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Liturgical Functions of Late Byzantine Art: An Analysis of the Thessaloniki Epitaphios

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The Thessaloniki Epitaphios, a late Byzantine embroidered textile, is an important piece to consider in the study of Byzantine art and its role in liturgy. In this paper, I undertake a stylistic and formalistic analysis of the inscriptions, depiction of the humanity of Christ, and treatment of time in the Thessaloniki Epitaphios to determine if the Epitaphios had liturgical rather than simply symbolic functions, thus helping contextualize Byzantine art within the Western canon. Analyzing the potential for the liturgical function of this piece additionally sheds light onto how Byzantine art itself should be classified with regards to the Western canon.

Introduction

The role of late Byzantine pieces in liturgical rites has been subject to a longstanding debate in the field, with one of the most recent subjects of this discussion being the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* (see Figure 1). A silk on linen textile, the *Epitaphios* originates from Thessaloniki, Greece, circa 1300.¹ Located on a trade route that connected Constantinople and Durazzo on the Adriatic, Thessaloniki was a key commercial port and site for religious pilgrimage in late Byzantium.² Several stylistic features, in particular the expressiveness of the figures, suggest the *Epitaphios* was produced during the late Byzantine Palaiologan Dynasty (1259-1453), under which Thessaloniki reached its cultural height, and when there was a significant emphasis in the culture on liturgical rites.³ Thus, artworks created during the Palaiologan Dynasty invites scrutiny with respect to their roles as active participants in liturgical rites.

¹ Anastasia Drandaki, Demetra Papanikola-Bakirtzi, Anastasia G. Tourta, Jenny Albani, and Eugenia Chalkia, *Heaven & Earth* (Athens: Hellenic Republic Ministry of Culture and Sports, 1994).

² Paul Hetherington, *Byzantine and Medieval Greece: Churches, Castles, and Art of the Mainland and Peloponnese* (London: J. Murray, 1991).

³ Eugenia Russell, *Literature and Culture in Late Byzantine Thessalonica* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

This concept is especially relevant when considering the place of Byzantine art in the Western canon as brought up by Byzantinists Anthony Cutler and Robert Nelson. Art from the Byzantine Empire, which existed on the fringes of the Western world, often boasts characteristically Western features, bringing into question whether it is actually to be considered part of the Western art canon. Cutler draws attention to the use of formalistic analysis when classifying Byzantine art as either part of or not part of the Western canon, while Nelson focuses on the distinction of this art as based on historical distinctions laid down by Hegel, based in large part on Byzantium's role as foil to the rise of the West in a similar vein to Islam.⁴ Nelson suggests art historical analyses account for purpose and function when classifying Byzantine art within the Western canon. These different ways of contextualizing Byzantine art within the Western canon come into play when looking at the liturgical functions of the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios*.

Epitaphioi and *aeres*, smaller textiles similar to *epitaphios*, were traditionally used as covers for the chalice and paten during the Liturgy of the Eucharist.⁵ Often decorated, these textiles traditionally depict Christ giving bread and wine to his disciples. This holds true in the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios*, which features a central panel depicting the dead body of Christ surrounded by angels. This scene is bookended by panels showing Christ distributing bread and wine respectively. A decorative border features the Eucharistic bread and the chalice alternating in order, and red linen underlays the embroidered textile.

Rather than serving as passive covers for the chalice and paten, *epitaphioi* were active liturgical pieces. Establishing this argument in *The Embodied Icon*, Byzantinist Warren Woodfin draws attention to various *epitaphioi*, including the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios*, and cites the late-fourteenth-century Byzantine

⁴ Anthony Cutler, "The Pathos of Distance: Byzantium in the Gaze of Renaissance Europe and Modern Scholarship," *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650*. By Claire J. Farago (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 23-45. Robert S. Nelson, "Living on the Byzantine Borders of Western Art," *Gesta* 35, no. 1 (1996): 3-7.

