶς σε καθήρω;
 πῦρ ἀπνεές τελέθεις, ποταμὸς παλίνροσος ἀπέστη.
 ἄπτεο σοῦ βασιλῆος· νῦν ἐπέοικέ <με> πάντα
 μορφῆς ἀνδρομέης τελέθειν καὶ [ὑστατα] ἔμπαλιν αὐτὸς
 αἵμασιν αὐτοχύτοις παλάμαισιν ἐμαῖς σε καθήρω.

On the Baptism

*“Look at the heart and the trembling hand and all the limbs
 of your servant. Go away, how will I purify you?
 You are spontaneous fire, the river flows backwards.”
 “Touch your king: now, I have to take entirely
 human shape; in my turn, I myself will purify you
 with my hands flowing with blood, spilled of my own free will.”*

¹⁵ The manuscript reads τεμνούσης.

¹⁶ The word order imitates the action: δίστομον cleaves ῥώμης and πάσης.

¹⁷ Note the word play σπάθη – πάθη.

¹⁸ See H. MAGUIRE, *Image and Imagination: the Byzantine Epigram as Evidence for Viewer Response (Canadian Institute of Balkan Studies)*. Toronto 1996. The author talks about a series of epigrams on a silver bowl, in which the poet, “simply shuffling around the same words and conceits”, tries to please his patron; these poems are like “trial pieces for the patron to choose from” (pp. 8–9). See also LAUXTERMANN, *Byzantine Poetry* 42–44 about similar series of epigrams, which “highlight a pivotal phase in the production of epigrams ... namely the moment when the poet showed his work to the patron in order to get his approval”. In more elaborate poems the poet often mentions the name and social status of the patron (absent in the case of these ultra short sword epigrams), specifies the type of object and praises the qualities of the work of art (both elements are present in the sword epigrams).

¹⁹ Poem no. 283 in my edition, cf. CRAMER, Appendix 333, vv. 23–29.

Although the Parisian manuscript presents the speakers in a different way, its apograph (Paris. gr. 1630, 14th century) corrects the error, showing a dialogue of two times three verses between a frightened John the Baptist (here, we read *ὡς ἀπὸ τοῦ προδρόμου* in the margin) and Christ (we read *ὡς ἀπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ* in the margin). Not all the elements present are based on the Gospel of Matthew: e.g. the retreat of the river Jordan is a popular element taken from the Psalms (113, 3), cited in many Byzantine texts. The vocabulary is Homeric: v. 3 echoes the words pronounced by Paris hastily retreating before Menelaus during a battle like someone who has just seen a snake (Il. 3, 33: *ὡς δ' ὅτε τίς τε δράκοντα ἰδὼν παλίνρροσος ἀπέστη*). This time, the title, verbs or pronouns do not give any indication of a specific object: the verses could be intended as a literary epigram, written for pure meditation, to be read without accompaniment of an icon, but with the imagination of the reader forming his own mental picture on the basis of elements known to him. However, the balanced structure, a question in three verses and an answer in three verses, could very well fit a symmetrical composition, like the splendid icons of the encounter of Christ and John the Baptist (not during the Baptism, but just before it, exactly as in Geometres' epigram!) painted on the walls of Hosios Loukas (3rd quarter of the 11th century) (fig. 5 and 6). On the left, we see John the Baptist, with a speech taken from the Gospel of Matthew 3, 15–17: *ἐγὼ χρειαν ἔχω ὑπὸ σοῦ βαπτισθῆναι, καὶ σὺ ἔρχῃ πρὸς με;* (“I need to be baptised by you, and yet you come to me?”). On the right, we see Christ, answering John: *ἄφες ἄρτι, οὕτως γὰρ πρέπον ἐστὶν ἡμῖν πληρῶσαι πάσαν δικαιοσύνην* (“Let it happen now for it is right for us to fulfil all righteousness”). Geometres' epigram is a sophisticated elaboration of the exact same theme and could have been used in a similar icon.

IV. In the fourth and last example, Christ shows the contrast between his divine and his human nature, and asks the beholder not to be surprised:²⁰

Ὅς δίφρω πυρόεντι ἐφέζομαι, ὃς φῶς οἰκῶ,
 εἰς δόμον ἔστηκα χειρὶ χαραττόμενος.
 θάμβεε μή τι <έόντα μ'> ἐν ἀγκαλίδεσσι τιθήνης·
 καὶ τὸ πρὶν φερόμαν, γαστέρα δ' οἶκον ἔχον.