⁵ Drandaki et al., *Heaven & Earth*.

paintings featuring angels carrying textiles with the image of Christ's body in Holy Week processions and the *Diataxis*.⁶ This would suggest such textiles played an active role in liturgical proceedings. In an effort to determine if the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* was indeed produced as a liturgical rather than simply symbolic piece, this paper will undertake a stylistic and formalistic analysis of the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* with respect to its inscriptions, depiction of the humanity of Christ, and treatment of time. Analysis of this piece can then help contextualize Byzantine art within the Western canon. The determination that the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* had significant liturgical functions that influenced the creation and design of the piece would suggest that, in line with Nelson's argument, Byzantine works must be considered within the context of their function when determining their place in the Western canon.

Christ's Humanity

Emphasis on the Corporeal in the Eucharist

Christ as both human and divine is perhaps one of the most contested points of Christian theology, both in the present day and in Late Byzantium. This concept holds a key role in the Eucharist as well. According to the Byzantine tradition, the bread used for the Eucharist is transformed into the actual body of Christ. In consuming it, the faithful participate in the divine. The Eucharist is dependent on the body and corporeal presence of Christ, as it represents the sacrifice of his humanity:

"The holy table [altar] corresponds to the spot in the tomb where Christ was placed. On it lies the true and heavenly bread, the mystical and unbloody sacrifice. Christ sacrifices His flesh and blood and offers it to the faithful as food for eternal life."⁷

Here St. Germanus, patriarch of Constantinople in the eighth century, stresses the connection between the liturgy and Christ's sacrifice of his body and blood, making his humanity, and in particular his bodily

⁶ Warren T. Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon: Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012). Discussing these paintings, Gemistos the Deacon (c. 1380) describes how *aeres* were held above the chalice and paten during Eucharist ceremonies rather than merely covering them.

⁷ Germanus, *On the Divine Liturgy*, trans. Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1984), 59.

sacrifice, a key aspect of the Eucharist. The duality achieved in depicting Christ's corporeal presence in the context of a transformative liturgical rite is important to consider in analyzing the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios*.

There are several ways by which Christ's corporeal presence is depicted in the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios*. First, this primarily silk piece features a contemporary underlay of red linen that recalls blood under skin (see Figure 2).^{*} Many figures and symbols in the piece are outlined by red as well, mimicking blood flowing through the veins. Second, displaying Christ's dead body on a long rectangular textile brings to mind burial cloths. Thus, drawing attention to Christ's morbidity emphasizes his humanity and the sacrifice he made for the salvation of the faithful.

The transformative nature of the liturgy is alluded to in the *Epitaphios* to in the depiction of Christ's body (see Figure 3). Its muscularity is immediately striking; his abdominal and pectoral muscles are clearly defined, and his calf muscles bulge at the back of his legs. In many cases, the body of Christ is depicted as gaunt to emphasize his suffering. Having fasted for forty days and nights prior to his death, his body is weakened and frail. The tilt of the head of Christ serves as further evidence of this (see Figure 4). Rather than a head slumped in death, the *Epitaphios* presents Christ with his head tilted upwards. This detail draws attention toward the paradox of divine energy invested in a dying body. Christ still has life in his veins and strength enough to raise his head toward the heavens, toward his father. This begs the question as to why Christ in the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* suggests a spark of life that contradicts the death that is depicted.

Christ is clearly depicted in a way that emphasizes his humanity. The red linen foundation, his muscularity, and the tilt of the head all serve as the last signs of life in the body of Christ. But the use of material as the medium for this image cannot be ignored. It is reminiscent of burial cloths, suggesting

^{*} Damage to various areas in the piece, particularly the right side panel (see Figure 6), shows the foundation is red, which indicates the red underlay is contemporary to the embroidered textile.