*I, who am sitting on a burning chariot, I, who live in the light,
 am present in a church, painted by a hand.*

*Nobody should be surprised that I am lying in the arms of a nurse:
 I was also carried before, and my house was a belly.*

The expression *ἐν ἀγκαλίδεσσι τιθήνης* is, again, Homeric: during his happy youth, when his father Hector was still alive, Astyanax fell asleep in the arms of his wet nurse (Il. 22, 503). But in the poem of Geometres, the choice of the word *τιθήνη* is significant, because Christ is not talking about his wet nurse, but about his mother. Therefore, one expects a more “maternal” word than *τιθήνη*.²¹ In fact, there was a metrical equivalent at hand, the expression *ἐν ἀγκαλίδεσσι τεκούσης*, used by Geometres' other favourite model Gregory of Nazianzus (Carm. II 1. 50, 33) and by Nonnus (Dion. 9, 219). I think, therefore, that the choice of the word *τιθήνη* has a special meaning here, referring to the Galaktotrophousa, the Virgin nurturing her child.²² While the theme of the *Virgo lactans* was well-known in the Western-European Renaissance (fig. 7, “Saint Luke painting the Virgin”, by Rogier van der Weyde), it is virtually absent in the Byzantine iconography known to us, except for some images of Late Antiquity and from the fringes of the Byzantine empire (fig. 8, 9 and 10). Although 10th century images of the Galaktotrophousa are not known to us, Geometres' epigram corroborates the thesis of Anthony Cutler based on different literary sources, that the

²⁰ Poem no. 267 in my edition, cf. CRAMER, Appendix 331, vv. 1–4.

²¹ In fact, in other poems, John Geometres uses the word *μήτηρ* for the Virgin (poem 65, 34: *σὺν μητρὶ κραταίῃ*; 265, 2 and 289, 16: *μητρός*; 290, 15: *μητέρα παρθένον, οιοτόκειαν, παμβασιλείαν*; 300, 120: *μητέρα σήν*).

²² In poem no. 6 in my edition (= CRAMER, Appendix 271, vv. 26–30) on the *Koimesis*, Christ talks about his infancy and describes himself as suckling the breast of his mother: *σαῖς ἠγκαλίζου πρὶν με χερσί, Παρθένε, θηλῆς δὲ σῆς ἔσπασα μητρικὸν γάλα*, etc.

Galaktotrophousa was indeed a popular iconographic subject in 10th century Constantinople.²³ The poet refers to a topic present in poetry, homily and iconography of his own time.

To conclude, these four epigrams having been transmitted only in manuscripts, offer different possibilities for interpretation. None of them gives practical information, such as the name of a patron or a technical description of an image or object. But different factors, like the content (references to objects), the language (deictics adverbs or pronouns), the placing in the manuscript (together with similar poems), the symmetrical nature of the composition (with parallels on icons), the presence of similar images in literature or iconography (even if they have not been transmitted to us), suggest that they could have been used as real verse inscriptions. If they were meant to be used as real inscriptions, they seem to have added magical power or to have helped the reader to complete the image he was looking at and to give it spiritual value.²⁴

²³ In his article *The Cult of the Galaktotrophousa in Byzantium and Italy*. *JÖB* 37 (1987) 335–50, A. CUTLER shows that “the Galaktotrophousa was not only a beloved image from no later than the 9th century, but also one cultivated in the heart of the capital” (p. 336). He continues to cite different passages in poetry and prose. The image of the Virgin Mary as a loving and emotive Mother of God became much more popular in the middle-Byzantine period, first in poetry, in homily, in 10th century iconography and finally in 11th century liturgy, cf. N. TSIRONIS, *From poetry to liturgy, the cult of the Virgin in the Middle Byzantine era*, in: M. VASSILAKI (ed.), *Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*. Aldershot 2005, 91–99 and E.S. BOLMAN, *The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa and the cult of the Virgin Mary in Egypt*, in: IDEM, 13–22.

²⁴ See also H. MAGUIRE, *Image and Imagination* 25 on ecphrastic epigrams: “It is true that what mattered in these epigrams was more often psychological and spiritual truth rather than scientific accuracy of description” and R. WEBB, *Ecphrasis Ancient and Modern. The Invention of a Genre*. *Word & Image* 15/1 (1999) 7–18 on works of art as a starting point for a free description.