Christ as depicted here is on the brink of death, but not quite dead yet. Thus, the moment presented in the center panel image is one of transformation – the moment life transitions into death. This kind of transformation, the bridging of human or physical with divine or mystical, known as the Incarnation, is a key component of Byzantine liturgical practices.⁸ Ceremonies like the Eucharist are literal reenactments of the original event. Thus, the depiction of Christ and emphasis on the corporeal presence in the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* is one that closely parallels the Eucharist liturgy.

The Interplay of Image and Text *Use of Inscriptions in the Epitaphios*

Text plays an important role in preaching the truth of the images and scenes presented in the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios*. The use of inscriptions in Byzantine art goes beyond merely describing an image. They elevate it, working with the image to form a cohesive message that poses it as true in the eyes of the viewer. To illustrate this point, art historian Liz James in *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture* compares a hypothetical Byzantine icon to Magritte's *This is Not a Pipe*.⁹ In Magritte's famous painting, the inscription "this is not a pipe" appears below a painted image of a pipe (see Figure 5). The inscription forces the viewer to acknowledge that the painted pipe is not a real pipe – it is only an image. The role of inscriptions in Byzantine art was drastically different.

"For a Byzantine viewer in the period after Iconoclasm it [looking at an image with the words *This is not Christ* underneath an image of Christ] would suggest that somehow the painter had painted Christ incorrectly and thus, because Christ did not look like Christ, he could not be Christ."¹⁰

⁸ Robert F. Taft, "The Living Icon: Touching the Transcendent in Palaiologan Iconography and Liturgy," in: *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*, ed. Sarah T. Brooks (St. Louis, MO: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 54-61.

⁹ Liz James, *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Ibid.

Therefore, text helps argue for the truthfulness of the image it accompanies, and it is with this mindset that the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* must be approached.

There are several important inscriptions on the piece, the most prominent being those on the side panels of the *Epitaphios*. For example, the right side panel shows Christ giving bread to his disciples (see Figure 6). The inscription, located on the upper left hand side of the panel, reads, “Take and eat, this is my body” (Matthew 26:26-28).¹¹ During the Eucharist ceremony, the priest recites this line as the bread transforms into the body of Christ. As the priest speaks these words just as Christ spoke these words, the transformation occurs, and thus the liturgical rite makes the original event true and present. It is clear that this inscription is not a caption; it is not a descriptor of the image it accompanies. The viewer reads it as though Christ himself were saying it. This helps legitimize the image by presenting it as if it is occurring in the present for the viewer. Art historian Henry Maguire, in his thesis in the 1960s, speaks of how inscriptions on such images “make images live in the mind’s eye” and “convey perceptions of works of art and perceptions of the meanings of such works.”¹² This is clear in the use of this text, particularly since it is not set apart from the image in a distinct and separate area but is instead squeezed between the figures. This forces the viewer to contemplate the words as part of, and in time with, the image, rather than separate from it.

Another example of how inscriptions establish the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* as a true image is the inscription “Hagios, Hagios, Hagios” accompanying the winged Seraph and Cherubim (see Figure 7).¹³ Known as the Trisagion hymn, translated as “holy” thrice, it likely originated from Isaiah 6:3, in which angels cry out “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty.”¹⁴ Byzantines sung these words as part of the opening of the Divine Liturgy, just before the Liturgy of the Word and the Great Entrance.¹⁵ It was also

¹¹ *Oxford Annotated Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹² James, *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture*.

¹³ Drandaki et al., *Heaven & Earth*.

¹⁴ *Oxford Annotated Bible*.

¹⁵ Germanus, *On the Divine Liturgy*.

sung during the Eucharist, allowing liturgical participants to reenact and reproduce liturgy by chanting these words. This hymn was often inscribed on processional crosses as well.¹⁶ As seen above, the text is squeezed into the image in a way that necessitates interaction between the two. This implies to the viewer that it is the Cherubim chanting the hymn. This activation of image through words further encourages interaction of the viewer with the piece.

Text, therefore, plays an important role in allowing the viewer to activate the power of the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios*. As Robert Nelson describes in his essay *Image and Inscription*, "By means of inscribed icons, medieval viewers, readers, and listeners enacted liturgical dramas of their own in these spaces of devotion."¹⁷ The Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* is a clear example of this. In quoting directly from Matthew and Isaiah, the same quotations used in the liturgy itself, the piece is invested with Eucharistic energy. The inscriptions are an integral part of the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* and serve to activate the piece in a way that suggests its role was more than simple symbolism; rather, this textile served a clear liturgical function by encouraging the viewer to participate in the liturgy that the images depict.

Time and Eternity *Temporality in the Epitaphios*

There is only one Church above and below, since God came down among us and was seen in our form and accomplished what he did for us. And the Lord's priestly activity and communion and contemplation constitute one single work, **which is carried out at the same time both above and here below**, but with this difference: above it is done without veils and symbols, but here it is accomplished through symbols.¹⁸

The idea of rituals as true reenactments rather than purely symbolic reenactments was key in late Byzantium, but another interesting point brought up in the above quote, from Symeon of

¹⁶ Glanville Downey, "A Processional Cross," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 12, no. 9 (May 1954), 276-80.

¹⁷ Robert S. Nelson, "Image and Inscription," in: *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture*, by Liz James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 100-16.

¹⁸ Symeon of Thessaloniki, *Dialogue against all Heresies*, chap. 31, quoted in Taft, 54-61. Emphasis mine.

Thessaloniki (d. 1429), relates to the perception of time with respect to a liturgical rite. Not only were such rituals true reenactments; they were also simultaneous with events in the heavens. This idea, one of a ritual uniting its temporal dimension with divine eternal reality into a single moment of time that connects the human and divine worlds, will be important in considering the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios*.

The composition of the *Epitaphios* provides a great deal of understanding of the representations of time and transcendence of time. The symmetrical composition focuses attention on the central panel; the viewer is led inward toward the body of Christ. The figures of Christ on either side also gesture toward the center. Life is leaving his body, and in this moment, life transitions into death. Thus, the center panel is focused on a single moment, Christ in a constant flux between life and death. This is an interesting contrast to the way time is presented in the side panels, where time appears frozen. The side panels present Christ giving bread and wine to his apostles, his hand frozen just before the bread enters the kneeling apostle's mouth, or the wine about to tip into the other apostle's mouth (see Figure 8). There is no transition or transformation in these images; they are moments frozen in time. Yet these moments transcend time – the actions of these figures are always occurring, both in the time of the image and in that of the viewer.

Furthermore, the subjects of the side panels – the giving of bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ – is the first act of the Eucharist liturgy, in which viewers of the *Epitaphios* would have been participating as they viewed the image. Thus, the images of the side panels transcend time, as they occur in the past and present. Considering the series of panels as a whole and accounting for the centrality of the composition, it becomes evident that the energy of the center panel, of that single, fluctuating moment in time, is carried through the side panels. In this way the piece takes the moment before death and carries it throughout time. Christ, his human and divine presence, is carried to the present through the liturgical rite that the side panels present.

This theme culminates in the border of alternating Eucharistic wafers and chalices (see Figure 9), which poses the textile as an active participant in the liturgy. Closer examination of the border yields the following finding – the Eucharist wafers, rather than distinct circles, are interwoven together. Circles wind into smaller ones, which continue on to form larger wafers. Thus, the viewer is guided from one circle to the next, which invites the viewer to pause and contemplate the piece as he or she follows the border.¹⁹ Thus, it would be reasonable to assume the border attempted to enforce a sense of continuity using interconnected Eucharist circles. Furthermore, there is no clear beginning or end in the border as the viewer is led through the piece continuously. The piece seems almost timeless while encompassing and promoting a liturgy based on very specific moments in time, that of the Last Supper and that of Christ's death.

Therefore, the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* argues the truth of its image and the truth of the Liturgy of the Eucharist by collapsing the events it depicts into a single frame of time that bridges the human and the divine, a moment of time that also transcends time and exists in the past, present, and future. Similar to the corporeality of Christ's body, the temporality as presented in the *Epitaphios* transcends a mere symbolic function of the textile, suggesting instead that the textile served an active role in liturgy.

Conclusion

The Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* clearly achieves a sense of activation and invocation of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, rendering it an active component of the ritual rather than a mere symbol. Jesuit priest and liturgical expert Robert Taft, in his essay *The Living Icon*, claims: "In this theology, church ritual constitutes not only a *representation* but also a *re-presentation*, that is, a rendering present again, of the

¹⁹ An argument against this theory would be the corners of the textile, where the aforementioned connections are cut across (see Figure 10). However, it seems there was an attempt to continue the connecting circles at the corners, but when unable to do so, the maker of the textile paneled the cut across the smaller hoops to fit it to the rest of the textile.

earthly saving work of Christ.”²⁰ After this analysis, it is clear the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* falls in line. The piece argues the truth of the Eucharist liturgy as seen in its depiction of the corporeal Christ, use of inscriptions, and presentation of temporality. In demonstrating and designating the *Epitaphios* as liturgical in line with the argument of Woodfin, this paper suggests that Byzantine art be considered, as suggested by Nelson, within the context of its function and purpose when considering its role within the Western canon. In this piece, utility heavily informs its style, composition, and other formal aspects; thus, contextualizing Byzantine works of art such as the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* without regard for functional aspects such as a role in liturgy would fail to capture the essence and depth of such pieces.

²⁰ Taft, 54-61.

Appendix

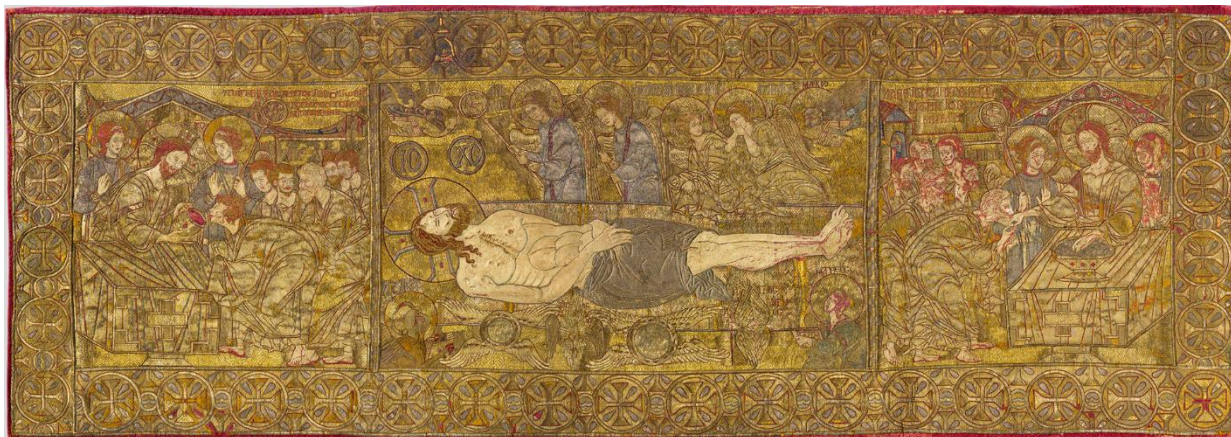


Figure 1 – Thessaloniki *Epitaphios*, from Thessaloniki, Greece, c. 1300



Figure 2 – Red underlay of the *Epitaphios*

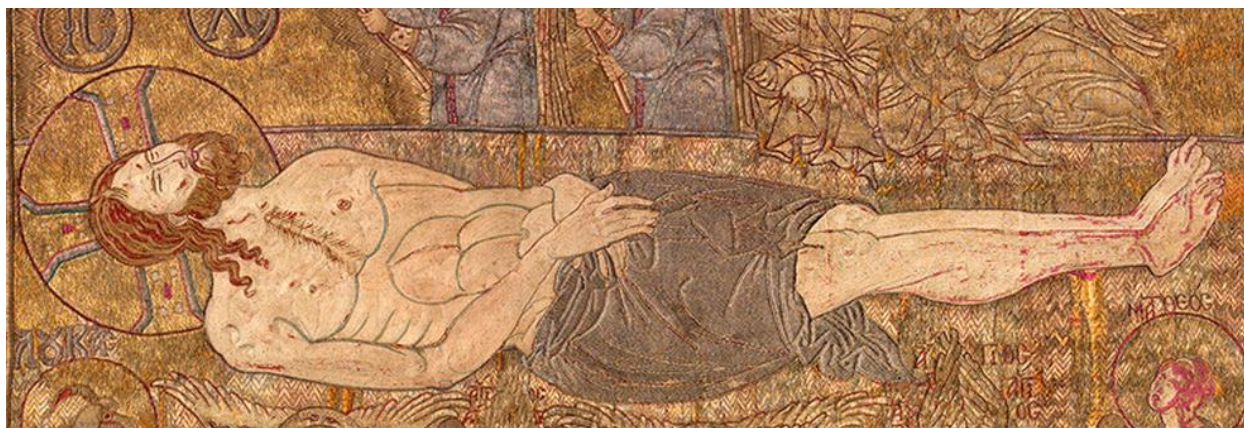


Figure 3 – Detail, Body of Christ, center panel.

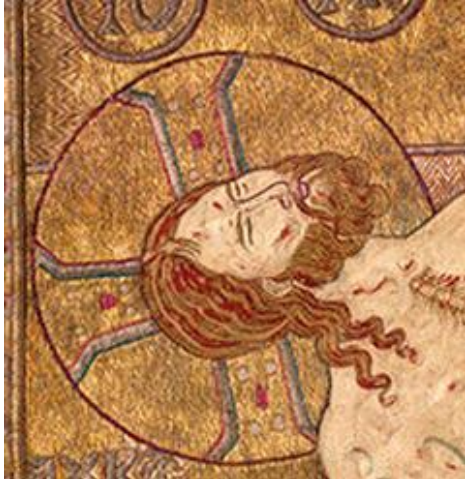


Figure 4 – Detail of Christ's head.



Figure 5 – This is Not a Pipe, Magritte

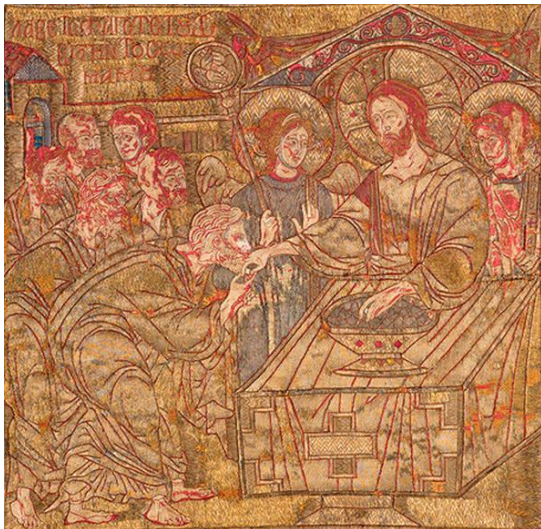


Figure 6 – Detail, Right panel showing Jesus handing bread to his apostle and inscription.



Figure 7 – Detail of center panel showing Cherubim with lance and *Hagios* inscription.



Figure 8 – Detail, Left panel showing Christ giving wine to kneeling apostle.



Figure 9 – Border of the Thessaloniki *Epitaphios* featuring alternating Eucharistic wafers and chalices.



Figure 10 – Detail of upper right hand corner of the border. Border is paneled, resulting in a break in the continuity established in the rest of the border.

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